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STRIP TEASE

By Carl Hiaasen

Alfred A. Knopf. 358 pp.

Carl Hiaasen is America's preeminent muckraker on laughing gas.

In *Strip Tease*, as usual, the Miami Herald columnist plants one foot solidly on a foundation of commonplace social and political sludge, then steps through the looking-glass that reflects his caricaturist angle of vision, casts a glance back and says, "Hey, if I can't laugh at this craziness I will get very seriously upset."

It's an election year in Hiaasen's fifth novel, and what makes political power brokers edgy in South Florida's early September isn't the heat but the tumidity. "I love naked women, I truly do," confesses U.S. Congressman David Dilbeck. That's what made Dilbeck leap onto the stage of a Ft. Lauderdale strip joint and waste a champagne bottle across the skull of some already wasted weasel who burrowed his face into the abdomen of the club's loveliest dancer. Unfortunately, the man's friend snapped a photo of the assault, putting Dilbeck's re-election aspirations in jeopardy.

The face that launched a thousand tips, and the champagne bottle, belongs to Erin Grant who already had troubles enough. Erin dances at the Eager Beaver only so she can pay off legal fees arising from the ongoing custody battle for her four year-old daughter.

Erin's ex, a sleazeball drug-popping felon named Darrell, won custody because a born-again judge couldn't abide Erin's removing "her undies in public." To remain unswerving in his moral indignation, the judge has made himself a regular at the Eager Beaver, sitting wide-eyed with the Bible on his lap and his hands beneath it. One tragic night, however, lured to a rival club by its practice of "friction dancing," in a paroxysm of thankfulness to the Lord for the blessings he was about to receive from a busty blonde angel, the judge keeled over before the laying on of hands and died "with his tongue on the table."

Meantime, Dilbeck, rampant proof that chivalry is not dead but in a padded cell, has become awash in a tide of passion for Erin whose flood he cannot control. He orders assistants to steal her shoe, her razor and even her laundry lint, with which he performs a natural act in an unnatural medium.

All the while, the threat of blackmail hovers. This makes some powerful scoundrels nervous. Dilbeck is chairman of the House committee which perpetuates price supports for U.S. sugar. Promoted as aid to America's "struggling family farmer," these supports in fact make millionaires of a few exploiters of Jamaican and Dominican migrants while crippling the economies of poor Caribbean nations. To protect Dilbeck,

the sugar barons employ Malcolm Moldowsky, a "fixer's fixer," whose hero is former Attorney General John Mitchell and whose specialty is making slime look noble.

With Jimmy Breslin fervor and Damon Runyon flavor, Hiaasen sets the warring camps in motion. On one side are Dilbeck, Moldowsky, the sugar-growing Rojo family, Erb Crandall (Dilbeck's "loyal executive assistant and longtime bagman") and, by tangential self-interest, Erin's ex. On the other are Erin, Miami homicide detective Al Garcia and the wacky crew from the Eager Beaver, who showcase Hiaasen's side-splitting talent for characterization. There are the club's dancers, like Monique, Sr., who inspires herself by imagining celebrities in the audience, and Urbana Sprawl, so thoracically gifted that "she once smothered a man on a convertible sofa," and there's Orly, the club's owner, who tempts customers with oil, pasta and creamed corn wrestling.

Most devoted to Erin, and after her the novel's most endearing character, is Shad, the Eager Beaver's bouncer, who looks like "a shaved bear." Numbed by overexposure to nude women, Shad sits around reading Kafka and Camus and plotting get-rich-via-litigation schemes involving large insects buried deep in cups of yogurt and cottage cheese. Shad has his testy moments. When he feels his lawyer's dragging his Italian heels, Shad takes a Black & Decker drill to the lawyer's favorite Matisse to demonstrate "the new pointillism." But with Erin he is Sir Galahad, always putting his hulk at her service and insisting, "She ain't a stripper. She dances." When he doesn't like the music Erin's made to dance to, Shad chews up a Hammer CD, spits it on the mike stand and commands the deejay to "play Bob Seger or die."

Like Shad, this hilarious novel has teeth. Readers will spend much of the race toward its zany but tense final scene doubled over, yet they'll note too along the way some two-fisted satire of political graft, campaign pandering, voter apathy, sanctimonious military actions, the exploitation of migrants, men lobotomized by lust, as well as Hiaasen's compassion for the continuing plight of hurricane victims and the many ways women choose to sell themselves in return for sustenance. It is finally this wedding of laughter to understanding that places Hiaasen squarely in the tradition of America's important comic writers.