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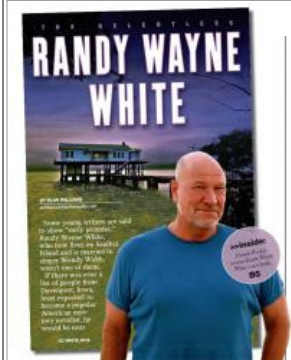
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THE RELENTLESS

BY EVAN WILLIAMS ewilliams@floridaweekly.com

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Some young writers are said to show "early promise." Randy Wayne White, who now lives on Sanibel Island and is married to singer Wendy Webb, wasn't one of them.

If there was ever a list of people from Davenport, Iowa, least expected to become a popular American mystery novelist, he would be near the top. Perhaps most skeptical of all was his old high school English teacher, friends say.

"We frequently laugh about it, because I sat behind him in English lit class," said Ron Iossi, a former classmate of Mr.



Randy Wayne White

White's at Davenport's Central High School. They graduated in 1968 and are still close friends. "I've told this story before. The teacher passed out an essay we'd all written, and I vividly remember her throwing the essay on his desk and telling him in front of the entire class, 'Mr. White, you will never make it as a writer. You will starve as a writer.'"

These days, whenever Mr. White offers another installment in his Doc Ford series, nearly every spring, it is likely to end up on The New York Times bestseller list. But it wasn't until his late 30s that he rose to the forefront of the American mystery/crime novel scene, where he began a successful and prolific career. His 17th novel in the Doc Ford series, "Deep Shadow," will hit bookstores nationwide this month.

His first Doc Ford novel, "Sanibel Flats," was named one of the Hundred Favorite Mysteries of the 20th Century by the American Independent Mystery Booksellers Association after it was published in 1990.

"I wonder if she knows he made it as a writer?" Mr. Iossi wonders about that old English teacher. You can almost hear a chill run up his spine. "That was the '60s, and it wasn't unusual for a teacher to embarrass a student in front of the whole class like that. Maybe it was a motivation for him at the time, I don't know."

At least outwardly, Mr. White excelled more at sports, as a springboard diver at Davenport's Central High School, as well as in football and baseball.

"I shall not talk too much as far as his baseball ability, being a hitter," said Bill Freese, who retired from coaching Central High School baseball in the mid 1980s. "But I do remember him, as a catcher, doing a very credible job. He'd catch batting practice I think all day long if you let him. He had quickness, but the good Lord didn't give him that kind of speed to go with his quickness. (But) he could maneuver, and if a pitcher was wild he could protect the pitcher from a lot of wild pitches."

Mr. White has a long-time love of baseball. In 2002, he went on a mission to help restart an old Cuban youth baseball league that was founded by none other than Ernest "Papa" Hemingway, a writer Mr. White admires. While in Cuba, he shot an award-winning documentary about the trip, "The Gift of the Game." He also once tried out for the Cincinnati Reds, but didn't make the team.

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Even if Mr. White didn't wear an early love of literature on his sleeve, it was there. Before high school, he had discovered and admired writers like John Steinbeck, Joseph Conrad and Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Homes.

"Mark Twain would be the first one that comes to mind," Mr. White said about authors he admired as a young man. "Also, an unfortunately unknown August Derleth who was wonderful."

His ambitions are no longer a secret back in Davenport, where he has more than a few number one fans.

"I don't think a lot of us knew (he was a writer) for a long time," Coach Freese said. "I can't tell you exactly how long it was, but people who read a great deal more than I, and pick up fictional types of stories, mysteries if you will, (said), 'boy, did you read this?' And then all of a sudden, the baseball coach across the way said (to me), 'Do you know this guy?' And I said, 'Well, he caught for me.' And that's how I became acquainted with the fact that he's a literary man."

A mystery novelist in the making

Accounts of Randy White's childhood are in some ways as stark as a Midwestern winter. They paint a portrait of a kind, hard-working farm boy who became self-sufficient at an early age, and ultimately succeeded as a novelist, as Mr. White said last week, "beyond my wildest expectations."

Born in Ashland, Ohio, in 1950, his parents' soon moved to "a little farm near the Indiana-Michigan border." In one account, Mr. White remembered "sitting up in the hayloft" on his parents' farm, reading.

"It was certainly a solitary life," he said about his childhood, in a 2005 interview with Jay MacDonald. "My brother is five years older, my sister five years younger. I was an amazingly poor student. I mean, I was a nice guy, I wasn't a troublemaker or anything, but for whatever reason I just had trouble understanding. I went back to my old high school to be inducted into their Hall of Fame and they showed me some of my old grades and it was heartbreaking for me. But I loved books and I grew up reading. I always thought if I could write a book, maybe I could be part of the magic I found in books. But I never really thought I was smart enough or capable of that."

His parents moved to Davenport in time to start his sophomore year at Central High School. During his junior year, they left the town. Mr. White stayed and got an apartment. "I worked for Davenport Brass and Foundry and washed dishes at night at a bar. When you're on your own, when the safety nets not there, you try not to fall."

Instead of going to college, he traveled. After moving to Sanibel Island in

1972, he wrote for the Fort Myers News

Press for three years. After earning a captain's license in 1974, he embarked on a 13-year career as a fishing guide at Tarpon Bay Marina on Sanibel Island. From those experiences, he culled the fictional setting of Dinkin's Bay for his Doc Ford series.

"(Dinkin's Bay) is like a character itself," said Mr. White. "Florida is an incredible, eclectic, crazed, individual character."

During that time, he also traveled the world as a columnist with Outside Magazine. He has a proven taste for adventure and travel. That has included a "bat fishing" excursion, as well as a stint training with an elite Navy SEALs commando team. Mr. White was once called the "George Plimpton" of mystery novelists because of his broad range of enthusiasm.

In the 1980s, a publisher paid him to write seven novels under the pen name Randy Stryker. They more or less told him who the characters would be. Mr. White filled the pages as best he could, although he's not especially proud of the work.

"For years I apologized for these books," he once wrote. "I no longer do."

Mr. White has no plans to stop writing, or seeking other adventures. In the last decade, he became a partner in two Lee County restaurants, both named Doc Ford's Rum Bar and Grill. He spends a lot of time at the restaurants. And he's feeling good about life.

"I work out every day, swim laps, lift weights," Mr. White said. "I feel like I'm in the best shape probably I've been in in 14 years."

Randy Wayne White on writing

Mr. White spoke to Florida Weekly

from his home on Sanibel Island last week.

FW: Do you have a routine or any rituals that you follow?



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RWW: A friend of mine, Don Carman, who pitched for the Philadelphia Phillies, signs baseballs "Be relentless." And I think one of the keys to writing successfully, whatever successfully means, is to be relentless. So I write seven days a week, get up pretty early and go to my office, work on research, character profiles. And then I work at the writing.

FW: This is your 17th novel in the Doc Ford series, and you've spent two decades with that character. What do you see when you reflect back on your career?

RWW: It's a rare day that I don't wake up and think how incredibly fortunate I am. And that's absolutely true. I've succeeded beyond my wildest expectations. I do look back on occasion, and as a matter of fact, I was discussing this with my wife. I must have been driven more than any normal person. I was absolutely almost feverish about becoming a novelist.

FW: In the late 1980s, you developed the beginnings of your Doc Ford series, and began your career as an independent novelist. That was just after the federal government closed down Tarpon Bay on Sanibel, ending your 13-year-career as a fishing guide. What happened?

RWW: In 1987, the federal government came to us and told us Tarpon Bay was closing. I had one son that was 7, one that was 5. I was out of a job and I'm not qualified to do anything. I didn't go to college. I had a captain's license and very little to recommend me to any employer...

I had been very fortunate to publish magazine pieces with a very powerful magazine, Outside, which was published by Rolling Stone. I wrote what I think were some very good pieces for them, even at that time. So I thought, sink or swim. (That's when he wrote his first Doc Ford novel, "Sanibel Flats.") It probably took me three or four months to write, but when I found out it was accepted, I thought 'holy shit,' this book needs to be better. So I went back and rewrote the entire thing. I did write what I think was a very good book, and it did get published. But I think my advance was \$5,000. One just recently sold on eBay (a hard-copy of "Sanibel Flats") for \$2,700.

FW: Before you became a novelist, you were also a journalist for a few years with a daily newspaper in Fort Myers. How was that?

RWW: The Fort Myers News Press

was a very positive place to work. And I think for anyone, especially young people who have an interest in writing, journalism is a wonderful place to start. But I think they should not stay there too long.

FW: Why not?

RWW: In the course of human nature and the way our lives tend to flow, we become financially dependent on day-to-day workplace jobs. So before you know it, your life does slip away unless you have some shattering event that demands you jump off the highboard and change from journalism to fiction. Carl Hiaasen is an example. Tim Dorsey is another great example. And both of those guys are absolutely incredible writers.

FW: What's the secret to longevity as a writer?

RWW: The financial mandate is a very powerful catalyst. You know, I had two young sons (at the time he was working on "Sanibel Flats"). I had to succeed; I had to.

However, I have now exceeded any expectations of success in that regard. But I'm still equally, not one less bit, driven. I'm just relentless about it...

And it's truly the hardest thing, finding uninterrupted time to write. I have to be very protective of my writing time.

FW: Characters in books, even if they are fictional, often become practically real in the minds of authors, and readers. In that sense, how "real" are some of your characters, including your most famous ones, Doc Ford and Tomlinson?

RWW: Oh, they're real. They have their own lives. And, if as a writer, I attempt through plotting to manipulate them, to do something they normally would not do, I end up throwing that work away. It may sound like schizophrenia but it's true...

That marina family is all real (literally), and I just adore being able to reflect on those characters and bring them back. The characters Doc Ford and Tomlinson are so strong, to me anyway, that they do indeed live their own lives and have their own destinies. I know what the destiny is, but I'm not going to give anything away.

FW: No?

RWW: They're very dear to me, I'll say that.

FW: I read in an interview that Doc and Tomlinson represent opposite personas within yourself, "one linear and one purely spiritual." Could you talk about that?

RWW: When I knew I had to write a good book, I took some time and came up with characters I found interesting intellectually and emotionally. I decided I wanted one character purely intellectual and one character purely intuitive and spiritual, because those two cerebral components, to me anyway, are often at war. And I knew those two components, if there were more books, would become very involved in death's dance, because they always are at war in us. And which does win? The spiritual or the existential? It's an interesting ebb and flow, I think.

FW: You once said, "I write for myself." How do you write for yourself?

RWW: I write the books I want to write. I also want them to sell, so I'm very empathetic, I guess, with my readers. I want them to enjoy the books on a plotline level. I also write the books on two other levels. And there's no reason why the reader should know and even care. I write them on the spiritual level. And the third level is environmental, and there are little links and keys throughout the books that always link those three (elements).

FW: You once said, "The toughest thing about writing is you have to go into a room alone and do your work." Do you still feel that's the toughest thing?

RWW: Absolutely. (And) not falling for my own excuses, reasons I don't need to write today. ;

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