



BOOK REVIEW

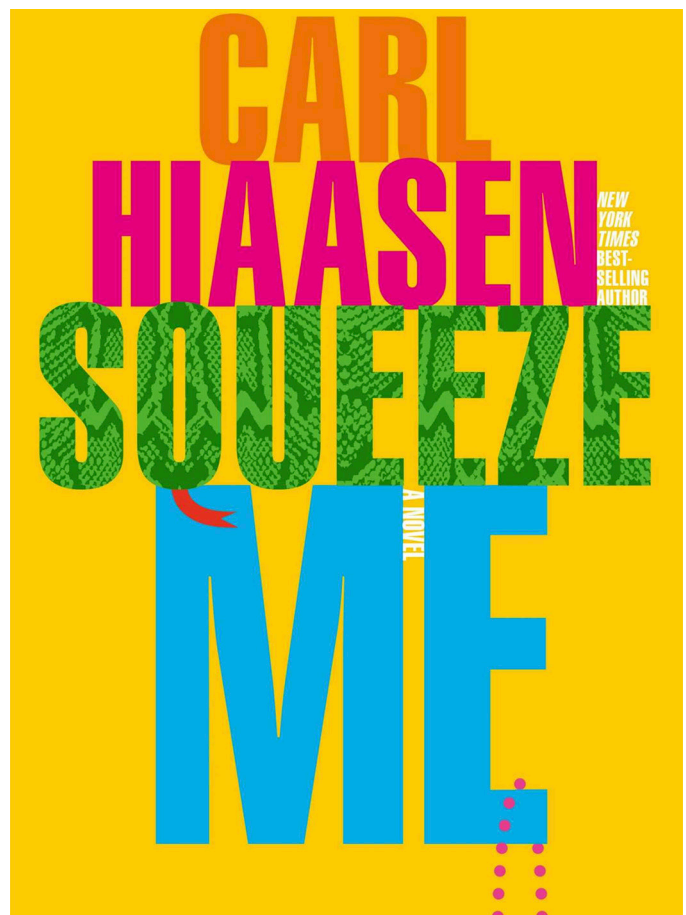
# Carl Hiaasen and Herpetological Crimes

*Squeeze Me*. 2020. Carl Hiaasen. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, New York, USA. [9] + 352 pp. ISBN 9781524733452 (hardcover). ISBN 9781524733469 (ebook). \$28.95.

Biological imagery abounds in Carl Hiaasen’s fiction, which tends to feature razor-sharp spoofs, bizarre mayhem, and Florida-based shenanigans that often are loosely based on actual events. Serendipity tends to lead to slapstick, although the clowning might end up in a death. In addition to his novels, Hiaasen also has published children’s books, short story collections, and essays (a 2014 collection is named *Dance of the Reptiles* and subtitled *Rampaging Tourists, Marauding Pythons, Larcenous Legislators, Crazy Celebrities, and Tar-Balled Beaches: Selected Columns*). An adaptation of an adult-oriented book was filmed in 1996, with Demi Moore and Burt Reynolds in the starring roles. A children’s book, *Hoot* (2002), was made into a family film in 2006. His printed work has won a slew of honors and awards, including the prestigious Newbery Medal for children’s literature. Many of his books became national best-sellers and have been translated for the international market, but neither movie did well.

A former journalist, Hiaasen has a keen understanding of how things work in Florida. Sometimes the perpetrator of mayhem in a novel is an ecoterrorist longing for the days before Florida was invaded *en masse* by what he called “frostbitten lemmings” in *Tourist Season* (1986). Despite being morally objectionable and their violence not being condoned, these characters are usually at least partially sympathetic. The real villains of the story tend to be corrupt politicians and self-serving public officials who are unmoved by the suffering of others. Bob Branham, a long-time friend of the author, observed “Carl always felt strongly about the destruction of the wildlife around him” (Freeman 2004). “This is my church, this island out here and all the others ... And the sky and the Gulf and the rivers that roll out of the ‘glades, all of it’s my church,” says a character in *Nature Girl* (2006), paraphrasing the likes of Ansel Adams, John Muir, and Frank Lloyd Wright. And in *Skin Tight* (1989), another protagonist sees Miami as “a malignancy and its sickly orange aura as a vast misty bubble of pustular gas.” Not often do you see a complaint of light pollution in a novel, and the nostalgia of many fictional characters for a time when apartment complexes were not a dominant landscape feature is palpably the author’s.

I think Hiaasen’s writing also reflects his antagonism to the unscrupulousness of many who purport to be public servants but instead work solely to enrich themselves. “One of the wondrous things about Florida was the climate of unabashed corruption... There was absolutely no trouble from which money could not extricate you,” thinks an incompetent plastic surgeon in *Skin Tight*. In a recent newspaper column, Hiaasen skewered the response of Florida Governor DeSantis to the Covid crisis. Noting that the Governor recently awarded a private company called Publix all of the vaccine administration in Palm Beach County, he opined that “It would be cynical to think DeSantis chose Publix because the company gave \$100,000 to the Friends of Ron DeSantis political action committee last month” (Hiaasen 2021), although evidence for that motivation is still



lacking. Hiaasen’s “satire comes from a point of outrage, even anger, about injustice, something wrong,” he admitted in an interview following the publication of the book reviewed below (Kaplan 2020). Recent reports of an alligator strolling through a Publix parking lot (Doliner 2021) will surely appear in a future novel.

Recent years have engendered plenty of rage on both sides of the American political spectrum. With President Trump moving his official residence to Florida, the ground was set for another Hiaasen extravaganza. *Squeeze Me* (2020) starts with an invasive Burmese Python swallowing an elderly president-adoring woman, Kiki Pew Fitzsimmons. She is at the exclusive Lipid House, attending a fund-raising event for the IBS Wellness Foundation, “globally committed to defeating irritated bowel syndrome.” Addled by alcohol and other chemicals, she wanders the grounds at night, thus meeting her fate. And yes, this can happen (Perry et al. 2020), although it never has in the United States.

Much of the action that follows occurs near “Casa Bellicosa,” owned by a tanning-bed and cheeseburger-loving philandering President code-named “Mastodon” by his Secret Service detail. A proud member of the “POTUS Pussies,” some-

times known by the more family-friendly “Potussies,” the late Fitzsimmons liked that he was “reliably white, old and scornful of social reforms.” Several of these rich, old, white women have roles to play in the complex plot. The protagonist in this novel is Angie Armstrong, a current wildlife wrangler and former state wildlife officer. She is one of many plucky, intelligent, and capable female characters in Hiaasen’s books. Called on to remove the python and intrigued by the large bulge in its belly, she gets further entangled as various miscreants attempt to cover-up the theft of the now-beheaded snake and its periodic reappearance, not least in front of the President and First Lady’s motorcade. Many events will strike the reader as not unrelated to recent political figures. For example, the President helps push an anti-immigrant agenda. Before all is said and done, a hapless illegal immigrant is falsely blamed for the Fitzsimmons “murder”; Angie finds love, as Hiaasen’s protagonists often do; and the Potussies sing their “Big Unimpeachable You” to the President at another big party.

I have never seen an author use so many herpetological cameos in his fiction. But herps, hilarity, and pandemonium aside, Hiaasen does a great job in *Squeeze Me* of discussing the Florida python invasion and alerting non-herpetologists



An invasive Burmese Python (*Python bivittatus*) in Florida. These snakes have become apex predators in southern Florida, where they feast on a smorgasbord of native mammals, birds, and reptiles. Although no human Floridians are known to have become prey of these snakes, a fictional Burmese Python eats a president-adoring senior citizen in Carl Hiaasen’s most recent novel titled *Squeeze Me*. Photograph by Kenneth L. Krysko.

to a very real problem. In an interview about an earlier book, *Razor Girl* (2016), Hiaasen patiently explained that Common Green Iguanas are not protected in Florida. “There is actually a bounty on iguanas... they’re a real problem, an invasive species” (Johnson 2016).

“Reptiles like the python have long slithered through Hiaasen’s vision of Florida as a refuge for the worst of humankind” wrote Maslin (2020), and they sure do slither in *Squeeze Me*. A whole bevy of huge pythons appear, much to the chagrin of media-wary, appearance-conscious groundskeepers. They appear elsewhere in his writing, too. The protagonist in *Double Whammy* (1987) at one point hopes not to encounter snakes, like the urbanite that he is, but I think Maslin (2020) may misunderstand Hiaasen’s feelings for reptiles. After all, he used to keep snakes until they became too much trouble (Freeman 2004). Regardless, reptiles certainly make regular appearances in his books (as do fish). A Burmese Python first makes an appearance in *Skin Tight*, as the pet and performance piece of Cathy, the lead of the punk band Cathy and the Catheters. Hiaasen’s first single-authored novel, *Tourist Season*, opens with the death of a Florida promoter found with a plastic alligator stuck in his windpipe. As the book progresses, a crocodile and airborne snakes make important appearances. Other wildlife do as well, including many Everglades birds and miscellaneous fish, but the Florida herpetofauna, native and invasive, is especially prominent. Appearing in multiple books is a character named “Skink,” who is introduced in *Double Whammy* and is soon skinning a rattlesnake, presumably for food. Hiaasen describes him as “a totally unhinged, roadkill-eating ex-governor” (Anonymous 2012) who has a large library and sometimes engages in vigilantism. Simply too honest to be a good politician, he disappeared into a small town whose residents rarely vote and changed his name. Notably, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice banned *Double Whammy* in 2017, saying it contained information about how to manufacture explosives — an exploding camera does make an appearance toward the end of that novel. Curiously, the same department did allow inmates to access such family-friendly fare as Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* (Haag 2017). In *Skink: No Surrender* (2014), one of Hiaasen’s children’s books, combating sea-turtle egg poaching is a major plot line. In *Squeeze Me*, Skink now lives, together with his many books, in the Everglades. In one memorable plotline, he successfully incubates an iguana egg in an empty eye-socket. Reptiles appear elsewhere as well. In another children’s book, *Chomp* (2012), an important character suffers from migraines after a flash-frozen iguana falls from a tree and bonks his head. In *Basket Case* (2002), one of several Hiaasen books with a reptile on the cover, the protagonist uses

the frozen corpse of his pet Savannah Monitor to defend himself. In *Lucky You* (1997), turtle rescue is an important plotline. Clearly, the author has a long-abiding interest in reptiles. I think he genuinely likes them. In a picture of him draped in a large snake used in many of the reviews of *Squeeze Me*, Hiaasen is smiling broadly. I reached out to Mr. Hiaasen’s publicist at Knopf to ask about the author’s herpetological interests and frequent mention of invasive species and the problems they cause but did not receive a response.

As a herpetologist with a sense of the absurd, or as a person concerned about invasive species or conservation and habitat loss, or perhaps as a misanthrope rooting for the snakes to swallow another obnoxious character, you cannot avoid loving Hiaasen’s work. However, if you find yourself missing the President-reject, now that he has returned to Florida and has been cut off from Twitter, perhaps you should start with some of Hiaasen’s earlier works. Although the political party that “Mastodon” belongs to is not named in *Squeeze Me*, “If you are wearing a MAGA anything, you won’t like” this book (Maslin 2020).

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