

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE FLORIDA PLACE?



ALEX SANCHEZ

My favorite Florida place is South Beach, along Ocean Drive, in Miami Beach. Starting at dawn, watching the yellow ball of sun emerge out of the blue-green Gulf Stream to the fanfare of seagulls and pelicans. At lunchtime, eating strawberry and mango salad amid the breezes at a seafront café. In the afternoon, sitting in the soft grass of Lummus Park, as a local artist sculpts a new day's massive sandcastle. Roller-skaters whiz past, tracing figure eights. Chiseled models have photos taken amid a backdrop of dunes. At twilight, returning to surf's edge to watch the sky flame into a riotous sunset of turquoise, pink, and green. And in the evening, strolling past the clubs of yesteryear's deco hotels, accompanied by a soundtrack that changes with each footstep from salsa, to jazz, to

house, to rock, to laughter. For over 50 years I've traveled that stretch of land and sea, ever surprised by the changes in nature, in man, and in myself. And should God will it, I hope to for 50 more.



A. MANETTE ANSAY

The Florida coastline gave way to its drained interior, flat fenced fields fringed with horned cattle, gladiola farms, tomato farms, crossroad towns with their concrete-block churches and faded American flags. Hart talked about agriculture, about industry, about the energy crisis. He talked about the election scandal. He lamented the religious right, religious belief in general, its distortions, great and small...Just beyond Yeehaw Junction: seven white crosses, all in a row, each with its faded memorial wreath. High overhead, the sky stood watch: cloudless, vast, uncompromising.

It's Florida's central interior that compels me, the rural highways west of Orlando, straight roads that cut knife-clean between cattle ranches and snap-bean fields, towns complete but without excess. It's a landscape both split and defined by contrasts: blue sky and golden light, bone-dry fields and green flood planes, black and brown cattle like random decorations, scatterings of small, white egrets. Round-bellied hay bales stand in rows; dust pollinates the air. Suddenly, the highway ends and we're bumping down a narrow dirt road, gleams of water winking in the run-off ditch where two sandhill cranes, tall as miniature ponies, lift their dripping beaks to watch us pass. We park at the edge of a grassy airstrip, and while my boyfriend, a pilot, walks over to the clubhouse at the edge of the hangars and RV hook-ups, I turn back, past the ostrich farm, to gather pine cones twice the length of my hands. Once I found a feather from a red-tailed hawk. Once I saw a three-foot snake spooling heart-beat quick through the grass. Looking up, I see black-headed vultures circling high, an exercise in perspective.

My first trip to the Seminole-Lake Gliderport, in March of 2007, deeply impacted both the writing of *Good Things I Wish You* and my sense of connection to a state I was still calling "where I live" as opposed to "home." I'd come to Florida as a temporary solution to problems that abruptly proved permanent: My 16-year marriage ended, the housing market crashed, and I found myself stranded 90 miles north of what would become a tenured position at the University of Miami. My commute was (alas, still is) a grueling triathlon involving auto, Tri-Rail, Metro, linked excursions through concrete and billboards, strip malls, traffic, trash. Everything seemed transient, disposable, drained, a mirror reflecting the state of my own life. "Go to the beach," out-of-state friends urged, but I'd been living aboard a sailboat, and the few public strips of "reconstituted" sand only left me longing for all I had lost: open space, possibility.

By the time I return to the airstrip, my boyfriend is waiting for me, anxious to fly. And as we buckle in, I'm eager, too, for the initial tug of the tow plane, the gradual acceleration, the first glimmering moment when we lift, lightly, as if in a dream, scattering a flock of wild turkeys into the tall slash pines.

At 3,000 feet, he releases the tow rope; there's a thunk, a sense of falling, and then we're on our own. We coast toward the flat, dark shadow of a cloud where we find our first "lift," thermalling to 4,000 feet, joining a few surprised vultures and one ungainly woodstork. One can stay in the air for hours this way, gliding from cloud to cloud, passing over the lakes with their colorful names: Mineola, Palatlahaha, Minehaha. As a novelist, I rely on external detail for interior characterization, believing that the places and spaces that shape us are inseparable from the people we become. My former self would never have been here—aloft, adrift, unplanned—but my new self, my new life, has already been shaped by the uncompromised landscape beneath me, beautiful and bold as any ocean vista.



CHRIS KUZNESKI

Like most transplants who grew up in the Northeast, my [favorite Florida place] depends on the weather. During the cooler months—when the humidity level dips below 100 percent and the flocks of birdlike mosquitoes disappear from the skies—there's nothing better than putting the top down and driving along the coast. The azure water, the sandy, white beaches, and the old men in thongs are all memorable in their own special way.

Sometimes, when I'm feeling particularly tense or frustrated after a tough day of writing, I like to call my friends up north and ask them about the snow. Invariably, as they go on and on about the slush, and the shoveling, and the charcoal gray skies, I feel my spirits soar. Not because of their suffering (well, maybe a little), but because I was smart enough to move to this sunny paradise that we call home.

Oh, and the summer months? Unlike my characters who are willing to chase assassins in the brutal heat or search for hidden treasure in the Everglades, I rarely venture outside. In fact, from June to September, my favorite place is next to the air conditioner.



DIANE A.S. STUCKART

I'm not an insomniac in the usual sense of the word. What I am is a dutiful mom to a pack of pups blessed with small bladders, keen hearing, and an insatiable need to monitor the doings of Florida's various nocturnal creatures. We live on an acreage in Loxahatchee, an unincorporated area which once was part of the Everglades, and where the occasional 13-foot gator still shows up on people's doorsteps. Therefore, we prudently don't have a doggie door to allow them—or any other night-roaming critters—to come and go as they please. This means that I often find my bleary-eyed self wandering my yard at 3 in the morning on those nights when the dogs have decided it is much more entertaining to be outside than in.

At this point, I must clarify that I am not a native Floridian. I moved here almost five years ago from my home in Texas. Just like everything else in the Lone Star State, the vistas there are big and bold and theatric.

Whereas, here in Florida, they are...not. (Okay, I'll concede that the Atlantic Ocean does possess a certain drama, but I have to drive a good 25 miles from the house to see it.)

Everything within rock-throwing distance of my place is a variation on the same theme of sand, grasses, and flowering weeds interspersed with slash pines and Sabal palms. Putting a generous spin on it, the scenery possesses a subtle beauty best appreciated in the shade. But the longer I live here, the more I find myself inexorably seduced by the beauty of these grassy lands once covered in water and still occasionally reclaimed by Mother Nature during the rainy season. And I have my wee-hour forays with the dogs to thank for this change of heart.

After dark in my little piece of Southeast Florida, the subtle abruptly transforms into sultry, morphs into mysterious. Since sultry and mysterious are next to godliness in a writer's heart, I cannot resist the call. The best nights to wander are those with a crisp in the air, just enough to keep marauding mosquitoes at bay. (Unless one is attempting to emulate a character in a teen vampire novel, one does not relish wandering the night after having been drained of a significant amount of blood.) And so, while the dogs prowl our property's four corners, I pry open my drooping eyelids to take in a sky untainted by city lights.

Some nights, the moon is an impossibly shiny dime pressed into a distant black velvet backdrop. The light it beams upon the landscape is sharp, painting the pines and palms in jagged bas relief against the sleek sky. Other times, it's a silver squint that casts nary a ray, so that every bit of foliage is cloaked in darkness. But most dramatic are those evenings when a bloated full moon crouches atop the pine trees like a huge Bufo toad, its expansive yellow glow leaving the pups no shadows in which to hide.

The allure of the night air is equally compelling, perfumed according to the season with orange blossoms or gardenias or other blooms that I have yet to identify. I breathe the fragrance and find it comforting, reminding me as it does of the soft scent that came of opening Grandma's handkerchief drawer when I was a child. And while it's quiet where I wander, it is never silent. On a breezy night, palm fronds crackle where the air touches them, while the pines whisper their reply. Over this background, the night birds and the frogs lay down a cheery if intermittent soundtrack that lasts until dawn. Usually, they perform a simple and gentle hymn to the night...except for those evenings following a heavy rain. Then, unable to contain their excitement, the frogs take over with a rousing Broadway chorus that easily drowns out the soft jangle of dog tags on four collars as the pups, curiosity satisfied for the time being, trot back to join me.

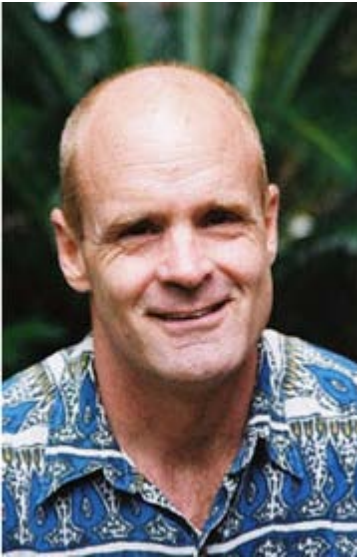
I'll pay for this interruption of good REM sleep in the morning, but most nights I don't care. One can always snag a nap later. I'll make the occasional sacrifice if it means time spent in the moonlight with the frogs and the breeze and the night blossoms. For, just like Dorothy in her ruby slippers, I've found magic in my own backyard.

And I think I can safely say that the dogs agree.



CARLTON WARD JR.

My favorite place in Florida is far away and close by. It's far enough from the highways and houses that the only sounds you hear are wind, water and wildlife, and maybe quiet human voices carrying from pastures, canoes, or campfires. This place is many places and is definitely my favorite place when I am there. Caladesi Island, Panther Key, Pah-hay-okee, Hendrie Ranch, Sebastian Inlet, Horse Creek, Kissimmee Prairie, Withlacoochee Bay, Shark Valley, Ocala Pineland, Little Manatee River, Limestone, Captiva Pass, Egmont Key. This place *is* Florida, where its native soul speaks to those who come still and listen.



JACK E. DAVIS

If the wind is ample and steady, I have found my favorite place. It might blow up through the streets in downtown St. Petersburg blocks from the public waterfront, a seven-mile uncluttered saunter past industrious waterbirds and jumping fish, the bequest of a wise vision of nearly 100 years ago, rare then and rare now. Or it might cross Paynes Prairie near Gainesville, 21,000 inland acres of limestone strata sunken between hammocks and pinelands, sometimes a wetland to be enjoyed by canoe or kayak and more often a savanna where alligators sun on creek banks and their cousin fauna of the Pleistocene once grazed.

In describing the wind I may seem to confuse place with condition. To me, however, a sense of the former requires feeling the latter. Geography books discuss Florida's average rainfall and temperatures, but they do not speak of the wind. They should, and not in measures but in sensory experience. In the granite regions of New Hampshire, for example, the summer wind across a lake blows as does the wind in Florida, but it feels different. It blows through the warm unclothed desert of the West, but there too it is different.

In Florida, natural elements such as wind, storms, and sunlight are the sustenance of place and memory. I came to this realization several years ago when I lived in Birmingham, Ala. After driving a few hours south on U.S. 231 and crossing the border at the tidy town of Campbellton, a major thoroughway for auto tourists before the Interstate came, I would see from there on cabbage palms, saw palmettoes, Indian blanket flowers, citrus stands, and familiar names on road signs. But I would not find home until I stopped, stepped out, and felt a light buffeting on the ears and sensed the steady portage of salt and sea life and coolness on the air. My connection to place seems particularly keen on windy nights when I become alert to palm fronds rattling in discordant time with other tree foliage or to clouds like clipperships sailing across the peninsula from the Gulf to the Atlantic. In Gainesville, where I live and am exiled the farthest one can be in the state from open water, the clouds transport me back to my Gulfcoast childhood, when nature first impressed me with its relevance.

I don't recall how that happened or when exactly. What comes to mind is Hurricane Camille and 1969, when my family lived in Fort Walton Beach on the lee side of Santa Rosa Island's Lawrence-of-Arabia-size sand dunes, the finest in the state. I went to bed listening to window sashes thudding in their wooden frames and waiting for the wind outside to say something discernable to me, though I knew not what. Because nothing of consequence happened to us, I can romanticize about that time. I grieve now when someone loses a loved one or home in a storm, and I surely would not want to lose either myself. Still, the transparent yet ominous force on the edges of a tropical storm or hurricane excites me. Maybe this is related to dropping barometric pressure and its effect on the blood coursing through my body and brain. More likely, my response has something to do with extreme weather reminding me that humans are not alone significant, that nature is not passive, that at times it will assert its superiority.

A pounding rainstorm affects me the same way. Nothing is more dramatic than the flash of heavenly light and the explosion of godly thunder. If there are no roof leaks to worry about at home, I let go and surrender readily to the white-noise drum beat on our metal roof and fall into a restful sleep. If I am driving through the Everglades and see a thunder head pulling a sheet of rain across the distance, I cannot go on. A blissful vision lies before me, and I must get out and take it in. However much we humans foul our nest, nature still orchestrates profound beauty. In this instance, with contrasts complementing the beauty, lightning generates not thunder but silence, and the sky behind the dark, moving mass of weather is bright and glorious.

The Everglades are so expansive that multiple meteorological conditions can occur in different places at the same moment. The expanse awaits the eye, lying open to studied or leisurely viewing and, if you wish, to meditation and reflection. On most rainy-season afternoons there occurs the predictable cumulus build up from evaporating wetland and sea water. Anyone intimate with the region calls the resulting formations cloud mountains, ridiculing snobbish northern tourists and transplants who claim Florida has no vertical vista, no upward leap.

There is also what Marjory Stoneman Douglas called the marvelous white light of the subtropics. “No matter what has happened to the state of Florida,” she once said, “the light, thank goodness, they haven’t been able to change.” She found it emotionally uplifting and addictive, as do I. It drew her back to Florida from wherever she was in the world, as it does me.

When I lived beneath inert gray skies in Birmingham, I looked desperately for that light but never found it, not even on sunny days. My longing was such that I contemplated buying a special lamp that might duplicate it. But duplication is not possible. In a smarter move, I bought a house in St. Petersburg even though I continued to work in Birmingham and linger there in a dull little apartment. At every opportunity, I would drive down US 231 and through quiet little Campellton and into the familiar wind, rain, and light.

To my favorite place.



JANET BURROWAY

My favorite piece of Florida is a concrete-block bungalow on the narrow peninsular strip of sand called Alligator Point, on the Gulf half an hour straight south of Tallahassee. The house has three bedrooms, two porches, and a kitchen just big enough for one cook and a four-pound shrimp pot.

In 1973, my first year in Florida, it was my good luck to make friends with the woman who owns this house; and through her generosity it has been my recreation, retreat, and private Yaddo for 37 years. In the early days I used to come down for Sunday afternoon parties full of academics, lawyers, beer, bourbon, and kids with plastic buckets. Once her boys and mine had left home I was often offered the house to write, and when I could I’d bring, first my typewriter, then my computer, and set up on a desk with a view of lantana, sea oats, and infinity. If this occurred on weekdays, I was likely to be the only person on the Point. If there was anyone to speak to, it was no more than a, “Gorgeous weather, eh?” I would breakfast, walk, write, lunch, swim, write, dine, walk, and write.

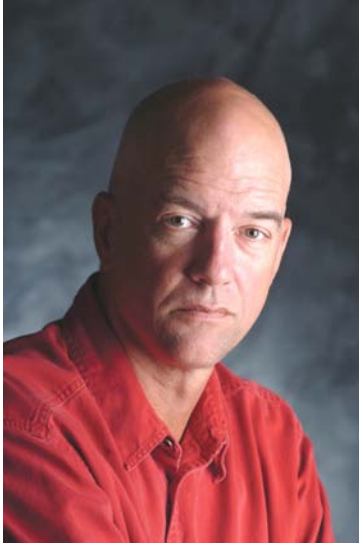
Four days with so little human contact seemed my limit, but for those four days I could feel myself zen-absorbed into the work and the place at once. Sometimes the dolphins patrolled no more than a dozen feet off shore. Sometimes the pelicans would plummet from sky to sea for their supper and my entertainment. One day the sand would be littered with the helmet-shaped shells of horseshoe crabs. A month later the floor of the sea would be paved with sand dollars, fragile discs each with a thousand pulsing hairs. For one whole summer there would be a great blue heron in arrogant residence on the beach. The next year, weekend fishermen would pull up three hammerheads in an afternoon.

These changes had a rhythm at once seasonal and cosmic and capricious. When I came to write *Bridge of Sand*, I based my fictional town on the demographics of East Point and St. George Island 30 miles down the coast—they suited my plot and my theme—but my gut connection to the Gulf, and my awe of it, came from those long days along the Point.

Tallahassee, predictably, over the years doubled in size and then tripled. St. George evolved from a barren beach to a tourist Mecca, bikers’ paradise, and gated community of mansions. On

Alligator Point there was building too, and even a shadow of boom and bust, but the new structures always seemed to be down the shore out of sight, or else they filled in a gap we hadn't noticed between house and house. The sand is unalterably gray. You can't rent a beach chair or a Ski-do or a bicycle. There is no hotel, restaurant, gas, or grocery. Whether there's a road and a 7-11 depends on hurricane season. When you leave, you take your garbage with you.

My friend and I have undergone divorce, remarriage, illness, triumph, grief, joy, aging, mellowing. The house has shifted color in a narrower range, from ochre and putty to khaki and sand. The planks of the deck have been pried up and replaced, the screens renewed. It has AC now, an unimaginable luxury. The surf still pounds in earshot in its implacable, shushing rhythm. We'll still head down this weekend for a four-way-retirees' chat, and with any luck an overabundance of jumbo boil 'n' peel.



JONATHON KING

There is a point on the Loxahatchee River in northern Palm Beach County, at the edge of the Everglades, when time disappears. You ship your paddle and sit in a canoe in the silence of nature; aware only of the cluck of an egret, the burble of water moving over a cypress stump, the kerplunk of a turtle slipping off into the stream off a downed limb. It is a glimpse of ancient Florida, true Florida, rich and untouched Florida. It is a place I love and a place where I plant a recurring protagonist in my books. From here he is called into the urban dramas of our state, and sometimes those dramas visit even his Eden. But to this place both he, and I, always return, for inspiration, for regeneration, and for the foundation that is Florida's alone.



MICHAEL LISTER

Though I love all of Florida and feel truly grateful to have been born and to live here, my favorite Florida place is North Florida.

I've often been called a regional writer, and that really resonates with me because I write not about a central, major city (we have none), but a region—its small towns (*Thunder Beach*), its river swamps (*Double Exposure*), its massive prisons in rural areas (*Power in the Blood*).

There's a certain way of life in North Florida, and it's as different from South Florida living as the North is from the South. In fact, Florida is in many ways a microcosm of the country in reverse, (the north part of the state resembling the south part of the country; the south part of the state resembling the north part of the country).

My Florida is a wild, untamed place—backwoods, dirt roads, untouched, unspoiled, in some ways, unwelcoming. Not unwelcoming enough to those of us who call it home. It's both my natural and spiritual home, and I love it like only a native can.

My Florida is a place of sunshine and shadow, darkness and light, heat and humidity, beauty and danger, a place of crackers and snowbirds, shotgun houses and beachfront mansions—an environment of great risk and great reward.

Amid seemingly endless rows of slash pines, a flat land lined with dirt roads covered by oak tree canopies, the Spanish moss draped over their branches blowing like a lace curtain in a summer breeze, awaits discovery, and like most native peoples, those of us who live here hope it'll stay that way. It's a paradise, unlike the lower parts of the state, still preserved in much of its natural beauty and splendor, an Eden as yet untouched by original sin.

In my John Jordan mystery series (*The Body and the Blood*, *Blood of the Lamb*, etc.) I write about two Floridas—one virtually unknown, the other virtually unseen. The first Florida, the one I was born and raised in, is Gloria Jahoda's "Other Florida," the Panhandle, which, unlike the southern part of the state, remains virtually unknown to most of the world. The second Florida, the one I worked in for nearly a decade is Ted Bundy's hidden Florida, the Florida state Prison system, which remains nearly invisible even to most Floridians. In addition to being the Floridas I know, they are the Floridas I love... and sometimes hate.

One of the writer's jobs is to take his readers on a journey—preferably to a place they have never been, perhaps to a place they will never go. I often take my readers to such a place. I carefully lead them through the electronically locked gates of the chain-link fences, beneath the looping razor wire glinting in the sun, and into the strange world of a Florida State Prison.

This is a Florida unlike any other, where the normal geographical distinction mean nearly nothing, where the predators are far more dangerous than the panthers and alligators that fill our peninsula or the sharks that swim in the waters surrounding it. It's an alien environment where the normal rules and societal conventions don't apply, where a man can get raped for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, killed for little more.

It is in this Florida, more than any other, that culture, class, and race clash and collide in an inescapable cauldron, the heat of which is so intense that it often explodes. Unlike free Florida, the Florida behind the chain-link and razor wire is the same in the north part of the state as it is in the south, and the fragile alliances of the strangest of bedfellows are put to the most rigorous of tests. This Florida has its own rites and rituals, its own unwritten laws and silently agreed upon conventions.

I introduce my readers to inmates, some dangerous, some dainty, and to prison staff, some of whom are capable of as much brutality and incivility and the criminals they keep. This Florida is a study in human nature, a place of revelation for the nature of evil. For a mystery writer there could be no better place, and endless supply of crimes and criminals, of unspeakable acts of cruelty, unexpected acts of kindness, a place of suffering and salvation, retribution and redemption.

It is down these meanest of streets that I send my protagonist, Chaplain John Jordan—who is himself not mean, who, though tarnished and sometimes afraid, is not just the best man in his world, but a good enough man for any world. An ex-cop who still thirsts for justice, as well as strong drink, Jordan solves temporal mysteries while bearing witness to eternal ones. And he, more than any one, can move among both the cops and the criminals using his insight into the nature of humanity to divine the guilty party, the one tree hidden in the forest, which like Poe's Purloined Letter, is cleverly hidden in plain sight.

It is these two Floridas that I inhabit, these two Floridas that occupy my novels, and the longer I live, the more I realize that I didn't choose them so much as they chose me. To me, these are not only the most interesting Floridas, but the most undiscovered Floridas. For these reasons, I'll continue to take my readers down the dark alleys of a prison compound and down the dirt roads of the Panhandle's backwoods, serving as, among other things, tour guide to what seems to me to be the real Florida—or at least the Florida that's as real as it gets.



PETER MEINKE

As you turn south on First Street off 22nd Avenue South in St. Petersburg, you soon go under a large arch mysteriously proclaiming *DRIFTWOOD*. This is the entrance to our neighborhood, Driftwood (the last “D” being covered by a huge bougainvillea winding through an equally oversized sabal palm).

It’s a small, bohemian neighborhood, populated by artists, sculptors, potters, actors, writers, teachers, with the occasional eccentric lawyer and businessman to keep us out of trouble. Turning sharp left after the arch, you drive under interlocked ancient oaks along Wildwood Lane and, on the corner of Wildwood and Bay, arrive at the house that has kept us in Florida for over 40 years.

Right now azaleas, planted from cuttings throughout the decades, surround the house in various shades of pink, purple, red, and white. A crooked brick path leads to the front door of an old English-style cottage, built in the early 1930s; when Jeanne first walked up that path her heart beat so fast she could hardly breathe: I knew we were in trouble.

We were northeasterners by birth and inclination, and had come to St. Petersburg in 1966 to teach at [what was] then Florida Presbyterian College; our plan was to warm up for three years and then return to civilization. The College and St. Petersburg have been wonderful places to us, and for us; but it’s the house that has stopped us from leaving.

A major British poet, Patricia Beer (1923-1999), visited us once. She lived in an 18th-century thatch-covered English cottage in Devon, and as she and her husband sat with us on Wildwood Lane, she told us that she felt as if she had come home, here in America. Pecky cypress beams, original tile floors, brick fireplace, beautiful inefficient casement windows, and two small porches are its most notable attributes. By now there are bookshelves in every room, old wicker furniture, an antique sheriff’s desk, a tiny artist’s studio. The spirit and productions of our family, our four children growing up, and out, are everywhere to be seen and felt.

We’re old now, and tired of many things. But not of our house. They’ll have to carry us out.



TIM DORSEY

My favorite place in the state is the Dry Tortugas—unspoiled natural beauty and makes me feel like I’m in 19th century Florida.