

Books

Andrew: There was no calm after *this* storm

By MATTHEW BUDMAN
Special to The Times

Between them, Dave Barry and Carl Hiaasen have Miami down cold. Barry casts a sardonic but benevolent eye on Dade County, and is amused by its giant mosquitoes, aimless tourists and natural disasters; Hiaasen takes an equally sardonic look but turns up a seedy underworld of con artists, sleazy politicians and gun-toting felons — plus plenty of bugs, bad weather and sweaty vacationers, of course.

Hiaasen makes Florida come alive in all its swampy glory. His comic thrillers are unusually comic and unusually thrilling, bolstered by the kind of solid, detail-filled reporting that befits his day job as a columnist for the Miami Herald.

STORMY WEATHER

By Carl Hiaasen
Knopf, 336 pp., \$24

Stormy Weather, his sixth book (not counting three earlier novels he cowrote) in a remarkably consistent series, is as good as the others, grippingly plotted and written, full of angles and curves, men desperate and resourceful, women beautiful and crafty.

Hiaasen dedicates *Stormy Weather* to "Donna, Camille, Hugo and Andrew," and indeed, the book's catalytic hurricane — Andrew, the 1993 monster that left a quarter million homeless — assumes its own full role in this novel.

Hiaasen's human characters are also memorable, and plentiful, in

story lines that merge and dissolve throughout the novel. There are Max and Bonnie Lamb, newlyweds honeymooning at Disney World. There's the "deeply unhappy" Augustine, saddled with too much money and too little to do with it. There's Edie Marsh, a schemer who heads south to make her fortune from the hurricane (having abandoned a plan to seduce and blackmail a wealthy Kennedy).

And Hiaasen tosses in two wild cards with single names: Snapper, a small-time hood and "canny opportunist" who hooks up with Edie to capitalize on the tragedy, and Skink (who appears in the wonderful *Native Tongue*, as well), the wild-eyed former Florida governor who stages a quixotic campaign against tourism and development from his home in the wilderness. "Hurricanes are an eviction notice from God," he gently informs a newly homeless toddler.

"Go tell your people."

Into this seething mix Hiaasen tosses a wandering menagerie of exotic animals escaped from internment in Augustine's late uncle's now-leveled zoo.

EVERYONE CONVERGES on the disaster area: Max Lamb to videotape the hurricane's carnage for his New York office buddies, Edie and Snapper to bilk a deep-pocketed insurance company, Skink to terrorize a tourist who offends him, Augustine to track down his wild animals. And somehow all this steers clear of madcap farce. Hiaasen never misuses his characters to get laughs; some have unusual faces or hobbies or occupations, but they're altogether real, never simply quirky.

Adroit at keeping any number of balls in the air, Hiaasen's characters and story-lines remain distinct, focusing on a handful of themes. Much

of *Stormy Weather* revolves around incompetence and thievery in the housing industry. After showing us tragically flattened mobile homes and their occupants' ruined lives, Hiaasen depicts the corrupt salesman who had promised elderly buyers the homes were safe and the corrupt inspectors who swore the homes were well secured. Then comes the "drooling Klondike stampee" of corrupt roofers who promise frantic homeowners that — for cash in advance — they'll repair their roofs *first thing tomorrow morning*.

Readers will find many of *Stormy Weather's* charms in the deftly drawn characters who appear for just a page or two, from a "professional goon" who sets out to find the men responsible for his mother's mobile-home death, to a good ol' boy who, drunk, stumbles out of his house to hunt stray cows — only to



Carl Hiaasen

find himself face to face with Augustine's angry African buffalo.

En route to a conclusion that, without too tidily tying up every loose end, still satisfies; there's some sex and a lot of violence, all in the best of taste. A bad guy gets crucified, a sort-of-good guy gets eaten by a lion, and I'd rather not give away what happens to Snapper.

Matthew Budman, who lives in Highland Park, writes and edits for a Manhattan business monthly.