

Florida Humanities Speakers Directory



Engaging Speakers



Compelling Topics



Thought-provoking
Discussions



Cynthia Barnett

Journalist, Writer

Cynthia Barnett is an award-winning environmental journalist who has reported on water and climate change around the world. Her new book, *The Sound of the Sea: Seashells and the Fate of the Oceans*, is out this summer from W. W. Norton. "The seashell might seem a decidedly small foundation for a book," *The New York Times* wrote in its summer reading recommendations, "but Barnett's account remarkably spirals out, appropriately, to become a much larger story about the sea, about global history and about environmental crises and preservation."

Barnett is also the author of *Rain: A Natural and Cultural History*, longlisted for the National Book Award and a finalist for the 2016 PEN/E.O. Wilson Literary Science Writing Award. Her previous books are *Blue Revolution: Unmaking America's Water Crisis*, which articulates a water ethic for America, and *Mirage: Florida and the Vanishing Water of the Eastern U.S.* which won the gold medal for best nonfiction in the Florida Book Awards and has been listed by *The Tampa Bay Times* as one of the top 10 books that every Floridian should read.

Barnett has written for *National Geographic*, the *Atlantic*, the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Tampa Bay Times* and many other publications. Her numerous journalism awards include a national Sigma Delta Chi prize for investigative magazine reporting and eight Green Eyeshades, which recognize outstanding journalism in 11 southeastern states. She is also Environmental Journalist in Residence at the University of Florida's College of Journalism and Communications, and a fifth-generation Floridian raising a sixth generation in Gainesville.

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Program Format:

- In-person
- Virtual

Programs Available

The Sound of the Sea: Seashells and The Fate of the Oceans

The human fascination with seashells is primal. Archeological evidence suggests that Neanderthals collected cockle shells on the coast of what is modern Spain, perhaps giving preference to those they found beautiful. Here in Florida, the Calusa built "great cities of shell" on the southern coasts, later carted off for road fill. In the 1950s, the nation burned with seashell fever only a Florida beach vacation could cure. But legend had it the best shells were found at the Georgia border; that's about where cars headed north started to stink, and families had to pull over and dump their shells on the side of the road. In her new program *The Sound of the Sea: Seashells and the Fate of the Oceans*, award-winning environmental author Cynthia Barnett explores the long, rich and surprisingly profound relationship between humans and seashells.

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Funding for this program was provided through a grant from the Florida Humanities with funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Any views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this program do not necessarily represent those of Florida Humanities or the National Endowment for the Humanities.





Cynthia Barnett, continued

Writer

Traveling from Florida to the Bahamas to the Maldives, West Africa, and beyond, Barnett uncovers the ancient history of shells as global currency, their use as religious and luxury objects, and the rarely appreciated but remarkable creatures that make them. For eons, shell and their mollusk makers have reflected humanity's shifting attitudes toward and precarious place in the natural world. While shells reveal how humans have altered the climate and the sea—down to its very chemistry—they are also sentinels of hope for alternative energy, carbon capture, and other solutions that lie beneath the waves. With her engaging account of an aspect of nature and culture long hidden in plain sight, Barnett illuminates the beauty and wonder of seashells as well as the human ingenuity and scientific solutions they represent for our warming world.

Rain: A History for Stormy Times

A natural and cultural tour of RAIN, from the torrents that filled the oceans four billion years ago to the modern story of climate change. A wellspring of life, rain also has a place in our souls. In an ancient perfume region in northern India, villagers bottle the scent of rain from the monsoon-drenched earth, while in Manchester, England, and America's Seattle, leaden skies helped inspire Morrissey and Kurt Cobain's grunge. The scents and songs capture rain in small ways. Humans have long been convinced we could control the atmosphere with ideas much bigger, from the Roman rain god Jupiter Pluvius to the 2,203 miles of levees that attempt to straightjacket the Mississippi River. Now, after thousands of years spent praying for rain or worshipping it; burning witches at the stake to stop rain or sacrificing small children to bring it; even trying to blast rain out of the sky with mortars meant for war, humanity has finally managed to change the rain. Only not in ways we intended. Changing rainfall patterns are some of the earliest tremors of our warming globe; scientists expect Florida will continue to face more-extreme rains, but also more-severe droughts, as Earth and its oceans continue to heat up. Armed with computer models looking forward, there is also much to learn from looking back. Too much and not enough, rain is an experience we share. Its history has much to tell us about coming together to live more ethically with water – and adapt to the stormy times ahead.

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State of Water, State of Mind

Water defines us as Floridians no matter where we live: Beaches surround us on three sides. Rivers and streams flow for ten thousand miles through the peninsula. We're blessed with nearly eight thousand lakes and a thousand more freshwater springs – the largest concentration of artesian springs in the world. Amid a scourge of pollution half a century ago, the United States and Florida passed bedrock water legislation with the Clean Water Act at the federal level and the state's sweeping water and land-management laws of 1972, some of the strongest in the country. As we approach the fiftieth anniversary of these laws and celebrate their triumphs, our waters face new challenges, from increasing algal blooms to warming and sea-rise. In her program State of Water, State of Mind, Florida-based environmental author Cynthia Barnett shows audiences how one of the most water-rich states in the nation has come to face water scarcity and quality woes—and how we can live differently. With a shared ethic for water, Floridians come together to use less and pollute less. We live well with water today, in ways that don't jeopardize fresh, clean water for our children, ecosystems, and businesses tomorrow. She reflects on water as Florida's defining element—and how citizens can get more engaged with our state's most precious resource.

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