CARL HIAASEN

BIOGRAPHY

Carl Hiaasen, a native Floridian, started writing his trademark satirical columns for the University of Florida student newspaper. After a stint at *Cocoa Today* newspaper (now *Florida Today*), he joined the *Miami Herald* in 1976. He served as a member of the investigative team at the *Herald* and also wrote for the Sunday magazine before switching to the Metro section as a regular columnist. He has won numerous awards for his exposure of corrupt politicians, avaricious land developers, and illegal business practices. Diane Stevenson compiled several of Hiaasen's columns in the book, *Kick Ass* (University Press of Florida, 1999). Hiaasen has also authored wildly successful novels, including *Tourist Season*, *Skin Tight*, *Double Whammy*, and *Sick Puppy*. Author Tony Hillerman calls Hiaasen "the Mark Twain of the crime novel" and Donald Westlake says "Hiassen is so good he ought to be illegal." His fame extends to the musical world, where he has been immortalized in song by Warren Zevon, who put two Hiaasen-authored tracks on the album *Mutineer*, and by Jimmy Buffett, who based his song, "The Ballad of Skip Wiley" on Hiaasen's *Tourist Season*.

SUMMARY

The interview begins with Mr. Hiaasen's memories of journalism school at the University of Florida and his experiences writing for the student newspaper. He also discusses the differences between being an investigative reporter and a columnist, drawing from his experiences at the *Miami Herald*. He reserves particular contempt for the corporate mentality that he feels plagues newspapers today. He also addresses some of his favorite topics from his writings, including the environment, Walt Disney World, Big Sugar and the Everglades Restoration, Miami politics, Elian Gonzales and the 2000 presidential election. He also talks about what makes a good reporter and shares his thoughts on what he considers his greatest contribution to journalism, now and in the future.

Mr. Hiaasen was interviewed by Julian Pleasants on May 21, 2001, in Islamorada, Florida.

P: Talk about your time at the University of Florida and your journalism studies.

H: Well, I had transferred there in the fall of 1973 from Emory University, where I was an English literature major.... I knew I wanted to go into newspapers at the time, and Emory did not have a journalism program. Florida had one with a good reputation, and so I transferred there. I started doing some columns for the *Alligator* [University of Florida student newspaper], political, kind of satirical columns.... I don't know if the columns at that time would have qualified as journalism, but they appeared on the Op Ed page a couple times a week in the *Independent Alligator*. That was coinciding with my immersion in the journalism curriculum for the first time.... I think I started out having some bizarre notion that I wanted to write for television, and I was taking some broadcasting classes the first semester. I also had a writing class with Jean Chance.... At the end of it, I remember she took me aside and said, you really do not want to go into broadcasting; you will be frustrated, you will not really get to write what you want to write, and you are really better suited for newspaper work. Of course, she was right.... So I took her advice, and it was the best thing I ever did, I think.

P: What impact did Buddy Davis have on your career?

H: He was tremendous. I don't know anybody in the business who [had] Buddy Davis [and] wasn't profoundly affected by working with him. Opinion writing was the course – I think that's what it was called at the time.... With Buddy, what he taught you was, if you are going to have the audacity to write an opinion piece, editorial column, whatever it

happened to be, you better get off the fence, you better write what you say, you better have a target and say what you need to have, what needs to be done to fix the problem you are writing about, and hit home, have your research and your facts right.... Of course, all of us remember the brutal experience. You would submit your piece of writing to Buddy, and he graded it. You would get back a cassette.... It was Buddy giving you an oral grade.... You had to sit there... and listen to this cassette where Buddy would just sort of [give] a running monologue, a running critique, of your editorial piece.... At the very end of it, he would lay your grade on, you would hear the grade, and... you would be trembling in your chair, and you would be thrilled as punch if it was anything above a C, you just did cartwheels on your way out the door. But he drilled it into you. Some kids hated it, and they didn't make it through there, but that was his whole point, that if you are serious about being in the business, you got to be serious about expressing yourself in a way that people can understand it and backing it up with facts. I think all of us left with an appreciation for how to be tough....There's nothing to this day more aggravating than to pick up, all over the country, when I travel, an editorial page and read a newspaper's editorial on a subject and not have the faintest idea where they stand at the end of the editorial, and you can tell it was a committee decision and you can tell it was a committee writing job. You aren't doing anybody any service by that, and that was Buddy's point, is that this is an important privilege that you have, this opportunity to address the readers of your publication. You should use it to say what you think and deal with important issues, and if you can't make up your mind about something, you [have] no business writing about it. To this day, a lot of editorial writers have trouble with that idea, that they don't want the phone to ring in the morning,

they don't want the letters to come in. I think Buddy would tell them what he told all of us: you are getting into the wrong business. Go do something else.

P: You have never had that problem.

H: Well, you know, it's not easy. I mean, I have always been opinionated, and there's a lot about what is going on in Florida that always angered me. I never had any trouble finding the energy or the enthusiasm or the emotion to write, but there's a very specific discipline that goes with that and some people don't have it. You can have all the right passion in the world and all the right feelings in the world, but if you can't express yourself or you can't win people over or at least get your idea across in a way that they understand, then it all goes to waste. But that is true for almost all kinds of writing. I mean, a novelist who cannot keep readers turning the page, he may be as gifted as it comes in the use of the English language and descriptive abilities and his imagination, but if you can't tell a story, you're out of business.

It's the same with writing a newspaper story.... Gene Miller, the great reporter for the *Herald* who won two Pulitzer Prizes, ... always liked to say, there are no bad stories, there are just bad reporters who cannot write the stories. That's hyperbole, but his point was, if you do the work, you can turn almost anything into a readable piece, something that reaches out to the readers who ought to be concerned about it.... Now, you're competing with the Internet and you're competing with a jillion cable TV channels, you're competing with all kinds of printed media, magazines that you didn't have to worry about. Newspapers should be more interesting now than they were. They should be better written and more creatively put together now than they were twenty-five or thirty years ago, and they're not.... They're dumbed down. That was their solution to the

competition, was to make it dumber, and they're missing quite a bit, in my opinion.

P: Talk a little bit about your experience on the *Alligator*. I wanted to read one quotation from you about that experience: "Writing columns for the *Alligator* was a piece of cake. We had Nixon in the White House. Each day provided a wonderful new atrocity. It was a splendid opportunity for a columnist to learn the value of contempt, ridicule, and satire. It gave me a pile of newspaper clippings that continue to scare the hell out of editors years later."

H: It did. I was in an unusual position, because I had never worked really as a reporter. I was just in college, and I was writing these opinion columns that they were printing. Of course, my idea was that I could go right out of college and be a columnist, which is absurd and would have been the worst thing in the world for me, but because the columns were well-received in Gainesville and the university, I thought about it. I still think some of them are pretty funny, but, again, the material was priceless. It was like shooting fish in a barrel. You had [Henry] Kissinger [Nixon's national security advisor and Secretary of State]. You had the charade of the peace negotiations going on and [the] bombing [of] Cambodia. Then you had, of course, Watergate, which is what got a lot of us into the business to begin with.... [In 1974] Richard Nixon is resigning after Watergate, after the third-rate burglary that nobody was supposed to pay attention to. It was an extraordinary time to be at that age in America, with the war grinding down and ... kids being killed, and coming out of the era of assassinations of Bobby Kennedy [JFK's brother and U.S. Attorney General; Democratic candidate for president in 1968 at the time of his death], Martin Luther King, Jr. [civil rights leader], and John F. Kennedy [U.S. President, 1961-1963]. You had all that happening. Kent

State was still fresh in everybody's mind. It was a very dynamic time, and it was a good time to be writing edgy, irreverent, satirical, and sometimes sophomoric stuff. There was an audience for it, there was an appetite for it.... I mean, we had a crook in the White House. It doesn't get any worse than that. We had a guy who was ordering and approving and paying for burglaries and breaking into people's psychiatrist's offices [a reference to Daniel Ellsberg, the Pentagon analyst who leaked the Pentagon Papers regarding the Vietnam War]. You know, it makes you laugh years later when you hear these droolers get up and talk about what an evil person Bill Clinton was and comparing that whole thing to Watergate. It's absurd. These people must have been under a rock during Watergate. We're talking about high crimes in Watergate, the destruction of incriminating evidence, the eighteen-minute gap on the tape. Every day, there was something new....

To me, it [satire] seemed a natural voice to write in. It was the way I looked at the world, the way I saw what was happening. It seemed to me perfectly reasonable. Satire, and sometimes a kind of lacerating form of satire, was the perfectly natural way to go at corruption and evil and the misdeeds of politics and all that. But there were people it made very uncomfortable, very nervous. I like to think it was all the things that Buddy Davis taught us and others at [journalism] school, that you have this great privilege and you have this responsibility, the least you can do is say what you think and take the flak for it, take the heat for it. There are always going to be people who just disagree with you, but there's no sin in disagreement and there is no sin in getting people talking about something controversial. Even when I started the column at the *Herald*, there was a high degree of nervousness about it.... I wasn't always a nice guy, especially if you

were caught with your hand in the piggy bank and you were a politician, you know, your day was ruined if you read one of my columns about you, and they were not used to that....

P: Did you ever have any pressure from the University of Florida administration?

H: No.... I would hear things, that they did not like certain things, but I never got any pressure. I would have welcomed it, of course,... because it would not have bothered me. You always like to think that you are hitting some sort of target. You hate to think you are firing into a vacuum. Honestly, and this is going to sound really odd, I really tried to work hard at making the columns funny, so that even if people didn't necessarily agree with me, the humor was there. That's because it's a very hard thing to be funny about serious subjects, it's one of the toughest things you can do, but I enjoyed making people laugh. That's certainly the same motivation for the novels, is that I enjoyed seeing [people] entertained by something I wrote. That was the biggest high I had ever experienced, walking around that campus and having people I never knew, professors, people I didn't know, stop me and saying they liked the column I wrote. It just knocked me on my butt every time somebody said they had even read it.... it was such a big high, to be told that something made them laugh. Still, to this day, those are the best letters I get... [and] my favorite columns are the ones that are funny as well as poignant....

P: You apparently developed your writing style very early.

H: Yeah, I guess. Again, I tell people it isn't so much a style as it is my voice, the honest voice that I go through life with. It's the same, very similar to the narrative voice of the heroes and heroines of the novels I write. It's the way I look at the world. It's very

hard for me to divorce myself, even in fiction, from my point of view about certain things. It's so strong. At a very, very young age, I held very strong points of view, right or wrong. It seemed to me it is such a natural way for me to do it....

The most difficult time after I got out of school... [was when] I got on the investigations team, where, of course, you are heavily-edited and heavily-lawyered. Every shred of subjectivity is beaten out of that work, and it has to be, because you are dealing with many cases, [with] high libel potential. You are dealing with serious allegations against people.... You are disciplined and trained to take yourself out of every sentence in that story. Your point of view should be the last thing that hits the readers, but you should still be able to make a strong point. So I went from that experience for a couple of years, where it was almost a clinical detachment. You could be in even the worst scandal and your adrenaline was going, because you knew you were onto something if it was a particular level of corruption or you had a good story or something, but when you sat down to write, you wrote with the view that they are not going to know anything about how I feel. Then you go from that to saying, how would you like to try a column? It's like having handcuffs cut off.... It's a completely different muscle that you are using when you are writing opinion, as opposed to writing investigations, or magazine pieces even.

So... the biggest adjustment, was that I had been away from it for so long... I got out of school in 1974 and I started the column in 1985, so it was like eleven years I had not done that kind of writing. ...[A]t that point, I was about halfway into *Tourist Season*, which is the first novel I tackled on my own.... The hero of that novel was this deranged newspaper columnist. Everyone thought that I had modeled it on myself, but the truth

was... I modeled myself after Skip Wiley [character from Hiaasen's *Tourist Season*], not the other way around. But that was a hard thing, because it was just all of a sudden, okay, it's a completely different job, ... we want you to do this column, we want you to say exactly what you think about things, and if you raise a little hell, fine.... that was what the pitch was. Then when it started happening, everybody got a little, ooh, not that much hell. But that didn't last. [T]hey got used to it....

Any time you sit down and say, I think I am going to write something funny, it's the hardest thing in the world. I think if you spoke with Dave Barry [syndicated humor columnist], who is a good friend of mine and one of the funniest guys on the planet, and funny in person as well, he's also the hardest-working guy I have ever known, and he agonizes and bleeds over every line. Almost anybody can write narrative, straight narrative, or, in the case of newspapers, can cover an event competently and make it fairly interesting, but if you say, I'm going to set out to be funny, and not just funny but currently funny, topically funny, sharp, it's hard to do. It's very easy to fall flat on your face.... It's the most challenging, I think, kind of opinion writing to do....

P: There is a very fine line between satire and cynicism. How do you draw that line?

H: [P]eople... say, well,... you are such a cynic. I say... a true cynic is a person who doesn't think there is any hope, and if I were a true cynic, I wouldn't be wasting my breath, or all those dead trees that we publish the *Miami Herald* with, to bother putting a column in the paper. As long as there's a tiny little spark of outrage out there somewhere in the public waiting to be kindled into something bigger, then you got to keep writing. A cynic is someone, I think, who gives up, says to hell with it. There isn't a

day that goes by, especially living down here in the Keys and watching it change as radically as it has, where I don't think to myself, this is a lost cause, it's time to bail out, or it's time to bail out of Florida; we're not getting better, we're getting worse. All it takes is watching the legislature in session, and you get that stomach-churning feeling that it's all a lost cause. But then you also see things happening. In the letters I get from folks all over the state who are standing up finally and saying, we have had it with this stuff and we're not going to let them get away with it here.... They may lose most of the battles, but they'll win every now and then. And then what do you do? Do you walk away from those folks and say, to hell with it, quit trying? No, you can't do that. So, I don't see myself as a cynic. Certainly, satire has a cynical note to it. When you hear a politician give the most cockamamie story to explain something atrocious that they have done, he would look at the columnist and say, you're just being cynical, and I say, no, I'm being skeptical. After this many years, I would hope that I have some kind of instinct for when somebody is lying. That's one thing, people say journalists are so cynical. They're not cynical necessarily; they're skeptical, because they have spent most of their careers being lied to. That's a fact. That's what we do, day in and day out. We go to the mayor and we say, why did your friend get this contract, and he says, it's just a coincidence. That's a lie. Now the newspapers and the reporters can't call it a lie, but I can certainly in a column cast grave doubt on the veracity of that statement. If you get your facts right and you dig in a little bit, a lot of times it's just a question of connecting the dots, I call it for the reader.... I say, I will show you how it happened; follow the ball. And then it turns out to be right....

You're nuts if you aren't skeptical, but I don't see it as saying, well, the whole

country is corrupt. I think there's a huge, especially in the state of Florida, ... great engine of greed that has always been a dominating force in Florida. But the interesting thing that happens with that is the momentum builds to develop and exploit every square-foot of this place, because it is a gorgeous and a very unique state... Well, I can't walk away from it. That's what a cynic would do, just walk away.

P: Some critics say that journalists have abdicated their responsibility. William Greider argued that reporters were often good on the facts, but weak on the truth.

H: Absolutely. I couldn't agree more. But I don't think it's anything new. I think reporters today are more astute than they were fifty or sixty years ago. They're more intrepid than they were. They're more dogged. They're better educated.... Very good on the facts, but very weak on the truth.

There's this fraternity that develops.... The best reporting about the White House generally ends up being done by people who don't have the White House as a beat. The White House reporters in the *Washington Post* didn't break the Watergate story. If memory serves, they were somewhat resentful of these two city-side reporters [Woodward and Bernstein, who broke the Watergate story]....

... Greider [and] Seymour Hersch [uncovered the My Lai incident in the Vietnam war] and all these heavy-hitters... came out of a generation where you had a whole government stitched together on lies, and on a daily basis. They [the government] would lie to you about how many boys died in Vietnam that day. What more despicable lie is there than that, that Johnson or Nixon or whoever was making? So, naturally, you've got that [skeptical] attitude. Now it's a much more comfortable life. Although newspapers are shrinking and people are being laid-off and quality is certainly not what

it used to be, the fact is... we're much more a self-absorbed society than we were in the 1960s and even in the 1950s, I think. Now it's much more celebrity-driven.... you pick up the paper and you can find much more news about Madonna [pop singer] than you will ever find about the Nobel Prize winner for science or for genetics or... for the cancer treatments. That's the public appetite.

I'm not sure that the blame goes entirely to journalists for that, but I do think they're plenty of important things that aren't covered well. This is going to sound like a typical reporter. I don't lay it on the reporters so much as I do on the editors and the management of newspapers, because good investigative reporting costs money, and many, many times you get to the bottom and you have a dry hole. You've spent thousands of dollars, and you've got nothing to put in the paper, and they're not any newspapers today that are willing to eat that kind of expense. Their solution has been in many cases to disband the investigative team or poach from it to the extent that they don't have the same number of full-time reporters. I think these decisions are trickling down, and then you take the steam and the heart [out] of the reporters themselves if you don't let them go out and do their jobs.

P: Has the *Miami Herald* done that?

H: To some extent, although the great thing about being in Miami is that the news will not let you do that; the news will not let you abdicate that responsibility, because one scandal is on the heels of another scandal all the time. You can't ignore it, you have to dispatch resources – morally, you have to do it. They're places that do not have the bizarre and constant news flow that we have, where it's very easy to just forget about your investigative team and you have them pulled off to cover this and cover that daily

stuff. Here, we could have an investigative team ten times as large as we do now, and they would all be busy. My view is that we have way too few people doing this kind of work. But they will never be able to shut it down, because the nature of news and the preponderance of corruption down here just will not let them....

We went through the happy face of newspapering for awhile, what we used to call Jell-O Journalism, soft journalism, because it's easy. Nobody writes you any letters – here is the mayor cutting a ribbon, here are the kids on the first day of school. Instead of putting hard news in the paper, you make it softer. But we went through our phase of that, we certainly did, at the *Herald*. Readers didn't like it, despite what they said in the focus groups.... What people say they want to read and what they read are two different things. We went through a period where we went from having a Pulitzer Prize-winning crime reporter, Edna Buchanan, and extensive and exhaustive crime coverage.... We went through a period where it was perceived that we had too much crime. The Chamber of Commerce was [saying], we're scaring people off, we're overblowing the crime, we're exaggerating it, ... so we went to this phase where crime was not covered as thoroughly. And guess what? The next group of focus groups said, what happened to all your police coverage? Then we scrambled back the other direction.... By ignoring it [crime], we're not doing anybody a favor... What we are doing is, we are depriving them of information that they're going to turn on Channel 7 and see. It's stupid, and they finally figured that out, but we went through that phase – all newspapers did, I think – of, oh gee, we are just bringing people down in the morning with all this. Well, guess what? Crime is now down. Homicides are way down in Miami. The attention brought results. Why are we writing about the tourists getting mugged and

killed as they leave Miami International Airport – this isn't good for tourism? Well, it's even worse for the tourists getting mugged and killed, okay...?

Those decisions are not made by reporters. Those decisions are made by editors and above. I don't know of any reporters who would not salivate at the chance to go after the big story... instead of being yanked off to go cover a craft show... Most reporters just hate that stuff; good reporters do. They would much rather be out digging through records and following up leads that come in.... Those are the ones we are out there digging for, not for our own glory, because nobody remembers the bylines; nobody remembers who writes these stories. It is folly to think that. It all goes into the birdcage....

P: That is an interesting point. What makes a good reporter?

H: To some extent what makes a good cop, too. A good instinct for when something doesn't look right, doesn't fit right, doesn't sound right. A story just doesn't hold up. Secondly, an unfailing instinct for when you're being misled or lied to. Third, and probably most importantly, a real strong sense in what's right and what's wrong, that when somebody does something wrong, who is in a position of public trust, it should go in the newspaper. It's that simple. Let the readers decide whether it is worth throwing him out of office or not.... The fun of it is just digging, digging, digging..., nothing gets a good journalist going with more energy than the idea that somebody is covering something up.... You're not out there for yourself. The big high, the kick I always got, was knowing I had gotten hold of something, knowing they hated the idea that I got... hold of it and they were going to get to read all about it on the front page on Sunday.... The by-line didn't matter. It was just the idea that you can't keep the truth from people,

and as much as you want to try, we're going to put it in the paper, and they can deal with it.

P: But the problem is partly what you mentioned earlier – haven't a lot of these reporters been co-opted? Has the media really protected democracy? I would imagine Thomas Jefferson would be very disappointed in today's press.

H: Oh yeah, but I think the press has always disappointed people. I don't think that is anything new. I think they are much less co-opted today than they were in Jefferson's era, to be honest with you.... I also think that the disease isn't being co-opted so much as it's being dispirited, to the point of laziness sometimes.... You know, you go where the facts lead you, and if you have to go crawling and begging and groveling, which is what pretty much it is at most newspapers now, ... just to get what you need, that will take it out of you. What happens then is that you... start self-editing – I don't want to go after that, they will never let me go chase that story – and the result is that good stories don't get written....

[For[the vigorous free press in this country today, the big enemy is Wall Street, or the big enemy is the corporations that own these newspapers, who are now putting out newspapers for shareholders [and] not for readers, who are much more concerned with pleasing the stockholders than they are with meeting the real day-to-day needs of readers.... So, these papers are being shrunk by attrition. They're getting thinner.... All this is being done without telling the readers, and they're just not supposed to notice that there is nobody covering the city council meeting for a few weeks because... somebody quit, and they're not going to replace them to save money.... Meanwhile,

something is not covered and somebody gets away with something and somebody's community is worse off for the fact that we're too cheap to keep a full payroll. It's absolutely the truth of the *Miami Herald*, and it's true probably to every paper in the country, if they're going to be honest about it. So that is a much greater danger to people's need to know than whether the reporters are too cozy. The source of the problem is real simple: there aren't enough reporters, and there aren't enough good reporters. The pool is shrinking, not growing, because newspapers are shrinking. That's a far more disturbing thing to me. You know, you have a corporate culture now existent in many newsrooms that was never there when I started. I mean, you never heard about the business side.... Now it's much different.... Everybody in the newsroom is painfully aware of what the circulation numbers show... because they get posted... I never knew what the profit margin of *Miami Herald* for Knight-Ridder was. I knew we made a lot of money, but I didn't know. Now it is emblazoned in the brain of everybody on every floor of the paper, that if the *Herald* does not make its 22, 23 percent, whatever Tony Ridder [head of Knight-Ridder newspapers] has decreed for this year, we face cutbacks, layoffs.... You can't pollute the reporter's mind with these kinds of concerns. You want him to go out and kick over the rocks and give the people, that community, the most thorough possible coverage that is available. Yet, you are telling him you can do that, but don't spend this, don't take this source to lunch, you can't go to Tallahassee. It's insane. That's a terrifically scary thing, but it's nothing new. Papers have always been cheap.

P: But 22 percent, that is a pretty good return. They should have a little extra money to...

H: He [Tony Ridder] wants 25 percent this year. It's absurd. I always tell people,... I know heroin dealers who would be thrilled with that kind of profit-margin. It's completely obscene. It's unrealistic. It will have a devastating effect on the quality of the journalism that is being produced, because it means getting rid of older experienced people to whom they can afford to offer buy-out packages. It's very sad, and it's short-sighted. And it's not by any means unique to Knight-Ridder. The *L. A. Times* is going through it. Gannett has been famous for it for years. Gannett was the pioneer of journalism on the cheap. You know, I worked for Al Neuharth right out of college.

P: Talk a little bit about your experiences in Cocoa with Al Neuharth.

H: I remember I graduated in March of 1974, and I think my first day was March 21, if I'm not mistaken, 1974, *Cocoa Today*, which was the precursor of *USA TODAY*. It was the tenth anniversary... of the founding of that newspaper, or some anniversary of it, and I just happened to arrive that day. Al Neuharth had assembled everybody in the press room for a big pep-talk and congratulatory speech. I'm sitting there, and no sooner has he gotten started than he launches into an attack on one of the reporters, on, specifically, a series that had been done called, "Confessions of a Used Car Salesman," which I had seen....

It was fascinating stuff, these guys telling how they dolled up these wrecks and were able to get people to buy them. They put sugar in the tank and did all this horrible stuff to make it sound good for a minute, and then they would sell them. It was... also filled with comments of horror and contempt by honest car dealers who said, we would never do that. It was a very balanced series.... Well, the Used Car Association of Brevard County, or whatever the hell they called themselves, had raised some hell and

in their outrage had pulled some ads. Al was on a roll about how one-sided he thought the series was, a little too strong, a little too tough on everybody. Well, he never had the balls to come out and say it was because they pulled some ads.... I thought, this is my first day in the real world of journalism, and I've got the publisher of this newspaper chewing out a reporter for doing his job.... So much for theory; so much for idealism....

[Y]ou talk about separating the ethical barriers between the newsroom and the business side. Neuharth lived on the beach in a big fancy house, and at the time he had just married a state senator named Lore Wilson. They lived... on Cocoa Beach, and there was some setback in zoning issues that the neighbors had raised about what Al was doing with the property. We dutifully... were writing about it.... [T]here was a possibility Al was going to be cited for building below the setback line on the beach, which was a big environmental thing up there at the time. I'll never forget, he called in from wherever he was traveling, and he had the story read to him word-for-word over the phone, and he said, what is the headline going to be? And he rewrote the headline himself. A complete violation. That's like having Nixon write the headline on the Watergate stories that you want to read. But he was the boss. There was a great deal of dissension and demoralization at the newspaper because of this. He was meddling in the story; he should've sat back and taken his lumps.... The whole newsroom was just appalled that he would do this sort of thing. It was hard on the editors. I felt bad for them. They get the call, and what are they going to do? That is their boss; are they going to tell him to go pound salt? They would be out of a job.... Management, it may be, isn't the enemy, but they're not necessarily your friends either, and they're not necessarily committed in the way that reporters and front-line editors are to putting out

a complete and thorough and balanced newspaper.

P: Then there is a lot of hypocrisy in publishing.

H: A terrific amount of hypocrisy, and I would go so far as saying, in some cases, corruption. I don't mean criminal corruption, but there's certainly a corruption of the unspoken bond between the readers and the newspaper. We will always serve you first – that's just plain bullshit. If we believed that, we wouldn't be laying people off right now at the *Miami Herald*.... We barely have enough photographers to cover the day-to-day news, and they want to lay off four more now. That isn't what a newspaper in a big, dynamic, growing community does for its readers. It's basically the same as cutting your police force in the middle of a crime wave.... But believe me, we're not alone; it's going on everywhere..., so I'm not singling out Knight-Ridder.... We shouldn't even pretend that we are working hard for you, the reader. We're working hard to make that 25 percent for Tony Ridder, is what it boils down to, and the shareholders, so that he doesn't get yelled at, at the next shareholder's meeting.... We aren't really doing journalism here; this is a franchise operation, and our job is to make money, and you got to understand that. And, by the way, we will put something on your front lawn every morning; some days it's going to be better than others, some days it's going to be real good, and some days it's going to be disgraceful, it will be so thin. At least be honest with them, say, lookit, we are getting hammered from corporate headquarters, [and] that's why the paper is getting thinner. It isn't because there is less news happening, folks; it's because we are printing less of it than we ever have.

P: What is your view of *USA TODAY*? Is that the wave of the future?

H: No. Everyone said that.... I don't think it is. I think it's great for what it is.... I read it

when I can on airplanes.... But I think most readers are sophisticated enough to know that you're just getting little M&M bites of news, and if you really want to know what's going on in the Mideast, you don't look it up in *USA TODAY*. You go to the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Having said that, I also have to note that probably eight out of every ten readers, that's all they really want to know about the Mideast.... I don't think it's the wave of the future, but I don't think the future is all that bright either.... *USA TODAY*... has gotten better, I think, over the years, the quality of the writing. They break stories....

P: They do some investigative journalism.

H: They do, and they have gotten a hell of a lot better than when they first started. But I know everybody, all of us, went to color weather pages. That was our answer. Let's make the weather map almost real life-size, and that will show readers we really care about them. It's expensive putting all that color in the paper, and the same number of people looked at the weather page who looked at it before. So they abandoned that.... I think there are plenty of times when shorter is good... [but] I think there are a lot of times that... the only way to distinguish us from the broadcast media and from the thinner newspapers and magazines, is to be able to do what they call interpretive journalism.... A good paper can deliver something that TV, radio and the Internet can't give you; depth and insight and basic investigative stuff can't be duplicated by TV or radio... to the devastating effect that it can have in a newspaper. So... that's really our only trump card over these other media. One thing we can do that they can't do is depth. More and more papers are shrinking away from depth – let's just be just like radio, only let's be it in print. It's insane... [and] they wonder why nobody is picking up

circulation, why advertising is flat. Well, they're a lot of complicated reasons. One of the reasons is, we aren't offering people anything they aren't getting anywhere else. We're failing in that regard.

The best newspapers, the ones that are making tons of money, are spending tons of money on the product. They're going through down-cycles now because of the economy, but the fact is, the *New York Times* remains a highly profitable newspaper, the *Washington Post*, a highly profitable newspaper, and also at the same time high-quality, and they spend a fortune covering the world. You know, we close all our bureaus outside of the United States, we do all this great cost-cutting, and then we wonder, gee, I wonder why our circulation is flat.... If it were Coke and Pepsi, they would be finding ways of getting more people to use their product and not just putting less syrup into the soda. But that's what we do in the newspaper business....

P: Talk a little bit about your experience with *COCOA TODAY*.

H: ... I was there about two and half years and I had a great time. It was a great learning-ground. I was very lucky to be surrounded by some talented people.... [T]he good thing about a small paper is, if you got a little bit of ambition and a little bit of talent, they will let you try and do almost everything, which I did. They had a little Sunday magazine, and I worked for that. All kinds of different stuff. I would get a crazy feature idea, and it was, why not, try it. There was not the level of bureaucracy that you get at a bigger paper where you have to go through all these channels just to try anything new. That was the good part. I think the part I didn't like was it was small town, and it did a lot of small-town stuff that drove me crazy....

When you have a smaller paper like that, you have a lot of people on their way to

somewhere else, and I was included.... The only way to make any money was to change jobs, honestly. When you are getting $7.50 a week raises and told that is good, people with families, you know, you aren't going to hang in there.... I understand that people move around, and the same thing, of course, happens here at the *Herald* on a bigger scale. In the twenty-five years I have been here, if you just took the people who walked out the door to the *Washington Post*, to the *New York Times*, or *Time* magazine or *Newsweek* or L. A. , you would have an extraordinary staff of talent... A certain amount of it is inevitable, that kind of change, but it is hard, because just when someone would get to know a community or get to know a beat, someone who was covering Cocoa Beach, just when you finally nail it down, you get moved to another beat, or they leave.... But the readers... aren't really aware that a whole re-education process now has to begin.... Every time you change a beat, it sets the level of coverage back in the community. The result is a lot of smaller communities are not covered very well....

P: Why have you stayed with the *Miami Herald* for twenty-five years? Did you ever have a desire to go anywhere else?

H: No, I didn't. I had some opportunities, but I didn't. First of all, I could not see myself living anywhere else. This is where I was born and raised. Florida is, really, it just is a character in the novels, it's a character in my life. It's very hard to walk away from this place for any length of time, even as much as it has changed and as heartbreaking as it has been to watch some of the change.....

...[A]fter about two years at *COCOA*, the *Herald* called me up because I had won

second place in some national award.... Two things changed my mind [about moving to the *Miami Herald*]. One is that I had a young family, and it was a lot more money than I was making or would ever make at *COCOA*.... Then second of all, my father had just passed away, ...my mom was alone... and I just thought it would better if I would be around for my mom.... It was much better for me, I think, for a lot of reasons to be writing about a place I cared about and at least had some roots.... For me, it was a place I knew from childhood, so the learning curve was not nearly as steep for me.

P: Was one of the critical factors in your decision that you would eventually get your own column?

H: ...[W]hen you join a paper, they always say, what do you have [for] long-range plans, and I'd written down, just whimsically almost, some day I would like to write a column again; I wrote one in college.... I didn't actively go look for the column.... I [had] been on the investigations team.... We just finished up a long investigation in the Bahamas. It was very grueling, about corruption involving the prime minister, and I had been away from home a lot. I was just fried; I was burned out for the time being. Not on all of it, but you always have a postpartum period after you spend a lot of months on something and you finally get it all in the paper in the space of a week or six days.... Then... the executive editor at the time came to me and said, would you be interested in taking a shot at doing the column.... It was one thing I hadn't done at the paper. It was one of the few... writing jobs I hadn't had, and I said, yeah, I will give it a shot.... Then, once I got comfortable in the voice and comfortable doing that length, doing the same length every column, which was another discipline I had to learn. What I... found was, you do get a sort of emotional connection with your readers, and the mail you get, a

sense that they start looking for your column, they expect you to be responding and writing about certain things to get them angry....

All of a sudden, you feel like it is your duty. It sounds odd, that's the last thing I expected. I go through periods all the time when I say, to hell with it; I don't want to do it anymore. I'm tired, I can't do that and the books at the same time. But then you get this mail, and people seem to really depend on you in the morning over their breakfast cereal to at least say what they have been thinking and ranting and raving about. Part of it gratifies your ego, but part of it is also, [and] I told them this, the only way I would ever leave is if I thought there was someone else with as strong a voice about especially the environmental stuff that I feel strongly about.... You know, I always feel like if I go, no one is going to do this. Not that I do it exceptionally well, but there will not be anybody doing it, because our pattern is, we're not replacing people who leave.

Then before you know it, the years pile up and you are doing it, and the longer you do it, the harder it is to walk away from it. ... I certainly don't need to do it anymore. It's not a financial decision on my part. I've been so ridiculously lucky with the books. I've just been blessed with being able to do the novels and enjoy some success with that, but I do the column because it's important. I do the books because it's therapy. It's therapy for me, and it's fun. It's different. It's a very challenging kind of writing, to sit down and construct a whole novel. You have to use up a lot more tricks in your bag to do a novel. But the column is important because you write it, and it's in the paper the next day, and you're responding to something hopefully fairly quickly, shining a little spotlight on this one thing before it gets too far in the legislature, too far with the county commissioner, before somebody's life is messed up because they do something stupid

or somebody's sitting in jail who should not be in jail....

So, the immediacy of it, that this adrenaline rush of jumping on a big story still is there. I think if it wasn't there, I wouldn't do it. I'm saying all of this, [but] six months from now, I could bag it. I don't know. For me, the tough part is going to be keeping the loyalty to the paper going while they are shoving good people out the door.... There is almost a point of a moral line in the sand that you have to draw. This isn't affecting my life at all. I still get my paycheck and they're still happy to get my column, but these are people I have worked with for years, good people who do not deserve to be treated this way. At some point, you say, I can't sit by and watch this happen. I hope it doesn't come to that, but that would be one of the deciding factors, not anything to do with my own personal life.

P: In your columns, I have been particularly interested in your descriptions of politicians: "pernicious little ferret", "worthless blowhard", and my personal favorite, "a veritable slag-heap of mediocrity." Do you get a lot of pressure from editors to modify your comments or phone calls from the maligned?

H: I think I used to get the occasional cringing phone call saying, gee, do we really have to say that? And I would say, look what he did. Yeah, but he's going to be on the phone tomorrow. Let him be on the phone tomorrow – so what? I don't relish or take any joy in knowing, I mean, these are folks with wives and husbands and kids, and I take it very seriously. As frivolous or as whimsical as some of those names sound, those are applied to individuals who did some really bad stuff and whose actions affected people. To me, they were perfectly accurate descriptions. But yeah, they get queasy about it. Readers love it. I don't hear much from the politicians themselves,

because they are always afraid if they write to me I'll put that in the column too.....

But in the case of, like, "the pernicious little ferret", I think I was referring to Humberto Hernandez [former Miami city commissioner], who is now in jail for voter-fraud and for money-laundering and fixing an election. He first came to the public attention when the ValuJet crash happened in the Everglades. He has a law firm, and he sent someone in his law firm to infiltrate the bus full of relatives who were taken to the crash site so they could hand out their business cards to try to get lawsuits against ValuJet. To me, I was easy on him. He's lucky that all I called him was a pernicious little ferret. But I mean, where on the food chain does a guy like that fit? There's no bottom. He's right where he belongs, jail. Good for him. I don't have any compunction about that at all. Again, keep in mind that I save these sorts of little rants for people who have a public trust. I don't pick on the little guy; I don't pick on a gas station owner or a grocery store clerk who is rude to me or something. I never do that. These are people who have put themselves out there and said, lookit, I'm the best and the brightest; I'll do this for you, I'll do that for you, I'll represent you fairly, I'll be honest, I will not steal. Then they turn around and do everything they said they weren't going to do to the detriment of government, the people they are elected to serve, their families and everything else...

...I wrote about this guy..., who's just slime from way back, back when he was in the city of Miami politics. This guy is a sitting member of the Miami-Dade school board, and he's getting money from the federal government to run low-income housing. He's taking a check to subsidize rents for older people, and at the same time, this one individual, he was going to her every month and shaking her down for, I think it was, up

to $350 a month, when she was supposed to be paying $28 a month rent and the rest was paid by the government.... He's shaking her down for extra cash, so he's getting paid twice, by the feds and by the woman who the program was designed to help. Now, my question is, what can you say about that individual?.... There's no way he's going to read that column and not feel sick to his stomach if I have anything to say about it, because it's a shameful and disgraceful thing that he did.... His lie was that he was just charging the extra money to rent the furniture in the apartment, except the only problem was she owned the furniture in the apartment.... I do not care if [he] breaks down in sobbing, hacking hysteria when he reads the column. I don't care, frankly, if he throws himself off a building. At some point, if you put yourself out as a protector and a defender of the public trust and this is how you behave, your number's up as far as I am concerned. I have no sympathy whatsoever for him.

P: Where do you get most of your information? Do you ever use inside informants?

H: Yeah, sometimes you get tips.... I really just read the paper and watch TV and just poach liberally and then check with the reporters and watch a story evolving. I have files of stories that I see evolving over time... They still like me to be on top of the news.... That's also because it is a daily paper and you want to be topical.... But I do try to bounce off what is happening because... your readership level is highest for those stories that are making people talk. You know, you do not want to do Elian Gonzales to death, but it was on the front page for months. I had to write a number of columns about Elian Gonzales. The election fiasco, the recount fiasco, well, I had to bite the bullet after the first couple. Even when you knew which way it was headed, you had to do it. You knew the outcome; you still had to write the pieces. It's being timely and

trying to find something original to say, if you can.

P: Looking back on Elian Gonzales what is your reaction to the story now?

H: The same. I think the outcome was absolutely the only morally-acceptable outcome. When you have a living parent of a kid, I don't care if he's a communist or whatever, he's the kid's father. He belongs with his father. Any other civilized society, there wouldn't have been a question, but he became a pawn [and] he was used shamefully in this country. He was held up like a bowling trophy and trotted around, look what we have got, nah-nah, looking at Fidel. Well, the whole world thought this was insane... give him back to his father, for God sakes. It was not like he was orphaned. If it had been an American boy who had washed up on Cuba's shore, what do you think America's reaction would have been? And the other stupid thing was it played right into Castro's hands. I mean, you could not have scripted it any better for him. He could not have done anything... else to get half a million people on the streets of Havana... They were not marching at gunpoint; they were really pissed.... I understood both sides, I understood their emotions, but right is right, and as a parent and a father, if I would've been that little kid's father, I would've been just as upset as he was. But looking back, it divided the community.... But there were a lot of people in this community who felt that the obvious thing was not being said, and that is, he belonged [with his father in Cuba], because they were scared. There's this fear that if you speak out, and especially if you are Cuban-American, that you would be persecuted or even worse things happening to you for agreeing. I heard from a lot of Cuban-Americans on my voice mail at work and letters, scared to give their names. It was very sad. You know, they hated Castro as much as anybody. This is not about Castro; it's about a boy and his father.... I just got

tons of mail from people saying, thank God somebody finally wrote what should have happened in this case.

P: Who won the presidential election of 2000?

H: Well, I think from the study the *Herald* did with *USA TODAY* and others, clearly the intention of most Florida voters was to vote for Al Gore.... Using the typical standards of judging these ballots... Bush would have won, or did win, but the intent of the voters, just looking at the numbers, clearly was to elect Al Gore, meaning, of course, he should be in the White House now. But the rules are the rules, and if your ballot is not proper, you cannot [be counted].... Whatever happened, if you're George W. Bush, they're all kinds of reasons to be extremely humble, not only losing the national vote by half a million votes but knowing that the people of Florida did not pick you....

It was a mess, and kind of a dispiriting one, and I guess the only philosophical thing you can say was that it was always Gore's race to lose, not just in Florida, but nationally. The other thing you can say is that Ralph Nader, without any doubt, cost Al Gore the election.... In Florida, he certainly did.... Nader clearly had enough margin of votes, and the election was that close. So, when they start plopping those oil derricks in the wilderness, the Arctic Refuge in Alaska, they ought to name one after Nader, because that's why it's happening.

P: Let me ask you about Operation Court Broom? How did this corruption and bribery in the court system go on so long, and how was it uncovered? One judge said that he could not be blamed for taking a bribe because he was on drugs.

H: ... There was a whole crew of them. There was a little system going on, and I don't

know how this story broke.... I do know that it went on because, as these things often unfold, there was a fraternity of judges and attorneys who were friends, and ex-judges who later became defense attorneys, and it could be done fairly quietly because they were all in on it. You know, wink, wink, they all knew, and it was pretty tight-knit.... One of the reasons it went on so long, obviously, was because, again, the issue of changing [reporters]. You have a reporter who covers the courts for eighteen months, and he's off the courts. It would be very tough to break that story. You have to have someone who has been there a long time and knows all the players, unless you get a real big break. But, secondly, the reason it went on is because the state attorney's office has always been a political office; it's an elected office in this town. So they end up as friends or colleagues or golfing buddies of some of the judges, and there's an incestuous little thing. Not just in Miami-Dade; it's even more true in some of the rural counties in Florida. Everybody knows everybody else. You just don't spend much time investigating your friends.... And that's the function of a newspaper, you have to light a fire. The sad thing is that so many of our corruption [cases] down here are made by the federal government. The FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] comes in or DEA [Drug Enforcement Agency] or whatever it is, because they are not part of the local political network....

That's why the federal government has had to take such an active role down here, because there has been a general reluctance, going back to when Janet Reno was states attorney, to spend a whole lot of time on public corruption cases. The prosecutor's position will be, well, the feds have much better laws for that. And they do; they have RICO [federal anti-racketeering laws], they have conspiracy laws. You can

also make good conspiracy cases with the state of Florida law... but there is... a general reluctance and queasiness to go after somebody who contributed to your campaign.... You asked me before about Miami; is it more corrupt than other places? Yes, certainly, I think it is. I think there's corruption everywhere, and I think in a state as booming like Florida; I think greed is going to rule the day in small towns just as it does in cities, but I think Miami just has a history. It has a particularly bumbling form of corruption. It is egregious corruption. It is clumsy; it is not sophisticated.... You know, the FBI videotape is showing, and there's the guy taking the money, and he's giggling like a six-year-old and then counting the money on videotape. ...[T]here's just no cool to it at all. Instead of just slipping in their pocket and slipping out the door, they're just idiots. It's great for me, for my job; it makes it a lot more fun.... I'm firmly convinced that it exists everywhere. I think just the level of it and the sometimes bizarre nature of it is what makes Miami a little bit special.

P: Yet the voters continue to re-elect Joe Carollo and Xavier Suarez and all these guys.

H: Yeah, it's really amazing. The other thing is these are folks with absolutely no charisma.... Alcee Hastings**,** one of our congressmen, was impeached from the federal judiciary, for God sakes, on corruption charges. He was acquitted in a criminal trial, but a panel of justices decided he was guilty, they booted him off the federal bench, which almost never happens, and we put him right back in Congress. Humberto Hernandez, whom I mentioned earlier, the city commissioner in Miami, they were well-aware of what he did in the ValuJet crash, the voters were well-aware that he was under investigation for money laundering and bank-fraud, and they elected him resoundingly. Now,

granted, the election was fixed, but he still had enough votes....

P: In the *Herald* today, they were listing the 100 most lucrative corporations in the state, and Lennar Homes, which built homes destroyed by Hurricane Andrew, was near the top. I know you wrote about them in *Tourist Season* and in several columns. Does this kind of shoddy building still go on?

H: Well, I think they have to be more careful. I'm sure it does. We'll find out when the next big hurricane hits, won't we? Linar certainly got their share of press, well-deserved, after Hurricane Andrew. Other companies did as well, but that's the largest home-builder. They got mad at me for doing some columns about some stuff they had done, and then they got caught in another development building houses on, basically, dump sites, tire dumps.... There's a long history of that kind of behavior in the building industry in Florida. Presumably, the new building codes will help. Presumably, the insurance industry is actually going to start paying attention to what kind of homes it insures now....

P: Well, the adverse publicity has not seemed to hurt the company's bottom line very much, has it?

H: Not at all, no.... I was told they were unhappy and they were yanking some ads. Of course, I lost about thirty seconds of sleep over that,... you cannot worry about that stuff. They were wrong. People's lives were completely disrupted and ruined because these folks couldn't build a house that stood up to ninety-mile-an-hour winds.... I'm not thinking about them. I'm thinking about the people and their kids who had to tape garbage bags over the holes in their house and huddle in the rain for three days... after Hurricane Andrew because they were living in a cracker box and didn't know it. Those

are the people that I'm writing for....

P: This is off the subject a little bit, but in several of your novels there is a character named Skink – where did that character come from? Is he modeled on anybody?

H: No, certainly not modeled on any former governor. In the novels, he's an ex-governor who goes crazy and goes running into the woods and only comes out to wreak havoc and seek vengeance. He's just sort of a wild man.... Confronted with the kind of corruption that really exists, he couldn't deal with it, fictitiously. I have been asked, certainly, by ex-governors if they were modeled for Skink, and they wish they were, but, no, absolutely not. He's the sort of character I wish existed in real life, and it's one of the great joys of the novel, being able to turn him loose and have him kick some butt.

P: Is he, in a way, your alter ego or conscience?

H: I think in those novels that he appears, if not my conscience, he really is the moral compass of those novels, and he was never created that way, he just sort of popped [up]. I needed a kind of a renegade character, and in an early novel called *Double Whammy*, I just invented him.... But it [Skink] was just supposed to be around, originally, for a couple chapters in that book, but he sort of took over. That is what happens sometimes in fiction. I liked him so much that I brought him back for a couple other books. But I wish there had been someone like that who had been in the governor's mansion at some point.

P: Well, there is a little resemblance to Claude Kirk.

H: Well, maybe physically. But politically... I think Claude is one of the ones who insists that he is modeled after him – one of his many delusions.

P: Let me talk to you a little bit about one of the major topics in your column, the

environment. I wanted to quote to you what Nathaniel Reed [a noted Florida environmentalist] said about your writing on the environment: “He takes no prisoners, whether they are black, white or human. If you are ludicrous, if you are droll, if you are an idiot or a bandit, he will either have a great deal of fun with you or he will absolutely skewer you.”

H: That’s high flattery from Nat. Nat knows more about the Everglades than any living human I think I know, so I respect his opinion on it. You know, I’m not a hydrologist and I’m not a biologist, and I don’t know all the intricacies of this program. All I know is that there’s a whole lot of money to be spent on this [Everglades Restoration], and that means a lot of it is going to get stolen and wasted. That’s my concern, that it be spent doing what the intent of the law is and what the will of the people of Florida wants. It will never be the same Everglades. The Everglades are now broken up by two different highways and eaten up by subdivisions on both flanks, so it can’t ever be the old Everglades, but the least they can do is put the freshwater back. If they got any brains at all, they will. Now, it’s complicated.... I don’t pretend to understand it all, and even the environmental community is periodically at each other’s throats....

I have to look at the big picture and sometimes remind people that twelve and fifteen years ago, nobody gave a rat’s ass about the Everglades. You never heard a politician talk about it, except for Bob Graham. It wasn’t popular. In his first run for governor, Jeb Bush had almost nothing to say about the environment or the Everglades. It’s no accident that he got on this bandwagon in a big way, and I give him credit for it. I don’t know whether he cares or doesn’t care, but he did get involved. He threw his weight around in Washington, and he did what he had to do to get it rolling....

The point is we can spend the next fifty years arguing about how much acreage Big Sugar needs to give up or what the phosphorus levels should be coming into Taylor Creek, but it has to get rolling, because we don't have a whole lot of time. As the drought that we are now going through attests, it doesn't take much to throw the whole system out of whack and cause incredible upheaval in the wildlife community and in the demand and supply equation for both coasts... of Florida. I think it's a victory that the bill got passed. I think it will be a tragedy if people are allowed to loot it and scam it and milk it the way is inevitably going to happen at some level. I think that somebody has got to ride herd on it, and it would be a perfectly wonderful legacy for Jeb Bush.... But some politician needs to get on it, whether it is at the congressional level, to make sure that it happens and lean on all these people.... ...[I]t would be very nice to say, yeah, let us get Big Sugar to pay for fixing up the whole Everglades. Well, there are a couple things wrong with that. First of all, I'll be the first one to say that they treated the place as a toilet for four years, and it's atrocious what they did to the pine. But they aren't singularly at fault for what the Everglades has become. The problem, for instance, of what has happened in Florida Bay is a result of the freshwater flowing out of the Everglades. It can as much be traced to the south Dade avocado farmers and tomato farmers as it can [to the sugar farmers].... You want to look to blame; look at the people who developed from West Palm all the way down to Florida City. You are talking about massive sucking-up of water from Naples, everywhere. The municipalities and the government and the politicians who were running them were as much as looting the Everglades and doing damage as Big Sugar was and everyone else. There is no shortage of people to blame.... [T]he environmentalists need to understand, you cannot

expect the private sector to pay for all this; they are not going to. Politically, they do not have a chance against the Fanjuls [Alfonso “Alfy” Fanjul Jr. and Jose “Pepe” Fanjul, owners of Florida Crystals]. They do not, not a chance....

P: How powerful are the Fanjuls?

H: I think they are powerful to the extent that, you know, as *Vanity Fair* suggested, can they affect the presidential recount? Probably not. I think they can suggest lawyers, but I don’t think the Fanjuls are calling the election.... I think they give a lot of money to Republicans and Democrats, and I think they probably had as much access or more with Bill Clinton than they do with Bush.... I think all the press and all the anger about the Everglades has been good. It has certainly straightened them up a little bit.... I have very little sympathy for the sugar industry, and that goes back to the virtual slavery in which they held migrant workers for so many years. Their solution to that instead of upgrading their living conditions was just to bring in machines....

[Sugar] is one of the biggest welfare programs that the American people support, and they don’t even know it. It’s huge corporate welfare. Of course, the Fanjuls go nuts when you use that phrase, but that’s exactly what it is. It’s a handout; it’s a big, fat, juicy handout. The sort of thing that politicians love to scream and yell about – if it’s some unwed mother with three kids, they would be raising hell, but if it’s two multimillionaires in Palm Beach, it’s okay....

P: Let me quote Nathaniel Reed again. “Hiaasen, with laughter and a rapier, has skewered most of the Everglades opponents more than once. He knows how to hurt, and he knows how to make you cry with laughter.” I notice you have often applied that rapier wit to the sugar industry.

H: I did, and part of it was based on their reaction to the initial... stages of the Everglades movement..., [a] complete disavowal of any responsibility for what had been done.... Now, they got their thinking adjusted a little bit, they want to be good citizens, but at first it was complete arrogance. Complete arrogance. It was basically we can do whatever we want, [so] go screw yourself. At that point, you have to go at them with both knuckles. A good bit of ridicule is something that they, of course, despise. They would rather be screeched at than made fun of, so whenever possible... I try to do that.... Every time I think a brief glint of some sort of conscience..., gee, have I been too tough on them, all I have to do is pick up the Palm Beach *Shiny Sheet*, the society pages, and look at the party rosters for the Fanjul social schedule. Again, this is money that the taxpayers have stuffed into their pockets to live this kind of a life, so that their crop will get sold at a guaranteed price and so that crops out of Jamaica and other poor countries that could use some capital don't get it. I mean, then all the sympathy evaporates in the world. They are just fine, and I have not hurt them any. But the one thing that they do fear is that shift in public opinion. They could care less about whether I am making fun of them, but they do care if the politicians start reacting to calls from constituents who are reacting to either a column I wrote or a speech Nat gives or whoever gets up and rants and raves....

P: Are environmentalists stronger today in political and economic terms than they were ten or fifteen years ago?

H: Yes, absolutely. I do not think you would see [George W.] Bush [President of the U.S., 2001-] backpedaling on all his energy stuff already and mealy-mouthing about conservation.... Do I think they are organized? Not as organized as they should be. Are

they effective? Sometimes. I mean, I think some groups are very good and effective. I think that there's so much work to be done in so many different places in this country, around the world, that it is very hard to expect them all to be marching to the same drummer or all on the same page. These are people who care and they are vocal, and it is to be expected that they are not going to agree on how to fix the Everglades. But at some point, political expediency has to sink in.... It [development] has made environmentalists out of the meek and mild electorate that normally would not even show up at a city council meeting or a zoning board meeting. Republican, Democrat, it does not matter; it is a quality-of-life issue, and I always tell people that. Here in the Keys, it is a big issue. If you make this as ugly as Hialeah, Florida, then your tourism is going to reflect that; it is going to go down, and everyone suffers.... It has to come down to money, ultimately, people's pocketbooks, and then they say, you are right; it's good economic sense not to destroy the beauty of a place, not to wreck the ecology of a place like Florida. It's stupid to destroy it, even for a real-estate sale. There's definitely a bigger price to pay now for some of the most egregious kind of developments.... At some point, some companies say, you know what, this isn't going to be worth it, it's going to be ugly, and we're going to be in the headlines, and it's going to take a lot of time; let's see if we can change this and don't do this; reduce the density. These things are happening more and more. I can't say I'm optimistic because I think the general thrust of most development is to see a piece of property and envision how many people... we can cram in there....

Every year, they [the Florida legislature] try to get away with more and more stuff. This is where it's so important to have strong editorial positions, strong columns, just

good strong vigilant journalists who are watching, because so much of what happens in Tallahassee is done secretly and you find out after the fact. Looting Preservation 2000 is just the beginning, I imagine. You have a couple of real jokers who are in positions of strong power in the [Florida] House and the [Florida] Senate, and this... is kind of dull day-to-day stuff that it's hard to get voters and readers interested in until it is something that... affects their life so directly, either visually or some other way, that then they are mad, then they want to raise a ruckus. By then, it's sometimes too late, so it's a challenge to keep people worked up about it....

P: I was very intrigued by your book *Team Rodent*. What persuaded you to write that book?

H: ... Random House had this little series of books they were going to do for a Library of Contemporary Thought, [and] they called me and said, we are trying to get a bunch of writers on board for this; anything you want to just rant and rave about, a short little book, think about it, just anything that ticks you off that you have not written that much about. So, I said yeah, I could write about Disney, because I think they have had a tremendous impact on Florida, but I think they've also had a huge sort of financial and cultural and every way impact on American society. It's their philosophy that their way is the only way and the best way. I see Disney World as a metaphor for all of it, because of what happened in Central Florida, the phoniness of all of it, the fatuousness of it. The idea of putting this theme park, which I will be the first to admit is just an incredible technical achievement, in a place that could be anywhere.... [B]ecause it is so insulated and so alien to the true Florida experience...[it] is, for someone who cares about Florida, a source of some resentment. They transformed the tourist economy of Florida,

and they certainly turned Central Florida into a parking lot, and a tacky one at that.... You mentioned about hypocrisy. That was one of the underlying themes in that novel, is that how they act and how they present themselves and how they really behave as a corporate citizen are two different things. Since then, the horror stories I have gotten from employees....

P: According to your book, they [Disney] are not really good citizens, are they?

H: Not in my view, no. They're just like any other big company. What's interesting, the subdivision – Celebration [planned community] – to show you how they have captured, and successfully captured, the American myth, people go there and see it as a tourist [attraction]. It's a subdivision, and the tourists stop there and wonder around expecting to see... Mickey and Goofy playing in the yards. I don't know, but it's such a problem that the people who really live there have these signs in the yards that tell people, this isn't a tourist exhibit, we live here, please don't come into our house. Because you had people walking in.... It's truly more about illusion than about the reality. For the employees, certainly, it's a different world. When they get involved in lawsuits, they are a big, bare-knuckled hard-ass company.... They really do have their own government, their own fiefdom. Extraordinary autonomy....

It's really an amazing thing to see basically the entire state system of law-and-order and government, judiciary, everything, roll over for one company, and that's what happened when Disney came to Florida....

P: Let me conclude with a couple of broad-based questions. I realize you are still in the middle of your career, but when you look back on your time as a journalist and as a writer, what would you think would be your greatest contribution to your community and

the state?

H: I don't know. I mean, I honestly don't know. I would like to think I was really just another voice that raised the awareness of the public to certain issues. Really, if nothing else, I think the columns have served as a signal to, I hope, lots of readers and people living in the community, that it's all right to get up and say what you think.... So when you write a strong column, suddenly people realize that it's okay to have strong opinions. This is what America is all about, and it's good to remind them of that. I think that's some value, that I take comfort in knowing that people might be less afraid to take a stand because they see it can be done without any dire consequences. In terms of... legacy, newspaper work is all transitory. I hope the novels are read. It would be lovely if they are read fifty years from now and people laugh and say, hey, I know what he was talking about....

In terms of the newspaper work, I probably am most proud of a project we did that stopped a couple [of] big condo projects up on Card Sound Road in north Key Largo, where they were going to turn that into basically a huge city of condos and apartments. Card Sound Road... is a beautiful stretch of north Key Largo that they were perfectly prepared to rape and pillage until we wrote about them....

I'm just one person writing a column that may or may not be on-the- money, but if it's your life and involves your kids and your family and quality of life, if you turn out in enough numbers, you are going to intimidate the politician into listening to you. Otherwise, you are not going to be heard, and that is the sad truth.... And to the extent that the columns get people riled up enough to make them show up, then I feel good about it. I don't take a credit for it, but I feel good about it....

P: One reason for your success might be that your ripostes are not caustic, and they are tinged with a sense of humor so that, although you make a strong statement, you do not appear to be too judgmental. Is that a fair assessment?

H: That's a charitable assessment. I think that some of the targets of the columns would argue with that. I mean, there are times when I am very judgmental.... But I think what I do try to do is limit the scope of the column to some individual thing, an action, a vote, something that was done that was wrong that needs to be fixed. You know, I don't think you want to do a broadside; I think you want to be specific. And I certainly don't have any trouble saying something laudatory about Jeb Bush or whomever when they have taken a courageous stand on something.... By the same token, I don't have any qualms about kicking them in the knees when I think they have really sold the citizens down the river on something. But you have to have that ability,... if you are going to be tough on them for doing something you think is wrong, you also have to be fair....[Y]ou have to be, and I've said it before, an equal-opportunity son of a bitch – that's my job... It doesn't matter. Wrong is wrong, right is right, and, presumably, you are writing the column because you have a strong sense about that, strong feelings and positions about what is right and what is wrong, and, presumably, that's why they gave you a newspaper column....

P: You always have to be sort of a curmudgeon, do you not?

H: I think you do.... People have different visions of a newspaper column. Some are very comfortable writing about walking their dog or a funny thing that happened at the supermarket. That's never been my style.... My mission has always been to get out there, mix it up and be right in the middle of it and be on top of the news. You're going

to get enemies, you're going to get flak, but to be relevant and germane and topical and all that means getting off the fence....

P: One final question. What do you want to accomplish in the future?

H: ... The only thing I want to do is to keep writing columns that mean something, about things that are important. When that becomes impossible to do, for whatever reason, then I stop.... If you are realistic, you don't have any grand ambitions beyond that next sentence you are trying to write. You want every sentence to be better than the last one that you wrote, and as a novelist, that's what you do. Even as a columnist, you want every column to be better than your last column.... If you're a realist, you don't think in terms of making a difference; you think in terms of doing a good job, writing the best thing you can write, and then it's up to the readers and voters and citizens to decide how they want to react. That's all you can do. You aren't proselytizing, you aren't preaching, you aren't running a pep-rally.... It really is just keeping afloat and trying not to lose your love of the language and your skills and your sharpness. You know, I don't have any grand ambition except to keep the same sort of level of honesty up.... I think staying angry is the most important thing to do if you write the kind of things I write. Even the humor, it all comes from anger..., satire has always come from a sense of anger and injustice. Mark Twain, [Jonathan] Swift, whoever was writing it, they were all writing about something very serious and something that really upset them, and they were making people laugh at the same time, a tough thing to do. But [when] you lose that anger and you get a little too passive and mellowed out, then you are of no use at all to the readers, in my opinion, at least in my job.

END OF INTERVIEW