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Is South Florida the New Southern California?: Carl Hiaasen's Dystopian Paradise

by David M. Parker

Florida and California have from their entry into American culture been considered by writers to be enchanted states, the places to which Americans can escape to a more exotic reality than is represented by the colder North and East. As early as the American Revolution, then-Spanish Florida was known for its unspoiled terrain and its lush beauty. Harriet Beecher Stowe extolled its exotic qualities, while Stephen Crane wrote of the contrast between the harsh outside world and the escapist qualities of the state. California, by contrast, has been seen as a paradise, a found Eden, and like Florida, a place whose beauty never palls since the Gold Rush brought Americans west in the 1840s. While Florida was tropical, writers saw California as Mediterranean. Still, other writers found that even the natural beauty could not mask

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the American civilization that intruded on it, and this began a debunking discourse in reference to these two exotic regions.¹

Southern California specifically has for some time represented the consequences of American excess to writers in various genres. Even before Nathanael West, in *The Day of the Locust* (1939), indicted the region for its materialism and its apparent disregard for American values, and certainly afterward, Southern California has been presented as a sprawling dystopia inhabited by narcissistic self-indulgent people who deserve the consequences of fires and earthquakes. Increasingly, South Florida has been presented as a similar planning disaster which deserves the consequences of weather for the same reasons. This is the environment in which Carl Hiaasen, a native Floridian and a longtime columnist for the *Miami Herald*, sets his fiction. Hiaasen was born in 1953, grew up in rural Broward County, began writing an underground newspaper in high school, graduated from the University of Florida's school of journalism in 1974, and joined the *Miami Herald* in 1976. He joined the paper's investigative reporting unit in 1979, and began to write columns in 1985, at first three times a week. Hiaasen started writing widely acclaimed novels in 1986; with the success of the novels, he cut back his column to once a week, and currently is still writing for the *Herald*.²

1. For Florida, see Anne E. Rowe, *The Idea of Florida in the American Literary Imagination*, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), *passim*. For California, see Franklin Walker, *A Literary History of Southern California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), *passim*; Lawrence Clark Powell, *California Classics: The Creative Literature of the Golden State* (Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Press, 1971), ix-xiii; Kevin Starr, *Americans and the California Dream, 1850-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 417-419; and David Wyatt, *The Fall into Eden: Landscape Imagination in California* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), xvi-xix, 207.
2. For the presentation of a dystopian Southern California, see Richard G. Lillard, *Eden in Jeopardy, Man's Prodigal Meddling with his Environment: The Southern California Experience* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966); Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990), 20-22, 30-46; Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York, Vintage Books, 1999), 5-91; and William Fulton, "Home Sweet Home: Pursuing Dreams in a Land of Fire," *New York Times Week in Review*, November 2, 2003, accessed July 25, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/02/weekinreview/the-national-home-sweet-home-pursuing-dreams-in-a-land-of-fire.html>. For Carl Hiaasen, see Joanne Kenen, "Carl of the Wild," *American Journalism Review* 15, no. 8 (1993), 25-31; Mireya Navarro, "At Home with Carl Hiaasen: Can Success and Satire Mix?" *New York Times*, July 4, 1996, accessed February 16, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/07/04/garden/at-home-with-carl-hiaasen-can-success-and-satire-mix.html>; "Hurricane Hiaasen," *People Weekly* 53 no. 19, 139-144 (May 15 2000); and CBS News, "Florida: A Paradise of Scandals," Carl Hiaasen interview with Steve Kroft, *60 Minutes*, April 17 2005, accessed July 25, 2011 http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/04/15/60minutes/main688458.shtml?source=search_story.

Southern California and South Florida have remarkably similar histories. Both areas lagged behind the northern part of their states in terms of development, both were the beneficiaries of land booms promoted by civic boosters, both became known initially as centers of citrus production and tourism, and both spent their boom years as predominantly Anglo-Saxon populated cities, distinguished from the rest of the country by temperate weather and by the fact that they appear to attract an unusual number of eccentric people. The tropes for expressing this are remarkably similar: about the eccentric people in Southern California, for example, Frank Lloyd Wright said "Tip the world over on its side and everything loose will land in Los Angeles," a statement so profound that Saul Bellow repeated it without specific attribution in his novel, *Seize the Day* (1956). Hiaasen describes this as the "sludge theory" of American geography, observing that "If you pick up the country and tilt it, all the sludge would pool in a peninsula at the lower right-hand corner." Southern California developed its current identity immediately after World War II, while South Florida entered the popular mind after Castro's takeover of Cuba in 1959 and even more so by the 1980s; in fact, the commentary following the Mariel boat lift of 1980, in which thousands of Cuban exiles chaotically and unexpectedly arrived on Florida beaches, identified it as even more foreign and exotic than Southern California has ever been rendered. As T.D. Allman explains it, Miami has from the beginning been "a place where some arrive searching for wealth and happiness, and others are there waiting to sell them land, polish their shoes and pick their pockets."³

While the ethnic makeup of South Florida plays a significant role in its representation in popular culture, it is not the sole focal point of Carl Hiaasen's critique. Hiaasen, like Nathanael West, finds an appealing target in the people who the developers have attracted to South Florida. He is, however, also concerned with the environment and the sins that rapacious developers have committed

3. William Deverell, Greg Hise and David C. Sloane, "Orange Empires: Comparing Miami and Los Angeles," *Pacific Historical Review* 68, no. 2 (1999), 146-147; Kathy Kolnick, "Orange Empires: Miami and Los Angeles, February 27-28, 1998," *Urban History Newsletter* 21(1999), 7; Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1996), 11; Kenen, "Carl of the Wild," 25; T.D. Allman, *Miami: City of the Future* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987), quote on 123; Joan Didion, *Miami* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); David Rieff, *Coming to Miami* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987).

against it. Where Southern California is plagued with earthquakes, fires and resulting landslides, South Florida has hurricanes, and both regions have experienced land development encroaching into wilderness spaces. Hiaasen is especially concerned with water and land issues, and it is this aspect of Hiaasen's writings on which this analysis will focus.

Hiaasen's work has entered the scholarly world in the context of the crime novel, and there is certainly good reason to group him with the likes of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. A distinct tradition of Florida crime writing, well documented in the anthology *Crime Fiction and Film in the Sunshine State: Florida Noir* (1997), partially originated in journalism, as clearly reflected in the work of Edna Buchanan, the Pulitzer prize-winning police reporter for the Miami Herald from 1973 to 1991. Buchanan has published ten crime novels and two works of nonfiction, has appeared on *60 Minutes* and has been played by the late Elizabeth Montgomery in TV versions of her work. Hammett and Chandler, however, did not have Hiaasen's ecological conscience, perhaps because they wrote in a different era. Chandler's Los Angeles is a city of artifice, not necessarily a city destroyed by rapacious developers (as the pianist Oscar Levant famously said twenty years later, "Strip away the phony tinsel of Hollywood and you find the real tinsel underneath"), and Hammett wrote about the San Francisco Bay Area, not Los Angeles. Studies of Hiaasen's earlier work have concluded that Hiaasen's major concern is with the grotesque aspects of South Florida and "what's been done to the environment in pursuit of money." Hiaasen himself has described Florida as "a paradise of scandals teeming with drifters, deadbeats and misfits drawn here by some dark primordial calling like demented trout."⁴

In his first novel, *Tourist Season* (1986), Hiaasen examines the impact of drifters, deadbeats and misfits on the fragile ecosystem of Florida. Skip Wiley, the criminal mastermind in this book, is a newspaper columnist with an extreme desire to rescue Florida

4. Liahna K. Babener, "Raymond Chandler's City of Lies," in *Los Angeles In Fiction: A Collection of Essays*, ed. David Fine (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 127-149; Oscar Levant, *The Columbia World of Quotations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), #35538; Julie Sloan Brannon, "The Rules are Different Here: South Florida Noir and the Grotesque," in Steve Glassman and Maurice J. O'Sullivan, eds., *Crime Fiction and Film in the Sunshine State: Florida Noir* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997), 56; CBS News, "Florida: A Paradise of Scandals," April 17 2005.

from its overdevelopment, one of the characteristics of the region's history. Hiaasen explains:

For thirty years, beginning around the turn of the century, South Florida grew at an astonishing pace . . . Where there was no land, they dredged it from the bottom of Biscayne Bay, manufactured an island, named it after a flower or a daughter or themselves, and peddled it as a natural oasis . . . Those wheeler-dealers who didn't blow their brains out after the Hurricane of '26 or hang themselves after the real-estate bust were eventually rewarded with untold wealth, [and] these characters are regarded as the true pioneers of South Florida.

Wiley forms a terrorist organization called *Las Noches de Diciembre*, the other members of which are a virulent and violent anti-Castro Cuban émigré who has failed at bomb-making, an aggrieved Black retired running back for the Miami Dolphins, and a Seminole Indian. The group develops a plot to make south Florida less attractive to the flood of tourists. It consists of a string of sensational murders (two of them involve feeding the victims, alive, to Pavlov, one of a very few surviving North American crocodiles) capped by the kidnapping of the queen of the Orange Bowl Parade, all of which are designed to garner significant and sensational media coverage. Of course, the adventures of *Las Noches de Diciembre* are over the top in excess, but the adventures of Skip Wiley in *Tourist Season* detail the frustration that the overdevelopment of Florida can cause in a native who has seen too much of it.⁵

It is clear that Hiaasen intends his novels to expand upon material he has covered as a columnist for the *Miami Herald* to a wider audience than the *Herald's* readers. For example, in his weekly columns Hiaasen has been highly critical of the stranglehold he believes the sugar industry has on Florida politics. This critique appears in his novels as well, even those which do not, as we will see below, have ecology as their central focus. In *Strip Tease* (1993), a novel about the difficulties of assessing morality in the political

5. Carl Hiaasen, *Tourist Season* (New York: Warner Books, 1986), 232, 315, 351-354. For additional analysis of this work, see Peter Jordan, "Carl Hiaasen's Environmental Thrillers: Crime Fiction in Green Peace," *Studies in Popular Culture* 13 (1990), 68; Gary Mormino, "Sunbelt Dreams and Altered States: A Social and Cultural History of Florida, 1950-2000," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 81, no. 1 (2002), 19.

sphere of South Florida, Davey Dilbeck, a member of Congress and chairman of the subcommittee that regulates price supports for sugar, becomes a suspect in an assault case at a strip club. Dilbeck is being bankrolled by Big Sugar, and the attorney who keeps him out of trouble does this in part because one of the attorney's tasks is "making sure that Big Sugar's price supports passed Congress with no snags." The Congressman goes to strip clubs with Christopher Rojo, a member of a family who runs a sugar-cane operation but who had never visited the site where sugar is produced (in fact, Hiaasen shows us Rojo's first visit to the sugar fields, in the company of the congressman and two strippers).⁶

Sugar, however, is not the only thing that's fouling Lake Okeechobee. In Hiaasen's *Basket Case* (2002), an obscure rock musician with a cult following dies mysteriously and Jack Tagger, our journalist hero, decides to find out what really happened; Tagger ultimately has to hire a boat to make a hostage exchange in the middle of the lake. Hiaasen describes the recreational facility where the heroes rent the boat: a supply camp for fishermen that "has fallen on hard times. Farms and cattle ranches have dumped so much [manure]-fouled runoff into [Lake Okeechobee] that miles of prime bass habitat have been transformed into impenetrable cattail bogs. The decline in sport fishing commerce has been exacerbated by water levels so treacherously low as to discourage navigation by high-speed fanatics with 175-horsepower outboards." There is enough water, however, for the bad guys in the airboat to crash, which kills both of them. Between Big Sugar and Big Cattle, the ecosystem of South Florida does not stand a chance.⁷

Each one of Hiaasen's novels contains an environmental and ecological critique of South Florida, although his perspective has changed during the course of his writing and his environmental critique has differing points of origin. While *Tourist Season* was about population growth befouling South Florida, the irresponsible behavior in *Sick Puppy* (2000) has its genesis in greed. The novel begins with a Fort Lauderdale-based lobbyist, Palmer Stoa, shooting a rare African black rhinoceros at point-blank range at the Wilderness Veldt Plantation, a safari ranch near Ocala.

6. Diane Stevenson, ed., *Kick Ass, Selected Columns of Carl Hiaasen* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1990), 380-404; Carl Hiaasen, *Strip Tease* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 13-15, 64, 98-99.

7. Carl Hiaasen, *Basket Case* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 271-282.

The aged rhinoceros, who had been the featured attraction at an Arizona roadside zoo, wore a fiberglass horn because its real horn had been sawed off and sold to a Chinese herbalist in Panama City. On the way back to Fort Lauderdale, Stoaat throws the remnants of his Burger King lunch out the window. This enrages the novel's protagonist, one Twilly Spree, "an unemployed twenty-six year old college dropout with a brief but spectacular history of psychological problems," who had inherited several millions of dollars, and maintained a well-developed concern for the environment. Spree, after arranging to have a garbage truck dump its load into Stoaat's convertible BMW (which had its top down), kidnaps Stoaat's Labrador Retriever to use as ransom for his demands concerning the larger project on which Stoaat is working.⁸

That project is a development called Shearwater Island, a seaside community, which was to be developed on Toad Island, a community of 217 people at the mouth of the Suwanee on the Gulf Coast. In order for construction to proceed, the developers needed funding for a bridge and a comprehensive biological survey. The bridge funding is dependent on political maneuvering and hidden kickbacks, some of Hiaasen's favorite political *bêtes noires*. The survey is conducted by a new biology Ph.D. from Cornell, Steven Brinkman, who had "chosen the private sector for its higher salaries and opportunities for advancement." Brinkman's supervisor, Karl Krimmler, would have been happy to hear that no wildlife at all lived on the island since all the developers saw in nature were "bureaucratic obstacles." Brinkman finds no endangered species, but hundreds of oak toads, "so many [you'd] never catch them all," and Krimmler explained that the toads will be buried with a bulldozer instead. Meanwhile, the inhabitants of Toad Island, led by Nils Fishback, the landscape architect of the first project planned for the locale, "the Towers of Tarpon Island," have done almost everything they could to develop the island themselves, but all of these projects had failed (Hiaasen explains that a "cheerlessly detailed history [of each of the schemes is] available for scrutiny in the bankruptcy files of the federal courthouse at Gainesville."). This time, the Toad Islanders circulated a petition that suggested they were environmentalists—it even quoted *Walden*—but they worried that such an appeal could attract legitimate conservation organizations that would make the

8. Carl Hiaasen, *Sick Puppy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 3-11.

developers increase their offer for the land. When financing has been obtained for the bridge and the last of the toads have been plowed under, the Toad Island "protesters" hold a press conference to announce that the Shearwater Island Company had caved in to their demands. These demands included a mitigation program that required replanting three acres of new trees for each acre of the island that was developed—although the developers were not legally required to plant the trees on the island as long as they were planted somewhere in Florida. Palmer Stoa had designed this scam. Florida, in *Sick Puppy*, is a piece of land where every inch must be made to make a profit for someone, an indictment of the rapaciousness of development and a prime example of dystopia.⁹

Even the dog that Spree kidnaps in the novel is given a pedigree that is related to the environment. He was a gift from Dag Magnusson, the president of the Magnusson Phosphate Company, whose mine in Polk County was about to be shut down by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) "for polluting a commercial lake with chemical runoff, [which] was so vile that it exterminated all life forms larger than amoebas." Stoa could not find a congressman who would intervene, but he was able to put Magnusson in touch with a regional EPA administrator with a weak spot for trout fishing. After Magnusson brought the administrator to a private stretch of river in Montana where he "nailed his first twenty inch rainbow," the EPA settled with Magnusson Phosphate, "which ultimately agreed to pay a \$3,900 fine and erect large warning signs on the shores of the poisoned lake." Stoa named the dog "Boodle" as a joke, since he was a gift for having arranging a bribe.¹⁰

Spree, with the help of Skink, a former governor of Florida (and one of several recurring characters in Hiaasen's books), convinces the current governor, Dick Artemus, to exercise a line-item veto on the funds set aside for "the Toad Island-Shearwater Bridge and highway improvement project." While hunting, Stoa is finally trampled by a rhinoceros, older and even more feeble than the one Stoa shot at the beginning of the book, who had just gored Robert Clapley, the other promoter of the project: Hiaasen notes in the epilogue,

9. Hiaasen, *Sick Puppy*, 27-43.

10. *Ibid.*, 83-84.

With the death of Robert Clapley, the Zurich-based SwissOne Basic Group withdrew all lines of credit for the Shearwater Island Development Corporation, which immediately folded. At a bankruptcy auction arranged by Clapley's estate, his extensive waterfront holdings on Toad Island were sold to an anonymous buyer, who eventually renamed it Amy Island and deeded every parcel for preservation. No new bridge was built.¹¹

The buyer, of course, was Twilly Spree, who named the island after his mother, and the environment has its revenge on the greedy developers.

The Shearwater Island scam is a recurring theme in Hiaasen's novels as part of his concern for the destruction of undeveloped real estate in Florida for commercial profit. The ending of *Tourist Season*, for example, takes place on Osprey Island, which is being cleared for condominium development; the characters race to get off the island before the preset dynamite which has been wired to explode at dawn explodes. In *Lucky You* (1997), Hiaasen shows his readers that very little involving land preservation in Florida is as simple as it may appear. Part of the novel is focused on a plot of land called Simmons Wood, which had been maintained as a private hunting reserve since 1959 by one Lighthorse Simmons, whose family had been early settlers of the area. When a hunter, however, mistook Simmons for a six-point buck and shattered his kneecap with a bullet, Simmons never set foot in Simmons Wood again, and had the area zoned commercial. However, he could not bring himself to sell it for sentimental reasons. After his death, his heirs, who had no use for the property, were quite willing to sell it to be turned into whatever the buyer wanted it to be.¹²

In *Lucky You*, Jo Layne Lucks, who has one of two winning lottery tickets worth \$14 million, is a nurse who works as a veterinarian's assistant. The main plot of the novel revolves around an attempt by thieves to steal the ticket. Jo Layne started to explore Simmons Wood after divorcing her husband, a lawyer who had

11. Hiaasen, *Sick Puppy*, 338. For Skink, the name assumed by Governor Clinton Tyree, see Brannon, "The Rules are Different Here," 58-59, and Jordan, "Carl Hiaasen's Environmental Thrillers," 66-67. Skink appears in almost all of Hiaasen's novels; his first appearance is in *Double Whammy* (1987; New York, Warner Books, 2005), and Hiaasen describes him and his history on pages 107-112.

12. Hiaasen, *Tourist Season*, 358-378; Carl Hiaasen, *Lucky You* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 101-103.

been convicted of fraud, taken a job as a toll taker on the turnpike, and who had then been arrested "for stealing a jumbo-sized bag of change." She recorded the various types of wildlife she saw in a notebook, and became enamored of the "cooters," baby turtles that perched on the rocks and logs of the creek that ran through the property. When the "For Sale" sign went up on the highway, she bought the largest aquarium she could find and started rescuing the turtles, because "she couldn't bear the thought of them being buried alive by bulldozers." Just like the frogs on Toad/Shearwater Island, nature has to give way to development—paradise ruined by dystopian development.¹³

The machinations of land development are not quite as central to *Skinny Dip* (2004) as they are to the plots of *Sick Puppy* and *Lucky You*, but the plot of *Skinny Dip* is driven by the consequences of land development in the Everglades. Hiaasen is perhaps more concerned with the fate of the Everglades than with any other aspect of the ecology of Florida, and *Skinny Dip* gives him the chance to explain what sins have been committed in the expansion of Florida real estate west and south into the river of grass. He describes a process by which successive generations of "land developers, bankers, railroad barons, real-estate promoters, citrus growers, sugar tycoons and . . . the politicians they owned," beginning with one Hamilton Disston in 1896, go broke attempting to drain the swamp. What could not be dried, paved or planted to support agriculture, industry and housing construction has been transformed into channels and reservoirs by the Army Corps of Engineers to protect these enterprises from too-frequent flooding. This was tolerated until a series of droughts scared "even the most slatternly" politicians into extolling the Everglades as a national treasure, and appropriated \$8 billion to restore the purity of its waters. Unfortunately for those concerned with the environment in the novel, 90% of the 'glades had been developed or converted into agricultural plots before the national park could be established. *Skinny Dip* is about the purity, or lack thereof, of the water in the Everglades, and the importance to agribusiness of showing that the Everglades have not been as befouled as Lake Okeechobee has been.¹⁴

Samuel Johnson "Red" Hammernut, a large-scale vegetable grower, hires Charles Regis Perrone ("Chaz"), the holder of an

13. Hiaasen, *Lucky You*, 41-43.

14. Carl Hiaasen, *Skinny Dip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 90-91.

M.A. in marine biology from the University of Miami soon after Hammernut's farm makes the headlines of a newspaper as "LOCAL FARM CITED AS GLADES POLLUTER." Hammernut then makes a major donation to Duke University's Wetland Center, and Chaz is enrolled in its Ph.D. program. Upon Chaz's graduation, Hammernut pulls more strings and gets Chaz a job as a state biologist, "testing water purity in a particular sector of the Everglades Agricultural Area." This particular sector abuts Hammernut's thirteen thousand acres of lettuce, cabbage, tomatoes, corn, radishes, escarole and parsley; its continued profitability is why Hammernut invested in Chaz's education. Unlike Steven Brinkman, Chaz is more committed to his employer than he is to the ideals of science. When he thinks that his wife, known as Joey, had seen him forging the water data, he throws her over the railing of a cruise ship, and assumes that this has killed her. But Chaz is mistaken—he forgot that Joey was a champion swimmer in college and she does not die.

Joey survives by hanging on to a floating bale of marijuana, and is rescued by Mick Stranahan, an investigator who had been retired by the State Attorney's office for killing a "duly elected [but crooked] judge." After Hurricane Andrew destroyed the stilt house in Biscayne Bay he had bought with part of the buyout money, Stranahan becomes the caretaker of a concrete house somewhere in the northern Keys. While Chaz dutifully enlists the Broward County police, particularly a Detective Karl Rolvaag, to search for Joey in an area of the ocean where he thinks the ship was located, Stranahan helps Joey figure out how to make Chaz squirm. When we meet Rolvaag, incidentally, he's bringing a box of live rats home to his two pet pythons; the snakes will constitute one of the subplots of the novel.

Meanwhile, Chaz goes on with his water-management job in the Everglades, which he finds "hot, buggy, funky-smelling and treacherous." Hiaasen puts him in a bright yellow Humvee, which Hammernut bought him for his expeditions, and tells us that the color was intended to scare away any panthers that he might encounter, even though the panthers were nearly extinct and colorblind to boot (in a 2008 column in the *Miami Herald*, Hiaasen reports that the panthers, numbering between 80 and 100, are "hanging on longer and in larger numbers than anybody had foreseen). Hammernut also arms Chaz with a two-iron to fight off alligators. We see Chaz take a sample of tea-colored water from a monitoring station and place it in his vehicle, and we learn that

he is thinking "What a steaming [cesspool] this is. To think the taxpayers of America are spending 8 million dollars to save it." We then learn that Hammernut keeps him on, because within an eight month period after Chaz was hired, phosphorus levels in the runoff from Hammernut Farms had dropped from 302 parts per billion ("more fertilizer per gallon than . . . the state's largest cattle ranch and sugarcane grower combined") to about 9 parts per billion, "a level so low that regulators removed Hammernut Farm from their target list of outlaw polluters." This demonstrates how high the stakes were in keeping the fictitious readings secret, and why Chaz found it necessary to throw Joey overboard.¹⁵

The Everglades becomes a minor character during the rest of *Skinny Dip*. Rolvaag finds a fingernail in the bale of marijuana Joey had been clinging to and decides she is alive while Stranahan executes a blackmail sting on Chaz, saying he saw the incident on the cruise ship, and incidentally, that he knows about the phosphorus tests and that Hammernut had paid for the Humvee. Stranahan also tells Ricca, the woman Chaz had been cheating on Joey with, that he saw the incident, and, when Chaz tries to make this up to her, Ricca refuses to see him. When Chaz finally convinces Ricca to go for a ride with him, they drive into the Everglades, and after trying to scare her, Chaz shoots her in the leg. Unfortunately for Chaz, Ricca can swim too, and she finds herself under the protection of Skink, the former governor, in the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge. Skink helps her to the nearest highway, where a Jeep is waiting for her. Rolvaag "solves" the case (after taking some water samples himself, which revealed illegal phosphorus levels of 317, 327 and 344 parts per billion) leaves the Fort Lauderdale force and goes home to Minnesota after he releases the pythons into the Everglades—Hiaasen's comment on all the non-native species that have crowded the indigenous flora and fauna of South Florida out of their natural habitats.

At one point in *Skinny Dip*, Stranahan arranges to have a fleet of helicopters buzz Chaz on his water collection rounds, and Joey is on one of the helicopters with Stranahan:

15. Hiaasen, *Skinny Dip*, 75-77, 125-127. For the Florida Panther, see Hiaasen, "Remembering the Florida panther's champion," *Miami Herald*, June 29, 2008. Incidentally, a minor character in the "Gibtown" episode of the television series *Glades* (which aired July 17, 2011) is a marine biologist who has been doctoring the pollution levels in the Everglades, a sign that Hiaasen's view of Florida is increasingly the view being presented to the rest of the nation.

Stranahan spotted three small deer bounding to the shelter of a tree island, and it occurred to Joey that—except for the occasional garbage-looting raccoon—these were the first truly wild animals she'd seen since moving to Florida. She's always been curious about the Everglades, but Chaz had refused to take her along on field trips ... That he never spoke of the place, except to gripe about the snakes and the insects, was even more stunning to Joey now that she'd finally seen it for herself. How could Chaz—a biologist—for God's sake—not be dazzled?

Hammernut prepares for the blackmail meeting by loading \$500,000 into a suitcase with a transmitter, which makes it easy to track down after the exchange with Chaz, who steals it. Hammernut recovers the money, but Chaz escapes into the Everglades where he encounters Skink, who remembers everything Ricca told him. As Skink marches Chaz further into the swamp, Chaz wonders where this will all end, and Skink says to him "Did you ever study Tennyson? I'm guessing not. 'Nature red in tooth and claw.' That's a very famous line." Chaz asks, "I'm not going back to Boca Raton, am I?" and Skink's reply is "No, Dr. Perrone, you are not."¹⁶

Hiaasen explains that the reason that the murder of the Everglades does not get much attention is the fact that the damage caused by the fertilizers pouring into the Everglades is not especially telegenic. It operates by disrupting the food chain and replacing the habitat of native birds and wildlife with aquatic plants that "thrive on the torrent of phosphorus" spilled into it by agricultural fertilizers. Despite a federal restoration project, and the "grudging cooperation" of sugar growers and corporate farmers, the Everglades, in 2004, was still dying at the rate of two acres a day.¹⁷

The Everglades makes another appearance in *Nature Girl* (2006), this time as an arena in which a young man, half-Seminole, tries to live like his Indian ancestors, and a woman with anger management issues attempts to teach a telemarketer a lesson during the course of an eco-tourism vacation. Unlike *Tourist Season* and *Skinny Dip*, in which we entered the Everglades from the (over) developed east coast of Florida, *Nature Girl* is set in Everglades City and the Ten Thousand Islands at the north end of the wetlands and

16. Hiaasen, *Skinny Dip*, 251, 351-355.

17. *Ibid.*, 334-335.

the characters are accustomed to the setting. Sammy Tigertail, who spent the first fourteen years of his life with his white father as Chad McQueen, always lived there. Honey Santana, on the other hand, grew up in Miami, where she felt "suffocated and disoriented." The night of her senior prom, Honey, drove her date's car due west to the Naples beach, on the west coast of Florida, to escape Miami's suffocating urban sprawl. On the way back, they stopped "near a kidney-shaped pond where a large alligator was wolfing down a purple gallinule." While gathering beer cans around the pond, Honey met the man who would become her husband, her child's father, and her ex-husband, Perry Skinner. She married him three weeks after their first meeting (they later divorced), and took up residence in Everglades City (population as of 2009: 616).¹⁸

At the start of the book, Honey, who has just quit a job with a lecherous fishmonger, Piejack (she attacked him with a crab mallet after he grabbed her breast), is considering a career in ecotours like her friend Bonnie, who takes tourists out to Cormorant Key: "Driving home from Marco this afternoon I noticed a string of bright yellow kayaks crossing the bay, and I thought: What a heavenly way to spend the day, paddling in the sunshine through the mangroves." She is interrupted in this reverie by a telemarketer, who she provokes into calling her a "dried-up old skank." Honey tracks down the telemarketer using a reverse telephone directory. She then calls the offending telemarketer at home masquerading as another telemarketer selling lots west of Naples for a made-up company called Royal Gulf Hammocks, throwing in "a breathtaking ecotour through the Ten Thousand Islands in kayaks." Miraculously, the telemarketer agrees to her proposal because he wants some time off from his wife with his mistress, and the plot takes place around the ensuing events.¹⁹

Sammy Tigertail is perhaps an even more interesting character in this novel. His father drove a Budweiser truck, and was a regular customer at the Miccosukee service plaza where Sammy's mother worked in the gift shop. She reluctantly lets his father keep him because she had misgivings about raising a half-white son on the reservation. That arrangement ended when Sammy's father died suddenly and his stepmother drove him directly from the funeral back to the reservation. At fifteen, after a childhood in

18. Carl Hiaasen, *Nature Girl* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 88-89.

19. *Ibid.*, 7, 41, 56-57.

a subdivision in Broward County, he was now a Seminole, and a Tigertail, descended from one of the great chiefs: "except for his Irish blue eyes, he looked full-blooded." He set out to become a more complete Seminole by listening to his elders tell stories, and realized he envied them for having grown up buffered by the swamp. Now, however, Sammy lived amongst hotels, casinos, and big money. Since the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Bryan v Itasca County* (1976) that states had no authority to tax the business enterprises of Indian tribes, the Seminoles had become rich, and his uncle Tommy was now a gambling tycoon.²⁰

We meet Sammy as he is dumping a dead body in Lostmans River. The body, a white man named Wilson, had died of a heart attack on an airboat Sammy was piloting. Sammy naturally called his uncle, Tommy Tigertail (the Seminole character whom we met in *Tourist Season*), who advised Sammy to get the body off the reservation. Sammy read this as "dispose of the body permanently," put Wilson in his rental car, rented a crab boat and headed for a snook hole he knew on the river. After disposing the body and returning the crab boat, Sammy called Tommy to tell him he was going away for a while because he "wasn't spiritually ready to deal with tourists."²¹

It seems that Sammy had thought about this retreat from civilization for years. His father had bought him a copy of a report commissioned by the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of Ethnology in 1880 "to enquire into the condition and to ascertain the number of Indians commonly known as Seminole," in an attempt to make sure Sammy knew about his Indian ancestors. Its author, the Reverend Clay MacCauley, described the Seminoles as "strong, fearless, haughty, and independent" and doomed to submit, eventually, to the civilization of the white man. Sammy, as Hiaasen writes, "planned grandly to recast himself as one of those indomitable braves who resisted the intruders, or died trying." He encounters a group of Florida State University students camping out on the island, steals one of their canoes and sets off (accompanied by one of the young female campers who insists on going with him), to find a new island, this time uninhabited. When Gillian, the young woman, asks what she should call him, he says "Thocklo Tustenuggee," his great-great-great-grandfather's Seminole name.

20. Hiaasen, *Nature Girl*, 35-37.

21. *Ibid.*, 3-5.

They then head off to Dismal Key, two miles outside the Everglades National Park boundary.²²

Sammy's plot and Honey's plot intersect when they both end up on the same island. In a complex plot involving kidnapping, rescues of various kinds, helicopters and gunshots, Sammy ends up, along with Honey's ex-husband Perry Skinner, saving Honey from Piejack, who has turned out to be exceptionally evil. Sammy had never believed that all white men were evil, since his own father had been honest and loving. Then, there was his uncle's unusual white friend, Wiley, the tourist-hating protagonist of *Tourist Season*. Tommy Tigertail said that Wiley "wanted to save Florida as desperately as any Seminole, and that he'd gone mad trying." When Sammy asked what had happened to Wiley, Tommy said "The great Maker of Breath had given [Wiley's] spirit to an old bald eagle," a reference to the circumstances of Wiley's death on Osprey Island as he was attempting to get a young bald eagle to fly away when the island was cleared by dynamite. At the end of *Nature Girl*, where the plot sorts itself out, Sammy returns to the Ten Thousand Islands to dump Piejack's body, where he finds an old eagle and wonders if the bird might be the ghost spirit of Wiley. Given the matter of Wilson's car, Sammy's half brother Lee delivers him gasoline and provisions since it would be premature for him to go back to the reservation, and they work out drop sites and a schedule: "Aware that his half brother's wilderness skills were not as advanced as a full-blooded Seminole, Lee had also provided a compass, a dive watch, a NOAA marine chart and a bag of flares." Sammy is more complex than many of Hiaasen's other protagonists, and the fact that he is the nephew of one of the members of *Las Noches de Diciembre* further complicates him. Sammy spends the novel trying to work out the complicated relationships between his white father and his Seminole ancestry, and between living in Broward County, on the reservation, or in the Everglades itself. Hiaasen provides no conclusions for this, except to let us know that Sammy had not decided what to do if Gillian, who left the Everglades in a helicopter with one of Honey's telemarketers, came back to look for him.²³

Steve Croft of *60 Minutes* has reported, "Hiaasen . . . takes the raw material of Florida, and then molds and shapes it into comic mystery novels, often with only minor embellishments." Hiaasen himself has

22. Hiaasen, *Nature Girl*, 50-52, 72-73, 84-87, 100-105.

23. *Ibid.*, 110-111, 298-299.

observed that the plot of *Strip Tease* had been based on the exploits of Congressman J. Herbert Burke, who was arrested in 1978 for "behaving badly at a topless club in Fort Lauderdale," and the fact that Kendall Coffey, at the time the United States Attorney for the Southern District of Florida, was arrested for biting the arm of a stripper and abruptly went into private practice shortly before the film version of *Strip Tease* was released made Hiaasen feel like he had been "plagiarized by real life." As evidence that he must compete with the news, Hiaasen cites the story of Elian Gonzales, and comments that it's natural, if not obvious, that O.J. Simpson, when he could no longer afford to live in California, ended up in Florida. When he saw the photographs of the drivers licenses carried by some of the 9/11 hijackers on television, and they were Florida licenses, Hiaasen's response was "Where's the one place in the United States where the bar of bad behavior is so high that nobody's gonna notice these guys?"²⁴

Recently, Hiaasen reviewed a book, *Fool's Paradise: Players, Poseurs, and the Culture of Excess in South Beach* (2009) by Steven Gaines, notorious for his previous work on the Hamptons (*Philistines at the Hedgerow: Passion and Property in the Hamptons* [1998]). The conclusion of the review sums up Hiaasen's fascination with South Florida: "It's not the fault of Gaines that, from gorgeous airheads to slimy swindlers, *Fools Paradise* is populated by characters straight from central casting. That's the story of Florida. As any journalist can attest, just because a place is shallow, corrupt and infested with phonies doesn't mean it's dull." This has been echoed by the current television critic of the *Miami Herald*, Glenn Garvin. In a recent review of the Bravo television series, *The Real Housewives of Miami*, Garvin writes that the show may erase the image of *Miami Vice* in the mind of the television viewer, replacing it with the indisputable achievements of South Florida: "Our indolent trashiness. Our indolent superficiality." Shades of Oscar Levant and the real tinsel underneath the fake tinsel of Hollywood! Isn't that the national critique of Southern California in the popular mind as well? Paradise for the initial settlers, rendered dystopian by the trashy, superficial and venal people who succeeded them.²⁵

24. CBS News, "Florida: A Paradise of Scandals," April 17, 2005; Carl Hiaasen, "Real Life: That Bizarre and Brazen Plagiarist," *New York Times*, April 17, 2000, E1.

25. Carl Hiaasen, "On the Beach," *New York Times*, February 22, 2009, BR1; Glenn Garvin, "Real Housewives of Miami: You'll put your eyes out. Ears too," *Miami Herald*, February 22, 2011, accessed July 25, 2011, <http://www.miamiherald.com/2011/02/22/2077425/real-housewives-of-miami-youll.html>.

Carl Hiaasen's environmental critique is drawn in stark black and white, almost Manichaean terms, and there are very few people who are neutral. The ex-governor Skink is perhaps the purest of the lot, as he has gone back to nature and has a great deal of difficulty coping with city life. Jack Tagger, Jo Layne Lucks, Twilly Spree, Joey Perrone, Mick Stranahan and Honey Santana, and even Steven Brickman, are rewarded because they have done no harm to nature, and they are very much Hiaasen's own creations. The villains, who tend to be landowners, sugar barons, large farmers, politicians and lobbyists, are very broadly drawn, and, as Hiaasen has often said, are drawn from life. Hiaasen's fictional Florida is dystopian for the sheer awfulness of many of his characters and what they have done to the land, and it is paradise, as it had been for the earliest writers about Florida, for the remaining unspoiled or reclaimable areas where nature and people can coexist peacefully.