

Carl Hiaasen on SCAT

Q. What made you decide to write another novel for young readers?

I had planned on only doing two, but HOOT and FLUSH turned out to be so popular that I couldn't say no to writing a third. More than anything, the letters I received from kids were so touching and funny and smart that it made me want to do another book.

Q. SCAT is about a teacher who goes missing on a field trip. What gave you that idea?

It seemed like a neat mystery, especially since the teacher in the story, Mrs. Starch, is one of those intimidating classroom characters we all remember from our school days. So, when she disappears on a field trip into this foggy swamp, there's lots of wild speculation among her students about what really happened.

Q. In HOOT, endangered burrowing owls were at the center of the story. In SCAT, it's a Florida panther. What made you choose that particular animal?

Florida panthers are among the most endangered species on the planet – experts say there could be only 60 to 100 of the cats remaining. In my newspaper work, I'd written a lot about the efforts to save the panther, and I'd gone on a hike to track down one of the cats, which had a radio collar.

The biologists shot it with a tranquilizer dart when it was treed in a big pine, and it fell on a mattress that we'd made from inflated garbage bags. They vaccinated the animal and gave her a full medical exam – and found out she was pregnant, which was very cool. Then she woke up and wandered back into the Everglades.

Q. Have you ever seen a panther in the wild?

There are about 18 million people in Florida, and I'd bet that about 1,795,000 of them will never lay eyes on a wild panther in their lifetime. I've only seen one, about 12 years ago, while I was driving down the Card Sound Road toward the Keys.

Q. Is that just because they're so rare?

Yes, they're extremely rare, but they also avoid humans whenever possible. There's not a single case in Florida history of a panther attacking a person. Usually they stay far, far

away.

Unfortunately, the male cats require hundreds of square miles to roam, and in Florida there aren't hundreds of square miles to wander without running into people.

Q. In SCAT, your main characters are Nick, Marta and a mysterious boy known as "Smoke." In their search for Mrs. Starch they end up in the Black Vine Swamp – is that a real place?

It's a made-up name for an area on the edge of a real place in Southwest Florida called the Big Cypress, which probably holds more panthers than anywhere else.

Q. In the book, Nick becomes obsessed with finding Mrs. Starch, partly to distract himself from worrying about his father, who's been sent to fight in Iraq. Why did you include that angle as part of the story?

Thousands and thousands of kids in this country have been affected by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Either their mom or dad is stationed over there, or returned with a serious injury that changed their lives forever. Sometimes they don't make it home alive. We don't read very much about the cost of these wars on the young people who have lost

a parent or a loved one, or who have seen one return gravely wounded.

In SCAT, Nick's father narrowly escapes death when his convoy is attacked, but he's badly hurt.

Nick doesn't know what to expect when his dad comes home, and part of the story is how he deals with that.

Q. You dedicate SCAT to the memory of Dr. David Maehr, who was a panther researcher for many years in Florida. What's your connection to him?

Dave took me along on a couple of panther expeditions many years ago in the Big Cypress and Fakahatchee Strand. He was a pioneer in using radio collars on the cats, so that scientists could learn more about where and when and how far they traveled. The information that he and his teams came up with was invaluable to protecting the animals and their habitat. He wrote one of the definitive books on panthers, *The Florida Panther – Life and Death of a Vanishing Carnivore*.

Whenever I had a panther question, Dave was the first one I called. He helped me a great deal with SCAT. Tragically, he died in a plane crash several months before the book

came out. He was tracking black bears in Central Florida, using radio signals, when the plane went down.

Q. Is there a lesson or a message that you hope your young readers take from SCAT?

I really don't try load up my books with messages. If the characters are interesting – and they believe strongly in something – the readers get involved. If you don't care about the characters, the story doesn't work.

In this book, I'm very fond of Nick and Marta, but also of the boy called Smoke. He's one of those kids whom everybody treats as an outsider, but he turns out to be clever and gifted, and heroic in the end. I also found myself liking Mrs. Starch – we've all had teachers who scared the heck out of us because they seemed so cold and tough. But often those teachers turn out to be the best ones.

They surprise you, and Mrs. Starch is certainly full of surprises.