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STORMY WEATHER

By Carl Hiaasen

Alfred A. Knopf. 352 pp.

Take a thin strip of land pressed between the Atlantic and the Everglades; sprinkle abundantly with greed, fraud, murder, corruption and mayhem; batter with a hurricane; and dish up the zany corner of America Carl Hiaasen likes to call home.

But it's a bit different this time around. Even in the hilarious *Strip Tease*, his only other post-Andrew novel, Hiaasen made clear that one thing he could never joke about was the catastrophic effect of a major hurricane. *Stormy Weather*, focusing on the wake of opportunism trailing such a hurricane (and dedicated to Donna, Camille, Hugo and Andrew), seldom gets as funny as classic Hiaasen, but it proves even more powerfully unveiling. And it has more than its share of characters sketched by the inimitable Hiaasen hand in indelible cartoon.

There's Edie Marsh, for example, who's down on her luck lately. She'd spent six fruitless months in West Palm trying to sleep with a Kennedy, not just some marginally profitable Shriver or Lawford but "a direct heir, a pipeline to old Joe Kennedy's mother lode." But when a hurricane flattens much of Dade County, Edie spies an easier mark. Snapping up a deformed goon named Snapper en route, Edie heads south to find a home she can call her own when the insurance companies start writing checks.

That brings her to what's left of the house of Tony Torres who sits in his BarcaLounger with a shotgun in his hand, waiting for the irate dupes he'd sold "state-of-the-art" double-wide trailers "guaranteed to withstand high winds," which the storm has turned into shrapnel. One corrupt turn deserving another, Torres lounges under open sky, his roof gone with the wind, having been approved by a Dade building inspector named Avila who approved 80 new homes a day without leaving his truck.

Also wandering Miami are newlyweds Max and Bonnie Lamb. They'd been honeymooning at DisneyWorld, but when Miami gets leveled Max thinks of all those demolished dreams and ravaged lives, and of how entertaining they'll prove to his friends at the New York ad agency where he's a junior account executive. As Max cruises desolation with his camcorder, Bonnie realizes she's just married "the sickest thing I ever saw." Fortunately, worthier love may await Bonnie on her honeymoon in the form of Augustine Herrera, noble heir to his uncle's illegal animal and drug import business, who likes to juggle human skulls.

As scam artists, insurance swindlers, phony contractors and assorted thugs scavenge the rubble like hyenas, a bizarre vigilante roams among them with a Sisyphean determination to save Florida from its horde of predators. Leaving a glass eye instead of a silver bullet, this vagabond champion is none other than Skink, f.k.a. Clinton Tyree, whom readers grew to know and love in *Double Whammy*. Hiaasen fans will recall that

Tyree, a decorated Vietnam vet and former Gainesville English professor, had been forgiven his literacy and elected governor.

Perhaps the most celebrated of the many vehicles Hiaasen has employed to voice his own anger at Florida's devastation, Gov. Tyree "told The New York Times that Florida was being destroyed by unbridled growth, overdevelopment and pollution, and that the stinking root of these evils was greed." To confirm growing suspicion he was unbalanced, Tyree refused to accept bribes.

As Tyree, now Skink, literally shocks scoundrels into a greater appreciation for Florida, many of them administer justice to each other. There are crucifixions, impalings, lion maulings, deportations, scams within scams, and at one point a compact disk slipped into a location you don't want to even contemplate.

There's courtship here too, of a sort. "Have you ever been with a bald man?" Torres asks Edie. "Nope," she answers, "You ever seen venereal warts?" And there's conscience, as Augustine says to the honeymooner's wife he's in bed with, "Forgive me, but I was raised Catholic. I can't be sure I've had fun unless I feel guilty afterwards."

Zany as ever, Hiaasen is clearly less amused this time. As the nation's premiere muckraking satirist, he is perhaps the funniest important writer in America. But, as Twain and other former holders of that title have found, sometimes the gulf between what we are and what we should be grows too large to fill with humor. In the carnal feeding frenzy surrounding an Andrew-like catastrophe, Hiaasen's outrage and compassion find the pain and greed too raw to soothe with laughter.