

What is it about Florida that fuels your creativity—and how does this affect your writing? Here’s what Florida Book Award winners say:

Sen. Bob Graham, author of *Keys to the Kingdom*:

Florida is a rolling wave of human experiences emerging from an ocean of diversity and a striving to understand and assimilate to change. These aspects of our state have drawn to Florida and influenced generations of writers from Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings to Carl Hiaasen. Early in *Keys to the Kingdom*, I used my father’s love of baseball and my own experiences with the Cuban exiles from Mariel to anchor the formation of the character of Tony Ramos. For me, the most challenging aspect of writing a novel was dialogue, capturing how people from various backgrounds and ulterior motives speak to one another. In my first drafts I was verbalizing as the people with whom I was most familiar wrote—wordy paragraphs. It was when I made a conscious effort to listen to how a high-end banker or a Haitian sugar cane cutter actually communicated that I was able to develop plot and character through dialogue. Florida is an ideal place to listen to those voices.

Caren Umbarger, author of *Coming To: A Midwestern Tale*:

Renewal, for me, comes from spending time in nature. My connection with life is strongest and truest when I’m floating in a canoe, walking through the woods, riding my bike on the beach, or sitting quietly under a tree. The splendor of the natural world in Florida heals my soul which, in turn, enhances access to my creative source. From the beauty and warmth that surround me here, my swirling dreams can become stories and I am set free to write.

Jerald Milanich, coauthor of *Hidden Seminoles*:

Florida’s varied natural settings and the diverse native American cultures that have lived here for millennia offer a living library from which we can learn about people, cultures, and nature. Perhaps, if we understand the past, we can better plan our future.

Martin Dyckman, author of *Reubin O’D Askew and the Golden Age of Florida Politics*:

One of my books begins with a justice of the Florida Supreme Court sneaking into the men’s room to tear up a document and flush the "seventeen equal parts" down a toilet. When I pitched the idea to the publisher, she thought she might ask Carl Hiaasen to write an introduction. In the end, she didn’t, but the remark made a point. Florida is such a stew of paradoxes that fiction reads like fact and fact reads like fiction. There’s enough to keep any writer busy, wondering always whether anyone cares.

Ward Larsen, author of *Fly by Night*:

Florida has a terrific population of writers, and I enjoy spending time with them. Whether it’s a panel at a writing conference or liar’s poker at lunch, our state has no shortage of talent to give inspiration and encouragement, not to mention the occasional jab in one’s literary ribs.

Stephen Kampa, author of *Cracks in the Invisible*:

In Florida, I've learned much about art through the musicians I grew up jamming with: A good musician must be versatile (I had to play more than blues); a good musician must know that silence is music, too; and a good musician must master his instrument's tradition before he can expect to innovate within it—if you can't play Little Walter and Sonny Boy Williamson II, how can you expect to play Paul deLay and John Popper? Sound advice all around, and I try to carry those musicians' wisdom into my poetry.

Angela DiTerlizzi, author of *Say What?*

When creating books for children I am constantly tapping the memories from my own childhood and reflecting back to the days of my youth growing up in South Florida. I try to infuse the warmth, brightness, sense of adventure, and the feelings that these images evoke into the spirit of my work.

William McKeen, author of *Mile Marker Zero*:

There was a voyeuristic pleasure in writing *Mile Marker Zero*, because I was talking to writers about their work, and the role Key West played in that work. I was talking to and about some of the great writers of my lifetime—Thomas McGuane, Jim Harrison and Hunter Thompson—as well as painter Russell Chatham and singer Jimmy Buffett. And I came to appreciate the magical role of that place in their art and in their lives. Key West has a laissez faire attitude that removes any boundaries and opens up possibilities unimagined. One of my sources told me, “People who live on islands are just more tolerant.” Florida is nearly an island, so that live-and-let-live attitude has given it an astonishingly diverse culture and turned the place into an incubator of creativity.

Margaret Cardillo, author of *Just Being Audrey*:

I am definitely a product of my environment. I was born and raised in Naples and am now living in Coconut Grove, the oldest part of Miami. It's overgrown and lush and we have peacocks on our front porch every day. It's like a jungle fairytale. In Naples, I am inspired by the small town feel of it. It is vacation paradise to some but quotidian life to me. Miami is one of the most diverse places I have ever been. How all of these characters live together day in and day out amazes me. In between is the vast green mystery of the Everglades—a place that I am at once fascinated by and frightened of—there are so many stories there I want to tell.

Jessica Martinez, author of *Virtuosity*:

I'm inspired by Florida's extremes. Balminess and hurricanes, glitz and grits, the high-energy buzz of its cities and the slow crawl of a day at the beach—the contrasts are teeming with stories begging to be written.

Marianne Berkes, author of *Over in Australia*:

Enjoying a frog chorus in the pond near my Florida home inspired me to write my first informational picture book for children, “Marsh Music,” published in 2000. A companion book about bird sounds in the marsh followed. After a trip to Sanibel, I wrote “Seashells by the Seashore” and then “Over in the Ocean, in a Coral Reef.” All my books are

inspired by my love of nature. I hope to open kids' eyes to the magic found in our natural world, and what better place to appreciate and write about wildlife than in Florida?

Ryan G. Van Cleave, author of *Unlocked*:

Is there something about Florida that affects my creativity and my writing? You bet! I could offer a host of things about Florida that get me jazzed as a writer, but here are just two: (1) I sometimes sit on my porch and work by starlight, enjoying the cool evening breezes off the water. How's that for a soothing situation in which to write? (2) The beach. I live near Siesta Key Beach, so if I need a bit of creative energy, I can swing by the powder-white sand and get inspired by the people, the view, the weather.

Gianna Russo, author of *MoonFlower*:

As clichéd as it sounds, the lush natural world of Florida—and there's still some out there, thank goodness—is what calls to my creativity. I grew up climbing mulberry trees, trimming azaleas with my grandmother, getting dizzy on the fragrance of orange blossoms and waiting breathlessly for the blossoms of the night-blooming cereus. Our backyard garden, the cardinals and blue jays, the neon sunsets, the summer clouds—these elements of “real Florida” are my siren song. The natural world is sacred in the way that poetry is sacred and invariably calls forth from me a response—one that I hope does it justice.

Lynne Barrett, author of *Magpies*:

A phrase from an old sign is pinned to my bulletin board: Florida Attractions. For me, it evokes all that Florida attracts, from lightning to conmen. Attraction is an essential force in fiction; it draws characters to what will test and change them. In Florida they may seek refuge, fantasy, warmth in winter, one last score, recognition, anonymity, the dangerous, or the endangered. The one sure thing they'll find is the unexpected, some twist from safety to risk and, maybe, back again. My imagination finds these stories irresistible.