

Empathy and/as Activism in Florida Children's Literature

One of the best-known Florida writers these days is Carl Hiaasen, journalist and author not only of comic mysteries for adults but also comic environmental novels for teens, among them *Hoot* and *Flush*. But Hiaasen is among many writers tackling the profundities and paradoxes of the place called "Florida" and in forms ostensibly for younger readers. This presentation considers the relationship between empathy and activism in and around that larger body of work, which dates back to nineteenth-century Robinsonades and then early twentieth-century material such as *Freddy Goes to Florida* (Brooks, 1927), *Strawberry Girl* (Lenski, 1945), and the environmental-historical novels of Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, notably *Freedom River* (1953), set in the 1840s. Other foundational figures include Zora Neal Hurston and of course Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings – neither wrote children's books per se but both had particular investments in and associations with childhood. I'm interested in the possibilities but also the limitations of empathy and activism and especially empathy as "activism." All the more so in the context of a place with a complicated and vexing history of land speculation and development, settler colonialism, indigenous exploitation, and ongoing migration from both within and beyond U.S. national borders. I'll likely pay special attention to the Charlie Pierce historical series by Harvey Oyer, which are used widely in fourth-grade classrooms across the state, and which perform selective reparation for past atrocities (mostly environmental) while lionizing figures such as hotel and railroad tycoon Henry A. Flagler.