

Carl Hiaasen on FLUSH

Q: Your first novel for young readers, *Hoot*, was a tremendous success. Did that make it easier or harder to begin this second book?

Certainly the success of *Hoot*, as unexpected as it was, gave me more confidence to start writing *Flush*. Once the story got rolling it was great fun, and I looked forward to the writing every day.

Q: What are some of the differences you've found in writing for children? Do your kid fans respond to your books differently than the grown ups?

The plot lines for the young adult novels are a bit simpler than my other books, and obviously I've toned down some of the language and grotesquery. I got hundreds more letters about *Hoot* than for any of the adult novels, partly because so many teachers assigned the book in schools. Still, the letters from kids knock me out—they're funny, perceptive, thoughtful and very candid. They understand the moral center of the book, what's right and wrong, and they very strongly identify with some of the characters. Adult readers say they're crazy about the characters in those books, but they seldom say they identify with them—which is understandable, given some of their quirks.

Q: Many of your novels are inspired by real events. Is the sewage dumping in *Flush* based on a true story?

Flush is set in the Florida Keys, where I have a home. We have serious water quality issues down here, especially in the boat basins and marinas. We also have some of those ridiculous casino boats, like the one in *Flush*, that are huge and loud and totally out of place.

Q: Florida does seem to have more than its share of oddball characters and crime—what is it about the state?

Florida has always been a haven for outlaws and renegades, and also a place where dreamers come to make their fortunes or die trying. It still has a very tropical and intoxicating image, despite all the bizarre crime and rotten publicity. I sure try to do my part.

Q: You've written *Flush* in the voice of teenager Noah Underwood. I believe this is only the second book you've written in the first person. Was it a challenge? How do you decide whether to tell a story in the first or third person?

I enjoy writing in the first person if the story is right for that style. Noah is an appealing character—he's got a sharp sense of humor and also a good heart. Most of all, he's a keen observer of adult folly, which is essential in all my books. To write a whole novel in the first person, a writer needs a character who is interesting company—and Noah's a

very interesting kid.

Q: Noah clearly loves the outdoors and is an avid fisherman. Did your own love of fishing begin in childhood? Were you as aware of and concerned about the environment as a kid as you are now?

I was a kid when I started fishing and never outgrew it. I always loved the outdoors, being on the water, and living in Florida I was aware on a daily basis that overdevelopment was wiping out too many wild and beautiful places. I can't remember a time when I wasn't angry about that.

Q: Noah's dad Paine goes to some pretty extreme lengths to stop those who harm animals or the natural world. Is there an element of wish-fulfillment there? Even though Paine's actions aren't always legal, the bad guys sure do get what they deserve...!

There's a vicarious kick out of watching characters like Paine in action, because they often do things we *wish* we could do but are too scared or sensible to try. He's not terribly clever but he is passionate about what he believes, which is a good trait. As for the bad guys, in my novels they always get what they deserve, and frequently with a poetic or comic touch. If only that were true in real life!

Q: Actually, in most of your novels, the bad guys are thwarted in very

satisfying ways. In terms of crimes against the environment, do you think that justice tends to get done? Or would a character like Dusty Muleman be likely to get away with his crimes?

These days, it's rare when a corporate polluter or anyone who trashes the environment is brought to justice. The current political climate in Washington favors these kinds of criminals—in fact, they usually get tax breaks. A guy like Dusty Muleman would be more likely to get caught in a place like the Keys, though, because there is a higher concern about pollution down here. He might get a pretty hefty fine, though probably no jail time, which is what he'd really deserve for poisoning the ocean the way he did.

Q: Do you have any advice for kids—or adults—who would like to help protect the environment?

I always tell people who want to protect the places they care about—rivers, forests, estuaries, whatever—to stay alert, stay involved and, most importantly, show up at the meetings to let the politicians know that you care, and you're not alone. And even if you lose a few battles, don't quit fighting. The stakes are too high. Once these places are gone, ruined by pollution and development, we'll never get them back.