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Author: Cherish the rain rather than vilifying it



Some of the people who came to hear the lecturer are seen as they ready themselves for the event.

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CEDAR KEY -- A self-proclaimed pluviophile who literally "wrote the book about rain," captured the hearts and minds of members and guests of the Cedar Key Historical Society when she spoke about the topic on Thursday morning (Jan. 18).

Award-winning Florida author Cynthia Barnett delivered her program titled "Rain: A History for Stormy Times" at the Cedar Key Community Center thanks not only to the Cedar Key Historical Society, but also through funding by the Florida Humanities Council's Speaker Series.



Cynthia Barnett prepares her first slide before the start of the program.

Barnett provided a thought-provoking look at rain, humans, superstitions and science as she shared some highlights of her book *Rain: A Natural and Cultural History*.

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This is her third book, with the first two titles being *Mirage*, and *Blue Revolution*. Before becoming an author, she was a journalist who often wrote about water-related topics.

She shared with the audience members on Thursday that her fourth book is going to be about seashells, but like her other works this is not a coffee-table book. Instead the future book about seashells, which is tentatively going to hit the stands in early 2021, may well serve as a metaphor of what is happening in the oceans on planet Earth.

As for the program "Rain: A History for Stormy Times," this informative and entertaining presentation came after a relatively nice opening of the morning event in Cedar Key.



Cedar Key Historical Society President Minnie Crevasse welcomes people to the event. After the program, she mentioned that the museum needs more docents. The phone number for the museum is 352-543-5549. Individuals who are interested in providing this volunteer service are asked to call this number.

Cedar Key Historical Society President Minnie Crevasse reminded members and guests that a quilt is being raffled to help the society fund recovery for one of the museums on the island from damage suffered during a hurricane, and to help the Historical Society in other ways.

As she started speaking about the event of the day, President Crevasse said this is the first of a series of four presentations.

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The other three presentations by the Cedar Key Historical Society in conjunction with the Florida Humanities Council scheduled to be at the Cedar Key Community Center, all with a starting time of 10 a.m., are:

- **Feb. 15 - "Florida Lighthouses" by Brendan Burke;**
- **March 15 - "Making Chief Osceola: The Abolitionists and the Rise of an American Myth" by Andrew Frank; and**
- **April 19 - "The History of Cattle Ranching in Florida" by Bob Stone.**



Cedar Key Historical Society Executive Director Amy Gernhardt helps start the event.

Florida Humanities Council Program Coordinator Alex Buell tells listeners about how they can help the Council.

Cedar Key Historical Society Executive Director Amy Gernhardt introduced Florida Humanities Council Program Coordinator Alex Buell.

The Florida Humanities Council is the state affiliate for the National Endowment for the Humanities. The Florida Humanities Council is partly funded by the United States Congress and partly funded by the Florida Legislature.

In addition to speaker programs such as the one in Cedar Key on Thursday, the Florida Humanities Council also helps traveling Smithsonian exhibits; cultural discussion for high school students on topics such as race and class; poetry readings; and more, Buell said.



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The Florida Humanities Council sponsors community-based projects, facilitates important conversations among Floridians, and shines a spotlight on Florida's history, art, and culture.

Established in 1973, this council is an independent, nonprofit affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. For more than years, the Florida Humanities Council has developed and funded public programs that tell the stories of Florida and the unique individuals that call this state their home.



Cynthia Barnett (left) holds a copy of the cover of *Rain: A Natural and Cultural History* that was recovered after Hurricane Hermine damaged the library. Molly Jubitz, librarian at Cedar Key Public Library, presented the salvaged book cover to the author. This Hurricane Hermine first formed on Aug 28, 2016. Worldwide its damages are estimated at \$550 million. It finally dissipated on Sept. 8, 2016 and had a worldwide total of five recorded fatalities. The Cedar Key Library and Cedar Key City Hall are both completely operational after being restored after Hurricane Hermine of 2016.

Another fun part of the pre-lecture program was a presentation by Molly Jubitz, librarian at Cedar Key Public Library. She gave Barnett a copy of the cover of *Rain: A Natural and Cultural History* that was salvaged after Hurricane Hermine damaged the library.

During her presentation, Barnett explained why she believes Cedar Key is more resilient than some other Florida coastal communities, when it comes to recovery from floods.

During Barnett's presentation of "*Rain: A history for stormy times*," she spoke about flood and drought, opening first with her proclamation about rain being a good thing.

When people from outside look at Cedar Key, she said, they see it as very vulnerable to hurricanes and floods. Nevertheless, she sees Cedar Key's resilience to recover from those weather events to be stronger than other Florida coastal cities like Miami and Jacksonville.

She noticed the model of sea level rise in the Visitors Welcome enter at the Cedar Key

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Chamber of Commerce in downtown Cedar Key, and Barnett said this is not something one could expect to see in those metropolitan Chambers.

Cedar Key's resilience, she said, comes from its founders seeing the need to preserve wetlands such as the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge, the Cedar Key Museum State Park and other public lands that are protected from development.

"They knew that places like Atsena Otie Key should not be developed," she said.

Barnett's roots are in Cedar Key. Her great-great grandfather Nicodemus Wilder lived through the terrible hurricane of 1896.

As noted on part of a weather blog, this major hurricane struck the Cedar Keys on the morning of Sept. 29, 1896, with a 10-foot storm surge. The hurricane devastated the Eberhard Faber and Eagle mills, where cedar wood was used to form the wooden part of the pencil that surrounds the graphite.

Even as a rain advocate, Barnett finds her great-great grandfather Wilder's vision of the beauty in the aftermath of that 1896 storm as being helpful to people who dislike rain.

He described the beauty of the birds as they came back to roost after the hurricane, Barnett said.

Barnett is a pluviophile.

"I'm absolutely crazy about rain," Barnett said as she explained her reason for spending years to write the book about it. "I love to write on a rainy day. It's always much harder for me to write on a sunny day."

She loves the sound of rain on a tin roof. The sound of rain on palm fronds to Barnett is the sound of applause. The clean smell of the air after a nice rain is pleasant too, as many people know.

She shared with listeners how nature provides color more from rain. Rain gives life and improves the color of life. The fluorescent creatures of the rain forest are an example of that. Those bright colors help their own kind find them in the rain-blurred jungle, she said.

The green grass that appears after a spring rain is another example of color reflecting the aftereffect from rain.

The steadier the summer rains, the brighter and redder the hardwood trees are in the fall, she said.

"We can even thank the rain," Barnett said, "for the bluest blue in the skies."

Even the blue of the sky can be rain-resultant. As the dust and smoke are rinsed from the sky after a rain, the subsequent clear blue is what people see in contrast with the sky filled with dust and smoke particles.

One animal she enjoyed writing about in her book is named the Squinting Bush Brown Butterfly.

"When it emerges from the pupa in dry times," she said, "it is dull and puny. Those that emerge in rainy season are larger – marked with big, beautiful eye spots (on their wings). They eat more food, and they even get more sex."

Dry, pale desert creatures reflect the lack of rain in that environment.

Just as there are the beauty and life-giving powers of rain, so too the other side of the coin exists. She reminded listeners of the drought in Cedar Key 15 years ago, like the one a few years ago, where salt-water intrusion caused reason for great concern.

Drought can bring people together.

An epic worldwide drought cause people in ancient times to join forces in the four

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great river valleys to irrigate to grow crops for food, she said.

Not everyone loves rain to the degree that Barnett loves it, she said.

“Most people don’t wake up and wax eloquently about the beauty of the sky and the birds after a killer hurricane as my great-great grandfather did,” she said. “I often find myself having to defend rain.”

Some meteorologists refer to rainstorms as “beasts” and even Al Gore, known to be a relatively strong environmentalist, has referred to some events to “rain bombs,” she said.

“We call them ‘beasts’ as if they come from some fairy tale,” Barnett said, “but hurricanes are spun from warm seawater. And as our oceans continue to warm, with the planet, scientists say that climate change could amplify storms and their risks.”

There may not be more storms, she said, adding that there is a possibility that there will be more severe storms – with intense impacts, like extreme rains.

“The rain itself is not the beast or the bomb,” Barnett said. “The climate, the weather or nature itself, are not what we have to fear. What we have to fear is our response – the human response – to the changes and what we do.”

Barnett then helped people have a better understanding -- first of a raindrop. It does not look as it is often depicted in a drawing, where there is a rounded head with a thinning tail as it drops from the sky pulled by gravity toward Earth.

Instead, Barnett explained, the raindrops look like tiny liquid parachutes as their tops are rounded by resistance from the air as they fall.

Humans have sought to control rainfall for ions. One of the first gods from Mesopotamia was a storm god, she said.

Most religions, she said, see rain as a gift from God. In her book, there is a chapter titled “Praying for rain” where she writes about several religions.



One of the slides of drawings shown by the author at the Cedar Key Community Center is a representation of the witches alleged to be active in their practice of 'weather magic.' Suspected witches were killed in America many years ago.

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Barnett shared many stories with the audience. She spoke about people killing those who they thought were witches in old Scotland and in America, for committing “weather magic.”

There were rainmakers, who Barnett saw as being “fun and terrific con men,” even though their methods did not bring results and were not based on the scientific method.

Science still does not always prevail, she said, just as it did not in American history from before.

She spoke about the United States Congress long ago funding a program where shooting mortars into the air was seen as a method to bring rain, despite meteorologists saying this idea was pure hokum.

“This was neither the first nor the last time,” she said, “when politicians would listen to the influential and ill-informed over their own scientists.”

The United States Army Corps of Engineers in 1950 convinced the public that the best thing to do to the Florida Everglades was to drain it. Water was seen as “the vicious scourge of mankind,” she said as she described a clip from a propaganda film by the United States Corps of Engineers.

Paving over the places where floodwaters want to go, she said, is not a good policy. The floodwaters still go to those places, and then are not able to be absorbed by the ground that is covered with concrete and asphalt.

As people prepare for the future, there should be plans for not just floods and sea level rise, but also the potential for epic droughts, she said. Historically, America was built during relatively wet times.

As she concluded her program, she reminded listeners that the Florida Humanities Council is among the supporters of book authors.

Treasuring the stories that bring people together, she said, is beneficial to humanity.

Politics can be divisive, she said. On occasion a difference in opinion about scientific facts can cause rifts, added.

The human stories from history, she said, tell people about “the stormy times ahead,” and stories can unify people.

“Will we repeat the folly of fighting climate with concrete?” Barnett asked, “as we saw done in the Everglades. Will we listen to the influential and ill-informed as we did in the rainmaker days? Nature and climate are not what we have to fear.

“It is human action, or when it comes to climate change, lack of action (that should be feared),” she continued.

Just as the people of ancient time came together to deal with the epic drought of centuries ago, so too Barnett believes humans can join forces to deal with the obstacles they will face from the challenges of today.

Using solar energy more, replanting forests, using permeable covers for streets and parking lots are just a few of the many options people can use now to help reduce the human impact on the forces that affect climate changes.