

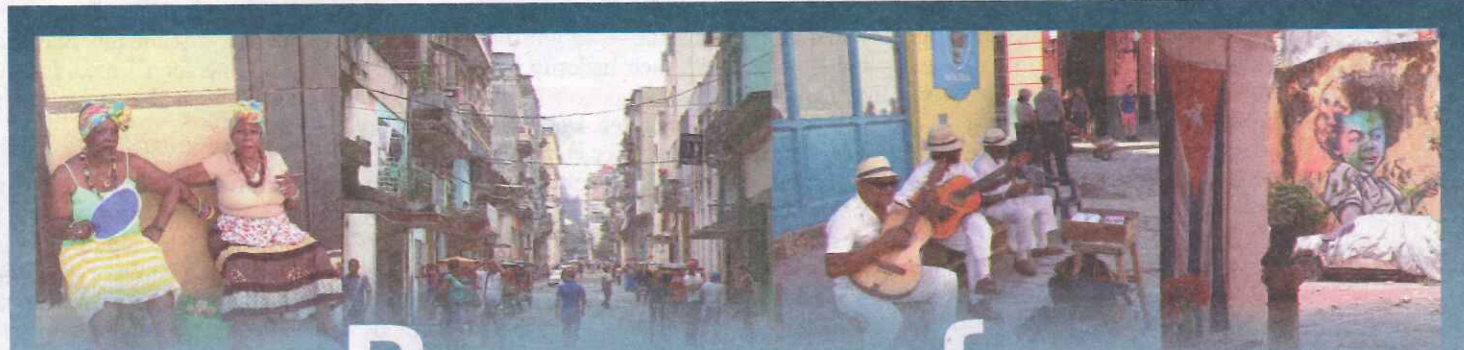
FORT MYERS FLORIDA WEEKLY®

IN THE KNOW. IN THE NOW.

WEEK OF MARCH 15-21, 2017

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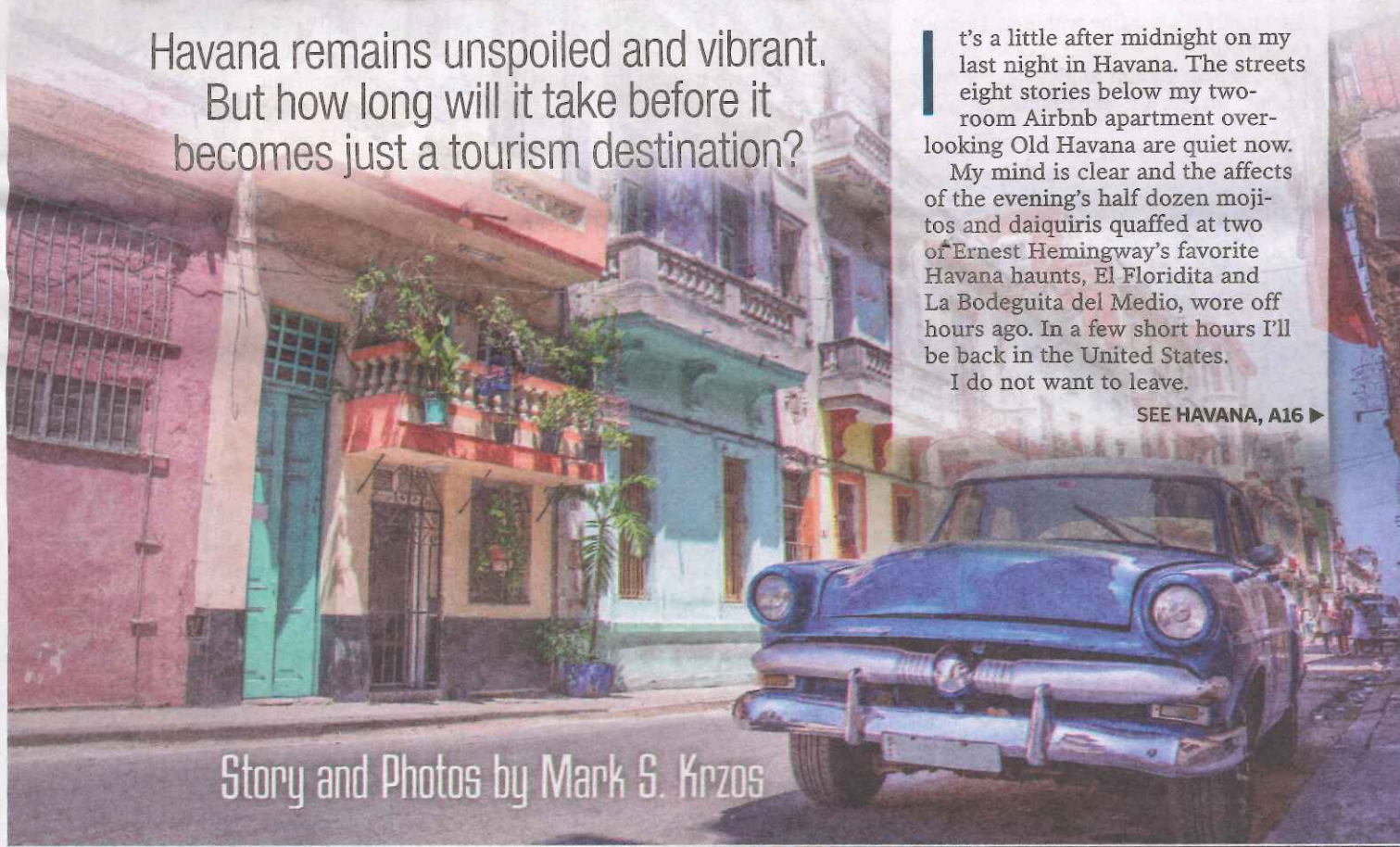
Dream of Havana

Havana remains unspoiled and vibrant. But how long will it take before it becomes just a tourism destination?

It's a little after midnight on my last night in Havana. The streets eight stories below my two-room Airbnb apartment overlooking Old Havana are quiet now. My mind is clear and the affects of the evening's half dozen mojitos and daiquiris quaffed at two of Ernest Hemingway's favorite Havana haunts, El Floridita and La Bodeguita del Medio, wore off hours ago. In a few short hours I'll be back in the United States. I do not want to leave.

SEE HAVANA, A16 ▶

Story and Photos by Mark S. Krzos



Experience the Everglades in a whole new way

BY CINDY PIERCE

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The 10th annual Everglades Bike Ride sets out from the heart of Everglades City on Sunday morning, April 2, giving cyclists the option of pedaling 15- or 62-mile "smooth" routes (on pavement) or a 27-mile "bumpy" route off-pavement and into the Fakahatchee Strand.

No matter which route you ride, it's a great way to experience what many consider the most unique part of Florida's landscape. Past participants have declared the SAG-supported ride one of the best bicycling events in the state.

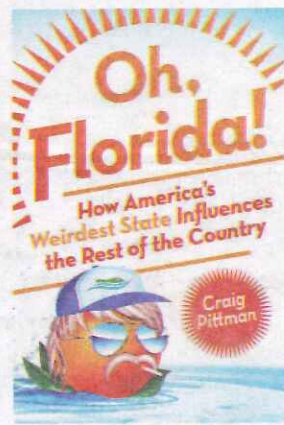
Organizers focus on safety, environmental education and stewardship for those who enjoy and promote hiking, walking and/or cycling as a means of traversing

the Everglades. Proceeds from registration fees will benefit Friends of the River of Grass Greenway, Smallwood's Store Museum and Florida's state and national parks.

The River of Grass Greenway is a non-motorized transportation and recreation corridor proposed to connect Naples and Miami. Paralleling the historical corridor of the Tamiami Trail/U.S. 41, the 76.47-

SEE RIDE, A26 ▶

INSIDE



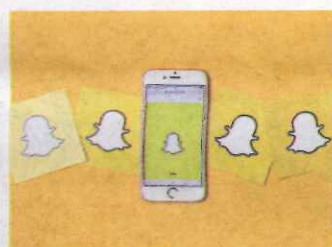
Weird Florida

Craig Pittman, author of "Oh Florida!" joins other writers at the Fort Myers book fest. C1 ▶



Business

For the self-employed, getting a mortgage can be tough. A33 ▶



Investing

Snapchat appears to be a one-trick pony, so use caution before you buy stock. A34 ▶



Strange, but good

The new BMW X4 might just be the perfect Florida car. A10 ▶

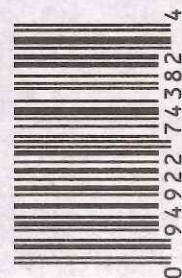
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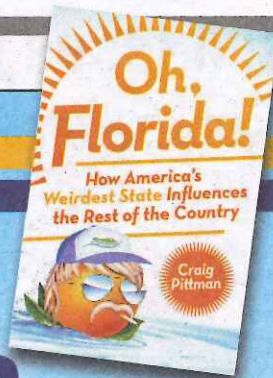
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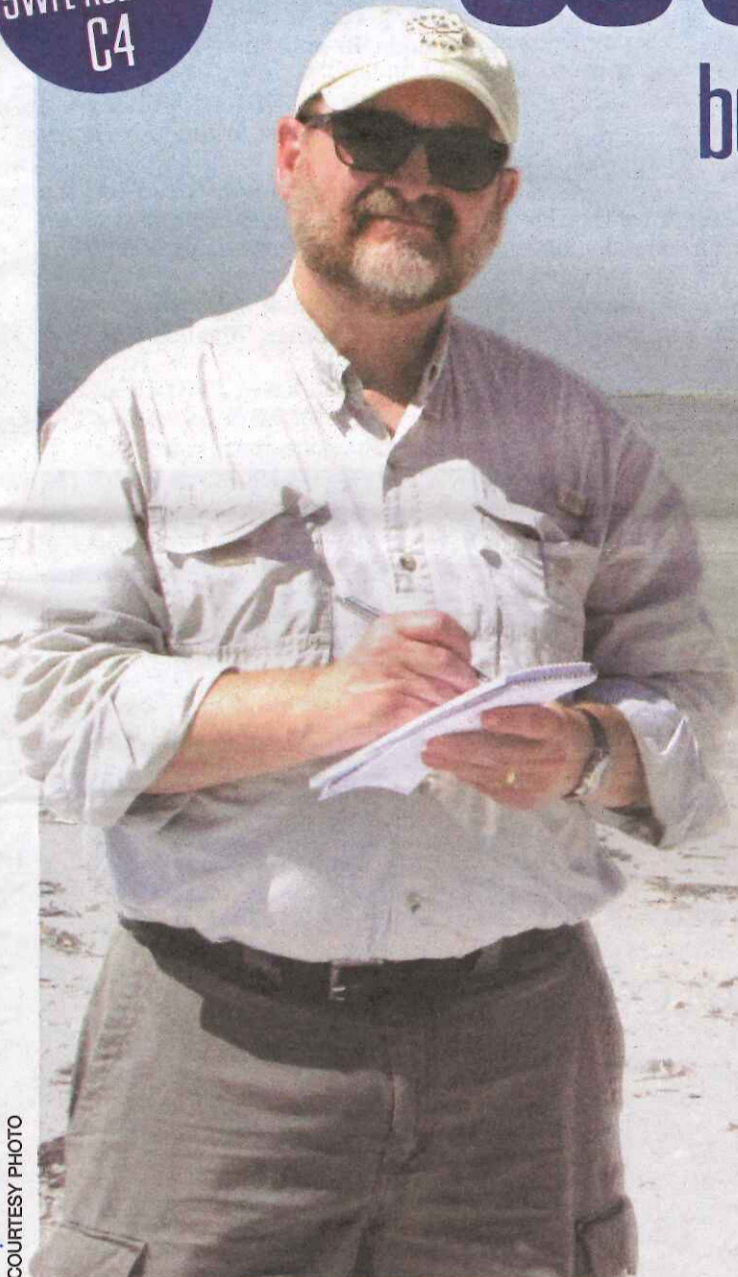


Southwest Florida Reading Festival



Florida may be wacky but it's ours

See more authors
SWFL Read Fest
C4



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

SEE READ FEST C4 ►

INSIDE



Pitcher this

An English Toby jug was found at a thrift store. **Collector's Corner C29 ►**



Society

A fundraiser for the Soup Kitchen was hosted at Sam Galloway Ford. **C31 ►**



Cuisine

Our critic gives four stars to Antica Trattoria in Bonita Springs. **C35 ►**

Florida Rep's "Shear Madness" extended to April 2

Florida Rep's "Shear Madness" has extended its nearly sold-out run to April 2, setting an 11-week record for the theater. For its final week, Lisa McMillan will join the cast. She is currently appearing in the New York production.

"Shear Madness" is the longest running non-musical in American theater history, and is still playing in Boston and Washington, D.C., after more than 30 years. "Shear Madness" has been seen by over 11 million people worldwide. Directed by Bruce Jordan, the play's co-creator and original director, Florida Rep's production opened on Jan. 20, and tickets have been scarce for more than two months.

This murder mystery was voted "Best Comedy of the Year" in Boston, Chicago,

Philadelphia, and is now playing in New York to rave reviews. In "Shear Madness" chaos erupts at a not-so-typical hair salon when the old lady upstairs is mysteriously murdered and everyone is a suspect. Unlike any other murder mystery, in "Shear Madness" the audience gets to spot the clues, question the suspects and solve the mystery. The outcome is never the same and no two performances are alike.

"Shear Madness" features an all-star cast including Sara Morsey ("Becky's New Car," "Dividing the Estate") and New York-based actors Danny Bernardy, seen recently at the Kennedy Center; Timothy C. Goodwin, from the New York production of the play; and Jen-

nifer Byrne and Jonathan Wiener. Also appearing is Florida Rep acting intern Brady Wease, making his ArtStage debut. Ms. McMillan will replace Florida Rep ensemble member Sara Morsey during the final week.

Regular performances are Tuesday-Saturday at 8 p.m. with matinees on Thursday, Saturday and Sunday at 2 p.m. Priced at \$52/\$45, single tickets are now on sale through the box office at 332-4488 and online at www.floridarep.org.

Florida Repertory Theatre performs in the Historic Arcade Theatre and the ArtStage Studio Theatre on Bay Street between Jackson and Hendry with limited free parking in the Fort Myers River District. ■



Florida Writers

Mystery series by Naples author Kinley Roby comes to an end. **C18 ►**

COURTESY PHOTO

Improv on the page

Children's book author never gave up the art of ad-libbing

BY NANCY STETSON

nstetson@floridaweekly.com

When author Chris Grabenstein attends a book festival or speaks at a school, he's greeted like a rock star — especially by those in the 8- to 12-year-old range.

Even reluctant readers love his books. Third through sixth graders adore him.

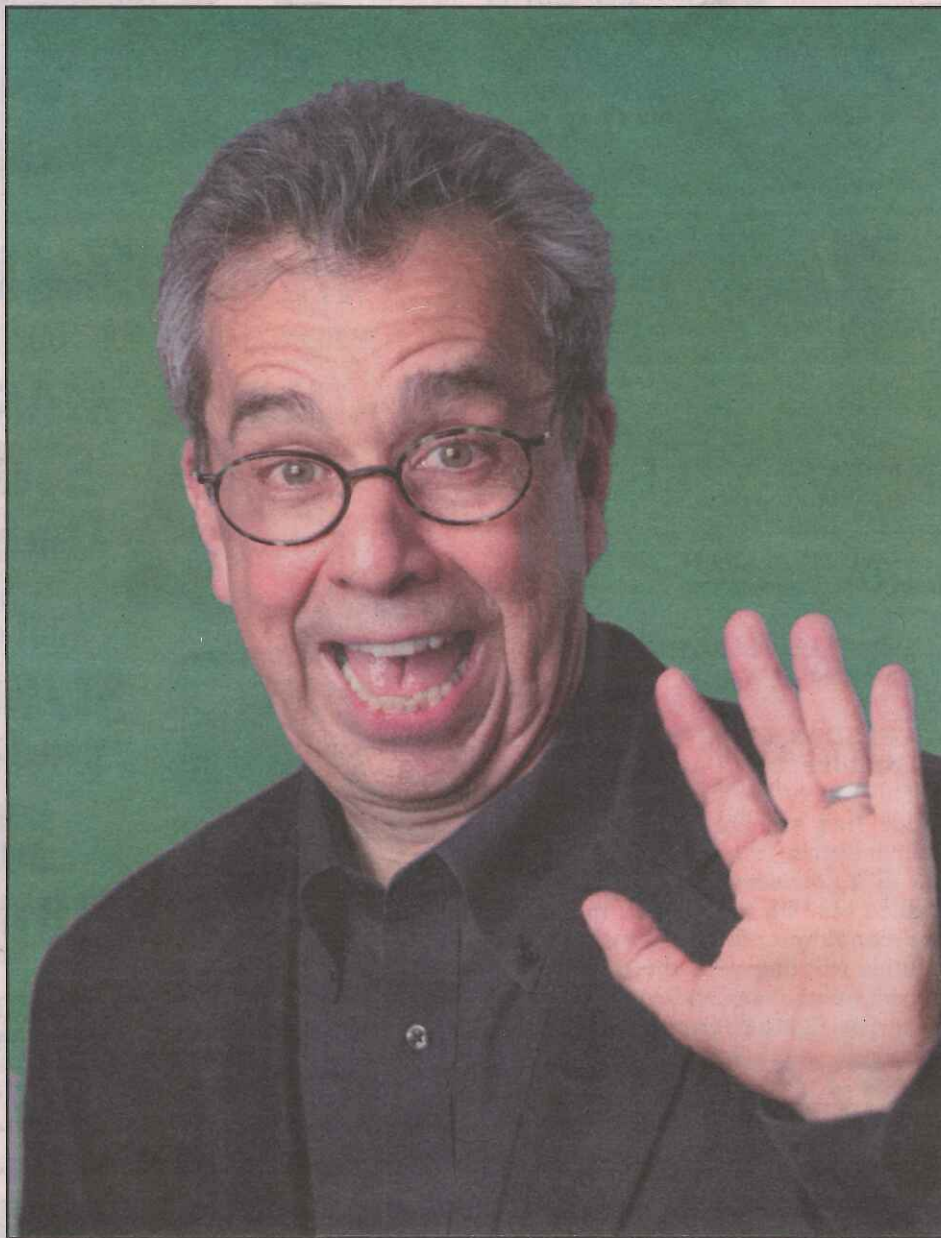
"They just go crazy," he says, adding it takes a little more to win over the seventh and eighth graders.

Mr. Grabenstein is the author of such New York Times Bestsellers as "The Island of Dr. Libris" and "Escape From Mr. Lemoncello's Library." He has also collaborated with James Patterson on the I Funny, Treasure Hunters and House of Robots series and the books "Word of Mouse," "Jacky Ha-Ha" and "Daniel X: Armageddon."

When he talks in schools, he does an improvisational exercise with the kids, using their suggestions and ideas to write a story with them. It teaches them about story structure while also showing them how not to get writer's block.

"I never know what the story's going to be, what suggestions they're going to give me," he says. "It's never the same story twice. That's what keeps it interesting."

Mr. Grabenstein is one of half a dozen children's book authors attending the Southwest Florida Reading Festival taking place Saturday, March 18, in Centennial Park in downtown Fort Myers. This year's event includes adult authors such as Nathan Hill ("The Nix"), Gregg Hurwitz ("Nowhere Man"), Cassandra King ("Moonrise"), James Grippando ("Most Dangerous Place") and Beatriz



Chris Grabenstein

Williams ("The Wicked City"). A total of 26 authors of books for adults, teens and children are expected to attend.

Mr. Grabenstein will speak at the children's author/illustrator tent at 2:15 p.m. and sign books at 10:15 a.m. and 3:15 p.m.

Amusement park beginnings

Mr. Grabenstein started his career doing improv in New York City. He then began writing advertising copy, working for now-bestselling author James Patterson at J. Walter Thompson in New York City.

"He's always been, and to this day is, the hardest working man in the business," he says.

He recalls that Mr. Patterson would go to his office early and work on his books from 6 to 9 a.m. Then, from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., he'd be the ad agency's executive creative director.

"I remember seeing a picture of him in Advertising Age in 1985, a photo of him with a stack of his books, maybe five (different titles.) They weren't the huge bestsellers yet."

Inspired, Mr. Grabenstein began writing his own series of murder mysteries set in the fictional New Jersey seaside town of Sea Haven, where an amusement park is a main attraction. Like Mr. Patterson's books, these were novels for adults.

But why the amusement park?

"Mystery writers try to avoid the Cabot Cove Syndrome," he says, referring to the "Murder She Wrote" series where a murder occurred with frightening regularity in Jessica Fletcher's coastal Maine town. "It happened so often, you would think residents would

READ FEST

From page 1

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.

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.

"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 Millner'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 1950, 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." ■



Pittman

say, 'Come on, let's get out of this town, someone's dying every week.'

"So I wanted to come up with a setting that had a transient population," he says. Plus, he's always had a fascination for amusement parks.

His first book in that first series, "Tilt a Whirl," won the Anthony Award and was named one of the best mysteries of 2005 by The Sun-Sentinel, the Detroit Free Press, the Christian Science Monitor, Barnes&Noble.com and BookBitch.com

He eventually wrote eight books in the series, each one named after an amusement park ride or game ("Whack a Mole," "Mad Mouse," "Fun House," for example.)

Then he wrote "a creepy ghost story about a haunted tree possessed by a demon of someone who'd crashed into it," he says. He'd written 120,000 words when his editor read it and declared it would be perfect for readers ages 8 to 12 — "if you take the adult language and situations out and cut 70,000 words," he says.

And Mr. Grabenstein, who has 20 nieces and nephews, thought: I might be able to write something my nieces and nephews could read!

So he did it. It became the first book of his Crossroads series.

"I realized, 'Wow! I've got this 12-year-old MAD magazine reader in my brain,'" he says.

A team effort

About 15 years after their time together at the ad agency, Mr. Grabenstein ran into his former boss, Mr. Patterson, at the West Palm Beach Day Academy

(Mr. Patterson's son was in the class Mr. Grabenstein was speaking to). The two decided to give collaboration a try. To date, they've written 16 books together.

If it's the first book in a series, Mr. Patterson will send him an 80-page outline. Mr. Grabenstein then sends back 10,000 words a month (toward a 40,000-word book). Then they talk on the phone and Mr. Grabenstein does rewrites.

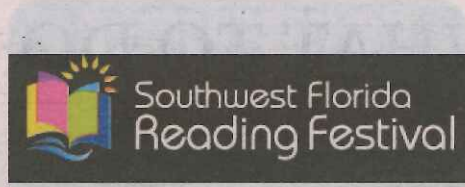
"He is intimately involved in every one of those books," he says. "It's terrific fun. He's easy to work with. He's taught me a lot over the years how to write. He's my mentor."

Mr. Grabenstein hasn't done too shabbily on his own, though. Both "The Island of Dr. Libris" and "Escape From Mr. Lemoncello's Library" were New York Times Bestsellers. The latter was followed by "Mr. Lemoncello's Library Olympics" and "Mr. Lemoncello's Great Library Race."

And Nickelodeon made a movie out of "Escape From Mr. Lemoncello's Library." Set for release in the fall, it stars Casey Simpson (of "Nicky, Ricky, Dicky & Dawn") and Breanna Yde (of "School House Rock" and "The Haunted Hathaways").

Florida memories

He's never lived in Florida, but Mr. Grabenstein's grandparents did, and his family would visit them every year in St. Petersburg. Images from those visits — the heat in the car before air-conditioning became a standard feature, stopping on the road for cows to pass, his grandparents' rambling house and old beach motels — show up in his writing.



in the know

Southwest Florida Reading Festival

>> **When:** 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, March 18

>> **Where:** Centennial Park, Fort Myers

>> **Cost:** Free

>> **Info:** 479-INFO or www.ReadFest.org

Attending authors

Adult authors

- Holly Brown
- Colin Campbell
- Shelley Shepard Gray
- Mark Greaney
- James Grippando
- Nathan Hill
- Gregg Hurwitz
- Cassandra King
- Mary Kubica
- Taya Kyle
- Craig Pittman
- Kimberla Lawson Roby
- D. Watkins
- Susan Wiggs
- Lori Wilde
- Beatriz Williams

Teen authors

- Kami Garcia
- SJ Kincaid
- Michelle Knudsen
- Sara Shepard

Children's authors

- Candace Fleming
- Chris Grabenstein
- Grace Lin
- Eric Rohmann
- Tui T. Sutherland
- Salina Yoon

The second book in Mr. Grabenstein's Wonderland series is set to come out in May.

"It's a collection of all those wacky things I used to see: Gatorland in Orlando, roadside Americana statues and crazy things. It's the coolest retro motel you can imagine ... a struggling underdog place like the mom-and-pop roadside attractions — Weeki-Wachee Springs, glass bottom boats, Frontier Town — all those memories rolled into one."

Mr. Grabenstein says he's still doing improv — only now it's on the page.

"Take whatever comes into your brain, don't deny it, take it and build on it," he says. "Just put down whatever crazy thing comes into your imagination. Write down crazy stuff, then you can make connections."

You never know where an idea will take you.

When he and his wife flew out to Vancouver to see some of "Escape From Mr. Lemoncello's Library" being filmed, she was "totally blown away," he says, adding she looked at all the actors and costumes and lighting and sets and crew and said in wonder, "All these people are here because of that silly idea!" ■

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