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“Listen to him, Mr. Take-Charge”: Gender Politics and Morality in Carl Hiaasen’s Crime Novels

In 2006, Florida novelist and muck-raking journalist Carl Hiaasen published *Nature Girl*, his eleventh comic crime novel. Although more muted than in some of the preceding ten, *Nature Girl*’s barely concealed subtext expresses Hiaasen’s outraged concern over the diminishing natural environment in his home state. Hiaasen’s chosen form, the popular crime novel, has enabled him to reach a wide audience with his ecological message. Working within the generic confines of the crime novel, however, produces a number of intriguing challenges to Hiaasen’s radical tendencies. The following essay analyses the treatment of gender and the developing moral dynamic in Hiaasen’s oeuvre in order to illuminate some of the tensions arising from his drawing upon certain conventions of crime fiction.

Hiaasen’s specific mode might be accurately described as “cartoon realism,” wherein a predominantly realist, if sardonic, discursive voice narrates outlandish events. A prominent aspect of this mode is Hiaasen’s employment of bizarrely comedic revenge, perhaps best exemplified by the “gruesome and appropriate” (Horsley 180) outcomes he devises for his novels’ villains, those he holds responsible for the desecration of Florida’s ecology. Typically in Hiaasen’s wish-fulfilment world, the abused natural environment achieves its own revenge, as destructive polluters of the Florida ecology encounter outrageous just desserts. On the one hand, the heightened reality in which he places his characters represents a crowd-pleasing sugaring of the pill, an essential element for transmitting an ultimately radical and coruscating political message to a wide readership. On the other, as the following essay argues, this form forces certain key compromises, as an analysis of gender and morality in his work reveals.

Another important component of Hiaasen’s cartoon realism, for example, is a preoccupation with comic sexual imagery. Frequently, this use of sexual iconography is linked to the unequal gendered relations between characters. Examples in Hiaasen’s work are plentiful, but we might turn to *Skinny Dip* (2005) in this instance. Early in this novel arises a foreshadowing of the nature of the subsequent relationship between Chaz Perrone’s estranged wife, Joey, and Mick Stranahan. While Mick is asleep, Joey tries to sneak away from his one-man island off the coast of Florida, back to the mainland. Before attempting to “borrow” his boat, Joey pauses in Mick’s kitchen, where she grabs for the journey a blatantly phallic symbol, “two apples and a ripe banana” (72). Mick’s boat is an overt symbol of his potent masculine independence, and its attempted theft here is refigured as a comic castration.[1] Tellingly, Joey’s attempted symbolic emasculation of Mick fails; based on previous thefts of the boat (all by women) he has

rigged its engine to cut out shortly after leaving the island. This initial conflict between the sexes prefigures several later developments in *Skinny Dip*, wherein Joey's control of her revenge plot against Chaz, the husband who attempted to murder her, is frequently assumed by Mick. In this respect, Hiaasen's cartoon realism, through its construction of broad character types and iconography, paints a relatively clear, if crude, set of gender relations. The incident reflects the general pattern of his novels, moreover, wherein attempted female subversion tends to be patriarchally contained.

Chaz himself represents one of Hiaasen's key archetypes; compared to the apparent masculine ideal set by Stranahan he proves to be comically feeble: libido-driven, pompous and pampered. Much comic mileage is attained in *Skinny Dip* through comparing Chaz's ineptitude when handling firearms (several times he shoots but fails to kill other characters), to the abilities of ex-cop Stranahan. Chaz's similarly bungled attempt to murder his wife, Joey, begins the novel, as he tosses her into the sea from a cruise liner. Clearly Chaz has forgotten both Joey's aptitude for swimming and, more seriously in this context, her non-gender specific name, both of which anticipate her triumph over Chaz in the ensuing narrative. Joey subsequently uncovers the fraudulent nature of Chaz's love, both for her and the environment. It transpires that he is interested only in the physical gratification of sex and, despite his job as a marine biologist, that he is ignorant of ecological matters to the extent that he is perhaps the only qualified Ph.D. in the field who thinks that the Gulf Stream flows north-to-south. During the course of the novel, Chaz is ruthlessly and appropriately punished both for his sexual and ecological shortcomings. Masculine agency is initially diminished when Chaz's corrupt paymaster assigns the intimidatingly masculine heavy, Tool, to watch his every step.[2] Similarly, the havoc visited upon his life by Joey's revenge so disrupts his sexual capabilities that he wonders, ultimately, "if he'd ever again be able to initiate a sex act without being taunted by the ambrosial ghost of his dead wife" (401). Chaz's desperate position at the end of the book, marooned in the Everglades he so loathes, reinforces his enfeebled status as a figure of masculinity in crisis, driven and finally destroyed by vanity and greed.

Although working with broad archetypes, there is ample evidence to suggest that Hiaasen is keen to subvert both male and female stereotypes often associated with the crime fiction genre. This urge is evident from his first solo novel, *Tourist Season* (1986), and it manifests with varying degrees of success as we move through his oeuvre.[3] The principal protagonist of *Tourist Season* is Brian Keyes, a private investigator who initially appears to fulfil most criteria of the conventional crime fiction male. Keyes is a reluctant actor, however, rather than a traditional hard-boiled detective; through the course of the novel he finds it difficult to assert the agency and independence usually associated with the investigative figure. Physically, he is boyish and lacking in authority,

"adolescently slender, with blue eyes and a smooth face" (15). Keyes resigned his previous job as a newspaper reporter because of his inability to endure investigations of gruesome deaths and murders, and has little stomach for the more unpleasant cases associated with his new line of employment, concentrating instead on divorces. Journalist and ex-colleague Skip Wiley, by contrast, is the most conspicuous figure of male agency in this novel. He quits his newspaper career in order to lead an eco-terrorist cell, *Las Noches de Diciembre*, a group dedicated to driving away Florida's tourists. If one traditional marker of masculinity in American literature is the ability to survive and prosper in an outdoor environment—as it most certainly is in Hiaasen's work—then Wiley clearly has the edge over Keyes. At one point Wiley outwits Keyes by luring him into the Everglades, ambushing and kidnapping him. The ease with which Wiley is able to deceive and overpower Keyes marks him overtly as the more masculine of the pair.

Although Keyes is evidently far removed from the hard-boiled stereotype, several occasions on which he acts in more conventionally aggressive, masculine ways suggest that the character only sporadically deflects the genre's gendered norms. While witnessing the *Noches*' murder of an elderly tourist, Keyes struggles to help the victim and is stabbed by one of the group, Jesús Bernal. Following this symbolic violation, when Keyes reencounters Bernal later in the novel he assaults him with a tennis racquet, rendering the Cuban unconscious. In their subsequent, and final, encounter Bernal holds Keyes' police friend Al Garciá at gunpoint, before Keyes intervenes and shoots Bernal dead. Through acts of violence such as these, Keyes apparently rediscovers a more conventional form of masculinity. Having first been violated, Keyes perpetrates a form of violence using questionable means (the tennis racquet, which was only in his possession as a result of having been defeated in a match by a woman), and finally dispatches Bernal with a pistol, more customarily identified in the genre as the male weapon.[4] Knowing how to handle a gun, as illustrated also by the varying competence of Stranahan and Chaz in *Skinny Dip*, is another key signifier of masculinity in Hiaasen's novels.

That Keyes remains distinctly uncomfortable with this particular form of masculinity, however, is interesting. Even at close range, he requires six shots to kill Bernal and afterwards he is plagued by guilty dreams of the killing, which morph into scenes of Wiley—the more potent male antagonist—as a puppeteer, controlling the events in Keyes' life. Keyes feels profoundly ambivalent about his acts of violence, realizing,

> that he had crossed a cold threshold and could never return to what he was…a professional bystander, an expertly detached voyeur who was skilled at reconstructing violence after the fact, but never present and never participatory. (301)

Associations of passive voyeurism with lack of masculinity are made overt when Jenna, Keyes' ex-partner, now married to Wiley, compares the two men. She considers Keyes "a totally passive person, an incurable knothole peeper, a spy," a description that Keyes tellingly refers to as an "emasculatory harangue" (343). That phrase underlines Keyes' status as an unusually equivocal crime novel protagonist, forced into abandoning passivity and actually severely discomfited by his (re)discovery of male agency.

If Hiaasen's attempted subversion of the crime genre's conventional male role ultimately proves difficult to achieve, he also tries to challenge gender constructions through this novel's principal female roles. Once more, the results are mixed. Jenna, for example, although a strikingly more capable character than Keyes, is finally subdued by the novel's masculine power structures, indeed by Keyes himself. Tiring of her manipulative behaviour, Keyes more or less forcibly abducts her, underlining his rediscovery of stereotypically masculine attributes. Keyes' actions here are justifiable, since Jenna has put the lives of innocent people in danger, but his reassertion of masculinity nevertheless calls a striking halt to Jenna's subversion of gender roles. Moreover, as with a number of purportedly strong, independent women in Hiaasen's fiction, Jenna is predominantly defined by her relationship with men, since she is first Keyes' partner, then Wiley's.

A more successful attempt to overthrow the female types of crime fiction rests in the same novel's character of Kara Lynn Shivers, a young beauty pageant queen placed under the protection of Keyes. This formulation may suggest a reversion to stereotype, but Kara Lynn, as Keyes quickly appreciates, confounds such expectations. Anticipating "a chronic case of airheadedness," Keyes instead encounters someone who is, "very self-assured for nineteen, and canny" (201). Kara Lynn is a well-adjusted and intelligent young woman, equally able to deter the leering advances of male beauty pageant hosts and her father's attempts to persuade her to undergo breast enlargement. Keyes and Kara Lynn begin a sexual relationship during the course of the book, but one in which neither consciously exploits the other. Though Keyes saves her life at least twice, Kara Lynn maintains sufficient independence to avoid being defined through her relationships with men. Indeed, she is drawn to Keyes precisely because of his refusal to direct cloying attention towards her. Likewise, when kidnapped by Wiley and threatened with death, she refuses to let him control her responses. Instead, Wiley finds himself disconcerted—for the only time in the novel—by Kara Lynn's failure to exhibit fear and by her deconstruction of Wiley's belief in his superior masculinity in comparison to Keyes. When he tries to denigrate Keyes in her eyes, for instance, she dismisses Wiley and the model of masculinity he represents as "pathetic," in a tone that makes Wiley physically flinch (359). In this respect, Hiaasen's attempt to undermine the depressing stereotype of

the teenage beauty queen is successful: despite competition from, amongst others, a private investigator, a seasoned cop, and a Machiavellian newspaper columnist, Kara Lynn emerges from this novel as the strongest, bravest and most resourceful character.

This tradition in Hiaasen's fiction of capable, intelligent and independent women may then be traced back to Kara Lynn Shivers. Erin, the single-mother stripper in *Strip Tease* is similarly adroit in exploiting the foibles of the men around her and using their image of her against them. She also notably succeeds in maintaining agency, through exercising sole control of her revenge upon her psychotic ex-husband and the odious Senator David Dilbeck. In Hiaasen's more recent novels, however, a conflict emerges when generic pressures reassert more conventional gender relationships. Frequently in these works, a strong male character becomes involved (usually romantically) with the female character, and begins to assume control of her revenge plot. Three of Hiaasen's recent novels—*Lucky You*, *Skinny Dip*, and *Nature Girl*—offer illuminating variations on tensions that emerge when the male attempts to wrest control of, in both senses, the plot.

In *Lucky You* (1998), an African-American woman, JoLayne Lucks, is robbed of her winning Florida state lottery ticket by two neo-Nazi rednecks (the holders of the other winning ticket, who don't wish to share the prize). In her quest to regain the ticket, JoLayne becomes involved with (white) newspaper reporter Tom Krome, who has come to her town to report on her win. From their initial encounter in JoLayne's house, a battle is joined for control of both their relationship and JoLayne's plan to recover her ticket. During their first meeting, JoLayne invites Krome into her house, while she is taking a bath. It is the reporter, however, who is unnerved by this, not least as she levels a shotgun (with all its usual phallic connotations acknowledged, if inverted) on him as they speak, and remarks that his contrasting "weapon," a tape recorder "cupped in his right hand…'Sure is tiny'" (41). In darkness, JoLayne leaves the bathtub, dresses, and orders Krome to strip and sit in the bathwater, after which she enjoys his discomfort as he sits in the bath, churning up bubbles "in a futile effort to conceal his shriveled cock" (43). JoLayne thus efficiently overturns both the gendered norms and the usual interviewer-interviewee hierarchy; it is the male reporter who feels emasculated, "disarmed and preposterous" (45).

This initial overturning of the conventional sexual dynamic is fascinatingly pursued throughout the novel. The protagonists enter an uneasy alliance marked by attempts from both parties to maintain control of the quest to recover the stolen lottery ticket. Krome's efforts to exclude JoLayne from aspects of the plan's operation soon become a sufficient source of rancour for her to feel doubly robbed and also infantilised, accusing him of "talkin' to me like I'm a child" (191). JoLayne and Krome soon begin a sexual relationship—predominantly at her instigation—one effect of which is to begin to

restore her freedom to act independently. Shortly after this relationship begins, Krome lies awake, baffled at the turn of events and unsure of why he feels attracted to her; JoLayne, by contrast, remains self-assured, confident and at this point once more in possession of agency.

Despite (or perhaps exacerbated by) the sexual relationship, tensions over how to recover the lottery ticket persist. Significantly, an increasingly stereotypical opposition emerges, between the male's wish to act in a restrained and ostensibly logical manner, and the female's reckless reliance on emotion and intuition. For instance, emphasizing his fear of JoLayne's assumption of that key symbol of masculine agency, the rifle, Krome rejects her plan, which involves ambushing one of the redneck thieves alone, "jamming her twelve-gauge into his groin and demanding under threat of emasculation that he return the stolen lottery ticket" (255). Continuing to plot their next move, Krome urges caution and more or less orders JoLayne to let him stake out the thief alone, while she leaves to rent a boat and buy provisions:

> Listen to him, thought JoLayne, Mr. Take-Charge.
>
> She considered holding her ground, telling him off. Then she changed her mind. It did look like a grand day to be out on the bay, especially if the alternative was six more hours in a cramped Honda. (258)

This is an equivocal reaction; JoLayne is unwilling to assume a position of merely taking orders, but ultimately rationalizes reasons to comply. She is, however, too intelligent to be consistently persuaded to abide by Krome's plans. At the end of the novel, with Krome's help, JoLayne succeeds in retrieving her lottery ticket and uses the winnings to safeguard an area of turtle habitat.[5] She surreptitiously slips the other winning ticket to Krome, at which point he ruefully recognizes that he is indeed the slower-witted of the two. JoLayne is ultimately successful in her ecological aims, although she remains only sporadically so in exercising a full measure of agency.[6]

A similar struggle between male and female protagonists for control of the quest for restitution occurs, with slightly different results, in *Skinny Dip*. Following Chaz's unsuccessful attempt to murder her, Joey Perrone teams up with a significantly older man, Mick Stranahan. Although sympathetic, Stranahan, as a retired cop living a self-sufficient island existence off the coast of Florida, is a considerably more formidable character than Krome: physically stronger and more decisive, more ideally masculine according to the gendered norms of Hiaasen's medium. Joey instigates the revenge against Chaz initially to Stranahan's disapproval; as an ex-cop, he advocates going to the police. With him persuaded, however, Joey shows considerably less aptitude for maintaining agency than JoLayne had in the earlier novel. Joey is initially an impressive

character: independent, generous and resourceful, and well able to defend herself, nowhere better exemplified than in her surviving the murder attempt. Despite her self-assuredness, however, she has certain stereotypical weaknesses, such as a penchant for Italian shoes, and is broadly defined through her relationships with men; Chaz is her second husband, and without any intervening period he is followed in her affections by Stranahan.

It is in her efforts to maintain control of the plot against Chaz that Joey is most conspicuously unsuccessful. Although initially unenthusiastic, Mick quickly becomes a part of the plan and is soon taking independent action, such as phoning Chaz in order to unsettle him by pretending to be a blackmailer. It is also Mick who drags a drugged Chaz out of a bedroom by his ankles, when Joey is too distraught to act.[7] By contrast, when Joey takes steps that they had not previously agreed, Mick is angered; after a rendezvous with Chaz and Tool, Mick is "furious to hear that she'd left the motel room to chat with Chaz's bodyguard" (296). That Stranahan acquires and maintain a relatively tight grip on proceedings throughout the novel suggests that his variety of idealized masculinity inevitably assumes responsibility for the female protagonist's quest. In this instance at least, the constrictions of Hiaasen's genre seem to restrict female autonomy. Although more recent examples of crime fiction (and of criticism of the genre) impart certain challenges, the requirement for male agency in crime fiction is a difficult model to shatter; as Sally R. Munt has found, the crime genre is "intransigent" when it comes to attempts to subverting sexism (qtd. in Jaffe 782). As far as overturning the apparently intrinsic gendered behaviour of crime fiction, Hiaasen indeed provides only fleeting exceptions. His male protagonists are usually associated with repressive patriarchal structures: either the law (generally being cops, ex-cops, or private investigators), or modes of control such as language or medical discourse (newspaper editors, columnists, surgeons), and thus challenge the status quo only within strictly limited parameters.

Until the most recent of these novels, Hiaasen proffers a female independence which is only operable within confined boundaries. In *Nature Girl* (2006), however, Hiaasen appears at last to propose a narrative driven entirely by female agency. Here, divorced mother Honey Santana tricks Texan telephone marketer Boyd Shreave into signing up for a bogus ecotour of some of the more obscure Florida Keys in an attempt to teach him about both manners and the environment. Honey is a strikingly self-reliant woman, to the extent that in this novel there is no question of any male character assuming control over the plot. Significantly, however, Honey has been diagnosed as borderline bipolar and prescribed controlling medicine. This suggests, dangerously, that in Hiaasen's work, female agency is to be equated with mental illness. Moreover, Honey's plot to re-educate Shreave is unusually unsuccessful; either he is so odious a character as to be

irredeemable, or, more troublingly, a revenge relying entirely on female agency is doomed, in Hiaasen's oeuvre, to failure.

In Hiaasen's defence, he takes pains to highlight how Honey's supposed illness is largely a patriarchal construct, little more than a male attempt to define and thereby control this contemporary madwoman in the attic. The operation of patriarchal control through medical discourse is here foregrounded by Hiaasen in a way that in fact offers a welcome challenge to the conventional exercise of male power in the crime novel. This is demonstrated within the fictional world of the novel, where even a character as loathsome as Louis Piejack (another of Hiaasen's grotesques, who spends the novel in pursuit of Honey) ultimately recognizes that she is "tough and outspoken and damn near fearless" (271) rather than mentally ill. Pejorative labels attached to Honey thereby constitute a commentary on contemporary society, where female agency is still severely restricted. The subversive challenge represented by Honey's outspokenness and fearlessness is nevertheless contained by the novel's ending. She is reunited with her estranged husband, brought back into the nuclear family, and she successfully manages to ignore the way in which another family meal is disrupted by a telemarketing call (a signifier, here, of a return to more conventional behaviour, since Shreave's original boorish call had set Honey's plan in motion at the beginning of the novel). Notwithstanding these apparent compromises, of all Hiaasen's female characters Honey remains the one who most successfully retains a capacity for independent and self-motivated action. While restrictions of genre continue to obstruct Hiaasen's apparent attempts to write a female character with unmediated and unthreatened agency, the foregrounding of her alleged bipolarity as demonstrably a product of a male-dominated medical discourse operates as a partial but powerful corrective to gender stereotypes.

As well as affecting the gender politics of Hiaasen's work, crime genre conventions have a significant impact upon the novels' moral position. Hiaasen's employment of character types—and these characters' fates—provides one illustration of his typical ethical framework. Hiaasen's masculine types, as already suggested, include misdirected or corrupt individuals such as David Dilbeck, Chaz Perrone and Boyd Shreave, all marred both by sexual obsession and a lack of affinity for the natural world. This archetype contrasts with the sympathetic or ideal male character, in touch with both his masculinity and the natural world, epitomized by Stranahan, but evident to a more limited extent in Keyes and Krome. A further archetype—again indicative of the pervasive influence of generic convention in his work—occurs in Hiaasen's characteristic use of ultra-masculine heavies, usually working on behalf of the novels' principal ecological villain. Of particular interest with regard to ethical frameworks is that Hiaasen's narratives tend to divide these characters further into those for whom redemption is possible, and those who are damned. Tool from *Skinny Dip* and Danny

Pogue from Hiaasen's earlier novel, *Native Tongue* (1991), are curiously linked in this respect.[8] Although initially portrayed as violent, amoral characters with criminal pasts, both encounter an old woman during the course of their respective novels who inspires them to reconsider their lives and change their ways. Crucially, in terms of the underlying ethical structures of Hiaasen's work, both already show potential sympathy with nature; Tool, for example, berates Chaz's disdain for Florida's wildlife and pours scorn on the latter's scant competence as a biologist.

If, on the other hand, the heavies are in some way morally perverted, and/or demonstrate no kinship with the natural world, then they are damned by the novels' end. Mr. Gash, in *Sick Puppy* (2000), for example, is a sadistic sex-offender who enjoys listening to taped compilations of members of the public—generally from ethnic minorities who speak poor English—making panicked telephone calls to the emergency services. Unsurprisingly, he finishes the novel half-buried beneath a bulldozer, unsuccessfully attempting to make his own emergency call, having had half of his tongue shot off. Racist thugs Snapper from *Stormy Weather* (1996) and Bode Gazzer and Chub from *Lucky You* meet similarly colourful ends at the hands of a vengeful nature. In short, if these characters demonstrate either what Hiaasen judges to be perverted sexuality, distasteful political views and/or a failure of sympathy with nature then they are beyond redemption.

The deterministic fates of Hiaasen's villains, damned or saved according to character and behaviour, tend to be rigid and inescapable. Even more significantly, they mirror the increasingly Manichean general moral structure of his novels. Placing Hiaasen's first novel, *Tourist Season*, side-by-side with the more recent *Skinny Dip* throws this increasingly polarized morality into sharp relief. The criminals in *Skinny Dip*—principally Chaz Perrone and Red Hammernut—are easily identifiable through their blithe contempt for Florida's ecology, and they are punished accordingly by the end of the novel. There are thus several tensions between Hiaasen's medium and message. Just as the polemical intent diminishes a more nuanced analysis of ecological politics, so the demand for grotesque revenge in Hiaasen's cartoon realist mode arguably prevents any especially sophisticated ethical considerations.

Written when Hiaasen was less accustomed to the conventions of the comic crime novel, *Tourist Season*, by contrast, strikes a more complex moral stance towards Skip Wiley's gang of eco-warriors. While comprising, perhaps as a consequence, a looser and less slick piece of crime plotting than the later novels, *Tourist Season* provides a more unsettling and challenging read, given the relative absence of the unambiguous morality of the later novels. *Tourist Season* is, as a result, a more politically radical work than any of the nine novels which it precedes. The greater complexity of the moral structure is particularly evident in the ambivalent depiction of the eco-warriors in *Tourist Season*. In

Hiaasen's later novels, the characters most concerned with preventing damage to Florida's fragile ecology are unequivocally the heroes of the piece. In *Tourist Season*, by contrast, Skip Wiley and his cohorts are labelled by the novel's more heroic figures as terrorists. Wiley, though, expounds his theories about the dangers of development in Florida using discourse that is more or less identical to that of the heroes of Hiaasen's later works. After kidnapping Keyes and transporting him to the Everglades, Wiley refers to the surroundings as his constituency,

> Along with the eagles, the opossums, the otters, the snakes, even the buzzards. All of this belongs to them, and more. Every goddamn acre, from here west to Miami Beach and north to the big lake, belongs to them. It got stolen away. (1986, 102)

These are sentiments with which Stranahan or Skink from the later novels (eccentrics, both, but sympathetic) would agree, as, indeed, does Hiaasen. It is Wiley's methods—killing tourists in bizarre ways and staging murderous stunts in order to make the settlers in Florida so afraid that they leave—rather than his aims to which Keyes and the others object. Stranahan's contempt for the crass commercialism and false values of the mainland is virtually identical to Wiley's, but his actions are notably different, and as a retired policeman he represents a figure much more readily identified with the establishment than rogue ex-journalist Wiley. Although Stranahan has killed, it has only ever been in self-defence and/or in the line of duty. In keeping with the less ambiguous moral structure of later novels such as *Skinny Dip*, Stranahan represents arguably a safer version of Wiley, a vessel containing the subversion of the earlier character.

The labelling of Wiley's gang as "terrorists" should not pass without comment, revealing as it is in the light of recent mass cultural dissemination of the term. *Tourist Season* was published in 1986, shortly before the end of the Cold War, predating Oklahoma and 9/11, at a time when the term "terrorist" in the United States held significantly different, certainly simpler and less contested, connotations. In an America just emerging from decades of monolithic (real or imagined) threat from the Soviet Bloc, terrorism was generally a minor phenomenon, and never experienced on a large scale on the American mainland. The appearance of "terrorist" as a term to label Wiley's group in *Tourist Season* is therefore perhaps less subversive than it might appear to a twenty-first century reader. When the novel was published, the term was a good deal less loaded and controversial than in recent years, following the Bush administration's so-called War on Terror and its attempts to delineate America's enemies as monolithically terrorist rogue states.

The very existence of this increasingly polarized moral framework underlying public discourse in the early twenty-first century United States should be considered, however,

as it provides further illumination of the tendency in Hiaasen's work, until most recently, towards ethical absolutism. Perhaps it is not just the genre within which Hiaasen works that has prompted moral simplicity in certain of his recent novels, but also the prevailing climate of political fundamentalism, with "its clear stark themes of 'Good' versus 'Evil' and 'Security' versus 'Peril,' its moral certainty, and its appearance of being mere 'fact'" (Picart 696). And perhaps it is as a way out of this simplistic ethical framework that *Nature Girl*, published in the twilight years of George W. Bush's presidency, proposes a return to a more complex set of moral relations. Encouragingly, *Nature Girl* marks something of a return to the earlier subversiveness. Not only does a female assume and retain control of the revenge plot (albeit with the caveats discussed above) but the moral framework is also more opaque than in any of Hiaasen's novels since *Tourist Season*. Superficially, the morality of the book is structured around Hiaasen's familiar binary opposition: good/cares for the environment (e.g. Honey) and bad/doesn't care (Boyd). The presence of Sammy Tigertail (the nephew of Tommy Tigertail, one of *Tourist Season*'s eco-terrorist *Noches de Diciembre*), however, complicates and destabilises this novel's moral configuration. Throughout the novel, Sammy is ambivalent about his mixed ethnicity (he is half white, half Seminole), and at its conclusion he remains undecided as to whether to return to either white or Seminole society, or to stay marooned and alone on a remote Key. Coupled with his sighting of an eagle that he imagines might be the reincarnation of Skip Wiley (thus implicitly evoking the complex morality of the earlier novel), Sammy's persistent uncertainty and liminal status in a welcome sense returns *Nature Girl* to the ethical ambiguity of *Tourist Season*. Plotwise, *Nature Girl* is, like *Tourist Season*, less slick than the novels in between, but both works compensate for this with a more complex moral structure. *Nature Girl* suggests that just as Hiaasen appears to have reconsidered the increasingly ossified gender models in his work, so this has enabled him to (re)adopt a more equivocal ethical and political stance.

To conclude, and also to pursue the developing ethical framework in Hiaasen's texts a little further, it would be useful to return to the character of Skip Wiley, and to consider his relationship with his author. As an outspoken columnist in a Florida newspaper, much given to writing environmentally concerned pieces that expose corruption, popular with readers but often offending business and political interests, Wiley is transparently an exaggerated autobiographical rendering of Hiaasen. Wiley is, as suggested above, an ambiguous figure—noble in aim if not method—and the passages where he attempts to justify his actions provide an interesting moral equivocation on Hiaasen's part (and, indeed, frequently echo the polemical discursive voice of Hiaasen's newspaper columns). Wiley seems undoubtedly an eruption from Hiaasen's suppressed rage at the environmental depredations daily taking place in Florida. But he represents one with whom Hiaasen cannot quite reconcile himself with

complete sympathy, hence Wiley's ultimate failure and his replacement with safer figures of subversion such as Stranahan and Skink in the later works.

In *Tourist Season*, Wiley perpetrates certain fitting retributions against those he holds to blame for desecrating Florida. For example, the body of the first victim of the *Noches*, the president of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, is found "wearing a brightly flowered print shirt and baggy Bermuda-style shorts…. He looked just like any old tourist from Milwaukee" (7). The cause of death, moreover, is discovered to be a toy rubber alligator lodged in his trachea. Wiley causes further chaos later in the novel, when overseeing the dumping of hundreds of (non-deadly) snakes onto a cruise trip being organized by the Miami Chamber. These acts function as stunts, and all are presented to the reader as amusing, imaginative, unexpected and appropriate in very much the same blackly comic way as the revenges in Hiaasen's later works. If one begins to perceive similarities between Hiaasen's mode of cartoon realism and Wiley's acts of subversion, then further clues as to the latter's position as a surrogate authorial figure are bountiful in this novel. Quite apart from his job as a writer, during the course of the narrative Wiley assumes two aliases, both literary in origin: firstly he travels pseudonymously alongside one of the other *Noches* as Skip and Viceroy "Karamazov" (158) and later he slips back into the country as "Victor Hugo" (277). Wiley also, at one point, fakes—that is, fictionalizes—his own death, and furthermore like Hiaasen holds to a faith in fiction's potential power: he hopes that newspaper hyperbole about his group's activities will help speed the tourists' exodus from Florida.

These attributes and actions of Wiley are worth considering further in narratological terms. While Wiley authors the various stunts carried out by his cell in *Tourist Season*, in the later books, Hiaasen himself wreaks comic revenge on his own fictional creations. The larger-scale acts of revenge have moved up a diegetic frame: no longer perpetrated by one fictional character upon another, they are now designed and enacted by the author.[9] Indeed, in ontological terms this point is even more significant, since the acts have actually shifted up by a level of reality. Just as his male characters tend to strip the female protagonists of agency, Hiaasen effectively appropriates Wiley's *modus operandi*. Hiaasen constructs, identifies, and wreaks violent revenge upon fictional characters who profit from causing environmental damage. I am inclined to read this, however, as something of a retreat: it is demonstrably less subversive for an author to conceive these grand acts of revenge against his own fictional creations than it is for a morally ambiguous character such as Wiley to carry out such acts within the ontological frame of the fictional world. Underlined by the contrastingly ambivalent ending of *Tourist Season*, wherein the narrative voice still cannot bring itself to condemn Wiley, and by the decreasingly subversive portrayal of female characters in his work, this shift towards "authorial revenge" perhaps marks the passage of Hiaasen's novels from

genuinely radical and angry works towards something populist but a little safer. This might, at least, be the case until the publication of *Nature Girl*. Before this novel, the combined forces of genre codes and increasingly polarized public political discourse might thus be argued to have muted Hiaasen's original aims. In its recognition of and reaction against the moral absolutism and gendered conservatism that was affecting his work, however, one might hope that *Nature Girl* marks a return to the more unbridled, cheerful subversiveness of Hiaasen's earlier novels.

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[1] Mick Stranahan, it should be noted, is linked both in this novel and in his earlier appearance in *Skin Tight* (1989) with phallic symbols, whether the marlin spike he uses as a weapon in the earlier novel, or the rifle he uses to defend his island against encroachers in *Skinny Dip*.

[2] In the context of Hiaasen's comic sexual imagery, it is worth noting his use of names associated with slang regarding genitalia: the names of both Tool and David Dilbeck (from *Strip Tease* (1993)) evoke this iconography. These particular names seem intended either to underline

masculinity, as in Tool, or undermine it, as in Di(lbe)ck, as suggested by the splitting of the term in the latter's name.

[3] Hiaasen published three novels in collaboration with William D. Montalbano before *Tourist Season*.

[4] Tennis is symbolically associated with the feminine in Hiaasen's work. At the conclusion of *Strip Tease*, for example, Dilbeck is "stripped to his boxer shorts and cowboy boots", forced at gunpoint by Erin, the novel's single-mother, working-class heroine, to cut sugar cane with an absurdly large machete—symbol of his defeated manhood—in order to give him a taste of real work. The inept Dilbeck is emasculated by this task: "Each blow brought a high-pitched grunt that reminded Erin of Monica Seles, the tennis star" (464-65).

[5] JoLayne's aims for her winnings—to save a small, isolated area of Florida's natural environment—brings to mind the term 'islandization', an important concept in contemporary discourse regarding biodiversity. Islandization sees natural habitats reduced to fragmented pockets, very much in the nature of that which JoLayne is attempting to save. This has important further implications for gender. If, as already suggested, wilderness is traditionally associated with the male, then its diminishment may be linked to—and traceable as a cause of—the apparent crisis in masculinity portrayed in Hiaasen's work. That is, since proving one's survival skills in the wilds is a traditional marker of American masculinity, then the disappearance of those wilds indicates that a crucial arena of male agency is vanishing. Moreover, if one is to attempt to challenge the traditional male/wilderness versus female/society binary opposition, then islandization severely restricts the extent to which an American female might test *her* ability to survive in the wilds. JoLayne's purchase thus subtly underlines another way in which female agency—and thus the potential for greater sexual equality—is further restricted by damage to the environment in America.

[6] The sleuthing partnership between Krome and JoLayne is complicated not only by their sexual relationship, but also by their different ethnic backgrounds. The issue of race in this novel, and in Hiaasen's work in general, is significant and requires further investigation. To explore the issue adequately would require more space than is available here, but it is worth mentioning that in *Lucky You* JoLayne's colour is significant mainly in terms of providing provocation for the overtly racist duo that steals her lottery ticket. Other than that, at one point in a flirtatious episode early on in their relationship, JoLayne (physically) pins Krome down and quizzes him on his attitudes towards race, specifically the number of black friends he has. In admitting that he has none, he mitigates this by arguing "I don't have many close friends of any color. I am not what you'd call gregarious" (123). In general, such is JoLayne's self-assurance in contrast to Krome that it is she who decides whether the issue arises between them, and after this point it is largely absent.

[7] This mirrors Chaz's murder attempt at the start of the novel, when he grabs Joey's ankles in order to toss her over the side of the cruise liner, and thus further underlines the emasculation of Chaz by casting him now in the feminine role.

[8] They also seem to be linked by Irish descent, since Tool's full name is Earl Edward O'Toole.

[9] I stress large scale acts of terror/revenge such as Wiley's here in order to distinguish them from the more personal revenges, such as that 'authored' by Mick and Joey on Chaz in *Skinny Dip*.