

Re-inventing the Self in *Shadow Country*

Colette Bancroft

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Ever since Ponce de Leon gave it the romantic (if not altogether honest) moniker “La Florida” in 1513, the state has been described as paradise on earth by an untold number of explorers, promoters, developers and scam artists. It’s always sunny in Florida, they all say, and your life here will be sunny, too. But fiction writers who use the state as a setting tell a different story.

Populated in the post-Columbian era largely by immigrants -- from Spaniards in the 16th century and Seminoles in the 18th to today’s retirees and speculators -- Florida has long been a stage for the re-invention of the self. Many people come to the state to begin lives different from the ones they left behind. Sometimes that just means trading business suits for golf shorts, but sometimes it means building a whole new identity from the ground up -- and keeping the old one secret.

The re-invented self has been a frequent theme in Florida fiction throughout the 20th

century and into the 21st. Sometimes such characters are simply strivers or optimists, but often they are predators of one kind or another: criminals, grifters, fugitives, shady businesspeople, cynical preachers or politicians, all of whom take advantage of others in ways large or small.

But Florida can be a bigger predator. Its palm-lined boulevards and sun-kissed shores are the mask of a land still sometimes savage -- epitomized by the enduring wilderness of the Everglades -- and it can take out a slick pretender like a gator lunging on a poodle.

Examples of this dynamic are common in the thriving field of Florida crime fiction, particularly in works by Carl Hiaasen, Randy Wayne White, James W. Hall, and Tim Dorsey, novels in which natural forces ranging from hurricanes to colonies of escaped Komodo dragons make short work of the newly minted identities of bad guys.

But literary fiction set in Florida addresses this theme as well, and one notable recent example is Peter Matthiessen’s *Shadow Country*. The 2008 novel is the crowning achievement of a long and illustrious writing

career, and arguably the great Florida novel: the fictionalized version of the true story of a Florida pioneer who, around the turn of the 19th century, was a successful businessman and developer of the southwest coast -- and quite possibly a serial killer.

Shadow Country makes rich and complex use of its geographical setting in the quintessential wild Florida. Matthiessen describes that landscape in all its beauty and brutality, evoking both the lush fertility that tempts men like Watson to try to bend it to their will and its implacable disregard for such human intrusion.

The seed of *Shadow Country* was planted in Matthiessen's imagination in his boyhood, when his family spent time on the southwest coast. He first heard the story of Edgar Watson in 1965. Writing the book, he said in a 2008 interview (Bancroft, 7L), was the work of more than 30 years. His first manuscript was some 1,500 pages long; at his publisher's behest, Matthiessen carved it into three novels, *Killing Mr. Watson*, published in 1990, *Lost Man's River* in 1997, and *Bone by Bone* in 1999. But the author was never satisfied with the story in that form and spent seven years rewriting

the three into a single book, the 892-page *Shadow Country*, which won the National Book Award for fiction in 2008 (Bancroft 2008, 7L).

Matthiessen did extensive research on Watson over the decades, combing records and collecting various versions of the man's legend: "I talked to everybody over 95 in southwest Florida" (Bancroft 2008, 7L). His fictional version of Watson is one of the most haunting and complex characters in recent American fiction, a man of mythic proportions and stunning evil.

In Matthiessen's novel, Watson is the son of slave-owning South Carolina planters who as a child watches that culture's hierarchies crumble amid terrible violence after the Civil War. Whether because of nature, nurture or both, he grows up to be a man with two distinct personalities: the charismatic, hard-working capitalist bent on amassing wealth and respectability, and the violent criminal prone to uncontrollable rages and rumored to have killed, among others, the outlaw Belle Starr. Both of those sides lead him to Florida at the turn of the 20th century, where he dreams of empire among the Ten Thousand Islands on the hem

of the Everglades, a land of boundless opportunity and very little law enforcement.

There, Watson invents and re-invents himself over several decades, as a doting family man, a prodigiously hard-working sugar planter and proto-developer who believes he can conquer the Glades and seize its riches. He inspires respect and then fear; despite his success as a businessman, his unshakeable outlaw reputation leads to his death in 1910, when he is shot to pieces by a posse of his neighbors in the tiny, hurricane-whipped town of Chokoloskee. It's an event that begins and ends the novel, and one the book turns over and over to reveal most of its mysteries.

Matthiessen tells the story from a multitude of viewpoints. The first of the book's three sections ranges among the first-person voices of Watson's Florida neighbors and family, creating a mosaic whose edges do not quite line up. The second section, told in third person, focuses on the efforts of Lucius, one of Watson's sons, now an adult, to discover the truth of his father's life. The last is narrated by Watson himself, a virtuoso (if not entirely reliable) storyteller

who can charm the reader one moment and chill her to the bone the next.

As Watson tells it, having escaped from prison in Arkansas, he makes his way for the first time to South Florida and is hired as a gunslinger by Will Durrance, an Arcadia rancher in the middle of a range war.

Durrance wants him to kill a man named Quinn Bass, a rival who has threatened the rancher's life. Watson coolly rationalizes the assignment:

I was a Carolina Watson and a farmer, not a hired gun, but I guess you could say I'd become a desperado, if that word meant a man driven to desperation by ill fortune. At thirty-six, after a hard year in prison and a hard escape, I had no prospects – nothing to show for those long years of toil and desperation but an undeserved criminal record and a forsaken family. I was determined to make a fresh start in southwest Florida. ... I knew all along I would kill Quinn Bass. For a Watson of Clouds Creek, this was dishonor. I had to accept that, and I did, and I do today. I will only say that many a

prosperous businessman and proud American honored for his enterprise in his community got his start in unmentionable dealings such as these. (Matthiessen 2008, 633-34)

Watson has found his milieu, and he intends to inhabit it as a businessman, not a desperado. He does indeed kill Bass, in a carefully provoked bar fight, then collects both Durrance's money and a sheriff's reward, shrugging off the insult when the lawman calls him a bounty hunter. Sailing down the coast south of Marco Island, he reflects, "I was still a fugitive, ever farther from my family, but for the first time in my life, I had the capital to establish my own enterprise on my own land, which was here for the claiming. ... This Everglades frontier was a huge wilderness to be tamed and harnessed" (Matthiessen 2008, 640).

By his own account, Watson acquires the deed to Chatham Bend, the island that is the core of his empire, not by claiming it fair and square but by ratting out its fugitive current owner to the sheriff: "The murderer Will Raymond, I advised him, could be found right up the coast in Chatham River. The sheriff knew this very well and was

sorry to be reminded of it" (Matthiessen 2008, 646). After Raymond is killed by a posse, Watson collects the \$250 reward for turning him in, goes straight to Raymond's widow and gives it to her:

She offered corn spirits and a simple repast, then took me straight to bed out of pure gratitude and the milk of human kindness. Buttoning up, I mentioned the late Mr. Raymond's quit-claim, and she implored me to accept it with her compliments, declaring her sincere and fervent hope that she would never set eyes on that cursed place again.

Altogether, a touching story with a happy ending. (Matthiessen 2008, 647)

At first, despite the Widow Raymond's description of it, Chatham Bend lives up to Watson's dreams of success. He wrests a sugar plantation from its wild tropical setting, toiling as hard as the workers he holds in virtual slavery there. (Later, "Watson's payday" will become a dark reference among his neighbors to the fact that his workers sometimes disappear around the time they expect to be paid for a

harvest.) He builds the finest house in the Ten Thousand Islands and brings his second wife, Mandy, and their three children to live there. In Fort Myers and beyond, down to Key West and up to Tampa, he is known for his Island's Best syrup and his swaggering confidence.

But over time, Watson and the wild landscape begin to merge. Mandy and the children move back to Fort Myers, ostensibly because her health is poor and the youngsters need to be in school, but also because she suffers from the torrid heat and swarms of insatiable mosquitoes, disapproves of his moonshine still, and fears some of the rough characters that tend to show up at the remote plantation.

Watson wants respect, but he also revels in the rumors of his outlaw past, never quite entirely repudiating them. He does not move to town and run his business from there, although he is full of schemes for building railroads and expanding ranches. Instead, he remains hands-on at Chatham Bend, and his persona becomes linked to that setting. The massive crocodile that lurks in the river just off his dock is not for Watson an object of fear (although it's rumored to be a man-

eater) but a kind of mascot. Mattheissen's accounts of his exploitation of the Everglades are filled with grisly images of death and destruction, like this description of an alligator hunt, narrated by Watson:

Taking a skiffload of coarse salt in 160-pound sacks, I set up camp on a long piney ridge near the head of Lost Man's Slough. Tant and Erskine were with me, also Lucius, who came along as camp cook out of curiosity. Working ever deeper into the swamps, leaving a trail of gator pools turned muddy red, we clubbed and axed for three weeks without cease, then stayed up late slashing the soft flats off the bellies and rolling them in salt by firelight. Around our camps hung that purple smell of heaped raw carcass; when we came back through, that smell had turned into the stink of putrefaction, as if the earth had rolled over and died. (Mattheissen 2008, 661)

Having witnessed such depredations in his youth, it is no wonder that as an adult Lucius identifies his father with the Everglades,

both of them boundlessly fertile but capable of terrible violence, and ultimately unknowable:

Lucius drank his bourbon in the shadow of the porch, contemplating the reflections of the giant cypress in the still moon water of the swamp. The gallinule's eerie whistling, the ancient hootings of barred owls in duet, the horn notes of limpkins and far sandhill cranes from beyond the moss-draped walls, were primordial rumorings as quintessentially in place as the lichens and shelf fungi fastened to the hoary bark of the great trees. And he considered how the Watson children, and especially the sons, had been bent by the great weight of the dead father -- pale saplings yearning for the light twisting up and around the fallen tree, drawing last minerals from the punky wood and straining toward the sun even as the huge log crumbles in a feast for beetles. (Matthiessen 2008, 319)

After Mandy's death, Watson leaves his plantation and his first crop of children

behind to return to the Panhandle, where he has relatives. There, he marries for a third time, fathers more children and puts his prodigious work ethic into motion to renew another farm. When he returns to Chokoloskee, even though one neighbor greets his arrival with "Speak of the Devil," he can still re-invent himself, even for the people, like storekeeper's wife Mamie Smallwood, who suspect him of multiple murders:

Say what you like about Ed Watson, he looked and acted like our idea of a hero. Stood there shining in the sun in a white linen suit and her on his arm in a wheat-brown linen dress and button boots. When she picked up her sweet baby girl in sunbonnet and pink bow frock, that handsome little family stood facing the crowd like they were posing for a nice holiday photo. (Matthiessen 2008, 125)

But that pretty picture soon crumbles. Watson returns to a Chatham Bend that has largely gone back to wilderness, and as it closes in on him, so does his own poorly buried past. The fine house becomes a den

of fugitive killers whom Watson cannot turn away because of what they know about him.

The novel's intense climax comes as the 1910 hurricane barrels into Watson's world. He is frantically shuttling between Chatham Bend and the settlements to the north, trying to get his family to safety and to persuade his angry neighbors that he has things under control at the plantation. (He does not.) Besides his legal third wife, Watson is worried about his "backdoor family," a woman named Josie Jenkins who has two young children by him, including a newborn boy. He can't persuade her to leave Pavilion Key, where she's staying with the children and one of her brothers, so Watson leaves her there. As the furious storm comes in, Josie and her brother lash themselves to the mangroves, but the waves tear the baby away. Watson learns that his belief that he could conquer this coast is a most bitter folly:

When the storm tide diminished,
brother and sister hunted among the
roots, heartbroken. His servants say
that the merciful Lord works in
mysterious ways, very few of which
strike me as merciful, and my little

son was awaiting his mother when
the seas receded. Not one hundred
yards from where she'd lost him,
pale tiny hands protruded like
sponge polyps from the sand,
grasping for air. Crown just beneath
the surface, her infant stood straight
upright, set for resurrection. So much
for Jack Artemas Jenkins, said the
Lord.

Down the southwest coast over that
night, the hurricane blew the water
from the bays, blew down many
shacks and cabins, carried the boats
out to sea or far inland. It blew that
coast to ragged tatters, destroying
last chances, scattering hopes. It
sucked the last turquoise from the
inshore waters, shrouded the
mangrove in caked sandy marl,
transformed blue sea and blue sky to
a dead gray. It blew the color right
out of the world. (Matthiessen 2008,
869)

Watson has left Leslie Cox, a vicious outlaw
who is married to Watson's niece, at
Chatham Bend with another young
gunslinger, seven of the plantation workers

and a young Mikasuki girl abandoned there by a pimp. The Monroe County sheriff wants Cox, and Watson has promised to produce him – his last and only chance, he knows, to redeem himself and save his own life.

He returns after the storm to find that Cox has killed them all, except for the girl, who has hanged herself after Cox raped her. Watson believes he can overpower Cox, who is deeply drunk; he knows if he cannot bring him back to the sheriff, he will be blamed for all those murders, too much for even Edgar Watson to wiggle out of. The Everglades, though, has one last blow in store for its would-be conqueror. Cox is not the only living man waiting for him on Chatham Bend:

Three copper figures had risen from the reeds in a little cove upriver. One raised an arm and pointed at the house and left his arm extended. Dressed in old-time banded skirts and blouses and plumed turbans, they bore two muskets and a long flintlock rifle. The formal dress and antiquated weapons – there was ceremony there, but what it signified

I could not know. (Matthiessen 2008, 875-76)

The Mikasuki have come for their dead girl, and for her violator. They get the drop on Watson and hold him off at gunpoint as they lead Cox into the swamp and out of his reach forever.

The book's final pages are Watson's wild narrative of his trip back to Chokoloskee. It is his wife's birthday, he reminds us, and he has made her a promise to be there. But it is a suicide mission; we learn at last that when he raised his gun before that posse, it wasn't loaded. In a perverse way, surrendering to his death is Watson's final desperate bid to bend to the law, to become civilized.

It will not work. In the book's first section, Bill House, a member of the posse, has already told us what happened to the corpse of the handsome, charming, virile Edgar Watson. Like his lost baby son, he is under the lonesome sand, but he is not upright for salvation.

We towed him all the way to Rabbit Key. Sometimes he come twisting to the surface, causing a yell of fear;

other times that grisly head was thumping on the bottom. ... In one place he got drawn across an orster bar, got tore up worse, and by the time we pulled him out on Rabbit Key, his clothes was all but gone, ears and nose, too. With limbs bound tight and no face to speak of, he looked less like a human man than some deep ocean monster thrown up by that storm. (Matthiessen 2008, 216)

References

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