

12-1995

Book Review: Oh Brave New World

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Recommended Citation

Angell, Charles F. (1995). Book Review: Oh Brave New World. *Bridgewater Review*, 14(2), 24-25.
Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol14/iss2/13

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BOOK REVIEWS

James Ellroy, *American Tabloid*
(Alfred A. Knopf, 1995)

Elmore Leonard, *Riding the Rap*
(Delacorte Press, 1995)

Carl Hiaasen, *Stormy Weather*
(Alfred A. Knopf, 1995)

"OH BRAVE NEW WORLD"

Charles Angell

For those who desire to relax and enjoy a good read, Carl Hiaasen, Elmore Leonard, and James Ellroy almost never disappoint. Each possesses a keen ear for dialogue, a highly developed skill at plotting, and a sharp eye for the appropriate setting. In this last regard, all three authors locate their latest fictions almost entirely in Florida, a state rapidly coming to symbolize the condition of late twentieth-century America. What makes these new novels an even more enjoyable read is the healthy portion of social satire served to the reader. The authors each have a particular take on American, or at least Floridian society, and the forces shaping it. Hiaasen suggests American society is governed by a randomness that no moral force can effectively counter; Leonard presents a criminal class so stupid that intelligence almost has to surrender before it; and Ellroy constructs a conspiracy that so interweaves historical fact with fiction that, as he says, he "build[s] a new myth from the gutter to the stars."

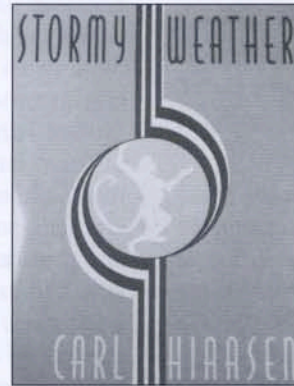
Readers of Hiaasen's earlier novels know that he, a native Floridian, has repeatedly satirized the corrupt politicians and rapacious developers, who, in transforming Florida into a vacation paradise, have blistered the Sunshine State with strip malls, condominiums, theme parks, and shopping centers. Hiaasen has said that he takes his revenge on this human kudzu by arranging for their violent deaths in his novels. *Stormy Weather*, dedicated "For Donna, Camille, Hugo, and Andrew," unleashes the "Storm of the Century" on South Florida. The storm seems almost a divine retribution on the residents. Its aftermath, as one character puts it, leaves "no law to speak of. The world's upside down for the time being." If Florida rightside-up crawls with human bottom feeders, imagine what visits the hurricane shattered neighborhoods hoping to profit from the misery and destruction. Max Lamb, a New York hotshot yuppie account executive on his honeymoon in Orlando, rushes south with his \$900 minicam to record the damage. "I bet we can sell it to C-SPAN. Pay for the whole honeymoon!" His new wife Bonnie follows reluctantly and when, inexplicably, Max disappears, she tries to find him. Edie and Snapper, attempting to stage a wrongful injury scam, suddenly realize how much bigger a payoff will result from defrauding the insurance company that holds the policy on Tony Torres' demolished house. Tony, who has sold most of the flimsy mobile homes suddenly made mobile by the hurricane, doesn't realize he is being hunted down by a Chicago mobster whose grandmother had perished in one of the trailers. Augustine arrives in the ruins hoping to track down and recapture the water buffaloes, lions, and exotic monkeys that have escaped from his late uncle's wildlife farm. He runs into Bonnie, still without Max, gives her shelter, and thus initiates the novel's love story. Enter Skink (or James Tyree, re-

signed Florida governor who now dwells deep within the Everglades), familiar to readers of Hiaasen's earlier books, who emerges from the swamp to do what he can to slow the depredations of the criminal, greedy, and depraved.

Nothing, Hiaasen implies in *Stormy Weather*, can slow Florida's descent into tourist tropique; only life at the margins offers any relief. Bonnie and Augustine, we're told in an 'Epilogue,' move to Florida's Ten Thousand Islands where they try to find some grace. Like Huckleberry Finn before them,

they light out for the territories, unable to dwell among the violent, deceitful, and cruel. Hiaasen remains witty and biting satirical, but the random and centrifugal events he chronicles in American society show that he, like the Roman satirist Juvenile, finds "it's hard not to write satire."

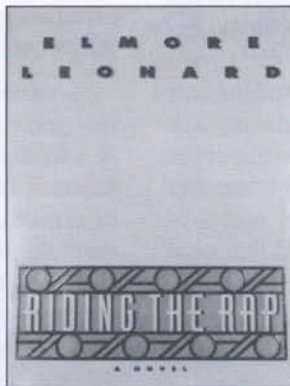
Elmore Leonard possesses a keen eye for satirical commentary and, like Hiaasen, sets his latest thriller in South Florida; reading *Riding the Rap*, one is put in mind of Samuel Johnson's remark about Thomas Sheridan: "such an excess of stupidity is not in Nature." As we follow the activities of Leonard's low-lives, we exclaim "How can these people be so stupid?" *Riding the Rap* reprises Marshal Waylan Givens and Harry Arno, first introduced in *Pronto*, and here brought together in a kidnap/extortion scheme. Closing out his bookmaking business and calling in unpaid debts, Harry sends bag man Bobby DeoGracias to collect from Chip Ganz, a faded flower child addicted to gambling and losing. Ganz and his bodyguard Louis Lewis, an ex-con, suborn Bobby to kidnap Harry, isolate him in a sealed room, and extort from him the two or three million Harry purportedly has stashed in a Bahamian bank. Trying to explain Ganz to Bobby, Louis tells him: "The thing about his ideas, they're different. Understand? Kind of gigs haven't been tried that



I know of. The man watches news on TV and reads the paper to get his ideas. The idea of the hostages, the idea of snatching one of these millionaires cheating on their savings-and-loan business you read about." Such stupidity may not exist in Nature, but it is abundant in the media. Ganz, Lewis, and DeoGracias construct and conduct their lives according to what they see on television. Ganz uses a sophisticated TV surveillance system to monitor his increasingly run-down estate. He and his fellow conspirators are forever posing for the surveillance camera, testing out their gestures and attitudes for how they'll play on TV.

Waylan Givens, against his better judgment, undertakes to locate Harry. The truly stupid like Ganz can thwart the truly intelligent at every turn, since nothing the intellectually challenged do makes logical sense. Only when he meets the psychic reader Dawn Navarro does Givens begin to make any progress. Dawn, for her part, makes connections not available to those operating in the phenomenal world. Givens operates by a clear set of rules. As he tells two car-jackers he apprehends: "I don't want to take what you did personally. You understand. Want to lean on you. Wish you any more state time'n you deserve. What you'll have to do now is ride the rap, as they say. "It's all anybody has to do. Givens finally locates Harry and rescues him. Talking the case over with Dawn, Givens thinks when she asks him "What's wrong with being foolish sometimes?" that "it was a good question."

James Ellroy's world has sufficient stupid people, but stupidity isn't its driving force, conspiracy is. *American Tabloid* sets out, in the words of its Preface, "to dislodge [Jack Kennedy's] urn and cast light on a few men who attended his ascent and facilitated his fall." Ellroy will demythologize the years of Kennedy's rise to power.



Ellroy, in a familiar postmodern narrative gambit, will intermingle the historical actors with fictional creations in what he terms a "reckless verisimilitude." His novel begins in November 1958 when Pete Bondurant, bodyguard and personal attendant to Howard Hughes, receives a call from Jimmy Hoffa, currently under investigation by the McClellan Committee and its chief counsel Robert Kennedy. Hoffa wants Bondurant to fly to Miami and take

care of a potentially damaging witness. *American Tabloid* ends on November 22, 1963 with Bondurant sitting in Jack Ruby's Carousel Club waiting for "the big f----- scream." In addition to the Kennedys, Hughes, and Hoffa, Ellroy introduces J. Edgar Hoover, Sam Giancana and his Chicago mobsters, and other actual participants in the events. Bobby Kennedy wants to

ruin Hoffa; J. Edgar Hoover wants to impede the Kennedys' rise to power; Sam Giancana and the mobsters want Castro out of Cuba and their casinos reopened; Howard Hughes wants to divest his airline and invest in Las Vegas real estate. These plots and more all interconnect in ways space doesn't permit me to detail. Into them Ellroy brings not only Bondurant but also Kemper Boyd, an FBI agent Hoover infiltrates into the McClellan Committee staff, Ward Littell another FBI agent who tries to locate the hidden Teamster pension ledgers (which ultimately lead to Joseph Kennedy's safe deposit box), and Lenny Sands, a Las Vegas lounge lizard Howard Hughes hires to edit a sleazy tabloid. These rogue characters allow Ellroy to tell a gripping story of intersecting and interlocking conspiracies. His fiction fills

in the holes of the historical record. *American Tabloid* completed, even a reader skeptical of conspiracy theories can't help thinking that something like what Ellroy describes must have been what happened. Ellroy's genius is never to mention Lee Harvey Oswald, leaving open the possibility that a whole other constellation of conspiracies had been operating independently, though towards the same end, as those in the novel.

The November murders in Charlestown's 99 Restaurant show us that Hiaasen, Leonard, and Ellroy know whereof they write. Real life hoodlums act out fantasies learned from movies – the *Godfather* was mentioned in describing the killings – and TV. Were the killings a random act of violence? a mob conspiracy? the acts, as Mike Barnicle suggested, of the unredeemably stupid? Hiaasen, Leonard, and Ellroy explore the characters and contexts in which such acts occur and make us wonder about this strange territory we've come to inhabit.

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