

Carl Hiaasen on HOOT

Q. Your novels are known for a fair amount of, well, adult content. What made you want to write for kids?

First, it was something I'd never done before, and it's important for writers to take chances. Secondly, I really wanted to write something that I could give to my nephew, nieces and stepson without worrying about the salty language or adult situations. They've all been asking to read my other novels and I've been trying to stall them, at least until they hit the teenaged years.

Q. As an adult fiction writer, it must have been difficult to "think like a kid," what were some of the challenges you faced in writing for your "new audience?"

The biggest challenge was trying not to subconsciously "write down" for younger readers. Kids are sophisticated readers with terrific vocabularies. They're also quite aware when adults are underestimating them.

Q. Would you say writing for kids is harder or easier than writing for

adults?

All writing is hard work, or at least it ought to be. When you pick a different audience for your work, the task becomes finding the right voice and the right tone in which to tell your story.

Q. Did you approach this book differently than an adult novel? Did your writing process change at all?

It didn't take me as long to write HOOT as it does to write the other novels, partly because it was slightly shorter and partly because the plot wasn't quite as multi-layered. Another reason it went along so quickly, frankly, is that I was having so much fun writing it.

Q. How do you go about writing a novel? Do you have the book plotted out in your mind before you begin? Are you ever surprised by the direction a book takes?

When I begin a novel, I've got a premise and a cast of characters and that's about all. I don't do outlines because they inherently limit the plot possibilities. I want the freedom to

change directions if needed, and I want to be surprised my characters. Those are the great joys of writing novels. If I wanted to know in advance how my books were to end, I'd write nonfiction instead.

Q. With Hoot, did you find yourself slipping into an adult sensibility and having to pull yourself back, or did the story flow out fairly naturally from your young characters?

Once I got rolling, I was pretty comfortable inside the heads of the young characters in HOOT. Once in a while, a piece of dialogue would start sounding too much like grownups yapping, so I'd throw it out and start over.

Q. Are any of the characters in Hoot based on real people? Or can't you say...

None of the characters in HOOT are based on real people, but the setting is very much borrowed from own childhood. The owls, too. The tactics used by Roy and his buddy, Mullet Fingers, to try to foil the destruction of the owl burrows might or might not have happened in my own childhood neighborhood. I'll have to check the statute of limitations on that one.

Q. When writing a young character did you find yourself looking back to yourself at that age? Or your children?

When I was creating the characters in HOOT, I'm sure I stole liberally from my own pre-adolescence. It also helped to have a stepson in fifth grade. Between Little League games and school functions, I'm constantly around kids who are roughly Roy's age, so there was no shortage of inspiration.

Q. You are known for filling your novels with your unique knowledge of Florida. Do you think that the experience of growing up there has changed a lot since you were a kid? Or the experience of growing up anywhere, for that matter...

Florida is a whole different world today than when I was a kid. It's a highly urbanized state with heavy urban problems, not the sleepy tourist trap it was forty years ago. Yet at the same time, there's still the Everglades, Florida Bay and miles of beaches that so far haven't been turned into condo canyons. So a kid can still experience some astounding wilderness, and decide for himself what's worth fighting for.

Q. Were you a reader as a kid? What were some of your favorite books?

I was a manic reader when I was young. That's what got me interested in writing. I burned through the whole Hardy Boy series when I was in fourth grade, and from then on I read all kinds of stuff, from Ian Fleming to J.D. Salinger to sports biographies of Vince Lombardi and Lou Gehrig. You name it.

Q. Did you write as a young boy? When did you know you wanted to be a writer?

I knew from a young age that I wanted to be a writer. I got a typewriter when I was six, and I was hooked. I wrote a neighborhood sports paper and handed out the carbons to my friends. Kickball scores, stuff like that.

Q. You are a columnist for the Miami Herald as well as a novelist. Do those two jobs compete? Or do they compliment each other?

It's getting harder and harder to do both jobs, but overall I'd have to say that the newspaper work has dovetailed well with the novels. Certainly it gives me a fountain of

material. Some of the most bizarre and warped scenes in my novels were ripped off from the pages of the Miami Herald, but readers who don't live in Florida won't believe that. Down here, truth is always stranger than fiction.

Q. Were any of the plot lines in Hoot taken from the headlines?

The burrowing owls who face destruction in HOOT are very much real. Their habitat is being wiped out by development, so the state finally gave them the status of a protected species. Sadly, the bulldozers keep rolling.

In fact, after I'd finished HOOT there was a news story about several owls being deliberately killed up in Broward County. The birds were the only things standing between the developer and some land he wanted to build on, and mysteriously the birds wound up dead. It was creepy how much it resembled the plot of the book.

Q. Your books are very funny, but they also tackle some serious issues.

Do you find it hard to strike a balance?

Unfortunately, I can't help myself. I've got to be mad about something in order to be funny, which means all my books are going to deal with issues that are important to me -

the trashing of the environment, political corruption, racial injustice, whatever.

The world can be a nasty place, and there's nothing wrong with going after the bad guys in a novel. HOOT was no different from the adult fiction in that respect. Funny stuff happens, weird stuff happens, but the soul of the plot is Roy's quest to stop something very bad from happening. And that's serious.

Q. In his own way, Beatrice's brother is somewhat of a young political/environmental activist. Would you consider yourself a political/environmental activist of sorts?

I would consider myself a deeply concerned member of the human race. I would like my children and grandchildren to be able to grow up in a place where they can always see a bald eagle or a manatee or a school of dolphins - or a pair of little burrowing owls, for that matter.

And I think it's obscene to tolerate a political system in which the greedy are allowed to carve up, pave and poison what's left of the wilderness. So, in my books, highly unpleasant things happen to those sorts of scoundrels.

Q. Did your 11-year-old stepson help you out with any of the accurate "kid lingo" used by the young characters in HOOT?

Ryan offered some gentle pointers on dialogue while I was writing the book.

Later he read an early draft and gave me a thumbs-up, which, from a fifth-grader, is practically a rave review.