


Women of Florida Fiction

**Essays on 12
Sunshine
State Writers**

Edited by
Tammy Powley and
April Van Camp



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and APRIL VAN CAMP



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Preface

TAMMY POWLEY

My thoughts turned to Florida female writers after I attended the 2011 Florida College English Association Conference (FCEA) in Melbourne, Florida. At the conference, I sat in on a number of presentations about the works of Florida author Karen Russell. The specific presentations included "For the Love of the Place: A Look at Karen Russell's Characterization and Setting in South Florida" by Lori Cornelius; "Telling Human Lies: Domesticating the Werewolf in Karen Russell's *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*" by Douglas Ford; and "Egdon Heath's Evil Cousin" by Rich McKee. So far, Russell has published two major works, the novel *Swamp-landia!* and a collection of short stories, *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*. A basic explanation of her subject matter is fantasy, some of which is mixed with a dash of Florida style settings. At least, that is what I took away from the conference until I read some of her work. Though this genre seemed outside of my normal comfort zone for reading, which includes a mix of Southern literature and classic Victorian works, I was intrigued and a little surprised that I had not heard of her novel or this author before. I wanted to find out more about her work, and while I was at it, I became curious about other Florida writers who might be out there ready for me to discover and add to my ever-growing reading list.

After providing myself with some immediate gratification of Russell's works via Amazon's Kindle listings, I moved on to Google the key words "Florida fiction writers." I was directed to a list on Amazon.com of "Top Florida Novels." This list included 17 novels, all written by men, and most were detective or mystery novels. Almost a year later, I repeated this search, just out of curiosity, and this same search string brought up a similar list

on Amazon.com. This time the list was entitled "Florida Fiction's best: some established authors and some new authors." This list includes seven books, all written by men. More than likely their names are familiar: Carl Hiaasen, Randy Wayne White, Robert Tacoma, Tom Corcoran, James O. Born, James W. Hall, and Dave Barry.

During my initial research, the more lists I checked and the more I drilled through Google links I wondered: Where were the women? I did find some who had written fiction pieces located in Florida, but the authors themselves were not Floridians. Additionally, I had to wade through a plethora of self-published authors who now are often merged in Amazon.com lists as well as other areas of the Internet, and I found it tricky to cull them. Of course, eventually, after much web searching, Zora Neale Hurston and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings appeared, but I was still unable to find much as far as contemporary female writers from Florida. Plus, because of Russell's use of Florida-style settings, I was curious about female writers from Florida who actually placed their stories in the state. I moved onto Facebook and posted a simple question to my friends: Do you know of any female fiction writers who either are from Florida or live in Florida? My luck began to change, and a few of my bookish friends started answering. I also started finding more leads by searching through on-line library catalogs, and I read through Florida university and college writing program web sites for professors who are published authors, looking specifically for novelists versus poets and authors who are Florida residents and who are writing about Florida.

As I started compiling a preliminary list of my own, I wondered: Why are none of these women's works included on Amazon's "Florida Fiction's Best" list? Is there anything distinctive about being a Florida writer in the first place, let alone a female fiction writer from Florida? Is this list simply created because these books sell well, and if so, why are these books representative of Florida's best-selling fiction?

At this stage, I began to read Karen Russell's short story collection, *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*, and I also started talking about Russell and my research on female Florida fiction writers to my friend and colleague Dr. April Van Camp, which of course, produced more questions: What sort of relationships do we see between these authors and their works, especially those set in Florida? Do these works have any distinctly female elements to them? Where do the works and the authors belong in the general literary canon as well as in the Florida literary canon?

Our questions and my earlier research initiated a fairly comprehensive list. There did not seem to be a huge number of female Florida authors, so we just added everyone at first. We even included authors on this list who were merely part-time residents but were also established in Florida's canon, such as Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and Elizabeth Bishop. However, while there is still plenty to discuss when it comes to these authors, we were more interested in writers whose works had acquired little or no critical research. An academic database search will invariably bring up plenty of secondary source material about Rawlings, but what about Russell? Even though Karen Russell has become the darling of the current literary world, giving interviews to various media such as the magazine *Poets & Writers* and even receiving an enthusiastic endorsement from Carl Hiaasen, there is still little academic source material about her work. Instead, databases include biographical information and book reviews. Of course, thanks to the three presenters at the 2011 FCEA conference, this has started to change, and that is what I wanted to continue to do, for Russell and other contemporary women writers from Florida.

Sorting through the list was our next step. We decided the scope of the project would include female Florida authors whose fiction, at least some of it, is set in Florida. A dozen authors made the final list for *Women of Florida Fiction: Essays on 12 Sunshine State Writers*.

Introduction

APRIL VAN CAMP

The pursuit of Florida's feminine fiction is not a vain venture, and the question that initiated the search—In a collection of Florida literature, where are all the women?—is no longer difficult to answer. Florida's women writers are writing. Perhaps their anonymity or at least their dwarfed presence on the Internet and in critical work occurs because they are not solely writers, but they are also teachers, insurance underwriters, international travelers, conference speakers, wives, partners, moms, grandmothers, daughters, and mentors. In other words, Florida women writers are doing a whole lot of what all women do: multiple jobs! Like many women who have what my mother calls "too many irons in the fire," Florida writers use their busy lives, their colorful pasts, their hopeful futures, and their pressing deadlines as muses, including family, friends, and personal fantasies in their fiction. While this method may provide fodder for stories, it does not necessarily make time for writing or for self-promotion. Still, these women write. They write gritty/romantic, down home/up town, backwoods/big city, fiery/cold-blooded, kindhearted/mean-spirited, and sometimes downright dirty descriptions of Florida landscapes, its myriad of natives, neighbors, and transplants, and its beautiful, bizarre, allure to the retired, the reclusive, and the repugnant. Like Eve in God's Garden, Florida women writers point directly at the snake as well as the tree of life, reminding us of the peril in Paradise.

Since these women's works are so direct, so viable, so intriguing, why are there so few critical essays written about their fiction? Is there a prevailing arrogance among academia that dismisses popular fiction, and if so, what are the criteria for dismissal and admission? These questions also

focused our work on *Women of Florida Fiction*, but many times, questions lead to more questions, more challenges, and—at the very least—some historical musing.

Book clubs were prolific in previous decades. When the Book-of-the-Month Club was in its heyday, 1930s through 1950s and fairly strong through the 1970s—it could create sales in the hundreds of thousands by selecting a book. Just mentioning a book in its news bulletin would often result in tens of thousands in sales. Something happened to book sales since the era of the clubs. Maybe it was the Internet—among other things. Did this club and others slight female authors, or were there just too few females writing? Men did sit on the selection committees in large numbers. Ironically, the feminist movement became prominent about the time that the book clubs were beginning their death march. Any connection? It is difficult to see any, but perhaps our vision is obstructed because the social changes are too big to be visible in small-scale things like books. Books ride on a social sea that is much bigger than individual works or authors.

Today, the clubs are gone in comparative influence although Oprah and others still maintain the tradition, as Connie May Fowler will attest. Reading habits in general change throughout the years. What are people reading today? Are women writing these popular, contemporary works, or are women writing other kinds of stories? Certainly, some women are feeding into the mainstream literary tastes. Still, if some critics and theorists are correct, women writers should—rather—be serving some more significant and exalted feminine tastes. Is there an audience with a desire for such literature large enough to support its writers? Jane Austen was one of the first great writers to face the wrath of more radical feminists because she seems to cater to backward—male—values and is too acquiescent to conventional social norms. Where do today's Florida women writers fall? Are they unique, overflowing with a specifically feminist critique of society, or do they simply happen to be female—like Austen? Scholars want to know. Floridians want to know. Students need to know. Hopefully, these questions throw down a gauntlet and provoke a larger, more intense conversation, one that can comprise another edition by other interesting and interested writers.

If Florida's women writers are doing something special, maybe they will need to develop a following like Zora Neale Hurston did after her death. Her disciples brought her back and into the literary canon. Without them, her unusual style would have kept her out of the mainstream—a

painful, frightening thought—a loss too agonizing to consider—and, to belabor the medieval metaphor, a challenge that calls for a champion.

Zora Neale Hurston, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, and Elizabeth Bishop fit neatly into the category of Florida's literary elite, and clearly, their talent as well as their readership has made this so. When does a piece of fiction cross the arbitrary, imaginary line between interpretive and escape literature? Does it occur at its birth, or does it cross over to the holy land at the author's death? Hopefully not! This book addresses living authors, none of whom are willing to die to ensure canonization. I will pull a Jennine Capó Crucet switch in point of view here (albeit poorly done and with apologies, Jennine): I do not think so. I think a work's significance is more aligned with quantum physics. In an unashamed and over simplified explanation, I think a good work by a good writer becomes both literary and commercial at the moment we readers acknowledge the work. Paying attention has much to do with valuing and creating value. *Women of Florida Fiction* is a book of literary criticism and more. Literary criticism can devolve into gratuitous attacks and faultfinding; conversely, it can become hagiography, shameless glorification. Then, too, it can become theoretical analysis that forgets literature is a pleasure, a joy, an entertainment, not merely a text for scholars to deconstruct. Our literary critics approached our Florida authors' works with reverence, and their respect shows in the essays. A number of the writers find psychoanalytic insights and others use an expository approach, analyzing character and Florida settings. Other contributors discuss gender, race, and Florida's diaspora. Still others concentrate on Florida as symbol and myth. Everyone knows that there is a hype, something that draws tourists and retirees to Florida, but rarely does hype match the reality. Perhaps Florida illustrates this in the extreme. At least, some of our essayists suggest this is so. Together, these essays comprise the first critical anthology of current Florida female fiction writers.

Angela Tenga, Jill C. Jones, and Sarah M. Mallonee's essays examine connections between their Florida authors and the Southern Gothic tradition. Their tendency to make comparisons between Flannery O'Connor and their authors' works suggests something about the depth and significance of these Florida authors. Similarly, Tammy Powley uses Jane Austen as a jumping point for her comparison, demonstrating author Angela Hunt's successful use of Austen's formula for a romance novel. My own essay fits neatly into this grouping as well since I discuss the value of Aristotelian comedic relief in Elizabeth Stuckey-French's dark novels. This is

high praise for our current authors and an indication of a hopeful literary future.

Although Valerie E. Kasper uses a Toni Morrison essay to launch her own analysis of Mary Jane Ryals's novel, a comparison does not drive her thesis. Like Camila Alvarez and Jane Anderson Jones, Kasper is more interested in racial tensions, ethnic roots, and the meaning of home. Alvarez and Jones's tendency to make biographical connections between text and author remind us that a body of work is the work of a body, a person. Their essays contend that being at home in Florida and feeling at home in Florida are not always the same.

Florida as symbol and myth is the subject of Claudia S. Slate, Lisa K. Perdigao, Lori Cornelius, Wendy Dwyer, and Beate Rodewald's essays. Their works suggest that Florida is a creation, a product of the stories told about the state, its history, and its people. Their comments remind of the serious implications that accompany storytelling, with its ability to liberate and bind those lives whose narratives are told by others. Maxine Lavon Montgomery and Tammy Powley also discuss the paradox of Florida, but they do so in terms of setting. For Montgomery, Florida provides Heidi Boehringer's protagonist the opportunity to "venture into the unexplored, uncharted margins of life—the forbidden wild side," while Powley's assessment of Karen Russell's Florida is like "a fun-house mirror that shows a distorted image which is unpleasant, even a little disturbing."

As co-editors of this volume, Tammy Powley and I shared the task of writing the chapter introductions to each author. Tammy introduces Karen Russell, Elizabeth Stuckey-French, Lynne Barrett, Janis Owens, Angela Hunt, and Ana Menéndez, while I introduce Jennine Capó Crucet, Connie May Fowler, Heidi Boehringer, Edna Buchanan, Vicki Hendricks, and Mary Jane Ryals. I had the pleasure of conducting all of the author interviews.

Women of Florida Fiction is about pausing for those people who are important in life, a genuine curtsy—rarely performed in this contentious world—to those in whom we see worth. It is a book about honoring women who write fiction, who write about fiction, and who read fiction. It is a book about sisterhood and scholarship that defies the vicious stereotypes of competition and the divisive verdicts between those who can and cannot write. It is a book about beginnings and foundations, for the essays in this book beg for those who agree, disagree, argue, and defy to continue writing and contributing to the body of critical work. It is also a call to Florida fiction writers—both published and unpublished—to keep writing.

Beyond all the relational reasons for *Women of Florida Fiction*, it is a book that provides a permanent record of critical data on current Florida women writers. Internet sources are useful, but they are mutable and fleeting. Online biographies, interviews, magazine, and newspaper articles frequently disappear or change before a critical piece can be published using such sources. This collection of critical work is a stable source, so Florida Studies teachers have a textbook that allows them to expand their syllabi. Literature teachers have an anthology that gives them options for assigning contemporary Florida novels. The public readership has a resource to explore thematic and theoretical underpinnings in their reading material. Equally important, we hope the book creates a relationship between the authors and critics that will give our Florida women writers as much attention and admiration as Florida male writers.

Karen Russell

A simple search on the Internet using the keywords “Karen Russell” turns up a plethora of blog posts, author interviews, and book reviews. Since publication of her first collection of short stories, *St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves* in 2006, author Karen Russell has been as popular with the press as she is with her readership and was included in *The New Yorker’s* “20 under 40” list of fiction writers in 2010. She has also won the *Transatlantic Review/Henfield Foundation Award* in 2005; she was a National Book Foundation “5 Under 35” honoree in 2009; she won the Bard fiction prize in 2011; she was awarded the Mary Ellen von der Heyden Berlin Prize and Fellow, American Academy in Berlin in 2012; and in 2012 she also was a nominee for the Pulitzer Prize in fiction (“Karen Russell”).

Russell attended Northwestern University where she studied Spanish and graduated with a BA in 2003. She went on to turn her attention to creative writing and earn her MFA at Columbia University in 2006. During her last year at Columbia, she submitted her first story for publication to *The New Yorker*, which accepted “Haunting Olivia” in 2005 (Loeb). This story later was republished in *St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*. After that first story was published, she continued to write short fiction pieces and has since been published again in *The New Yorker* as well as in other literary magazines such as *Zoetrope*, *Conjunctions*, *The Best American Short Stories*, *Granta*, and *Oxford American* (“Karen Russell”).

Following the publication of her short story collection, Karen Russell’s next book-length work was a novel called *Swamplandia!* The basis of the narrative for this first novel came from her short story entitled “Ava Wrestles the Alligator,” a story about a young girl who is left by her family to