Finding Florida' review: Single-minded focus on Florida's flaws

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FINDING FLORIDA
T.D. Allman
Atlantic Monthly Press
$27.50, 528 pages

With the passage of time, journalist T.D. Allman, a native Floridian and the author of "Miami: City of the Future," indicates, the truth "supposedly emerges from the rubble of accusations and self-justifications."

In Florida, however, "the reverse constantly happens." The truth is "airbrushed out of the picture entirely." We don't know that when whites finished devastating the state in the 19th century, "every one of these nonwhite persons in Florida had been killed, enslaved, physically removed, or driven into the Everglades."

This point of view permeates "Finding Florida: The True History of the Sunshine State," Allman's "hidden history" of Florida. Certain that he can discern -- and interpret -- what actually happened, Allman divides his bibliography into two sections: books "which tell the truth and those which perpetuate Florida's myths."

In "Finding Florida" he doesn't miss an opportunity to correct, castigate, and condemn. Allman busts myths, such as Washington Irving's story about Ponce de Leon and the Fountain of Youth, that serious people no longer take seriously. He discredits already discredited accounts of the beneficence of slavery, African Americans too shiftless or stupid to fight for their freedom and a Reconstruction rife with corruption. It took generations, he insists, for it "to become apparent that there were alternatives in Florida to genocide, to nailing ears to wooden posts."

In his account of the state's more recent past, Allman tells us that the jury that acquitted police officers accused of beating a motorcyclist to death in 1979, demonstrated that it "remained okay to kill black men in Florida." And that George Zimmerman's murder of Trayvon Martin more than three decades later proved the pervasiveness of the notion that "the black male by his very existence constitutes an unacceptable danger."

Allman concludes as well that because it was "all fake," Christo's installation (in which landfills in Biscayne Bay were wrapped in 6.5 million square feet of pink-colored cloth) was "truly, authentically, completely Miami."

And he blames the Challenger disaster of 1986 on NASA officials intent on depicting voyages into space as Adventureland, who exhibited a callous disregard for science and safety.

From earth orbit, he adds, one can see the ways in which the natural landscape has been ravaged: "Florida, once so
empty, glows as though gigantesque phosphorescent alien creatures are replicating even though it's not aliens down there. It's us."

Although Allman may exaggerate the unwillingness of Americans to be reminded of unpleasant things, he is surely right that racism persists in Florida -- and elsewhere.

"Finding Florida," however, is too blunt an instrument, too dependent on portraits in black and white, to reach anyone who doesn't already agree with him. And, alas, in his zeal to demonstrate that, "in some fundamental sense," Florida has never changed, Allman misses a lot of its diversity and dynamism.

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