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BOOKS OF THE TIMES | 'SKINNY DIP'

Her Marriage Had Taken a Dive, but She Sure Could Swim

By JANET MASLIN

t this point in his career as a comic novelist, Carl Hiaasen did not need to get any better. He has long been writing smart, fizzy Floridian escapades that amount to pure reading pleasure. But "Skinny Dip," his latest, is something more: a screwball delight so full of bright, deft, beautifully honed humor that it places Mr. Hiaasen in the company of Preston Sturges, Woody Allen and S. J. Perelman. This book is dedicated to the late, priceless Warren Zevon, who provided a theme song for Mr. Hiaasen's previous "Basket Case" and whose quick, diabolical wit put him on that same list.

"Skinny Dip" gets off to a flying start: in its first paragraph, a woman is thrown off the deck of a cruise ship by her spectacularly good-for-nothing husband, Chaz Perrone. The incident occurs near a supposedly unspoiled island, where the landscape is "pocked with hulks of sunken drug planes, and the only shells to be found along the tree-shorn beach were of the .45-caliber variety." The book abounds in nonchalantly perfect lines like that, apparent throwaways in which every word happens to be expertly chosen.

Fishermen find a dead body. ("We knew right away it wasn't no sailfish because it didn't jump.") And Chaz worriedly learns of this on the nightly news. "Through three minutes of laxative commercials he trembled in dread, waiting to hear if it was his wife who'd been reeled in by the startled anglers." But Joey Perrone was a good swimmer, and she has wound up in a remote spot with an ex-cop named Mick Stranahan, who would like to help her get even. "Seeing him hauled off in handcuffs might help the healing," Stranahan advises. "Why don't you let me call the police?"

When the investigation begins, Chaz tries to hide his crime by giving misleading information. But he can't do even that right: "Of the millions of people who weren't sure which direction the Gulf Stream ran, he was probably the only one to hold an advanced degree in a marine science," Mr. Hiaasen writes with finesse. Chaz got a biology degree from a diploma mill, "double-spacing being the only academic requirement," after writing a thesis entitled "A Comparative Analysis of Late-Season Oranges, Ruby Grapefruits and Tangelos." When he graduated the entire faculty "rose as one to cheer Chaz as he crossed

the stage, so elated were they to see the last of him."

Since then Chaz has dedicated himself to collecting lab samples of phosphorous-soaked water the color of root beer and then pronouncing it A-O.K. He has been hired by a vegetable grower named Red Hammernut to back up claims that Hammernut's slave-driving farms are not polluting the Everglades. As is usual with Mr. Hiaasen, there's a component of serious advocacy to his comedy ("Basket Case" skewered the newspaper business). But his case against despoiling Florida's landscape is hitched to so much fabulous funny business that it has a stealth effect rather than a crusading one.

Beyond its lean, clean prose and riotous syntax (" 'I did not feed Bert Miller's dog to my snakes,' he said, almost adding: But accidents happen"), "Skinny Dip" has the advantage of a well-populated plot that doesn't go overboard. In the finest tradition of screwball lunacy, the book welcomes one colorful nut after another without losing its spark. Best among them is the goon named Tool, who will be fondly remembered for stealing pain-killer patches from elderly cancer patients but still seeming like a guy with a heart of gold. Tool is so hairy that the heart is hard to find, and when he shaves body hair to make room for the drug patches, he appears to be wearing a moth-eaten sweater. Tool's motto, concerning swamp cuisine: "Anything that dies, fries.")

The story packs in Chaz's girlfriends ("he's got so many bimbos, you'd need radio collars to track them all), a running Viagra gag ("It's bad enough you're pointing a gun at me, but that, too?") and the Chaz-hating brother of Joey, Corbett, who raises sheep in New Zealand. ("Honestly, I don't travel much, but I'd fly all night to see that little whorehopper strapped into the electric chair and lit up like Dodger Stadium," he says.)

Mr. Hiaasen's book has the unabashed Baby Boomer appeal of naming characters after Joey Heatherton and Corbett Monica and of letting 53-year-old Stranahan vet potential girlfriends by asking them to name all four Beatles. Joey manages this, but only because she once saw a BBC special on the History Channel while her homicide-challenged husband was at a strip club.

Chaz's remarkable inability to bump off anyone, even at gunpoint, is one more of the book's endearing qualities. On the other hand Joey's spunk and resilience are potential problems. Tough-guy comedies have a tendency to go jokeless and gooey in the presence of fetching heroines. And Joey does arrive on Stranahan's island in the buff (hence the title) and make a cute list of reasons not to sleep with him.

Fortunately, Mr. Hiaasen gives her a \$13 million inheritance to fuel the murder plot and a nicely vengeful demeanor. "Wasn't that the name of his hairstylist?" Joey thinks, while spying on Chaz. "Mrs. Charles Perrone idly flexed her fingers around the wooden handle of the steak knife."

Almost every living organism in this book fares well as the story ends. Not even the story's snakes or tasty little dogs are made to suffer. But nobody winds up happier than the reader, unless it's Mr. Hiaasen for having hit his stride so unmistakably. "Skinny Dip"

is a madcap trip through southern Florida, but Mr. Hiaasen's geography no longer matters. You'd follow him anywhere.