

A NOVEL APPROACH

INSIDER

In addition to getting two new books on shelves this month, Randy Wayne White’s been quietly working on a project growing orange trees.

By Artis Henderson

Photography by Scott McIntyre

On an oppressively hot afternoon in 2015, Randy Wayne White pushed his way through a remote stretch of muck-filled Florida wilderness. He’d flown in by seaplane, one of the only ways to reach this inland place of tangled gumbo limbos and strangler figs. White battled at black clouds of mosquitoes as he moved through briars that snagged his clothes. In an overgrown spot where pythons hid in the underbrush, he finally found what he was looking for: an isolated orange tree.

A few months ago, White regaled me with the tale of his citrus adventure when I visited with him in the wood-paneled, first floor office of his Sanibel home. He told me he’d gone out there on a hunch and spotted the fruit from the plane, but finding the host tree at the densely overgrown ground level was an odyssey. The challenge was right up his alley.

White has written more than 50 books in his successful literary career.

Just last month, he published “Salt River”, the 26th title in his best-selling Doc Ford series, and this month he debuts his first young adult novel titled “Fins: A Sharks Incorporated Novel.”

His pursuits and skills are varied, but in everything White does, the common thread is his love for Florida. “I’m amazed by the incredible natural and social history of this state,” he says. Fittingly, another recent endeavor focuses on a Sunshine State emblem.

Four years ago, the longtime author and former fishing guide found a wild citrus tree that he believed was genetically the same as the first ones brought by the Spaniards in the 1500s. He also thought it could help Florida’s citrus greening problem. “It started as a crazy idea, but it’s following its own lead,” he says.

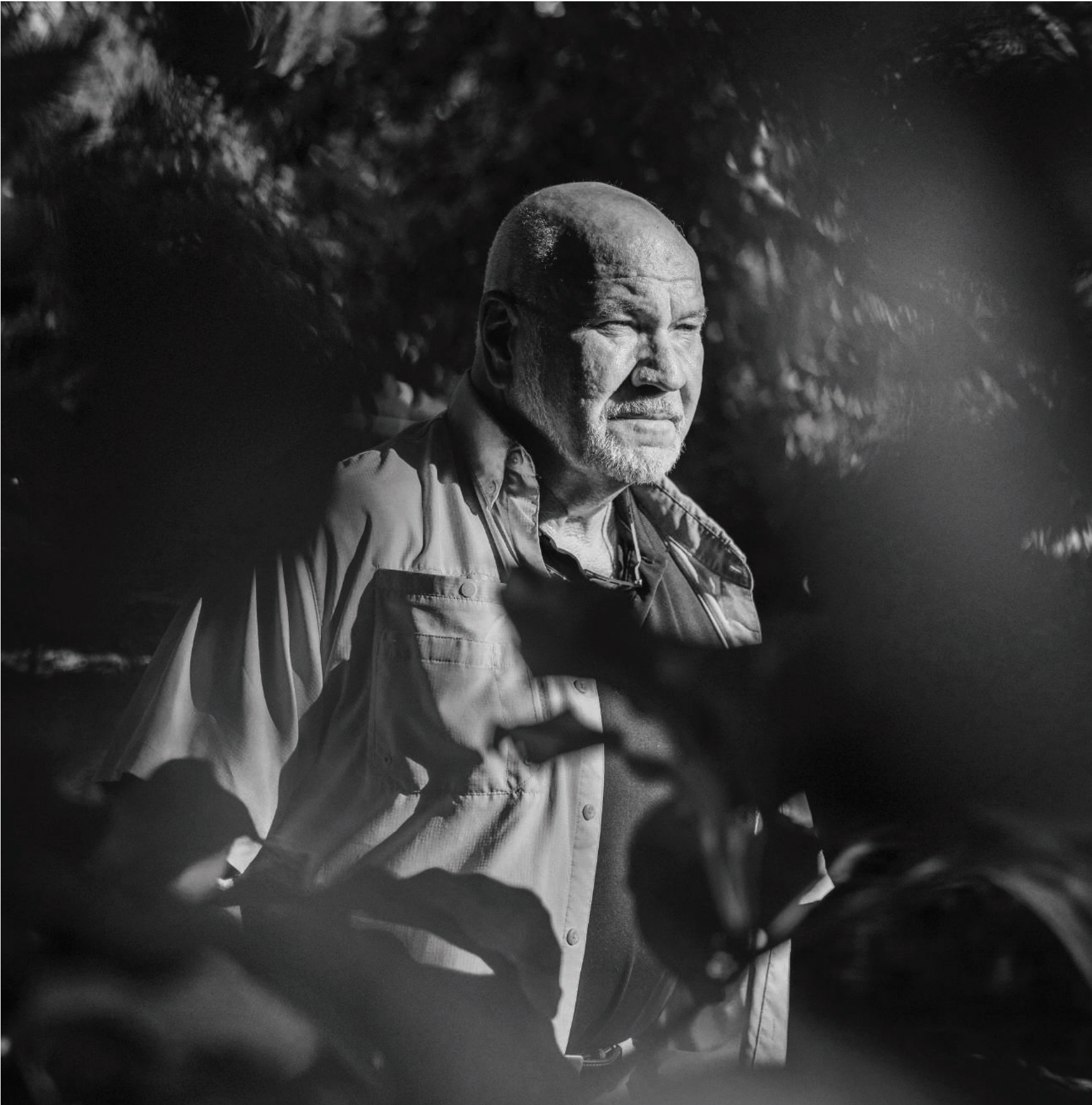
The project began with a bit of history and logical thinking: Citrus trees originated in Asia. Wasn’t it possible, White theorized, that old-growth root-

stock, originally from Asia, might be more resistant to a disease spread by a recently arrived Asiatic fly?

One of his partners in the project, Jeff Carter, a historian and Jimmy Carter’s son, discovered that if a citrus tree grew in a remote area where it couldn’t cross pollinate with other fruit, it would drop seeds with the exact DNA replica of the original plant. “Somewhere in Florida, we reasoned, there might be a feral orange tree that was a genetic clone of a tree planted in the 1500s,” he says. The idea is for the uncontaminated trees to be grafted onto new citrus trees to create disease-resistant plants.

Citrus greening began in China, spread by the Asian citrus psyllid, a tiny sap-sucking bug. Over time, greening causes trees to wither and stop producing fruit. The disease arrived in the United States in the early 2000s, and today experts estimate that 80% of the Florida citrus crop is affected. “Florida has lost half a million acres in the last 15

Author and adventurer Randy Wayne White has a project to grow oranges with rootstock believed to date to the 1500s, when the Spanish first brought citrus to the state.



years,” says Phillip Rucks, owner of Philip Rucks Citrus Nursery in Frostproof, the largest commercial citrus nursery in the United States. “It’s been several years of low blows.” Though groups are at work to create anti-bacterial agents and disease-tolerant oranges, no one has cracked the problem yet. To address the issue, Rucks says, people need to be proactive. That’s what White is doing.

Back in his office, White guides my attention to a map with a location labeled “Big F----- Pythons.” Somewhere in inland Florida, the author dodged 12-foot snakes to collect the fruit samples. He and his wife, singer-songwriter Wendy Webb, harvested the seeds, husked and dried them, then planted the first crop in pots beside their three-story Sanibel home.

The whole thing sounds as if it’s been ripped out of the pages of one of White’s books, and it kind of was. The research came about when White was working on the Hannah Smith novel, “Seduced,” in which the fishing guide and investigator goes on a quest to find the first orange

trees planted by Spanish conquistadors in order to save the state’s citrus industry. Now fiction and reality are intertwined, he says, “Probably more than with any book I’ve done.”

While the young trees were growing, White reached out to the biotech attorneys and applied for a provisional patent on his rootstock. He called it Seduced Archaic Citrus.

While his first, young trees were coming in, Hurricane Irma barreled through Southwest Florida. White gave four of his trees to his son, Rogan, who lives near the Caloosahatchee River. The plants spent a week under brackish water and survived. “Modern citrus can’t tolerate saltwater, yet all four trees are still growing like crazy,” White says. “It’s possible we’ve really stumbled onto something very unusual.”

He planted about 40 of his potted citrus trees in a 3.5-acre plot he owns midway between Sanibel and Captiva, where they thrived. In late 2018, another one of his partners in the project, Steve Smith, sent samples to

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Fans of White's novels will recognize the reference in his citrus project's name: Seduced Archaic Citrus comes from the Hannah Smith novel, "Seduced."



be tested for citrus greening. The results came back negative. Another encouraging sign. Smith, who has spent most of his career working with citrus, is the executive vice president of the Gulf Citrus Growers Association. Although, he points out, this work with White is a personal project. “It would be big,” Smith says of White’s idea. “We have yet to find a rootstock that’s completely greening resistant.” Still, the citrus vet often finds himself playing devil’s advocate with White. “Randy has a very novelistic point of view, and I tend to be more practical.” One of the challenges of the plan, besides proving the theory, would be getting enough of the new greening-resistant trees in groves. Smith puts the number of citrus acres in Florida at around 400,000. At 100 trees an acre (Smith’s estimate), that’s 40 million new trees needed. “That will take a long time,” he says.

But he’s hopeful, too: “You have to try everything.” So, why not an old-growth orange tree planted by Spanish conquistadors and discovered by a swashbuckling novelist?

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From his office on Sanibel, White drives us in his Ford Raptor to the plot he owns nearby. “Thomas Edison was growing goldenrod here when he and Firestone were trying to invent a substitute for rubber,” he tells me, as we climb out of the truck. It’s nearing dusk as we walk around the property, examining an old cistern covered with duckweed and admiring the halfmoon that has risen overhead. We stop at a small grove where White has planted a 30-by-15-foot plot of his fruit trees. The tallest one now stands 12 feet. He moves between the orange trees, inspecting their leaves, noting which ones need fertilizer and which could use pruning. We stand together and admire his crop. White spent his boyhood summers in rural North Carolina, and that farming instinct is still in him. That, combined with the adventurous spirit that led him to find the citrus tree in the first place, may just yield the next generation of Florida citrus. “My hope is that this rootstock really is resistant to this disease,” he says. “What a great gift to give the state.” 🍊

Randy Wayne White,
photographed at his home in
Sanibel, debuts his first young
adult novel this month.



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