

Sunshine Shenanigans

crime novels for snowbirds

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Summer is hardly the time for thinking about tropical escapes, but if by chance you're already planning next Winter's respite to the land of orange groves and The Mouse, the following tales just might give you pause. Remember, even Eden had its share of snakes.

Phyllis Smallman,
Champagne for Buzzards
McArthur & Co., 2011

Jacaranda, Florida: a small town that caters to the tourist trade, but also borders the wild marshlands that define rural Florida. For bartender Sherri Travis what begins as a normal day takes a really bad turn. After driving around town much of the morning she notices that her pickup is attracting more than normal attention from local buzzards; lifting a tarp in the back she finds a man's body with its head battered in. To make matters worse it's Lucan Percell, someone her fiancé Clay Adams had driven off his land for poaching.

After calling the local sheriff and enduring his questions, Sherri collars Clay's foreman, Howie Sweet: he admits he had borrowed the pickup and taken it to a local bar the previous night, and claims local landowner Harland Breslau and his arrogant son Boomer were there, and had argued with the victim.

Trying to put the events behind her, Sherri and a friend go horseback riding in the bush on Clay's property, but it seems trouble follows them everywhere. After running across a solitary, furtive

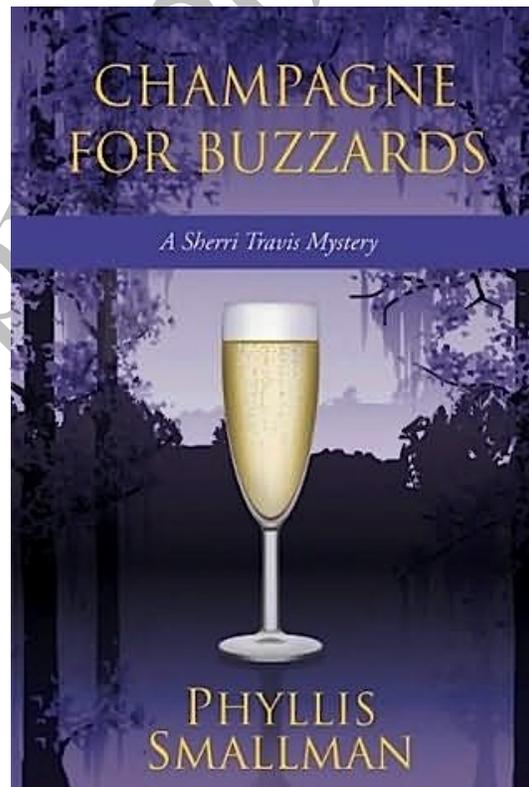


figure who disappears rapidly into the undergrowth, only moments later Boomer Breslau and two friends show up on ATVs. Although they are trespassing on Clay's land they seem unperturbed, and Boomer takes an unhealthy interest in the two women; he menaces Sherri, but when her horse bites

Boomer she and her friend manage to escape. Reaching the relative safety of Clay's house, Sherri reflects on events: who is the stranger, and was he responsible for killing Lucan? Were the Breslau clan somehow involved? And why, all of a sudden, is Clay's property attracting so many trespassers? Things come to a head when the stranger appears at Sherri's doorstep, and Boomer and his friends are not far behind.

A sharp narrative voice, distinctive characters, and fast-paced action are trademarks of Smallman's novels, and carry readers effortlessly into a unique world happily unfamiliar to most of us. With less emphasis on her trademark humour than is found in Smallman's earlier works, *Champagne for Buzzards* perfectly captures the distinctive setting of rural Florida and uses it effectively in a chilling tale that demonstrates that the veneer of civilization is, in some people, all too thin. Smallman's latest marks her growing mastery over a distinctive genre.

Carl Hiaasen
Star Island
 (Knopf, 2010)

With well over a dozen Florida-based crime novels (including four series and over half a dozen standalones) to his credit, you'd think Floridian author Carl Hiaasen has explored and exploited just about every possible nuance to life in the Sunshine State. You'd be wrong. Somehow the versatile wordsmith manages to keep coming up with fresh takes on the more bizarre aspects of an already very unique culture.

In *Star Island* a twenty-two-year-old pop star named Cherry Pye (yes, it's her

stage name) is attempting to resurrect her flagging career after her latest round of drug and alcohol abuse. Things go wrong when her look-alike stand-in, Ann DeLuisia, is mistakenly kidnapped by an obsessed paparazzo seeking a private

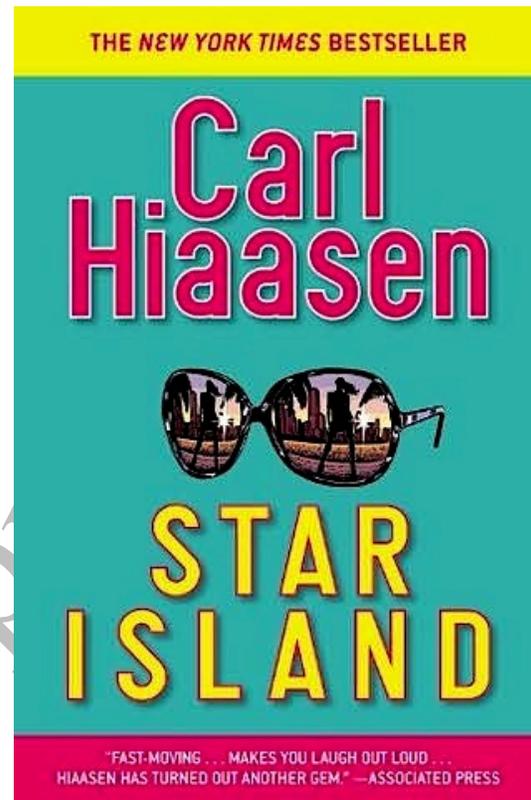


photo session. The task facing Cherry's handlers is somehow to get her back without the public—or Cherry—tweaking to her existence. Given the madcap group that forms Cherry's entourage—including a sex-obsessed record producer, a pair of botoxed publicists that make Joan Rivers look natural, an out-of-control bodyguard, and a psychotic stage-mother. For good measure throw into the mix Ann's relationship with an unhinged former governor of Florida who heads from his home in a mangrove swamp to Miami to find her, and you have a recipe for an

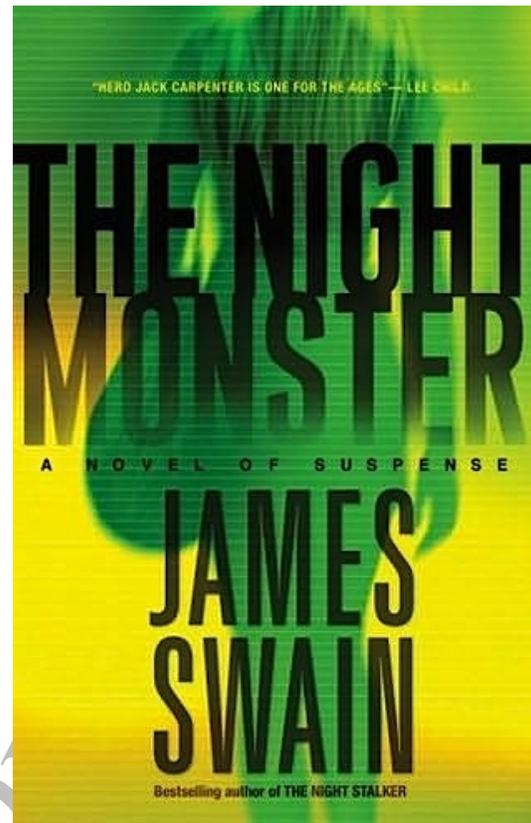
odyssey worthy of Homer—and much more entertaining.

Fresh, in-your-face, and definitely over the top, *Star Island* is an example of Carl Hiaasen at his best. A deft blend of farce with social satire, Hiaasen's tales are not everyone's cup of tea, but if your idea of a fun read is a bit of madcap mayhem, you'll find his writing as addictive as a bowl of potato chips.

James Swain
The Night Monster
(Ballantine Books, 2009)

At the other end of the comfy spectrum, award-winning author James Swain has delivered a dark tale about a cold case gone ominously warm. Eighteen years ago, as head of the Broward County Missing Persons Unit, Jack Carpenter failed to prevent the kidnapping of a young college coed. Now he's a PI, and the case still haunts him. When his daughter asks him to look into a voyeur who's been dogging her basketball team Carpenter obliges, and he's convinced that the trail leads to his old nemesis. The local cops don't agree, and Carpenter is forced to forge an uneasy alliance with the Missing Persons Unit new commander, and to call on an FBI agent with a personal stake in the hunt. Their quest will take them from the shuttered remains of a long-abandoned mental asylum to a small town harbouring a terrible secret.

Having penned two series totaling nearly a dozen novels, James Swain is a rich find for readers in search of well-told, gripping suspense tales as good as any being written today. Jack Carpenter is a complex, nuanced hero immersed in a



gripping tale that nicely blends action and suspense. Not at all your granny's Florida (unless she's given to nightmares), *The Night Monster* will have you up late trying to finish the book before going to bed. The third in his Jack Carpenter series, it will earn Swain new readers and solidify his reputation among those already familiar with his work.

There you have it: three Floridian felonies that just might make you seriously rethink next Winter's travel plans; after all, if all you want is sun, there's always Arizona...

Jim Napier can be reached at
jim.napier@deadlydiversions.com