

Two local writers pump out the volumes

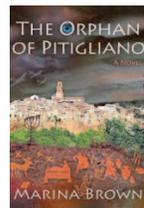
Amanda Sieradzki
Council on Culture & Arts

While quarantining has worn down many people's creativity—bored of going on television series binges or taking another stroll around the neighborhood—two local authors have offered up portals to new realms.

Their newest novels made big waves on the national and international stage at the Florida Writers Association's Royal Palm Literary Awards this fall.



Marina Brown



Marina Brown's novel "The Orphan of Pitigliano" transports readers into the Italian countryside. The plot takes place before the outbreak of World War II as three cousins seek to hide their Jewish identities.

Brown's novel won the 2020 Book of the Year award as well as a gold medal in historical fiction.

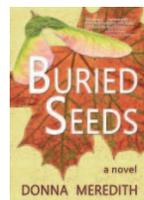
"I like grounding a story in something that is real," says Brown. "Learning something factual and historical adds

depth and flavor to any plot and character for me. It's also a fun challenge to do the research, and as you're writing these characters you get to feel what they feel in that setting. You're spilling your own energy into them in a way that's this reciprocal dynamism."

Ordinarily, awards are given out at the Association's annual conference in Orlando, however this year the ceremony took place virtually. Awards are divided by genre and are given to published and unpublished manuscripts.



Donna Meredith



Donna Meredith's "Buried Seeds" won a gold medal in women's fiction. Her recognition has been a great triumph, as it was awarded prior to publication.

Meredith says the novel took over a decade to come to fruition. Originally, she abandoned the manuscript after writing part of main character's story. It wasn't

until the 2018 West Virginia teacher's strike that she was inspired to return and add to her original idea. Subsequently, the book straddles two timelines — the first being the world of Angie Fisher, president of the local teachers union in West Virginia, and the second following her great-great-grandmother Rosella's journey earning the right to vote.

Perspective is incredibly important when it comes to any work of fiction, and even more so now as a writer in the midst of a global pandemic. For Meredith, her novels take an activist's point of view on a wide range of social issues from women's rights to climate change.

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Writers

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“When you move and live somewhere else, you look at where you’re from with fresh eyes,” says Meredith. “Moving to Florida helped me to do that with my home state of West Virginia. I don’t think you see the place you grew up through quite the same eyes if you stay there your whole life. When you move away, it changes your perspective.”

The pandemic has made it difficult to promote the books through traditional avenues for both authors. Brown was pleased to win the Omega Project grant along with her 2020 award, which provides books to 50 readers who then contribute reviews online. Midtown Reader is hosting a virtual webinar with Brown on Dec. 9.

“In the book publishing business, those reviews really help sales and recognition,” says Brown.

Meredith continues to promote her book virtually and has also harnessed her experience as an educator to create discussion questions and share recipes mentioned in the book on her website. Her books will go

If you go virtually

Midtown Reader is hosting a book webinar with Marina Brown on “The Orphan of Pitigliano” at 7 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 9, online via Zoom. Visit midtownreader.com for details or <https://www.facebook.com/events/810487603137565>. Registration link: https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/3116068432534/WN_AsrwEEf0ROyIkM1ysnIXRkQ

To learn more about Donna Meredith please visit <http://www.donnameredith.com>.

on sale for the holiday season, dropping in prices on Kindle and in print on Amazon through Dec. 25.

“You do what you can to overcome the isolation but it’s hard,” says Meredith, who continues to search for new ways to share her work.

Even after celebrating their achievements, Meredith and Brown have their eyes on the future, and their next novels. Temporarily grounded from travel, Brown is considering her current surroundings and capturing Florida’s mystique and exoticism.

Meredith travels the country in an RV and is waiting for the chance to get back on the road to get her creative juices flowing again. She feels a particular responsibility to writing stories imbued with a moral compass, especially given today’s tempestuous news

cycles and human rights movements.

“There’s nothing better than getting the feedback that someone enjoys the story or finds it meaningful and that is what drives me to write,” says Meredith. “My novels have all aimed at the idea that women have had to work really hard to overcome obstacles that our culture puts in the way, and that they have succeeded in doing a lot of that. But the work goes on.”

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area’s umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org). This article is part of COCA’s Creativity Persists collection which highlights how our community uses the arts to stay connected and inspired during the COVID-19 pandemic.