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Florida may be wacky but it's ours

Craig Pittman, who penned popular book on weird Florida, joins other authors at the Southwest Florida Reading Festival. BY GLENN MILLER Florida Weekly Correspondent



Author Craig Pittman arrived without his machete for a Florida Weekly interview at a Panera Bread plopped down in a patch of Pinellas County urban sprawl more than 100 miles north of Fort Myers.

"It's in the car," Mr. Pittman jokingly said of his machete as he settled into a booth. "They frown on it in public places."

Mr. Pittman, of course, doesn't walk around wielding machetes, either for recreational or criminal activities. He is the author of the widely praised 2016 book "Oh, Florida! How America's Weirdest State Influences the Rest of the Country."

Mr. Pittman will appear March 18 at the Southwest Florida Reading Festival in Centennial Park. "Oh, Florida!" recently won the Florida Book Award gold medal for nonfiction.

"Learning that I'd won was so exciting that when I heard it I nearly dropped my machete," Mr. Pittman joked at the time.

His book brims with wacky and loopy stories about the ubiquitous Florida Man, which led to a Twitter account and eventually the book. But the book is about more than meth addicts and people throwing alligators through fast food drive through windows. Much more.



Pittman

So was Mr. Pittman's wide-ranging chat. He touched on Florida writers, history and the environment. That makes sense because Mr. Pittman covers the environment for the Tampa Bay Times.

Through his long career he has compiled observations and insights that filled "Oh, Florida." Florida Weekly reviewer Phil Jason wrote that, "this book belongs in every Florida home."

Mr. Jason also referred to the author as "a master storyteller and a research addict." Mr. Pittman's research provided mounds of information.

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"I've barely scratched the surface in my book," Mr. Pittman said.

He thought about including the Koreshans in his book. The Koreshans were a cult who settled in Estero in the 1890s. The Koreshan story was chronicled by Florida Gulf Coast University associate journalism professor Lyn Milner's book "The Allure of Immortality, An American Cult, a Florida Swamp, and a Renegade Prophet."

Mr. Pittman's original manuscript was too long. There wasn't room for the Koreshans.

"The editor kicked it back to me and said this is great but it's 100 pages too long," Mr. Pittman said. "You got to cut it."

So some stories had to be cut, including one about a fellow from Punta Gorda.

"Out went the guy who said he had a love affair with a dolphin," Mr. Pittman said.

Not even one of Florida's most fabled characters could make it.

"When I go around and give talks, they'll ask, 'Hey, do you have the Skunk Ape in there?'" Mr. Pittman said.

Alas, the Skunk Ape didn't make it.

But the book made it to readers. For a while, that didn't appear likely.

"It was rejected by 15 publishers," Mr. Pittman said.

Why? Mr. Pittman said publishers liked the book and thought it was a "great" idea. But they doubted it would sell beyond the state line.

Eventually, of course, St. Martin's Press picked it up. And Mr. Pittman will appear at the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books in April, proving the book has appeal far beyond Florida.

Mr. Pittman is already working on his next book.

"I'm not really ready to talk about it but it's a more serious story," Mr. Pittman said. "It's got some wacky touches. ... It's an environmental book."

Mr. Pittman is also working on a novel.

"My goal was to write the ultimate Florida crime novel," Mr. Pittman said. "It's got machete vs. sword fight. It's got an obscene statue used as a weapon. It's got a naked meth addict and there's a retired Weeki Wachee mermaid."

Mr. Pittman isn't ready yet to announce the novel's title.

Mr. Pittman, whose Florida family roots go back to 1850, only five years after statehood, isn't embarrassed by the state's zaniness.

"What I always try to tell people is a lot of folks say to me, 'Oh, I'm always embarrassed by news coming out of Florida,'" said Mr. Pittman, who grew up in Pensacola. "I tell them don't be embarrassed. Be proud of that. Be proud that you live in the most interesting state in the union."

Mr. Pittman grew up reading and participating in Boy Scouts in the Panhandle. Both activities formed Mr. Pittman.

"I was a real, shy book-nerd sort of guy growing up," Mr. Pittman said.

Reading and stories were part of his childhood.

"My grandfather worshipped at the altar of Perry Mason," Mr. Pittman said. "He loved the TV show. He read all the books. My mother was a big fan of Agatha Christie."

Then there was his great-aunt Pansy who introduced him to perhaps the most influential Florida crime novelist of all, John D. MacDonald, creator of Travis McGee.

"When I was 14, she took a long drag on her cigarette and said, 'I think you're ready for Travis McGee' and handed me a copy of a book that had a topless woman seen from the back on the cover," Mr. Pittman said. "Yes, ma'am, I am ready for Travis McGee."

He was soon hooked on Mr. MacDonald.

"He slips in these environmental messages," Mr. Pittman said. "He teaches you that Florida is a beautiful place people are out to spoil it and maybe that's not such a good thing."

As a participant in the Southwest Florida Reading Festival, the author is a staunch supporter of reading, especially for writers.

"You got to fill up the gas tank," Mr. Pittman said. "You read other stuff so you can see how they structure sentences. You increase your vocabulary. You see how they tell a story. ... Anybody who wants to write has to read. People who don't read baffle me. I can't imagine what their lives are like. ... How do you function as a human being if you don't read?"

Craig Pittman reads. The evidence is in "Oh, Florida, How America's Weirdest State Influences the Rest of the Country." |

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