

A Woman's Nature: Ecofeminism in Carl Hiaasen's *Skinny Dip*

In the 21st century, a call to arms has been resonating throughout the United States, declared through the media, debated on by politicians, and discussed between the older and newer generations: the natural state of our world is in danger and we are the culprits. Environmental awareness has boomed with economical and technological changes, from an increase in gas prices bringing attention to the overuse of fossil fuels to the accessibility of the Internet revealing the melting polar ice caps in the Arctic due to climate change. As a result, green initiatives, or "[going] green," have been presented to reduce the excess use of natural resources, a growing source of research in academic and public literature; according to *Literary Criticism*, Charles E. Bressler marks these pursuits as ecocriticism, "the latest emerging field in literary studies that directly relates to who we are as human beings to the environment" (Bressler 230, 231). The rise of awareness has gathered "an eclectic group of writers, critics, and theorists who emphasize place, nature, and the physical world, attesting to the interconnectedness between humans (their culture) and nature," where the actions of individuals directly influences the state of the earth: if the environment is in danger, it is because human beings have put it there, often obliviously and ignorantly (231). Thus, in Carl Hiaasen's mystery *Skinny Dip*, not only is there the crime of attempted murder, but there is the crime occurring beneath the surface: the murder of the Everglades and the environmental crisis in Florida. Hiaasen's ecocritical subversion of the detective fiction formula transforms main character Joey from the victim into the victor, empowered as the detective of the personal crimes against her as well as the larger crimes occurring against nature.

As Bressler explains, ecocriticism "seeks to demonstrate humanity's connectedness to nature," studying "how characters and place are intertwined" and "how place affects and defines

the characters as do the characters affect the natural setting or place" (235). Due to the varying degrees of controversy surrounding environmental discussions, ecocriticism notably "[holds] the moral imperative that humanity must safeguard its planet—a concept that [ecocritics] dub an ecocentric value," emphasizing a code of ethics that realigns the individual with nature (235). Thus, Hiaasen's portrayal of main antagonist Charles "Chaz" Perrone is painfully ironic when examining *Skinny Dip* through an ecocritical lens. Chaz represents the moral and ethical opposite of ecocriticism, even as he touts his marine biologist title. He is all the more detestable as a character, let alone as the villain, as he insists that "it's *Dr. Perrone*" when addressed but, in the same breath, recalls how "he stiffly informed his faculty supervisor [of biology in graduate school] that the only sensible purpose for studying [sea creatures] was to isolate a toxin that would wipe them off the face of the earth," ultimately "[having] no interest whatsoever in the lesser species" (Hiaasen 24, 43). Chaz is openly an example of the very issue of humans negatively exploiting the environment for monetary purposes, made more infuriating by the fact that it is all a ridiculous façade: his position as a marine biologist *should* protect the environment, as argued by ecocriticism, but it is merely a guise to protect greater villain Samuel "Red" Hammernut, where Hammernut continues to pollute the Everglades on enormous scales while Chaz falsifies reports that declare the success of the Everglades restoration. Hiaasen paints Chaz to be such a stark contrast against what ecocriticism illustrates—no less the real issues regarding the Everglades' deterioration—that Chaz's additional crimes committed against his wife Joey puts her into the opportune position to dismantle what he represents. *Skinny Dip* opens with Joey's attempted murder, tossed "overboard from a luxury deck of the cruise liner M.V. *Sun Duchess*" by Chaz, and as Joey "[plunges] toward the dark Atlantic," the reader dives in with her with the same thing in mind: Chaz is a "bastard, Joey thought" (1).

Rather than submit, Joey subverts the standard feminized role of helpless target, remaining cognizant of the crime Chaz has perpetrated against her, angry and alert. Once rescued by retired policeman and appropriate savior Mick Stranahan, she decides to investigate why Chaz tried to kill her, completely reworking the typical formula of the detective mystery genre. Before the reader is even fully aware of just how appalling Chaz is to others and to his surroundings, Joey has transformed from intended victim to clever victor, taking the mystery into her own hands—with the added benefit of extracting revenge on Chaz: "*Justice* is a better word for it" (50). In Hiaasen's continuation of showcasing ecocriticism through an unconventional lens, Joey becomes a figure of ecofeminism, or "ecological feminism which analyzes the interconnection of the oppression of women and nature" (Bressler 236). Building off the foundation of ecocriticism, ecofeminists "demonstrate connections between sexism and the domination of nature. The subjection and subordination of women in society is linked . . . to the prescribed degradation of nature in a patriarchal society" (236). As Joey uncovers the details of Chaz's ruse with Hammernut, it is clear that he is a violator of nature as much as he is of women; for example, when Joey realizes Chaz has immediately gotten rid of all of her personal belongings, "sweeping [her] out the door like [she] was dirt," Joey realizes, "The guy's an animal and I never saw it. . . . A primitive with a Ph.D. And I was a fool for marrying him" (Hiaasen 70). The fact that Joey defines Chaz's behavior with animalistic terms is another example of irony in her renewed agency as an ecofeminist: Chaz is a beast of a human being who has disregarded nature in favor of personal gain, where the pollution of his self and his pollution of others highlights the survivability of a true animalistic need: women against a male-dominated culture.

However, it is important to note that Joey's transformation into an ecofeminist does not make her into a heroine. Although she does become the detective to her own mystery, regaining her independence through the investigation of and revenge on Chaz, she is questionably inert prior to the events of the book. Arguably, the thrill of the detective fiction genre is the shocking event that sends ripples of action and reaction into the heart of the plot, but flashbacks into Joey's life with Chaz reveals that, while wealthy and intelligent (especially in comparison to her husband), she is ignorant of Chaz's ploy with Hammernut against the Everglades' restoration, willfully taking no interest in Chaz's supposed work. The reader learns the beneficiary to Joey's fortune is the World Wildlife Mission, much to Chaz's chagrin, but otherwise, there is little evidence to indicate that Joey was any less stagnant toward the environment as Chaz; granted, Chaz shows that he is actively bringing harm to the land, but the lack of concern Joey has until personally forced to examine Chaz's motivations begs the question of what hurts the environment more: contributing to its destruction or doing nothing to prevent its destruction. Prior to Chaz's crime against her, Joey is as much talk but no action as her worthless marine biologist of a husband, as seen when Chaz insipidly describes their commitment to fighting against the environmental crisis:

Chaz cut in: "Let me save you some time. Joey has her own dough. Lots of it."

Inwardly, he congratulated himself for sticking to the present tense. "And if she dies, I don't get a cent. The money goes into an irrevocable trust."

"Who's the beneficiary?"

"The World Wildlife Mission. Ever heard of 'em?"

"Nope," Rolvaag said.

"They go around crusading for endangered penguins and panda bears. Stuff like that."

"Doesn't that bother you, Mr. Perrone?"

"Of course not. I'm a biologist, remember? I'm all about saving the wildlife."

...

Inside he was laughing like a jackal. (26-9)

Yet, the dramatic scene of being tossed into the ocean has both a literal and figurative effect upon Joey's life and character. In literature, water serves as a powerful symbol, seen in ancient religious texts to postmodernist interpretations, painted with strokes of ecocriticism; for example, being submerged in water can be construed as a rite of passage, undergoing the overwhelming sensations of losing oneself in order to better connect with one's self, where then resurfacing from the water signifies renewal, where the self has been cleansed or cleared of any doubt, returning to the surface with newfound awareness and knowledge. Similar to how Chaz is consistently and negatively likened to an animal throughout *Skinny Dip*, Joey connects with water—literally, "knifing headfirst into the waves," and symbolically, enduring its "messy and uncomfortable chop[s]" and discovering her ability to survive on a personal, ecofeminist level as she learns not only the crimes Chaz has perpetrated against her but against nature as well, all while on an island with Mick in content seclusion (1). For Joey, water has purified her, revealing her husband's true despicable nature and her own strength to overcome his attack:

"But what Chaz did out there," [Joey] went on, pointing at the water, "it just hacks me off royally. You've got no idea."

... The question was hanging there, so [Mick] went ahead and asked: "Then what's making you cry?"

"Oh, I suppose it's realizing that my whole life adds up to this one moment and this one place and this one"—she swept an arm angrily—"stinking, lousy situation. No offense, Mick, but half-blind on an island with some stranger isn't really where I expected to be at this point in time. This isn't the shape I expected to find myself in at age thirty whatever."

"Listen, you're going to be okay."

...

She asked Stranahan what he would do in her place.

"Take off the wedding ring, for starters," he said.

Joey . . . tugged the platinum band off her finger and palmed it. (35-6)

Ultimately, it is the fact that Chaz is permitting the pollution of the water in the Everglades, destroying its life as well as being determined to destroy Joey's, that Joey is able to recognize her autonomy and arm herself with ecofeminism, finally taking action.

Overall, Carl Hiaasen's *Skinny Dip* is a multifaceted work. It joins the detective mystery genre while simultaneously subverting its formula, where the murder victim survives and takes on the role of the detective; it humorously depicts the ineptitude of the antagonist while equally serving as an allegorical comment on real-world evils occurring by man against nature; it confronts absurd situations of sex and romance but also emphasizes the power of women, a woman's ability to survive, and how a woman's strength is a result of the male-dominated society that stands against her. Significantly, *Skinny Dip* is an example of ecocritical literature, illustrating the environmental crisis plaguing the world in the 21st century but leaving it up to the reader on what to do about it. For Joey, it is her link with the harsh purity of water on a personal level that equips her with the tools needed to face Chaz's crimes, where ecocriticism is used to

solve the mystery and ecofeminism renews Joey's nature to survive. Yet, within and outside of literature, green initiatives will continue to be a topic up for debate and ecocriticism will continue to gain attention, encouraging others—just like Joey—to discover the connection between nature and human nature.

Works Cited

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