

## The Thing about Florida: Exploring a Misunderstood State

**Tyler Gillespie**

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Tyler Gillespie's memoir *The Thing about Florida* addresses the state behind the myth and memes.

Though he's a fifth-generation Floridian, Gillespie was once embarrassed to call the state "home." Now, he's able to survey the oddities that make Florida the butt of so many jokes with clear eyes. Childhood memories and personal experiences influence his observations of Florida's eccentricities, including its alligators, gator wrestlers, snake hunters, reptile smugglers and collectors, hurricanes, and drag queens. Profiles of people with intimate knowledge of these phenomena come throughout the work, as do observations from history, from early explorers, and from conservationists who note changes in Florida's natural habitat, wildlife, and culture.

Gillespie is lighthearted and chatty as he reports on bizarre encounters, including with Rambo, a gator in a Santa outfit who became a media sensation. He also faces down personal fears, daring himself to sample snake meat; to join the Great Python Challenge snake hunt; to sit on the back of an alligator; and to ask uncomfortable questions.

Serious observations arise, too, including that Florida is often overlooked as a slave-owning Confederate state. Gillespie questions its culture of Civil War reenactments and politics. He also talks about coming to terms with his sexuality, and his struggles with addiction. Once part of a strict Southern Baptist megachurch community, he shows that being gay made exercising his faith difficult before he found a more welcoming church. His story comes amid profiles of LGBTQ+ activists, notes about the challenges that the community faces, and comments on the heartbreak of losing a dear friend in the Pulse nightclub shooting, an event Gillespie covered as a journalist.

*The Thing about Florida* is a personalized, amusing book about what makes the Sunshine State so unique.

WENDY HINMAN (March / April 2021)

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