Over an al fresco lunch along Beach Drive in St. Petersburg, Dennis Lehane looks at the scene before him. “What’s not to like?” he enthuses.

The temperature is mild and the view stunning — the sky a clear blue, sailboats bobbing gently in the bay. It is a Chamber of Commerce dream.

The award-winning author has set most of his novels in gritty working-class neighborhoods in his hometown of Boston. But few know that Lehane writes many of those books in the comfort of his home in St. Petersburg’s Historic Old Northeast neighborhood, where he lives part of each year.

“I absolutely love the winters here,” he says.

Choosing to divide time between homes in the Northeast and Tampa Bay is not uncommon. The groundwork for Lehane began
Lehane enumerates some of the many things he likes about the bay area, including the weather, favorite destinations and the fact that he is not the sought-after celebrity he is in his hometown. "I'm more anonymous here and don't tend to get pulled in as many directions like I do in Boston," he says.

Lehane also was a writer on three episodes of The Wire, one of the most critically acclaimed television series of all time. He has written for numerous other film and television projects, and an upcoming series for FX is rumored to be in the works. Not long ago, he beefed up his Hollywood credentials as executive producer on Martin Scorsese's film adaptation of his novel Shutter Island.

He also has an extensive academic career, having taught writing at Harvard and Pine Manor College in Massachusetts. In 2005, he became writer-in-residence at Eckerd College and is co-chairman of its annual Writers in Paradise conference.

In person, Lehane is easygoing and quick to laugh, and his Irish roots have given him the ability to tell a good story as well as write one. It doesn't take long, however, to understand that he is deadly serious about his work. Since his debut novel in 1994, he has published, on average, a book every year-and-a-half, many done while working on other film and television projects.

"I write every day from 7 a.m. until noon," he says, firmly implying that that time in his day is non-negotiable. "It's easier to work here."

Lehane accepts that he has attained a certain celebrity stature in Boston. Living in St. Petersburg provides him more leeway.

"I'm more anonymous here and don't tend to get pulled in as many directions like I do in Boston," he says. "I don't always have to be in my studio and can go write sometimes in a coffee shop or park."

Work aside, Lehane can become emphatic about the other reasons he likes living here.

"In college, I lived at 17th Avenue and First Street and fell in love with the Old Northeast. It's a great neighborhood," he says. He moved back in 2005.

"I love all the cliché things," he says: art museums, parks, playgrounds to take his daughter to everyday, the Chattaway, Elf Cup and Beach Drive, to name a few.

A recent addition to the local community cemented Lehane's connection between the Sunshine City and Beantown.

"The new Dunkin' Donuts on Fourth Street changes everything," he says. "It's a Boston thing. The chain was founded in nearby Quincy."

With no small amount of pride, Lehane says he was the store's second customer. Before that, he drove to outlets throughout Pinellas County. Press him, and he will tell you the distance of each one, down to a tenth of a mile, from his home.

On another matter, he remains coy: "I love the Rays, and what they stand for, and my wife has even accused me of being a closet Rays fan." Then with the skill of a seasoned politician, he declines to answer whom he'll root for when they face the Boston Red Sox.

His experience living in Tampa Bay will manifest itself in his new work. Lehane's next novel, Live by Night, will be released in October and is focused primarily in Florida, specifically Ybor City.

A follow-up to his impasioned historical novel, The Given Day, set during the Boston police strike of 1919, the new novel will center on the rum trade and labor strife in early 20th century Tampa.

How did he settle on the bay area as the backdrop for his book?

Having finished his lunch, Lehane looks out over the water.

"The book decided," he says.