

READING IS AN ADVENTURE.

Carl Hiaasen



SQUIRM EDUCATORS' GUIDE

ABOUT THE BOOK

Billy Dickens, a loner and snake enthusiast, lives with his free-spirited mother in Florida, where she moves the family from town to town in search of bald eagle nests. He hasn't seen his father since his parents divorced when he was four years old. Now an eighth grader, Billy conducts some shrewd detective work and finds that Dennis Dickens, his father, lives in Montana, where he is involved in some type of secret work. Billy travels across the country in search of his elusive father, and finds himself on a journey in which he floats down a river with his father's new wife and stepdaughter, hikes deep into a mountain, and comes dangerously close to a grizzly bear and her cubs. His only communication with his father is through a note that drops from a drone. Later, his father returns to Florida to apologize for his years of absence and takes Billy on a mission to the Everglades to save an endangered Florida panther from a wealthy poacher.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Photo © 2014 by Tim Chapman



CARL HIAASEN was born and raised in Florida. He writes a column for the *Miami Herald* and is the author of many bestselling novels, including *Razor Girl* and *Bad Monkey*. His books for younger readers include the Newbery Honor winner *Hoot*, as well as *Flush*, *Scat*, *Chomp*, and *Skink—No Surrender*.

You can read more about Hiaasen's work at carlhiaasen.com, and follow him on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter at @Carl_Hiaasen.



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PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Lead a class discussion about the difference between “endangered,” “threatened,” and “vulnerable” species. What and who determines if a species is placed on these lists? (animals.mom.me/difference-between-endangered-threatened-vulnerable-species-11408.html) Tell students that *Squirm* is set in both Montana and Florida. Have them find out which species are on the lists in these states.

Correlates with Common Core State Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 4-7.2; Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 4-7.7; Language: Convention of Standard English L. 4-7.1, 4-7.2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-7.3.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

- There are several incidents of bullying in the novel. How does Billy stand up to the bullies in his school? What does he do to defend Chin? Discuss the significance of the gift that Chin gives him. Billy's mother reminds him that the school has rules about bullying in the Code of Conduct (p. 8). How are these rules universal? Debate whether such rules are always effective?
 - Describe Billy's mother. The family moves often in search of bald eagle nests. Discuss how the frequent moves affect Billy and his sister, Belinda.
 - Billy is curious about his dad. Why does his mother tear up the return address labels on the envelopes containing his child support payments? Billy manages to piece together the address. How does he convince his mother to let him go to Montana? Explain why Billy's mother sends someone disguised as Billy's uncle to meet him at the airport. What does Billy discover when he gets to his father's house?
 - Describe Dennis Dickens, Billy's father. Why is he so secretive about his job? How does Aunt Sophie's money allow him to follow his passion? At what point does he decide to tell Billy the truth about his work? How does he know he can trust Billy with the truth?
 - Billy's mom says that there is nothing "usual" about Dennis Dickens. Cite evidence that she is correct. Why does she call Dennis Dickens a "serial quitter"? (p. 41) How might the same thing be said about Billy's mother? Discuss whether they were too much alike to live together.
 - *Sarcasm* is defined as a sharp and often satirical or ironic utterance designed to cut or give pain. Billy is a master of sarcasm. Identify some of his many sarcastic remarks. How does sarcasm make Billy appear brave and in control?
 - Billy lies to his mother on several occasions. He says, "When you're not used to lying, it's easy to get tripped up." (p. 31) What lies does he tell, and when does he come close to getting tripped up?
- Why does Billy feel he must lie? Debate whether he is protecting his mother or himself.
- Billy becomes separated from Summer Chasing-Hawks and Little Thunder-Sky in the high-timber country of the Rockies. He spots a remote-controlled drone hovering over him. Discuss the note that Dennis drops from the drone (p. 53). What is the irony in his writing "Love, Dad"? Discuss why Dennis Dickens uses the note, and that moment, to apologize for all the lost years with his children.
 - Explain why Billy feels anger and sadness when his father doesn't interact with him in person. How does Billy get to know his father as the novel progresses? Discuss the phrase "forgive and forget." Billy isn't likely to forget his adventure with his father. Do you think he forgives him?
 - Discuss what Billy means when he says to his dad, "You didn't just 'move out.' You bailed out." (p. 113) His dad admits that he was a coward. Explain what he means when he tells Billy "fear turned to shame." (p. 114) Dennis Dickens doesn't fear the poachers. Why does he fear his family? At what point does he confront his fear and shame?
 - Describe the relationship that Billy forms with Summer Chasing-Hawks and Little Thunder-Sky. How do they feel about Dennis Dickens?
 - Billy embarks on a journey with his father in Florida to find the poacher Lincoln Chumley Baxter IV, a real estate tycoon from San Francisco. What is the difference between "chasing" and "tracking" Baxter? Billy's father says that Baxter isn't an "ordinary" poacher. What is unusual about him?
 - Explain the title of the book.
- 📍 Correlates with Common Core State Standards in Reading Literature: Key Ideas & Details RL. 4-7.1, 4-7.3; Craft & Structure RL. 4-7.4, 4-7.6; Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 4-7.1, 4-7.3; Language: Convention of Standard English L. 4-7.1; Knowledge of Language L. 4-7.3; Vocabulary Acquisition & Use L. 4-7.5.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Identify the figurative language in the following passage: “Billy, it’s like looking for a microscopic needle in a super-giant haystack. A needle that doesn’t want to be found.” (p. 73) What is the haystack? Who is the needle? Ask students to write a simile and a metaphor that describe the scene when Billy finds his father tied up and left to be eaten by the grizzly bears.

Correlates with Common Core State Standards in Language: Vocabulary Acquisition & Use L. 4-7.5.

Dennis Dickens’s second wife is a Crow Indian, and her name is Little Thunder-Sky. Billy’s mother says the name is “mountain poetry.” (p. 34) Write a poem about one of the following characters:

Little Thunder-Sky
Summer Chasing-Hawks
Billy Big Stick

Correlates with Common Core State Standards in Language: Vocabulary Acquisition & Use L. 4-7.5.

At the end of the novel, Dennis Dickens writes to Billy. Ask students to write an essay that explains what Dennis means when he says, “Thanks for saving my life, in more ways than one.” (p. 270)

Correlates with Common Core State Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 4-7.1; Language: Convention of Standard English L. 4-7.1, 4-7.2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-7.3.

Congress passed the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1973. Ask students to read about the purpose of the ESA (fws.gov/endangered/laws-policies/index.html). Which government agency regulates it? How is it regulated? Have them find out which agency in their state protects wildlife. Instruct them to write an editorial for a local newspaper that Billy Dickens might write in support of the ESA.

Correlates with Common Core State Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 4-7.2; Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 4-7.7; Language: Convention of Standard English L. 4-7.1, 4-7.2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-7.3.

Billy’s mother moves her family throughout Florida in search of bald eagles. (myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/managed/bald-eagle/information/). She is eager to see a golden

eagle in Montana (fieldguide.mt.gov/speciesDetail.aspx?elcode=ABNKC22010). Have students research the similarities and differences between these two types of eagles. Then have them create an informative PowerPoint presentation that Billy’s mother might show to local bird-watchers.

Correlates with Common Core State Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 4-7.6; Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 4-7.7; Language: Convention of Standard English L. 4-7.1, 4-7.2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-7.3.

Carl Hiaasen is noted for writing ecological mysteries. The main focus of a mystery is a crime that needs solving. Ask students to write a paper that discusses why *Squirm* is an ecological mystery. What is the crime? How is there more than one mystery to be solved? What is Billy’s role in solving both mysteries? Cite specific scenes and use direct quotes from the novel to support your arguments.

Correlates with Common Core State Standards in Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 4-7.1; Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 4-7.7; Language: Convention of Standard English L. 4-7.1, 4-7.2; Knowledge of Language L. 4-7.3.

VOCABULARY / USE OF LANGUAGE

Students may encounter some unfamiliar words while reading the novel. Ask them to try to define these words, taking clues from context. Such words may include: *claustrophobic* (p. 3), *primal* (p. 4), *nonvenomous* (p. 6), *fledged* (p. 15), *riveted* (p. 23), *monofilament* (p. 36), *hydrate* (p. 57), *plumage* (p. 69), *fixated* (p. 70), *honorary* (p. 71), *forge* (p. 72), *propel* (p. 85), *nanosecond* (p. 92), *elusive* (p. 92), *divot* (p. 94), *righteous* (p. 109), *noble* (p. 109), *radius* (p. 114), *writhing* (p. 118), *ruefully* (p. 148), *confiscate* (p. 155), *illusion* (p. 174), *glowers* (p. 189), *indignant* (p. 195), *cratered* (p. 201) *mutant* (p. 248), and *leverage* (p. 253).

Correlates to Common Core State Standards in Language: Vocabulary Acquisition & Use L. 4-7.4.

This guide was prepared by Pat Scales, Children’s Literacy Consultant, Greenville, South Carolina

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READ AND EXPLORE WILDLIFE

All of Carl Hiaasen's books take place partly in Florida and emphasize the importance of wildlife preservation. As you read, explore Florida's ecosystems and the implications of using its resources through the below projects.

SPECIAL SPECIES

There are 350 different kinds of birds and 27 varieties of snakes that live in the Everglades. Ask students to identify at least 20 birds and five snakes common to the area. Have them do a colored sketch and write a brief description for a wildlife brochure on Everglades National Park.

EXPLORING THE EVERGLADES ECOSYSTEM

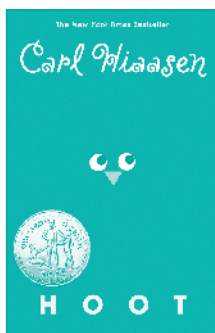
In *Hoot*, Roy gains a greater appreciation of wildlife when the Eberhardts take a Sunday-afternoon boat trip through the Everglades. Ask the class to study the Everglades' ecosystem. Divide students into groups. Ask each group to select one of the endangered species in Everglades National Park and to plan a campaign for saving the species. This may include posters, pamphlets, letters, etc.

EXTRA, EXTRA! RESEARCH THE EVERGLADES!

Ask students to find websites or newspaper and magazine articles to help them understand oil drilling and oil use in present-day America. Then engage them in a discussion about whether land like the Everglades should be kept pristine from oil drilling and mining or if these activities should be allowed. Be sure that students address the impact on animals (especially endangered species) and their habitats.

GET TO KNOW THE FLORIDA KEYS

The Florida Keys are a national marine sanctuary. Refer students to www.sanctuaries.nos.noaa.gov and ask them to describe the purpose of the national marine sanctuary. How are sanctuaries selected? What government agency oversees the sanctuaries? Have students write a brief description about the Key West Sanctuary for a travel magazine. Include information about special programs to protect it.



Hoot
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