

Introduction

Jim Ross

Florida is a land of seekers. People come here for fortune, love, respite, entertainment, natural beauty. They long for a fresh start, or at least a recharged battery, and Florida promises to deliver. Witness the Disney commercials on TV or the online advertisements from residential retirement communities. It's great down here! Just get yourself on a plane or point your car south on the interstate. The Sunshine State will take care of the rest.

The essays in this collection slip beneath the surface of those promises and examine the reality. What do seekers find once they cross the Florida line? It's usually something they didn't expect.

These essays provide a Florida take on universal themes: the urge to leave home and start anew, the struggle to build a life in a different place, the clarity that the natural world can provide. The personal experiences differ, of course, but they point to this truth: The places where we live, or visit, inevitably put their stamp on us. "A place become us and we become that place," as essayist Susannah Rodríguez Drissi puts it.

When readers encounter a collection of Florida essays they might expect a bazaar of the bizarre. You may have seen "Florida Man" on Twitter and marveled at the weird crime that happens here. You likely have laughed at the work of Dave Barry and Carl Hiaasen. And it's true: Florida's zany politicians, miscreants, and wildlife often defy belief. I have written many crazy Florida tales during a 28-year newspaper career here. In the early 1990s I wrote about a man who showed up for his Citrus County court hearing wearing a T-shirt that depicted bikini-clad women standing in the bed of a pickup truck. Underneath the picture was the caption "Haulin' Ass." The

judge, not amused, found the man guilty of contempt of court and sentenced him to 10 days in jail. Years later, racy T-shirt man ran for Congress. This being Florida, the only surprise was that he lost.

This collection features different kinds of stories. These essays, all but two previously published in literary journals and magazines, examine the quiet, private, personal moments that play out in the Sunshine State. No hanging chads or pages ripped from a *Miami Vice* script. Taken together, they help us better understand a state that is so diverse and full of contradictions that it defies easy classification.

Florida is a paradise in the marketing materials, but also a dangerous place to live, as Corey Ginsberg discovered as she fought to make her home in a crime-pocked neighborhood. It's a natural wonder, but also imperiled, as Lucy Bryan saw firsthand when she joined a student group on an environmental service trip in Apalachicola. It's a haven to immigrants but can't satisfy all of their yearnings, as Drissi realized when she arrived in Miami.

"Something constantly threatens to be out of control here," Lisa Roney writes in her essay. All Florida residents, and a good many visitors, know exactly what she means.

Yet despite its dangers, Florida also is a place of unexpected riches. Watch Sarah Fazeli come to Disney as a young woman to work as a character and receive life-changing advice from Merlin (yes, really). For Lauren Groff, a transplant from the Northeast, the life and work of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings provide a welcome guide to her new home. "Marjorie found a way to let Florida bloom into something magnificent inside of her. I am still struggling to do so," Groff writes in one of two brilliant essays republished in these pages.

This collection features essays from two kinds of authors. Most, like me, grew up elsewhere (the Chicago suburbs, in my case), came to Florida as adults to live or visit, and then wrote about their experiences. Some pieces are from authors who were born in Florida or grew up here, left, then returned as adults to live or visit.

Many of us have struggled to understand what we found when we arrived (or returned) here. Reading these essays from my fellow transplants and travelers makes me feel less alone on the journey. The essays also remind me how much my adopted home state has shaped me. I hope you enjoy these very real stories about life in this very real, and very special, state.