

# Whodunit in Florida?

## A Backdrop for Murder

by Mary Ellen Collins  
mecollins123@yahoo.com

**W**hen you think of quintessential Florida businesses, you think of tourism, development and citrus farming. But there's a "hidden industry" thriving right here in Tampa Bay – a creative industry that's populated by more best-selling, award-winning mystery writers than most readers probably realize.

Eckerd College writer-in-residence, Dennis Lehane, (*MBR*, August 2005) has written seven novels, including five Patrick Kenzie/Angie Gennaro mysteries, and *Mystic River*, which was made into an Academy Award-winning film. Lehane co-directed Eckerd's Writers in Paradise Workshop in January and is now focusing on finishing a historical novel.

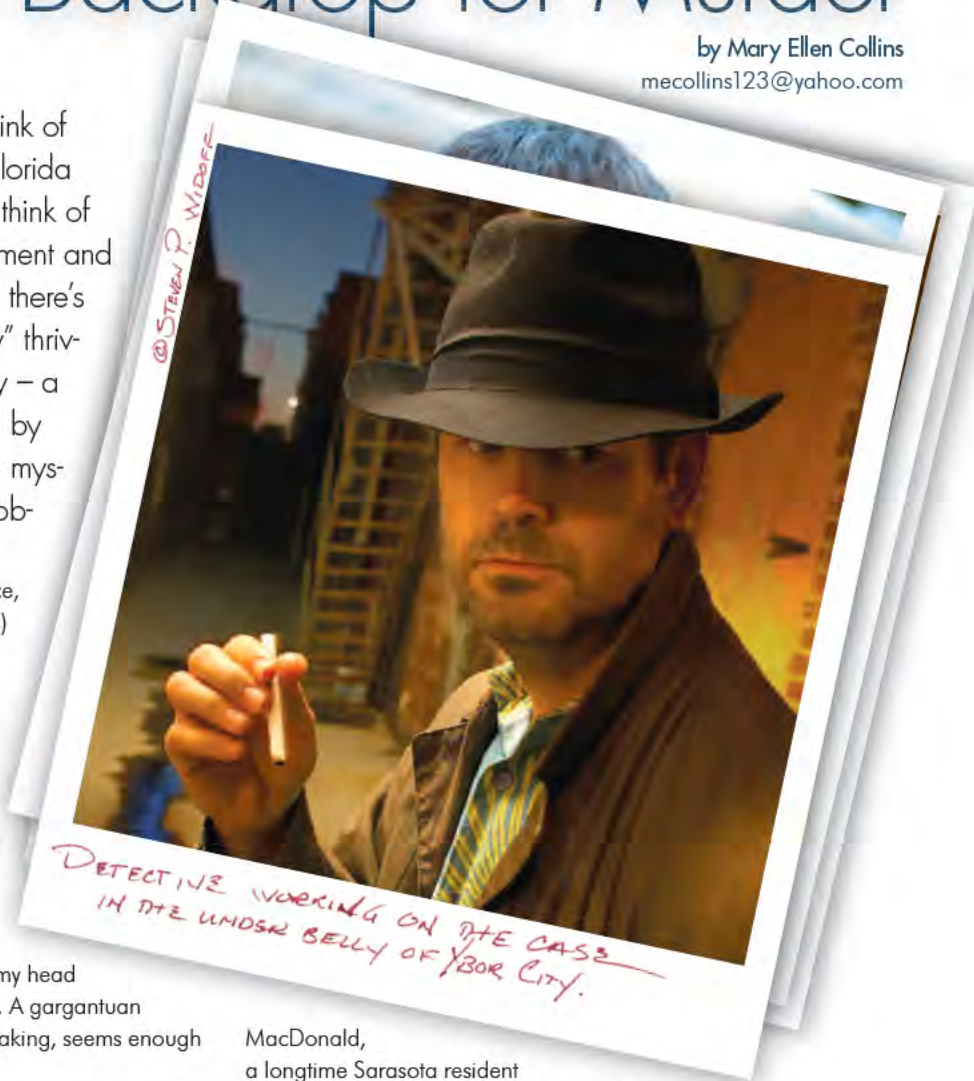
Actually, Lehane says, "I'm in a boring phase right now, keeping my head down and just trying to do the work. A gargantuan mess of a novel, four years in the making, seems enough to fill my plate at the moment."

Tampa resident Michael Connelly followed a career as a crime reporter in Daytona Beach, Ft. Lauderdale and Los Angeles by writing 18 books, including 12 novels featuring L.A. detective Harry (Hieronymus) Bosch. *The Outlook*, a novella about Bosch, ran in installments in *The New York Times Magazine* last fall and will come out in book form soon.

Not only do a number of mystery writers call Florida home, but some follow in John D. MacDonald's footsteps by using our state as the perfect backdrop for their stories.

MacDonald, a longtime Sarasota resident who is often called "the father of Florida mystery authors," produced 21 Travis McGee novels set in Ft. Lauderdale. Read on to find out how Tim Dorsey and Stuart Kaminsky work the Sunshine State into their tales of murder and mayhem.

We could say that mystery writing is 'big business' in the bay area – so big, that Sarasota even holds an annual conference for mystery writers and readers. But the fact is, we occasionally like to do a cover story simply because it's fun. So, mystery fans, this one's for you.



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TIM DORSEY, Tampa resident and author of nine twisted comic novels about the adventures of a criminally insane serial killer, thinks Florida provides a bottomless supply of inspiration.

"I love Florida. I'm passionate about the state. There's a constant renewable source of material if you have a newspaper subscription. As outlandish as some readers might think an idea is, people in Florida will say, 'Oh, I know where that came from.'"

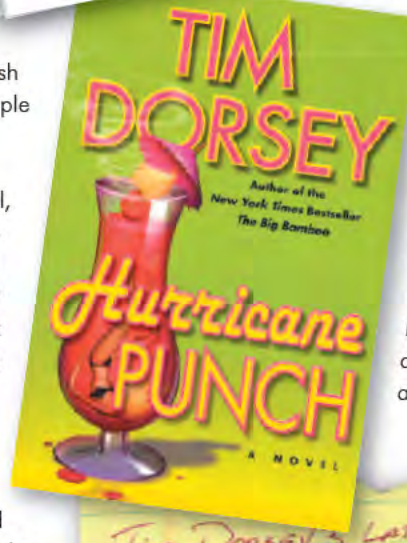
Although Dorsey imagined writing surreal, satirical novels from the time he was a teenager, he carved out a successful journalism career before creating fiction. He worked at *The Tampa Tribune* as a reporter, copy desk editor and night metro editor before leaving in 1999 to write full-time.

That year he published *Florida Roadkill*, which introduced the world to Serge Storms, the gun-toting, psychopathic protagonist who loves everything about "old Florida." When asked about the genesis for the character, Dorsey laughs.

"It was an accident. He was going to be a 'regular bad guy,' but as I was working on his back story and trying to make him larger than life, I found that the people he was bumping off were the people I wanted to bump off myself. In addition to being criminally insane, I made him crazy about Florida, and that let me get into all the crazy stuff about [the place]. Take the crazy about Florida part and subtract the violence, and that's me. Maybe that's why I can keep my temper ... he's a constructive outlet."

Serge's opinions about 'progress' often ring true, despite his over-the-top delivery. Here is an excerpt from one of his rants in *Florida Roadkill*, spoken

"IF A LITTLE VOICE SAYS, 'YOU'VE GONE TOO FAR,' THAT'S WHEN YOU SHOULD PUSH A LITTLE FURTHER."



Tim Dorsey's Latest Book.

right after he wakes up on top of a green information sign over I-75 near the Busch Gardens exit during rush hour:

"The Miami Seaquarium put in a monorail and rockets started going off at Cape Canaveral, making us feel like we were on the frontier of the future. Disney bought up everything north of Lake Okeechobee, preparing to shove the future down our throats sideways.

"Things evolved rapidly! Missile silos in Cuba. Bales on the beach.

Alligators are almost extinct and then they aren't. Juntas hanging shingles in Boca Raton. Richard Nixon and Bebe Rebozo skinny-dipping off Key Biscayne. We atone for atrocities against the Indians by playing bingo. Shark fetuses in formaldehyde jars, roadside gecko farms, tourists waddling around waffle houses like flocks of flightless birds. And before we know it, we have *The New Florida*, underplanned, overbuilt and ripe for a killer hurricane that'll knock that giant geodesic dome at Epcot down the turnpike like a golf ball, a solid one-wood by Buckminster Fuller."

Dorsey credits influences such as Kurt Vonnegut, Hunter Thompson and Joseph Heller for giving him "a

sense of not censoring my imagination. You don't have to fit into conventional plot structures. If a little voice says, 'you've gone too far,' that's when you should push a little further."

Dorsey's newest book, *Hurricane Punch*, came out earlier this year. His next effort, as yet unnamed, will be out in 2008. It follows familiar characters from *Triggerfish Twist* and *Hammerhead Ranch Motel* and involves someone who gets out of prison and comes to Tampa to go on a rampage of revenge.

For the book after that? "I'm starting to fool around with some ideas. I'm going to have a lot of road tripping. I'll figure out where I want the road trips to take place, then I'll research the local history and tidbits along that route, and take the plot from there."

Dorsey readers know that they better buckle their seatbelts, because the trip is bound to be a wacky, whirlwind journey through sex, drugs, and killing set on the surreal side of Dorsey's and Serge's favorite state. ■

STUART KAMINSKY  
www.stuartkaminsky.com



SARASOTA AUTHOR Stuart Kaminsky has recently joined an august group that most mystery writers would kill to belong to. Mystery Writers of America named him their 2006 Grandmaster, adding his name to a list that includes Mickey Spillane, Alfred Hitchcock and Agatha Christie.

After an academic career that included directing FSU's Graduate Conservatory of Motion Pictures and Television, Kaminsky turned to writing full-time in 1994. He has written textbooks, screenplays, short stories and original *Rockford Files* and *CSI: New York* novels. He also juggles four successful mystery series: the Toby Peters books, about a Hollywood private investigator, whose clients include stars like Bela Lugosi and the Marx Brothers; the Abe Lieberman series, about a veteran Chicago detective; the Inspector Rostnikov novels, set in Moscow; and the Lew Fonesca mysteries, which take place on Sarasota's dark side.

Kaminsky floats his own theory about why Florida is home to so many writers.

"There's been a tendency for American writers to set their stories increasingly at the edges of the continent, to seek new frontiers," he says. "Often, perhaps most of the time, the new frontiers don't live to up their promise. Writers, and I know many of them, decide to move from the major urban centers to these frontiers in search of a promise their characters cannot find."

His own character, Lew Fonesca, is a perfect example of someone who tries to flee to the end of the continent. The grief-stricken Fonesca leaves Chicago and heads for Key West after his wife dies in a hit-and-run accident, but ends up in Sarasota when his car gives out. There, he ekes out an existence solving cases and losing himself in film noir. He describes his new home in the introduction to *Retribution*:

"Sarasota is a beautiful bright orange blanket over a layer of darkness. Most people who come here don't look under the blanket.

"And then the newspaper or television news on Channel 40 lifts it to safely reveal a woman murdered in front of her infant

triplets, a cabdriver staggering into the lazy Sarasota-Bradenton airport bleeding from two bullet wounds in the chest, the rape and murder of a woman in her bed in a safe and expensive condominium community.

"For every high-rise there is a trailer park.

"For every theater there are six crack houses.

"For every festival there are a dozen bank robberies.

"For every millionaire there are a hundred desperate souls who would kill for twenty dollars."

Kaminsky is a Chicago native who's been in Florida since 1989, but he sounds like a reluctant local. "I guess I consider myself a Floridian. I'm a Sarasotan, but with reservations about being that. I don't find it the perfect place to live."

However, he laughs off the idea of returning to Chicago. "We'll be here until we get pushed out by change."

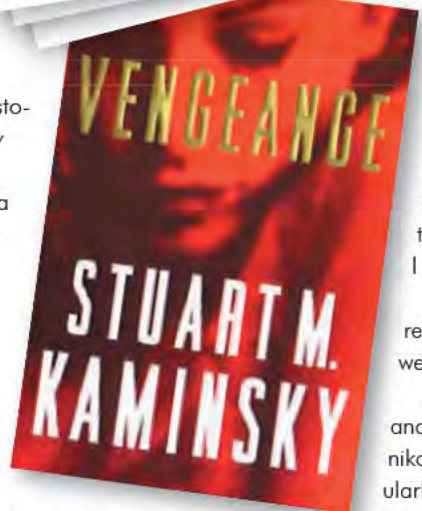
In addition to the Grandmaster Award, and an Edgar Allen Poe Award for the Rostnikov novel, *A Cold, Red Sunrise*, he's particularly proud of his Popular Culture/American Culture Association's Governing Board Award for his academic contributions.

"All I need is an Oscar," he says, and he just might get that chance. He's written the screenplay for an independent film based on his first Lew Fonesca novel, *Vengeance*. The movie is scheduled to begin shooting in Sarasota in May.

Kaminsky's newest Abe Lieberman book, *The Dead Don't Lie*, will be out in August. He's working on a proposal for a stand-alone mystery novel, and he has a full outline for the next Rostnikov novel, which he'll work on next.

"I have ideas for other mystery series, but I don't have the time. Whatever time I can get in between my regular series, I'll devote to ideas for stand-alone novels and to writing short stories and film scripts. I have no thoughts about retirement. I would like to slow down at some point, but I don't plan to stop writing."

There are just too many bad guys to catch and crimes to solve – in L.A., Chicago, Moscow and here at home in sunny Sarasota. ■



## Awash in Writers

There must be something in the Florida water besides seaweed, fish and manatees. Go to a local bookstore and scan the shelves in any genre, and you'll find the names of local residents. Here's the latest from a few of our literary neighbors, and they're not all mystery writers.



Clearwater author, Lisa Unger, has followed her *New York Times* best-selling suspense thriller, *Beautiful Lies*, with *Sliver of Truth*, featuring heroine Ridley Jones. Unger describes her protagonist as "a gutsy, smart, stubborn, funny, deep-thinking young woman who, through a daring act of heroism, stumbles into circumstances that unravel her life."

Unger ([www.lisaunger.com](http://www.lisaunger.com)) is working on her next thriller, which will be published in 2008.

Ray Arsenault, co-director of University of South Florida (USF) St. Petersburg's Florida Studies Program has been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, the Bancroft Prize and the Robert Kennedy Prize for his most recent work, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice*. His plans include writing *The Civil Rights Movement: A Very Short Introduction* for

Oxford's Very Short Introduction Series, and writing a book on race and sports since the 1930s.

Pete Williams just published *Core Performance Endurance*, a workout guide for endurance athletes, such as avid runners, cyclists and triathletes. The Safety Harbor resident says *Core Performance Golf* is due out in January 2008 ([www.petewilliams.net](http://www.petewilliams.net)).

Barnes and Noble has named *Tourist Season*, a second short story collection from Tampa writer Enid Shomer, as a 2007 Discover Award Winner. Each story has a Florida protagonist and eight take place in Florida. Shomer's first collection, *Imaginary Men*, won the Iowa Fiction Prize and the LSU/Southern Review Prize for the best first collection of short fiction by an American author ([www.enidshomer.com](http://www.enidshomer.com)).

Gary Mormino, co-director of the USF St. Peters-

burg's Florida Studies Program and *The Tampa Tribune's* History and Heritage columnist, recently published *Land of Sunshine, State of Dreams: A Social History of Modern Florida*. The book received the Florida Historical Society's 2006 Charlton Tebeau Prize; and in January, the American Library Association selected the book for an "Outstanding Academic Title Award." Mormino is working on a history of Florida during World War II and a study of Florida food and culture.

Bob Andelman, frequent MADDUX BUSINESS REPORT contributor, has recently published *Will Eisner: A Spirited Life!*, which chronicles the 70-year career of "the founding father of comic books." He is working on his tenth book, *Fans! (Not Customers): How Commerce Bank Created a Super-Growth Business in a No-Growth Industry*, which will be out in October. He's co-authoring the book with bank founder and chairman, Vernon W. Hill II, who recently expanded his New Jersey bank into southeast Florida. ([www.bobandelman.com](http://www.bobandelman.com)).

### A Conference To Die For

If murder mysteries crowd your bookshelves, head to Sarasota's Lido Beach Resort on June 1-2 for a chance to rub elbows with some of your favorite writers at Mystery Florida: A Conference to Die For.

The event begins on Friday evening with Mystery Mingle, a book signing with conference presenters and other local authors. The Saturday program features Tim Dorsey, author of nine novels including his most recent, *Hurricane Punch*; Stuart Kaminsky, recent recipient of the 2006 Grandmaster Award from the Mystery Writers of America; and Cal Branche, noted expert on longtime Sarasota resident, John D. MacDonald, author of the Travis McGee mysteries.

"We try to keep the conference small, and limit it to 100 attendees so everyone has a chance to be involved," says Terry Griffin of Mystery Florida Inc., the nonprofit organization that sponsors the event ([www.tgtbt.com/mysteryflorida.htm](http://www.tgtbt.com/mysteryflorida.htm)).

