

Poet and Professor David Kirby Wins 2016 Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing

David Kirby, an internationally recognized poet who grew up on a farm and went on to teach and inspire thousands of Florida students and writers, has won the 2016 Florida Humanities Council Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing. The award is scheduled to be presented April 8 at a luncheon in the Governor's Mansion in Tallahassee.

An independent panel of judges selected Kirby, 71, from among 19 nominees. "David Kirby is one of Florida's literary treasures," the judges said. "His poems and essays show how craft, humor, and insight can create enduring works of art."

Kirby, who has taught since 1969 at Florida State University where he is the Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor of English, is known for imparting wisdom and wit with a style ranging from lyrical romanticism to rock 'n roll.

"There is nothing quite as enriching and entertaining as a David Kirby poetry reading," said Janine Farver, executive director of the Florida Humanities Council, which oversees the award nomination process, convenes a panel of independent judges, and announces the winner. "He's a credit to those who influenced him—John Keats and Little Richard."

When told of the award, Kirby said he was thrilled. "The only two organizations I know of that give a Lifetime Achievement Award are the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences and the Florida Humanities Council, so I consider this award the equivalent of an Oscar," he said.

His work includes numerous books of poetry, essays, criticism, and children's literature. His biography of Richard Penniman—better known as Little Richard—defined one of rock 'n' roll's earliest architects. "In Kirby's book, Elvis and Chuck Berry are milquetoasts next to Little Richard," said the magazine "Rolling Stone."

Kirby's latest book of poems, "Get Up, Please," is due out in March. Included among the titles in his long list of publications are: "The Biscuit Joint," "The House on Boulevard Street," "The Ha-Ha," "Talking about Movies with Jesus," and "The Cows Are Going to Paris."

In addition to praising his writing and his distinguished teaching and mentoring of writers, the judges said Kirby's "incisive book reviews" help widen the public's appreciation for new writers. "David makes us feel fortunate that we can be in the company of such a witty guide and generous soul," the judges said.

The Florida Lifetime Achievement Award is the latest in a galaxy of awards and honors Kirby has received, among them the Pushcart Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Brittingham Prize in Poetry. He is a repeat medalist in the Florida Book Awards, has won grants from the Florida Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts, and has been published several times in yearly volumes of "The Best American Poetry."

Kirby, who grew up on a 10-acre farm in South Louisiana, said he began to discover his muse at age 5. "Seeing my hand clutching an oversized pencil and watching words spool out of the tip of that pencil onto that rough, gray paper we had, and listening to stories of my mom on our porch, made me feel like storytelling was a great form of capital. I never thought of it as part of schoolwork, it was just what we did."

His mother, Kirby said, "was a farm girl who grew up with people who lived in trees and cast voodoo spells and she had wonderful stories. My father was a

medievalist [professor] who read a dozen languages and spoke many of them. I had sort of a Mark Twain side of my upbringing and a deeply scholarly and European side.”

The family grew its own food and young Kirby helped care for the horses, chickens, and ducks. One of his chores was collecting the eggs. “To this day, I glare every time I see a chicken. My hands still bear the scars of angry hens,” he said.

As a teenager, he and his friends would ride their bikes to the Louisiana State University campus to see movies—and sometimes to pillage dumpsters outside the chemistry department where they would seek lab equipment “and do our best to blow ourselves up.”

The six previous recipients of the Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing were Gary Mormino, University of South Florida St. Petersburg history professor emeritus and co-founder of the Florida Studies Department; Janet Burroway, an FSU creative writing professor and author of novels, short stories and nonfiction books who influenced legions of writers; Enid Shomer, an elegant writer of poetry and fiction; the late Patrick D. Smith, beloved author of the Florida novel “A Land Remembered”; Carl Hiaasen, a Miami journalist and best-selling novelist who virtually invented the Florida Noir genre; and Michael V. Gannon, the eminent Florida historian and University of Florida professor emeritus.

Established in 1973, the Florida Humanities Council, an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, develops public programs and resources that explore Florida’s history, literary and artistic traditions, cultural values, and ethics.

The members of the 2016 judging panel are: Maurice O'Sullivan, Kenneth Curry professor of English at Rollins College; Lester Abberger, member of Florida Humanities Council Board; Enid Shomer, winner of the 2013 Florida Lifetime Achievement Award; Lynne Barrett, founder and editor of "The Florida Book Review"; and Colette Bancroft, the "Tampa Bay Times" book editor.