

H-Net Reviews

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Jeff Klinkenberg. *Seasons of Real Florida*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004. xv + 264 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2713-5.

Reviewed by William E. McGoun (Independent Scholar)

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Seasons of Real Florida

A co-worker once told me the only way you can tell when it's autumn in Florida is when the colors change on the license plates. That's not true, as I learned when I realized the "pine tree" in my back yard, the one I feared was dying each winter, was in fact a cypress, one of South Florida's few deciduous trees.

Klinkenberg, a feature writer for the *St. Petersburg Times*, makes the point that Florida has seasons, but that you must get away from the concrete of the city into the "real Florida," which he defines as "a culture shaped by the history, folkways, landscape, animals and weather of our state" (p. xiii).

"In Real Florida," he says, "we have real seasons, even if we don't have colorful leaves and hot apple cider sold at roadside stands. We have wildlife migrations and our own seasonal foods. We have dormant alligators or active alligators, mosquitoes or no mosquitoes" (p. xiv).

The book is arranged by season, beginning with fall, which he stresses is not the same thing as the autumn of northern states. "Fall in Real Florida is like spring in the North. Having survived our harshest season we felt renewed" (p. xiv). Having survived fifty-six South Florida summers without ever getting used to the heat before retiring to North Carolina, I can agree with his choice.

Actually, the grouping of columns by season is a bit of a gimmick. Most entries in fact have nothing to do with the season under which they are subsumed. While there are seasons in Florida, they are not nearly as distinct as they are farther north and life is not that tied to the time of year.

That does not, however, detract from the allure of the stories. As he promised up front, Klinkenberg for the most part speaks of rural areas and the people who live there, people whose lives are influenced strongly by the land. There is Ted Smallwood of Chokoloskee, Dessie Prescott of Crystal River, Ruby C. Williams of Bealsville in rural Hillsborough County, Tom Gaskins of

rural Glades County, Carol Sellars of Cayo Costa Key.

Frequently his subjects are jacks (or jills) of all trades. "Dessie [Prescott] had been an orange picker, a salad maker, a bus girl and a waitress.... She had killed and skinned skunks and sold their hides. She worked as hairdresser and a real estate agent and sold cars. She was a municipal license inspector, a barnstorming pilot and a military officer" (p. 57).

And then there was "Miss Ruby" Williams. "Miss Ruby picked oranges and strawberries. She drove a tractor.... She moved to New Jersey and drove a bus, founded a church, and became an evangelist. She moved back to Florida, farmed and opened her vegetable stand." Oh, and she paints (pp. 80-81).

There are eccentrics such as Ed Watts, the 50-year-old bachelor who lives at a spring off the Santa Fe River and usually wears nothing more than a loincloth, if that, and outspoken environmentalist Marjory Stoneman Douglas, who wrote of the wilds while living in the city and survived to 108. I was in a group of newspaper editorial writers that she once kept waiting because "I don't get up early on Saturday for anybody."

Some of them, like Smallwood and Douglas and Idella Parker, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's "perfect maid," have been chronicled before but most are unknown even to longtime Floridians. Even those who live in cities frequently lead lives tied to the outdoors, as do fish monger Buster Agliano of Tampa's Ybor City and "firefly doc" Jim Lloyd of Gainesville.

As is true of any collection of newspaper columns, this book should not be read at a sitting. Klinkenberg does his best to vary the tempo, but the stories nonetheless have a certain feel of sameness if too many are read at one time, with characters blurring into each other. I read the book a season at a time and even that was a bit too fast a pace. I must stress that this is not a criticism of Klinkenberg's writing but an observation on the nature

of the beast.

Klinkenberg frequently gives a strong sense of place, as when he talks of the eccentric “attractions” such as ostrich farms and snake pits that once lined Florida roadsides “on the outskirts of any respectable town” (p. 163). And he has a great feel for feeding mosquitoes in the summer at Everglades National Park. “Few had experienced such mosquitoes,” he says (pp. 220ff). I have fed them myself, and his description is right on the money.

If you look hard enough, you can find a few mistakes in any book, and this one is no exception. Artist Beanie Backus is identified as “Bean” (p. 18), Lake Placid and Lake Wales are less than 50 miles apart rather than 100 (p. 160), Coconut Grove is part of Miami rather than a suburb (p. 168), and Virgil, not Dante, was the guide through Hell in the *Divine Comedy* (p. 194).

Also, I suspect Agliano may have been stretching the truth when he said he played high-school football with former Chicago Bears fullback Rick Caseras, as Agliano was only 17 years old when Caseras was finishing up his career at the University of Florida.

But these are small things. This was my first major exposure to Klinkenberg’s writing, as I never lived anywhere where the *St. Petersburg Times* is delivered. We did meet once, when we were on a panel of history-cultural writers at Miami Book Fair International, but I did not get one of his books then. I should have.

Florida is a tremendously varied state. Pensacola is closer to Chicago, at least by road, than to Key West. Southeast Florida is part of the Caribbean while the rest is more part of the South, but even these differences do not capture the subtleties of a state made up so much of people from somewhere else (Klinkenberg was born in Chicago and I was born in Pennsylvania).

There is little in this book about urban areas outside Tampa Bay and nothing about the Panhandle west of the Appalachian River. Neither is surprising, given that Klinkenberg works for a St. Petersburg newspaper. Other than that, *Seasons of Real Florida* gives the flavor of this diverse state and of some of the characters who have made it distinctive. It’s a good read and an informative one at the same time.

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