

JOURNAL OF FLORIDA STUDIES

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF THE IDEA AND PLACE THAT IS FLORIDA

Volume 1, Issue 3, Spring 2014

Book Review

***Finding Florida: The True History of the Sunshine State,*
T.D. Allman**

***Devil in the Grove: Thurgood Marshall, the Groveland Boys, and the Dawn of a New America,*
Gilbert King**

Craig Pittman, *Tampa Bay Times*

When a reader picks up a book that's been labeled non-fiction, he or she is entering into an implied contract with the book's author and its publisher. The author and publisher are offering the reader a guarantee that this book contains facts, not fiction, and that those facts have been researched and verified. The reader who buys this book may thus safely rely on those facts in shaping his or her view of the world. Otherwise the label of "non-fiction" means nothing.

Of course, because authors are humans and not robots, some errors will creep in. As an author, I have to confess that some errors slipped by me with my books. For instance, in my last book, *The Scent of Scandal*, I wrote that Goldvein, Va., was 15 miles from Richmond. It's actually about 70 miles. The publisher will put the correct distance in the next edition of the book. Fortunately, that's not the type of error that altered the shape or meaning of the story.

In 2012 and 2013, two new non-fiction books about Florida were published to great acclaim. Both garnered national attention—one with rave reviews in the *New York Times* and other major publications, the other by winning a Pulitzer Prize and a movie contract. Although the two books feature some similar themes, their authors took differing approaches to gathering the facts, and I believe that made a difference.

The one that received the most attention was *Finding Florida: The True History of the Sunshine State* by T.D. Allman. The book, published in early 2013, is intended as a review of Florida history with a particular emphasis on racial issues through the centuries.

Kirkus Reviews, in a starred review, called it “a rich and lively history of Florida, minus the Disney gloss” and commended Allman because he “shatters five centuries of mythmaking to tell the real story.” The book received glowing reviews in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Daily Beast*. Allman even penned an op-ed column about Florida for the *Times*. He was interviewed on C-SPAN’s Book TV. NPR Books ran an excerpt. It was a remarkable outpouring of acclaim.

Yet the author contended his work merited even greater attention: “Allman, no shrinking violet, e-mailed me from Cambodia to suggest that *Finding Florida* 'is the most important book on Florida

readers are likely to encounter,’ ” Mark Pinsky wrote in the *Orlando Weekly*.

Amid this hoopla, a press release included in the book’s advance publicity raised a question: “It will be interesting to see if Florida’s academic, journalistic, community, and business groups are willing to give the book the same respect and attention it is getting in California and New York.” Sure enough, the one place where Allman’s book received less-than-glowing reviews were in Florida’s newspapers. Florida historians who reviewed the book in the *Tampa Bay Times*, the *Miami Herald*, and the *Orlando Sentinel* slammed it. They noted his odd omissions—for instance, there’s no mention at all of the many efforts to drain the Everglades, or of World War II, a crucial event that forever changed the state. The historians all pointed out that Allman had made a surprisingly large number of factual errors. A *Lakeland Ledger* columnist who read the book strongly urged readers to skip Allman’s book and instead buy

more reliable Florida books, a list of which he thoughtfully included.

The roll call of Allman errors is a long one, covering fields ranging from biology to geology to geography. He writes that Seminole Indians once lived on the land where Walt Disney built his theme park when they did not. He blames promoter Walter Fraser for creating St. Augustine's phony Fountain of Youth attraction when that was actually the handiwork of mythmaker Louella McConnell. He writes that "Palms...are not native to Florida," when the Florida silver palm, the Keys thatch palm, and the sabal palm—the state tree—are all natives. He wrote that "Rita Mae Brown had become the most successful Florida-born author since Zora Neale Hurston," but Hurston was born in Alabama and Brown was born in Pennsylvania. Allman wrote of the condominiums lining the Panhandle beaches that, "When the killer hurricanes of the early 2000s struck, many of these monstrosities became high-rise death traps." Hurricanes Dennis, Jeanne, Frances, and Ivan killed

Floridians with falling trees, crashing cars, and high water, but no one was killed by a collapsing condo.

Many of his mistakes undercut the very point Allman is trying to make. He writes that there is no "statue, monument or park" in St. Augustine to commemorate Spanish explorer Pedro Menéndez de Avilés in the city he founded. Actually there's a statue of the founder right in front of City Hall, and the conquistador's birthday is celebrated every year with a big costume party called the *Menéndez Noche de Gala*.

In his description of Tampa in the 1920s and 1930s, Allman writes: "In one of the more exotic examples of Florida hybridization, the Ku Klux Klan made common cause with the Mafiosi, dominated by the notorious Trafficante crime family. Tampa's Anglo elite used both organizations to break unions, terrorize blacks, keep the cigar workers in Ybor City in line—and limit Tampa's possibilities." On its face, that seems illogical. The

Mafia was made up of Italian Catholics—a group the Klan hated with a passion. In his book's footnotes, Allman cites Gary Mormino's *The Immigrant World of Ybor City* and Scott Deitch's *Cigar City Mafia*, the definitive history of the Mob in Tampa. Both authors say Allman got his facts wrong. "I never came across any mention of a connection between the KKK and the Trafficantes," says Scott Deitch, author of *Cigar City Mafia*. "Sounds like a real stretch."

Allman's footnotes are, in general, somewhat sketchy. Little there indicates he did any original research for a book that he has said took him six years to write. Instead, he cites numerous secondary sources. In an April 2013 interview with WLRN-FM in Miami, Allman told the radio hosts, "I say proudly I did no primary research in this book. It's all on second." When one host pressed him to explain, Allman said, "The problem isn't that Florida doesn't have good historians. It's that what they write is always shoved under the carpet." Pressed further to

point out the patch of carpet where he found all these hidden history books, Allman replied, "You just walk in every library and they're there." Yet some of those same historians that Allman relied upon for his research are the ones who say he messed up the story. The irony inherent in all this is hard to ignore: Allman's book, which is supposed to expose Florida's secret history, is based entirely on previously published books that he says are available in every library in Florida.

One example neatly illustrates this: The Reconstruction-era governor Ossian Hart, whom Allman told WLRN listeners had been "erased from history," was the subject of a well-researched and well-written biography by historian Canter Brown, published in 1997. Brown's biography of Hart was very warmly reviewed when it first hit shelves. You don't have to lift a carpet to find it. It's for sale on Amazon for less than \$10. Allman must have found a copy—he cites it as a source.

When Allman's book was first published, I picked up a copy and thumbed through it, immediately stumbling across several erroneous statements. Later, I learned that *Tampa Bay Times* colleague, Jeff Klinkenberg, who writes the "Real Florida" column, had a similar experience. So we teamed up to write a list of the 10 most glaring errors. Allman—who had already tried to persuade the *Tampa Bay Times'* book editor not to run a negative review of his book by Gary Mormino—did not take our criticism very well either. When we sought his response to our list, he sent us a two-page letter and demanded the newspaper publish it in its entirety. Instead we published an excerpt, but we did post the entire letter along with the online version of our story.

A year later, when his book came out in paperback, he was still fuming about it, telling a reporter for the alternative weekly newspaper *Creative Loafing*: "Their behavior has been unethical, disgraceful, vindictive and dishonest." However, it is worth

noting that Allman's book was long-listed for a National Book Award—until the judges read the reviews by the Florida historians and our top-10 list of his errors. After that it was dropped from further consideration.

Contrast this, then, with what happened with *Devil in the Grove: Thurgood Marshall, the Groveland Boys, and the Dawn of a New America* by Gilbert King. King's book, published in 2012, re-visits a divisive civil rights case in Lake County that began in 1949 when four black men (the "Groveland Boys") were falsely accused of raping a white woman. It's a complicated story involving not only blatant cover-ups, Klan violence, and the cold-blooded murder of a prisoner by Sheriff Willis V. McCall, but also the tangled courtroom drama that brought NAACP special counsel Thurgood Marshall to Groveland.

The Christian Science Monitor and *Library Journal* picked King's book as one of the best of the year, but unlike Allman's book, King's

publication merited no attention in the *New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal*. The only Florida newspaper to review it was the *Florida Times-Union* of Jacksonville, which praised it. Then, last year, the Pulitzer judges awarded it the prize for general non-fiction. King said when he got the call about the Pulitzer, he had just learned his publisher was about to remainder the book because it had sold so poorly. The Pulitzer judges called the book “a richly detailed chronicle of racial injustice.” The prize brought more than just the \$10,000 cash award. King’s sales shot through the roof and the movie rights were sold.

In his book King, who attended the University of South Florida and now lives in New York, does a masterly job of resurrecting and dissecting one of the most important civil rights cases in Florida history. Known as “the Groveland case,” it involved a falsified rape accusation, a shaky frame-up, Klan violence, bombings, political expedience that winked at racism and, most stunning of all, what can only be

called officially sanctioned murder by one of the most brutally murderous sheriffs in the history of the South. Thurgood Marshall, then working for the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund, took the case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, and saw it through to its conclusion despite at least one attempt on his life.

King doesn't hold back on the drama, as when the Lake County sheriff, Willis McCall, kills one defendant and tries to kill another—who miraculously lives to tell what happened. Nor does he neglect the details about how the case changed attitudes, even among the people who initially were quick to condemn the falsely accused men. And he doesn't shy away from depicting the flaws in his hero, Thurgood Marshall, presenting a fully rounded portrait of the man who, through his dogged pursuit of criminal and civil cases of injustice, may have done more to end segregation than anyone else. The story he tells is as compelling as fiction, but given

far greater moral weight because it's labeled as non-fiction.

Unlike Allman's tome, *Devil in the Grove* is based on diligent reporting and extensive research into both primary and secondary sources. In addition to interviewing the survivors, going through the old court records and reading copious newspaper coverage, King used the Freedom of Information Act to gain access to the FBI's unredacted Groveland case files. He also was able to persuade NAACP Legal Defense Fund officials to give him unprecedented access to their files on the case. Those rich and varied sources make all the difference in King's ability to tell his story.

However, even King has a detractor—just one, but an authoritative one. One of the central events of King's book is the death of Harry T Moore, the first civil rights martyr in the nation's history (and yet a character who is unaccountably absent from Allman's book). The bombing of Moore's house on Christmas Day

1951, during the ongoing investigation of the Groveland case, killed both Moore and his wife Henrietta. The crime remains officially unsolved. King explores potential connections to the whites who were terrorizing the black families in and around Groveland. One of King's sources is Ben Green's 1999 biography of Moore, *Before His Time: The Untold Story of Harry T. Moore, America's First Civil Rights Martyr*. Green reviewed King's book for the *Florida Historical Quarterly*, and while he said it "may teach the historical importance of the Groveland case to a wider audience," he nevertheless found it fell short of his standards as a historian. Green pointed out what he regarded as factual mistakes by King. For instance, King wrote that from 1900-1930, Florida had more lynchings than any other state. Green noted that in fact Florida had the highest *per capita* rate of lynchings, but numerically, Mississippi and Georgia had more actual lynchings. King's book puts Moore at a rally at the Mount Zion

Baptist Church in Miami that Green says the civil rights activist missed.

What bothered Green more, though, was what he called the “use of two popular, yet annoying, techniques in contemporary non-fiction: (1) attributing words, thoughts, and feelings to historical figures in dramatized scenes; and (2) making claims of ‘historical fact’ based on a single source or opinion without acknowledging contradictory sources or opinions.”

The second habit was what bothered Green the most: “Too often, King issues sweeping certitudes with none of the standard qualifiers: ‘allegedly,’ ‘reportedly,’ or ‘according to.’ This is particularly suspect with the Groveland case because, even today, no one knows what really happened that July night in 1949, on an isolated country road between Groveland and Okahumpka.”

King had not seen Green’s review when it first appeared, so I sent it to him for his reaction. He wrote me back: “In any reexamination of a complex legal case such as

Groveland, there are certain to be events or incidents that are interpreted differently by historians, especially as new primary sources become available. Indeed, the authors of a lynching study had already pointed out the statistical error Ben mentions, (the error also appears in the source I cited in my notes: Chapter 8, Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, Random House, 2010, p. 320) and it is slated for correction in future printings of *Devil in the Grove*). Ben and I do not agree on the date of the Mt. Zion meeting in Miami and whether Harry T. Moore was present. No new ground is being claimed in my book by placing Moore in Miami, as acclaimed civil rights scholar, Dr. Patricia Sullivan, in her book, also states that Moore attended the Mt. Zion meeting in Miami. (*Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement*, The New Press, 2009, p. 413).”

Then King addresses Green’s larger point: “*Devil in the Grove* is a work of narrative non-fiction and, as Ben undoubtedly knows from his own work, an author will confront

competing interpretations of events during one's years of research and investigation. Thus, the book's attention to rather extensive notes and sourcing are included to aid both the casual reader and the historian. Rather than selectively choosing pet theories to paint any particular figures favorably or negatively, all the versions and theories Ben lists in his review were given careful consideration....Ben's frustrations with narrative non-fiction notwithstanding, I emphatically stand by my narrative choices, research, and the rendering of the Groveland events described in *Devil in the Grove*."

So who did a better job of keeping their contract with the reader: Allman, whose work is impassioned and wide-ranging, but who stumbled repeatedly into obvious errors? Or King, who tells a compelling and important story, but does so by leaving out conflicting testimony and theories in order to present a more coherent narrative?

That's a question that readers will have to answer for themselves. Personally, I lean toward King's approach as being the one that comes closer to meeting the requirements of being called "non-fiction." Both point up the difficulties of trying to stay faithful to the facts while telling a good story. As an author, I can tell you that the hardest part about non-fiction isn't writing the story—it's marshalling all the facts.

And that's the truth.