Florida books win PULITZER and EDGAR awards

THE HAUNTING CASE THAT DREW THURGOOD MARSHALL TO FLORIDA
DENNIS LEHANE’S TROPICAL WORKSHOP
A PLACE TO IMAGINE LOST SPANISH GALLEONS
Dennis Lehane developed writing chops in Florida

BY LEE IRBY

A YOUNG MAN COMES TO FLORIDA looking to start over. Things back in Boston haven’t gone exactly as planned. But the kid has faith in himself and can almost feel the renewal offered by the warm sun and the languid skies. In Florida he’ll know no one, and can begin the process of refashioning himself. Maybe, finally, if he gets his act together, he can live up to the promise and show his old man that the years of struggle weren’t in vain.

The above might sound like the plot of Dennis Lehane’s new novel, *Live by Night*, but it also captures, to some degree, the dynamics that brought the author to the Sunshine State in the first place. Lehane is a writer whose association with Boston runs deep, but in his crucial years as a student, before fame ever knew him, Lehane used Florida as a tropical workshop to hone his craft.

Not surprisingly, the main attraction that Florida offered the footloose novelist-to-be was the weather. The decision to head south came at a pivotal time in Lehane’s life. Like many other young people, the future seemed rather fuzzy to him. He had already dropped out of two colleges. In 2012 he told an interviewer with the website *Literary Traveler* that he didn’t know exactly what he wanted to do with his life, because he felt he wasn’t good at anything else except for writing. So writing it would be.

But where? “Once I made the decision to become a writer,” he related in an interview with downtownstpete.com, “I searched out creative writing programs that worked on the workshop system and were south of the Mason-Dixon because I was fed up with the cold. Eckerd College leaped out at me for some reason.”

Waiting for the young writer were Peter Meinke and Sterling Watson, two accomplished authors and gifted teachers who spearheaded Eckerd’s creative writing department. Also awaiting him: a Florida that was struggling to deal with explosive growth, inadequate infrastructure, rampant drug use, and high rates of crime.

For a budding novelist, the perfect laboratory to hone his craft.

Lehane’s Florida experience also coincided with the advent of what has come to be called “Florida Noir,” novels based on the surreal happenings in a state where the unusual was expected. Whether it was the gruesome death of the Everglades, the terrible murders of the fugitive Ted Bundy, or the blood-soaked savagery of the cocaine cowboys, Florida served up spectacle on a nearly daily basis.

By the late 1980s, Lehane was at Miami’s Florida International University, enrolled in its MFA program, headed by a master of Florida Noir, James W. Hall. It would be a propitious matriculation, for Hall allowed Lehane to fuse tightly plotted suspense with street-smart lyricism. While some MFA programs frowned upon commercial endeavors, Hall felt unrestrained by high-brow conventions or what Lehane has derided as “navel-gazing.”

By the time Lehane graduated in the early 1990s, Miami had become its own urban stereotype. Its corpse had already been picked over by countless writers, not to mention Brian DePalma (director of *Scarface*) and Don Johnson (star of TV’s *Miami Vice*). Even though Lehane by then had spent over six years living in Florida, he knew better than to try to become a Florida novelist. What Florida had given him was freedom and perspective, and he used his gifts to re-imagine the city that had raised him, Boston. This artistic choice would make him famous the world over—as his Boston-based novels became bestsellers and were made into major motion pictures.

But Florida never left his blood. He maintained relationships with Eckerd College, where he teamed up with Sterling Watson to create “Writers in Paradise,” a writing workshop held in January that has featured many prize-winning authors. He rented and then purchased a home in St. Petersburg. Got married, had children.

And his interests began to turn to the historical. Here he managed to combine his two homes. *The Given Day* (2008) is an epic that uses the 1919 Boston Police Strike as a backdrop to tell the story of the Coughlin family, the youngest son of which, Joe, appears as the protagonist of
Live by Night. (The last installment of a planned trilogy takes place during World War II.)

The reasons for Joe Coughlin’s relocation to Florida fill up the first third of Live by Night. After serving a stint in a Charlestown prison, he is ordered by his mob boss to Tampa’s Ybor City to take over the rum trade during Prohibition, the details of which Lehane lavishes on the reader.

History in Florida plays tricks on novelists. There are few places in the country where the demarcations between historical epochs stand in such stark relief that the passage of time seems almost haphazard. Explanations are demanded; something must account for the discontinuity, the dislocation. Ybor City had this effect on Lehane. “Most of Florida, a building gets so much as a paint peel, and they knock it down and put up a Hooters,” he told National Public Radio in describing the inspiration for the novel, “but in Ybor they’ve just kept it completely preserved, and it looks exactly like it did back in the 1910s, 1920s, as long as you remove the cars.”

Ultimately, the novelist who uses Florida’s history to fuel the fictive drive is searching for authenticity, which is housed in a distant mist that glints in the little that remains of it. The Florida of the 1920s, which Lehane labors to bring to life, represents a lost world, a pre-Disney, pre-Miami Vice simulacrum that will forever beguile those of us disgusted by the merchandise peddled by the hustlers and hustlers who have poisoned our springs and bulldozed our scrub. And perhaps what Lehane does in Live by Night is pay homage to Florida, where he was allowed to become himself.

Lee Irby teaches history at Eckerd College. He has published three novels and was last seen playing the History Professor in the film Spring Breakers.

---

EXCERPT FROM:

LIVE BY NIGHT

By Dennis Lehane

SOME YEARS LATER, ON A TUGBOAT IN THE GULF OF MEXICO, Joe Coughlin’s feet were placed in a tub of cement. Twelve gunmen stood waiting until they got far enough out to sea to throw him overboard, while Joe listened to the engine chug and watched the water churn white at the stern. And it occurred to him that almost everything of note that had ever happened in his life—good or bad—had been set in motion the morning he first crossed paths with Emma Gould.

They met shortly after dawn in 1926, when Joe and the Bartolo brothers robbed the gaming room at the back of an Albert White speakeasy in South Boston. Before they entered it, Joe and the Bartolos had no idea the speakeasy belonged to Albert White. If they had, they would have beat a retreat in three separate directions to make the trail all the harder to follow.

They came down the back stairs smoothly enough. They passed through the empty bar area without incident. The bar and casino took up the rear of a furniture warehouse along the waterfront that Joe’s boss, Tim Hickey, had assured him was owned by some harmless Greeks recently arrived from Maryland. But when they walked into the back room, they found a poker game in full swing, the five players drinking amber Canadian from heavy crystal glasses, a gray carpet of cigarette smoke hanging overhead. A pile of money rose from the center of the table.

Not one of the men looked Greek. Or harmless. They had hung their suit jackets over the backs of their chairs, which left the guns on their hips exposed. When Joe, Dion, and Paolo walked in with pistols extended, none of the men went for the guns, but Joe could tell a couple were thinking about it.

A woman had been serving drinks to the table. She put the tray aside, lifted her cigarette out of an ashtray and took a drag, looked about to yawn with three guns pointed at her. Like she might ask to see something more impressive for an encore.

From Live by Night © 2012 by Dennis Lehane
Michael Grunwald
Gold Medal, General Nonfiction

Now a senior national correspondent for TIME Magazine, Michael Grunwald is a veteran reporter who honed his craft on the Boston Globe and the Washington Post. While in the Post's New York bureau, Grunwald wrote the lead story about the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks.

He joined TIME in September 2007, and has written cover stories on topics ranging from the future of California to the future of the Republican Party.

The New New Deal is the Harvard graduate's second book. It reveals the story behind President Obama’s $800-billion stimulus bill, which the author views as one of the most important pieces of legislation in American history, as well as being one of the most misunderstood.

He lives in South Beach with his wife, two children, and a Boston terrier named Candy.

"Florida is still a scam, Ponzi scheme, a fever dream where we’re perpetually eating our golden goose. We're still governed by liars who do all they can to make paradise unattractive and uncompetitive. But it's still paradise. I still love it."

—MICHAEL GRUNWALD

William A. Link
Silver Medal, General Nonfiction

William A. Link’s book does what many in the immediate post–World War II generation would like to do: define their parents’ role as part of the Greatest Generation and contemplate how it influenced the succeeding generation.

In the cleverly titled Links, he has written an unsentimental biography of his mother, a social activist, and father, an acclaimed historian. The North Carolina couple moved north, abandoning the quiet, small-town South for a new life entirely.

Link, himself an accomplished and award-winning historian, puts his parents’ lives in the context of a world-changing era whose elements included World War II, the coming of integration, and the Cold War.

A professor for 23 years at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro, Link specialized in North Carolina history, the history of the American South, and 20th-century American history.

He currently is the Richard J. Milbauer Professor of History at the University of Florida.

Tracy Crow
Bronze Medal, General Nonfiction

A former United States Marine Corps officer, Tracy Crow tells new writers to pour emotion into their work and to cultivate relentless determination.

"If I have any advice, it’s to get a little angry. Nobody but you is really going to care whether you ever publish a book, so you have to care a great deal,” Crow told r.k.v.r.y. Quarterly Literary Journal.

Eyes Right: Confessions of a Woman Marine is, as the title suggests, Crow’s memoir. It is far-reaching, telling how a troubled teen rose above her difficulties to become a military journalist and public affairs officer while dealing constantly with gender inequity and harassment. Moments of tragedy and humor abound as does high drama when Crow is court-martialed for conduct unbecoming an officer.

An Eckerd College assistant professor of writing and journalism, Crow also advises the student newspaper. The Current has been judged Florida’s best college newspaper by the Florida College Press Association and recently won a Mark of Excellence Award for Best College Newspaper and Best College Website for small schools in the Southeast.