

**No Introduction Necessary**

Folio Weekly's new Arts & Entertainment Editor Dan Brown is in the house, and ready to be inundated with your pitches and press releases on upcoming art, music and community events (e-mail them to [events@folioweekly.com](mailto:events@folioweekly.com)). As it happens, Brown's arrival at Folio Weekly coincided with the arrival of SPIN's 25th anniversary issue, which includes his former band, Royal Trux, on a list of "100 Moments That Rocked Our World." No. 55, "The Majors Get Weird" features a list of unlikely indie bands that got signed after the grunge revolution of 1991. (For the record, Brown, who played bass in Royal Trux, personally disavows the choice of album art that SPIN described thusly: "a toilet full of blood, feces and urine" but explains it was actually ketchup, frosting and toilet paper.) OK, Dan. The SPIN mention carries you *this* week. Now get to work.

**Pets No More**

Huguenot Park is banning pets from its beaches, effective Saturday, May 1. According to the city of Jacksonville's website, the new policy is "in response to a number of incidents involving attacks" and aims to "provide a safer park environment for patrons." Pets will still be allowed in the campground. Hanna Park will continue to allow pets on a leash.



**Hop On Board**

Duval hip-hop artist **Mas Appeal** is kicking off the second season of his weekly webcast, "The Lyricist Hour," on Monday, May 3 at 7 p.m. on [thenerdysouth.com](http://thenerdysouth.com). Mas Appeal, half of the hip-hop supergroup Simple Complexity, has teamed with co-host Mal aka Malecule, to promote independent and underground hip-hop artists, in addition to showcasing Duval hip-hop acts.

**Trunk Show**

"One should be a 'muscle man' comfortable wearing a Speedo swimsuit onstage."  
— From an audition notice for an upcoming staging of "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" at the Limelight Theatre in St. Augustine. Auditions are held Sunday, May 2 at 6 p.m. More information at [limelight-theatre.org](http://limelight-theatre.org)



At its most cloying, Rae's voice can be like a Yankee's first swallow of sweet tea. But it's the perfect accompaniment to her stories, which sound homespun and heartwarming, but are flecked with strange lights, ironic observations and unexpected turns.

**Storybook Life**

**Fernandina Beach writer Able Rae follows her heart and lives to tell the tale**

There aren't many people besides Moses who own up to heeding the voices in their heads. Most try to silence them or ask their psychiatrist to adjust their meds. But Able Rae isn't an ordinary person. At 53, she seems half-woman, half-sprite, with strawberry-blond hair bobbed at her chin and a mischievous glint in her blue eyes. She views her life as a narrative, or a series of stories that have evolved in a pleasingly literary manner. The stories are full of serendipitous meetings, strange compulsions to act and paths followed to fortuitous places.

That's how the Fernandina Beach author and storyteller found herself at an intersection in South Dakota more than 15 years ago, listening to a stern voice in the back seat. "Turn left," the man commanded. Rae was petrified. Having packed her minivan and driven west from Pennsylvania after the collapse of her marriage, she feared she was being carjacked. "Turn left now," the voice insisted.

Rae made the left, then slowly eased over onto the shoulder and stopped. She turned around to face her captor.

There was no one there.

Rae tells this story as we drive around Nassau County dropping off glass bottles, plastic jugs and medicine containers at three different recycling centers, but the tale's purpose is kind of hard to grasp. Why would a voice direct this magnolia blossom of a woman from Perry, Ga., to the Sturgis

Motorcycle Rally in the Black Hills of South Dakota? Why would she follow?

Rae tells the story naturally, as if this sort of thing happens to everyone all the time. To her, it has. She got her job at a Nassau County health food store after following an impulse to go back inside after shopping and tell the owner she wanted to work for him when he expanded his business. She got another job, tutoring a child on Cumberland Island, even

vegetarian food and washed her clothes. And then she insisted that before Rae leave South Dakota, she climb the imposing Bear Butte, a rock mountain that soars 1,254 feet above the plain. When Rae did, she saw hundreds of tiny brightly colored prayer pouches tucked into crevices and dangling from branches. The mountain is considered sacred by the Lakota, Sioux and Cheyenne Indians, and the messages, presumably, were left by

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though she'd never taught school and was herself an indifferent student.

On that August afternoon in the mid-1990s, Rae didn't figure out until she arrived in a small town near Sturgis that more than 400,000 motorcyclists were converging there, most in black leathers. She was wearing khaki slacks and a white blouse when she approached a Belle Fourche motel owner, who laughed so hard she could hardly keep upright. But the motel owner was kind, and sent Rae to stay the night at her friend Evelyn's house. And that's where the story of a ditzy woman on some vague quest turns into a story about Rae's fierce belief that there is goodness and guidance in the universe. Evelyn cooked Rae

other climbers before her. Upon seeing the messages, Rae became so sad, so suddenly and uncontrollably grief-stricken, that she had to sit on a ledge and weep. She cried for nearly an hour. Rae had been devastated by the breakup of her marriage, but she insists this grief was different.

"It wasn't my grief I was feeling," she says. "That was a grief I knew very well. [This] was something much larger than me."

**A**ble Rae moved to Fernandina Beach in 1999, because she wanted to be closer to her sister and brother-in-law and their three boys. It may have been the most traditional *Continues on page 9*

*Continued from page 7*  
impulse she's ever followed.

Since then, she's become part of the local literary landscape. Her stories — reflections on neighbors, on good meals and nature and the mysteries of personhood — are periodic features on the local public radio station, WJCT 89.9 FM. Delivered in a melodious contralto flavored with Georgia syrup, the stories are initially most striking because of Rae's voice. She speaks in a lilting high-toned Southern drawl, which she says she cultivated because she didn't like her grandmother's accent. While she says her grandmother Myra was one of the most intelligent people Rae ever met, Myra's accent made her sound ignorant. At its most cloying, Rae's voice can be like a Yankee's first swallow of sweet tea. Why put in so much sugar that the tea becomes only an undertone to the overwhelming sweetness? But Rae's Southern drawl is the perfect

accompaniment to her stories, which sound homespun and heartwarming but are flecked with strange lights, ironic observations and unexpected turns where a truth kind of slides through without your really noticing.

Rae never set out to be a writer. She didn't like to read, due to both a severe case of dyslexia and a stubborn determination to be nothing like her book-loving and ambitious mother. Rae majored in home economics when she went to college at Berry College in Rome, Ga., about three hours north of her hometown Perry — possibly last woman in the United States to claim such a major. Her master plan was to marry and have children. And to get out of Perry.

Rae's first husband was a Harvard-educated attorney who agreed to the marriage because Rae said she wanted children, and whom she left four years later carrying only her things in a *Continues on page 10*

## Walter Coker's Through the Lens



Joe the Plumber signs a fan's flag at the St. Augustine Tea Party, April 17.

## Bouquets & Brickbats

**Brickbats to District 6 City Councilmember Jack Webb** for missing the Rules Committee vote on the appointment of UNF professor Parvez Ahmed to the Human Rights Commission. Webb dodged the high profile and controversial vote after quizzing Ahmed, a Muslim, on his views on international diplomacy. Webb said he needed to grab a Diet Pepsi from the council breakroom and didn't notice the vote had been taken (4-1 to approve) until he returned.

**Brickbats to the city of Jacksonville** for making it more likely that parking at a downtown meter will cost you a \$15 parking ticket. The city changed parking meters in front of the Ed Ball building along Hogan Street from an hour maximum to a half-hour. Ed Ball is where the city's Housing and Neighborhoods Department is located, and where many committee meetings are held. By contrast, the city of St. Petersburg is encouraging downtown visitors by offering parking ticket amnesty with a receipt from a local business for first offenders, and allowing a pay-by-cell phone option that sends you a text message when your meter is up.

**Bouquets to Flagler College journalism graduate Haley Walker** for winning a Mark of Excellence award from the Society of Professional Journalists. Walker's first-person story was an immersive account of survival as she learned how to dumpster-dive for food and ate solely from her garbage forays for weeks. Walker said she wanted to step outside her life, an impulse that led her to be recognized for Online In-Depth Reporting in the four-year college or university category. Walker's story will now be entered in a national SPJ contest. She is currently working on a master's degree in environmental reporting at Michigan State University.



*Continued from page 9*

laundry basket. During her second marriage, to a national television sports producer, Rae got a taste of adventure as the couple crisscrossed the country. They had an apartment in Manhattan, then a home she designed on 17 acres of a Northeastern Pennsylvania mountain. But three months after she moved into the house, the marriage collapsed. Asked what happened, she declines to give details. “He was leading a double life. I found out. Best leave it at that.”

The people in the mountain town helped her through her divorce. Among them was a musician who tutored opera students and gave lectures on acting. He encouraged her to write a story for his annual winter solstice party, and asked her to read it at the party. She did. Then she wrote another and another. The NPR station where she volunteered began airing them.

Rae was single again when she moved to downtown Fernandina 10 years ago. She would walk along the waterfront before dawn, talking out loud to what she calls “the universe.” One morning, she roped harbormaster Bill Kavanaugh into taking her out to escort a large ship into port. One morning, she met a man dressed in a Confederate uniform, ghostly in the predawn light. He said he was there to move a Confederate soldier back to Southern soil in the old cemetery in Fernandina Beach.

After listening to local programming on WJCT, Rae approached station manager David Anderson about airing some of her stories. Anderson told her flat out that didn’t think her voice would work on the radio. Her drawl, he explained, was just too Southern for Northeast Florida.

Rae dropped off some tapes anyway, and bugged him now and then, gently prodding him to just listen to one. Finally, Anderson promised he would. And once he did, he put her on the air almost immediately, telling listeners he couldn’t believe he had told her that her accent would be an impediment.

At the time, her name was Myra Winner. In 2004, she changed it, and that, too, became a story. She did it, she says, because no part of her name really belonged to her. She shared her first name with her grandmother, her middle name, Ketus, with her mother and her last names with her father, then her first husband, then her second one.

When picking a new name, she followed a literary device of her own making. She chose “Able” because it spoke to an ability to accomplish what she set out to do. And “Rae” because it’s short.

**W**hen Rae describes her writing process, it sounds almost like a haunting. She finds herself thinking about something — it could be an object, like her mother’s housecoat, or the feeling of holding her father’s hand. She doesn’t know quite why she keeps turning over the thing in her mind. But the words and fragments of thoughts keep coming to her.

“Words just build up in my head, and I can’t sleep,” she says. She writes on a silver MacBook Pro laptop in the living room of a little rented house on the Intracoastal, an old fish camp. She sits on a plush, red recliner beside the fireplace, facing a wall of books. When she sits down to write, she doesn’t really know where she’s going. But she has to write about one thing to get to something else, and keep going until the meaning starts to crystallize.

“For me, life is a series of stories,” she says. “[Stories are] an underlying commonality, the fundamental building block of our nature. When you listen to people’s stories, it validates our humanity.”

In the story, “Pick, Pull, Shell & Shuck,” she tells how her mother fed the family year round out of the crops they’d grow in the summer in their large garden. On Sundays, her mother would cook two weeks’ worth of food and post the menu on the refrigerator. To feed the family, everyone had to do their part during the summer harvest, and when children came indoors from playing, they were put to work. The story continues:

*“Once inside, we weren’t allow to just sit. If you were going to be inside, you had to be in possession of a shelling pan. If you weren’t shelling butter beans, black eyes, zipper or white acre peas, you were snapping green beans or stringing poles.”*

Rae’s mother not only cooked all those meals and canned food for the winter, she never missed a recital and earned two advanced degrees, becoming the head of curriculum for their school system. When Rae and her sister Mary would play house, Rae would always create a substitute life where they lived in a mobile home and ate Swanson’s TV dinners. Rae craved a bite of Salisbury steak. (She discovered it wasn’t that great when she was old enough to buy one.) Later, after leaving Perry, she ate all kinds of cuisines. In New York, she could sample an international banquet just steps from her front door. But in speaking about these foods, she always circles back to her mother, with a grown-up’s understanding of the richness she had as a child.

“I can’t tell you what I would give these days for the time-honored ‘doing the corn’ with my mother,” she says, “or eating again, for just two weeks, from that menu stuck to the old refrigerator.”

**T**oday, Rae stops for lunch at T-Ray’s, a service station converted into a restaurant, with old aluminum-and-linoleum dining tables set up in the auto bays. Rae typically eats a lot of raw foods, organic vegetables, fruit and fish. Today, she orders fried fish on a salad.

The restaurant is one of her favorite places to collect stories. One day, she saw a goat tied up in the back of a pick-up truck. It turned out to be a therapy goat that visited elderly people at nursing homes. If Rae hasn’t been there for a while, T-Ray’s father Ray Mullis will pretend he doesn’t know her. “Tell me your name again,” he’ll tease. To her, T-Ray’s represents everything that’s good about Fernandina Beach and Amelia Island.

“You have well-heeled people from Plantation, mill workers, crabbers and shrimpers, people who have kept this island from going the way of Hilton Head, where it’s all behind a gate. They’ve kept the island more eclectic.”

Able’s stories no longer air weekly, just when there’s extra space to fill. In the meantime, she’s finishing a novel and a memoir. But she never stops collecting stories. Somehow, in my interviewing her, our conversation turns to me. I tell her a few stories and she insists I have to write them down.

“Susan, do you know what a unique life you’ve led? You have to write this down. Write it as fiction. Write it as a memoir. You just can’t make that stuff up!”

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Read a story by Able Rae on page 13.