

# A passionate voice for Florida

BY BARBARA O'REILLEY

Carl Hiaasen is known internationally for his satirical novels featuring screwball characters in weird situations that could happen only in Florida. He's been credited with almost single-handedly creating the "Florida noir" mystery genre.

But back at home, he's also known as the take-no-prisoners columnist for the *Miami Herald* who for 25 years has ripped into the less-seemly sides of Florida politics and culture. He has particularly targeted political corruption, crime, overdevelopment, environmental degradation, and—you guessed it—screwball characters in weird situations that could happen only in Florida.

As a journalist he writes with "ferocity and passion, mordant wit, and moral outrage," said one of his editors. He's been compared to such great American muckrakers as Baltimore's H.L. Mencken and Chicago's Mike Royko.

In addition to producing a dozen novels, four nonfiction books, and thousands of newspaper columns over the past few decades, he has also written three popular children's books.

In March, Hiaasen was named recipient of the 2011 Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing. "Hiaasen's writing embodies a consistent, often inspired, voice for preserving and protecting Florida and Floridians," stated the award judges.

The Florida Humanities Council, which originated the award last year, oversees the nomination process, convenes a panel of independent judges, and announces the winner. Last year's recipient was Michael Gannon, Distinguished Service Professor of History Emeritus at the University of Florida.



Hiaasen

Hiaasen accepted the award at a luncheon hosted by First Lady Ann Scott at the Governor's Mansion in Tallahassee, not exactly a comfortable venue for a columnist who has taken on every governor since 1985—or the novelist who created the character "Skink," a former governor who is a crazed, swamp-dwelling environmental terrorist.

"This is the first I've been to the Governor's Mansion," Hiaasen said in his remarks at the award luncheon. "Shockingly, I've never been invited here before. Truly, I've pissed off every single governor since Bob Graham."

Hiaasen, 58, emphasized that his choice of targets has nothing to do with political affiliation—and everything to do with his love of Florida. He was born and raised in western Broward County when it was a rural enclave of woods and swamp. He lived through Florida's half-century of astounding population growth—much of it centered in the southeastern part of the state.

As a boy, he witnessed the bulldozers clearing trees to make way for more and more houses, roads, commercial strips, and malls. He saw wetlands filled and waterways polluted. He traces his sense of moral outrage to this violation of "a place that I love."

"I'm going to go after anyone who I think is bad for the state," he told the *Tallahassee Democrat* in an interview after receiving the award. "For anyone who has kids or grandkids who intend to live their lives as Floridians, there is no way you can stand on the sidelines, watch the circus, and not say something."

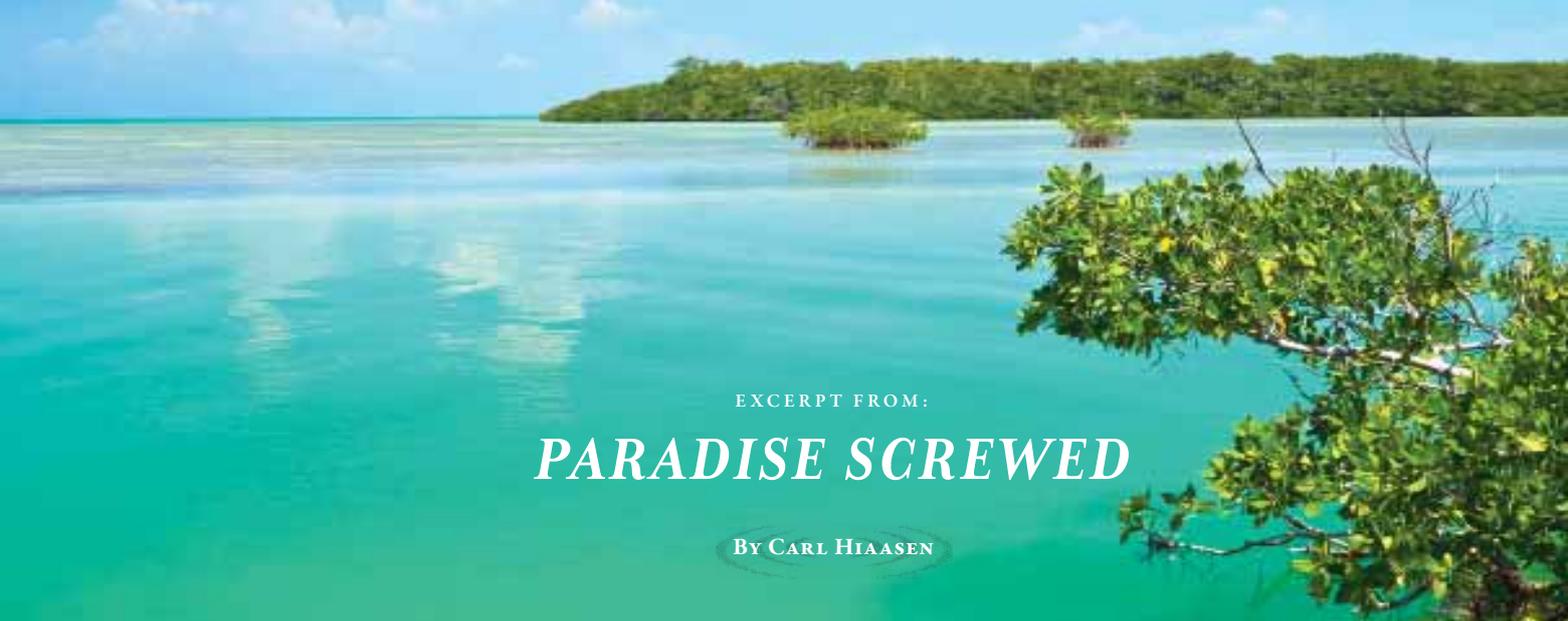
Over the years, Hiaasen has said that he gets the ideas for his wacky novels directly from the newspapers. "Everyone in Florida knows the novels are documentaries," he quipped at the award luncheon.

He added that he first came in contact with "the full bounty of Florida's weirdness" at age 25, when he started as a *Miami Herald* reporter. The writing, he said, "is psychotherapy for me. It's a lot cheaper than seeing a shrink."



Hiaasen, recipient of the Florida Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing, speaks at the award luncheon in the Governor's Mansion in March. Seated at right are First Lady Ann Scott and Secretary of State Kurt S. Browning.

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EXCERPT FROM:

# PARADISE SCREWED

BY CARL HIAASEN

**O**VER THE YEARS, my father and grandfather told me so many stories that the Keys had become in my young mind a mystical, Oz-like destination: a string of rough-cut jewels, trailing like a broken necklace from Florida's southernmost flank—the water, a dozen shades of blue and boiling with porpoises and game fish; the infinite churning sky, streaked by pink spoonbills and gawky pelicans and elegant ospreys. This I had to see for myself.

On a summer morning we headed down U.S. 1, which was (and remains) the only road through the Keys. Although we lived in Fort Lauderdale, merely a hundred miles north, it might as well have been Minneapolis. The drive seemed to take forever. From the backseat I watched fruitlessly for evidence of paradise, but all I saw were trailer parks, gas pumps, bait shops, mom-and-pop diners, bleached-out motels and palm-thatched tourist sheds that sold spray-painted conch shells...

We passed the charter docks at Bud n' Mary's, where the great Ted Williams occasionally could be found, and suddenly blue water appeared on both sides of the Overseas Highway. To the distant east was the full sweep of the Atlantic, deep indigo stirred to a light, lazy chop. To the near west was Florida Bay, glassy and shallow, with knots of lush green mangroves freckled with roosting white herons. At the time I didn't know the names of these islands, but they were Shell Key, Lignum

Vitae, the Petersons, the Twin Keys, the Gophers—places where I would spend, in coming years, hundreds upon hundreds of hours, none wasted.

The Keys never looked so enchanting as they did on that morning. As soon as we got to the motel, I grabbed a spinning rod from the car and made straight for the pier. Standing at the brim of those velvet horizons, gulping the sharp salty air, I understood what my father and grandfather meant.



This was an honest-to-God wilderness, as pure and unspoiled and accessible as a boy could imagine. On my first trip to the Gulf Stream, I caught no marlin, only a bonito, but it pulled harder than anything I'd ever felt. It was a great day, made better by the fact that [despite an unseaworthy stomach] I'd managed to hold down my lunch.

The deep-running Atlantic was undeniably impressive, but the calm crystal flats of the backcountry intrigued me the most. To wade the banks was to enter a boundless natural aquarium: starfish, nurse sharks, eagle rays, barracuda, bonefish, permit, and

tarpon, all swimming literally at your feet. The flats rippled with unique tidal energies—sweltering, primeval, seemingly indomitable.

This was around 1959, and nobody considered the possibility that the shoals of the Keys might be destroyed and that it might happen within a single human generation. Unimaginable! Life flourished everywhere in this tropical embrace, from the buttonwood hammocks to the coral reefs. The sun was so warm and constant, the waters so wide and clear, the currents so strong. Destroyed—how? By whom? Over centuries the Keys had survived droughts, floods, and the most ferocious of hurricanes. What was there to fear from man?

The worst, as it turned out. The population of Miami exploded during the next three decades, and urban blight metastasized straight down Highway 1, bringing crowds, crime, garbage, and big-city indifference to the Keys. The quaint and casual opportunism of the islands was replaced by an unrelenting hunger to dredge, subdivide, pave, build, and sell. It was tawdry, sad, and probably inevitable. By the 1980s, southeast Florida was home to four million souls, increasingly frenetic and determined to recreate at all costs. Where else would they go but the Keys?

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From "The Florida Keys: Something Precious Is Falling Apart," in *Paradise Screwed*, ©2001 by Carl Hiaasen. This essay was originally published in *Heart of the Land*, edited by The Nature Conservancy.