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the dirtbag times



inside: the south did it again - 2025 wasn't all bad -
creepy horse vs terrifiers - reading rocks



the dirtbag times
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THE SOUTH DID IT AGAIN

MICROMUSING

I've been reading *What's the Big Idea: 30 Concept Albums* by my friend Bill Kopp. As you can guess, the book is about 30 interesting concept albums. In said book Bill interviews folks associated with the albums, either the artists themselves or side musicians that participated in the sessions. Bill spoke to Patterson Hood of the Drive By Truckers for this book about their seminal album *Southern Rock Opera*. Patterson talks about the nuts and bolts of creating this concept album but also offers a quick aside about what influenced him to write about the South. I paraphrase Patterson as saying something to the tune of "When I was young I heard (country music singer) Charlie Daniels sing 'the South is gonna do it again' and I spent my life running as far away from that as I could only to see that Charlie was right. All that shit we were running from has caught up with all of us." And I've been thinking about that a lot lately.

I grew up in a weird part of Kentucky that was as much Southern as it was Midwestern, on the Ohio River close to where Indiana and Illinois meet. We were Southern but not really deep Southern. We would gently rib our Tennessee cousins for their legit Southern accents. In the South there are Civil War markers everywhere and its history tempers its traditions. My family's idea of summer vacations (on the rare occasion we had real vacations) was to visit Civil War battle sites. I remember as a real young kid being very relieved to know that Kentucky was not a slave state. I knew right away that owning another person was not a good thing. My mother and her siblings at least taught me that much, even though there was some cognitive dissonance over the grandeur of the Antebellum South as filtered through *Gone With the Wind* and countless shitty romance novels. That said, there were also Confederate flags everywhere, whispers of so and so on the next road over that had a white robe in the closet, my grandparents casual use of the "n" word, and the acronyms on school and public water fountains labeling the fountains as integrated. When Patterson says he ran from the South I resembled that remark. I literally ran from the South after college to the Pacific Northwest.

My South wasn't entirely intolerant. I grew up poor so that meant that I spent a lot of time in integrated schools and neighborhoods. It wasn't a Jesse Jackson rainbow coalition utopia by any stretch but it also wasn't race riots every day either. In the mid '80s we moved from Kentucky to Nashville and the Davidson County school district still bussed students across the county from "White" suburban neighborhoods to "Black" urban neighborhoods and vice-versa. Nashville, being a metropolitan city, attracted a wider variety of families and I met Indian, Southeast Asian, European, Latin, and Jewish kids. The New South to me was about economic promise and tolerance. I

was superbly naïve. The Pacific Northwest was not exactly a great melting pot either but I was exposed to many communities I had no prior experience with before. Northern European and Native American to be exact. But it was also supremely expensive to live there and after years of trying to raise a family on limited incomes we had to leave, and my road eventually ran South again.

I moved to Texas in the mid '00s. Again with the in-between thing, as Texas is Southern but also kinda not at the same time, a weird South/Southwestern thing and a whole lot of Texas's own special thing. The Texas metro areas are amazingly diverse. But Texas politics is unashamedly pro-White, even if its populace is majority not White. And now we've been in the western North Carolina mountains for the last eight years. Asheville is a tiny blue island in a vast sea of red, even if the state is somewhat purple politically. There are many different Souths but that shared history of slavery and violent xenophobia is common and there's just a thin coat of paint over that history. Much of the South doesn't really bother with the paint at all and lets it all hang out. My bicycle excursions outside of Asheville often pass homes adorned with the Stars and Bars and American flags hung upside down during the Biden years that now fly right side up in the Trump 2.0 era.

It is interesting that Patterson Hood opined that the South has now overtaken the nation. I feel that somewhat, in that we are in a conservative political mood and the culture seems to have adapted accordingly, you know, the bird whistle White Supremacy and that overall distrust of anything not White and conservative. It is almost like the South he and I ran away from has ascended all over America. But this isn't 1980. There are many pockets of resistance. Eventually the political puppets will lay down the Southern puppets' strings when they have served their purpose. A few of the savvier Republican politicians and pollsters have started to figure this out and are heading for the exits. They claim it is because Trump duped them or that they are afraid for their safety because they oppose some of Trump's agenda. I believe they are far shrewder than that. What these folks form in their wake may be slightly less unseemly than the MAGA movement, but it will likely still have MAGA at its core. The South will likely do it again, but how and how hard?

How do we reawaken that idea of the New South ascending? Fighting gerrymandering would be a great start so that way the South sends politicians to Washington that actually reflect the politics of the areas they represent. Making fascists and racists afraid again is also a great way to start. We must remind all Americans that what made America great to begin with is its rich multicultural history and immigrant class. That is America's great legacy. — KELLY MENACE

I found this Red Cross pin celebrating my donating six gallons of blood. I once donated every 56 days. However, when a cousin died of CJD (google it, ghastly) in 2019, the Red Cross said no more blood from me, just to be safe.

Funny, I've always been terrified of needles, can't even watch needle use in movies (yes, I know it's not real, but tell that to my brain). I made myself give blood all those years because of a hospitalized, brave five-year-old who smiled despite needles bristling all over her. If she could stand it, why couldn't I? — MIKE L. DOWNEY

QUIPS AND SIPS

The crisp air falls on the face of a man fresh out of time
The last line in an unfinished play.
A speech best forgotten,
but recited in hollow halls
Mothballs and Fall
leaves leave for Winter
wanting something thawed...
Cold souls wrapped around digital cords,
taunting those they never actually see
with things they never really do...
and words phrases they never really say..
"It's the American way", they say.
Low pay, long days...
high doubt, low turnout...
Just like the chance of ever really turning over a new leaf.
Beat the time with past crimes yet to be realized
Jaunt a scribble on a stain
and play pass the cocaine
Ride the comet of regret
into the traumas yet to be felt
for the pain overrides
the senses hide
smile while the cameras on.
Hum that catchy silly song
when all's done and dumb
and the field awaits another blunder
fools stampede asunder
keep them guessing,
a blessing?
smile life's depressing...
Laughing all the way to the cleaners they say for a reason
After all, tis the season for the pleasin'

— WILLIAM DANIEL THOMPSON



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THE SUCK
MUSIC TO HELP & FIGHT

WILLIAM DANIEL THOMPSON



TISHIA JACKSON



CREEPY HORSE VS. THE TERRIFIER SERIES

In a shop in Chicago, just off the Blue Line at Logan Square, is a shop of knick-knacks and trinkets. Among tchotchkies in a shop of Pedro Pascal's "Daddy is a state of mind" and Jennifer Coolidge's "These gays, they're trying to murder me!", I was interested to see Art the Clown, wearing flower petal sunglasses. For anyone in the dark, the clown from the *Terrifier* movies is a black and white painted clown in a matching costume that performs gruesome murders almost entirely in pantomime. I have seen a lot of things emblazoned with this "murderous clown". I've seen people argue their bona fides of fandom legitimacy. I was internet friends with a girl whose entire personality was that she knew "Art the Clown" from the beginning and would meet the actor at any horror conventions they had attended. People were talking about the excitement of something new in the horror industry, and that this character was putting a new energy not seen in a franchise since Freddy Krueger and Jason. I didn't say this. Making comparisons to horror movies' biggest villains, absolute icons of their industry, is a tall order to fill. I never watched the *Terrifier* films. Not a single one. What qualifies me to review horror movies? Against my will I was forced to watch hours of horror movies. Boyfriends, friends of boyfriends, your friend's boyfriend's friends, and punk fucking rockers. I may be the only punk rocker in all of history that isn't fucking obsessed with horror movie culture. I can argue the finer points of Bava vs Fulci, why Dario Argento ended the scene of a movie like he did, and what to notice when Ben is ripping the boards off of the door in George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*. There wasn't a house party in the 90s where *Army of Darkness* wasn't being quoted while on a television screen. "You're mother ate my dog!" from *Dead Alive* has to be one of my favorite lines ever in a movie. I went to a friend's for dinner, and we ended up watching *Hereditary*. Against my will, I have been forced to watch the entire span of the horror movie genre.

That being said, I was recently invited to watch all three movies that currently make up the *Terrifier* franchise on Discord. I was late and completely missed the first movie. Oops. my bad. I looked up the plot of the first movie on Wikipedia in case I missed anything I'd need to know for the second movie. All caught up. I was making tea and missed the scene in the film where a teenage boy sees Art and a young girl painted as him playing with a carcass, which gets him suspended. The mom is angry at coffee for brewing. She's like Malcolm in the Middle's mother, infected with rage. She's an over the top angry widow raising kids that do nothing but seem to piss her off the entire film. Vibe. The older sister is trying to be the middleman and maintain the peace. She's working on a costume based on the Frazetta-

style drawing her father made of her before he died. That's really what we get before hijinks happen with Art the Clown. One thing I will concede is that the actor playing "Art the Clown" is a genuine talent in pantomime.

I make note of the fact that a mother experiencing grief and a new experience of now being a single parent is deluded into a one-note performance establishing her as a "BITCH" that deserves to die. There's not a lot of nuance for the women in these movies. I mean, no, not any horror movie ever has improperly depicted women so that it's okay to brutally murder them. That has NEVER happened. *Evil Dead* movies, *Nightmare on Elm Street* movies, *Friday the 13th*...The daughter is going to a Halloween party and gets spooked when she finally encounters Art in a Halloween store. This store is apparently empty at 3:30 pm on the day of Halloween. Art acts up

and wears different sunglasses while conveying Pee-wee Herman-esque mannerisms and facial expressions. She leaves and bad special effects ensue. You think that gore is going to get me? I've seen *Dead Alive* at least 18 times. The lawnmower scene? The broken glass eyeball stab looks so fake it looks like it was done with the props in the Halloween store in the movie. This feels more like gooning for gore. Like trying to rub one out twice after you cum, when's it gonna be enough? Why? Why is this clown in their dreams and stalking them? He just murders everyone he comes across? Why did the dad draw his daughter as a 1970s van art from *Heavy Metal*? Why is mom allowing daughter to go out dressed like that? Of course, we needed to see her naked in the shower. Why don't we need to see a naked teenager showering?

From there, we are supposed to hate a young woman for finding a grown ass man trick or treating creepy. The gratuitous violence towards this woman as she is purposely kept alive as long as possible is sickening. Not so much the gore we see, but to commit such an act on a woman in such detail. Remember, the man that wrote this, created it in idea, form and then in film. We are supposed to feel these women deserve violent torture for not being kinder to a serial killing man dressed as a clown? Her mother experiences true horror seeing her daughter suffering and isn't seen again until her head is being used to hold candy that Art the clown passes out to trick



or treaters. Meanwhile, aggro mom is cleaning "BITCH" off of her car when she discovers the real culprit is Art the Clown, not her son. Her death was not nearly as horrible as I was expecting after what I saw the other women endure.

Then we suspend belief when the other friend of the main character decides to roofie her drunk friend with MDMA because she's such a sweetheart. It's okay, she's just looking out for her.

Sexy dancing and giggling ensue. While we do

see some male frontal nudity in a gore scene, the violence towards men is brief and typically cut short to make more time for violence against women. Really, watch every scene in this second movie. Every time a dude is attacked, it somehow drifts to women getting tortured and beaten. What in the incei did this motherfucker create? We are given the equivalent of WWF lingerie matches with the sister battling Art

the Clown for her brother. Once again we see little violence towards the brother, but gratuitous violence towards one murdered girl and the sister alike. Sister is made of Rambo warrior powers and saves her brother. A former victim of Art, a little girl done in his visage, runs off with Art's head. Cut scenes show Art the Clown's victim from the first movie, Vicky, in an insane asylum with "slut" and "whore" carved out on the walls and she has given birth to his head. She is grossly disfigured from her former looks and has committed to Art in bloody scrolls on the walls of her room.

This is how the third movie starts. How this shit became a pop-culture phenomenon I truly cannot understand. Yeah so chick from the very first movie gives birth to Art's head and it eats a woman for sustenance while the head waits for the body to arrive. After they kill wrestler Chris Jericho, they go to an old house and sit for five years. Sienna from the second movie is being released from a mental health facility to spend Christmas with her family. There actually was a cool scene for how they depict the PTSD she experienced of her murdered friend talking to her. She's emulated by her younger cousin and is estranged from her brother trying to be "normal" in college. No sooner does she get out, than Art the Clown and his new side piece Victoria are discovered by two maintenance men. In a scene with Art simply killing a man, we are given a scene of Victoria violently masturbating with a broken shard and a

puddle of blood evoking execution of orgasm. Art simply gives her a finger wag of naughty naughty.

There could have been social commentary in this film with a character we are introduced to that is obsessed with true crime and social media but nah. We build this character up and there's no reason. They get a quick, worthless death. Just filler and piecemeal for this production. For some reason we are supposed to feel bad for the brother when all his sister did was save his life. We see a scene of Art the Clown mistaking "Santa Claus" in a bar. This scene has no meaning for anything in the movie other than putting Art the Clown in a Santa Suit and me having to google: Is that Ron Howard's brother in *Terrifier 3*? Yes, it is. I don't understand the written drama, it just doesn't make any sense. Now the story is trying to have form at the eleventh hour. Demons, and somehow Sienna is not a Rambo warrior but a Viking warrior angel. Her dad knew and drew it everywhere but no one believed him!

Her family, who didn't totally believe that clown demons murdered mom get to experience Art and Vicky up close and personal. The uncle is already a Christmas tree decoration when we see them. They brutally torture the aunt, convincing her that her child's skull sits before her. She has a really awful death. They smash a tube into her mouth and force rats down her throat with fire and slit her throat releasing the rats. Why? One of the more violent deaths in the entire franchise. Like, why do these demons have to do these demonstrably awful deaths, is there a quota I don't know about? He really seems to have a thing for stabbing and cutting arms. Skull isn't the cute little cousin's; it's Sienna's brother's! Sienna kills Vicky and Vicky's blood opens a portal to Hell and apparently holding the blade end of a sword isn't the best way to keep a child from falling into Hell. Cousin falls into hell, and I guess that's all it takes to seal hell back up after demon blood opens it. Sienna wipes the sweat off her brow and vows to save little cousin.

I'm at a loss. These movies are the Mountain Dew energy drink equivalent of horror. It's TOO much. Too turned up. It's edgelord horror. WHOA! SO BRUTAL. It's just so one note. There was nothing exciting or different. Art the Clown as a new character to horror could've been so much. There's so much effects talent out there for projects, the gore could be far better. We've come so much further with Tom Savini's schools and innovations alone. The story could still have all the same deaths but far better writing. You don't completely know what is going on with Art the Clown until the third movie. There's so much that could've been done that just, wasn't and so much that was done that didn't have to be. Overall, I would never watch these movies ever again. Not because of the gore, but because of the bore. — *CREEPY HORSE*

Oh, who am I kidding. 2025 was a fucking dumpster fire if you care the least bit about the rule of law, the constitution, people who aren't cis white men, people who aren't fake Christian, poor people, uninsured people, barely insured people, people without Mar a Lago face, people in Western Carolina who FEMA hasn't paid yet, educators, people that got gerrymandered out of office ... oh the list can go on and on. But there were some things that weren't all awful and we in the *Diribag Times* office wanted to recognize some of the things that did not supremely suck in 2025.

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Good things that happened in 2025:

1.) Last week, three otters drifted at the mouth of Big Creek as it pours into the French Broad, taunting the dog on our morning walk, signifying healthy, clean waters.

2.) This week, my house will be finished. The Amish are installing the downstairs bathroom right now. The gas company called to say they can come over and turn the heat on today. This is the end of our rebuild, save for all the loose ends, and I won't spend next year rebuilding anything.

3.) The coffee shop and the library both re-open in their old homes this week, not unmarred by the flood, not the same as before, but new and present.

4.) A few weeks ago, the duck — who is a good thing all on his own — killed a vole, I think it was. Or maybe a mole. Or a shrew? One of those ground burrowing tiny creatures we watched swim frantically while the waters rose. The duck's murderous instinct isn't so much the good thing, but that he brought proof above ground and laid it out for all to know that the diggers are back under the earth, tilling it and making it soft for the worms who will make it rich for the plants next spring.

5.) All the birds are back. The bald eagles, the herons, the screaming jays and the peeping cardinals and all manner of sparrow and nuthatch and titmouse and finch, even the bank swallows came this summer, and there are geese in the river. Our little ecosystem is recovering with the speed of child's skinned knee.

6.) I quit smoking this year. I think. I mean I'm still on the stupid nicoderm patch, which is I think the gentlest of all the many unpleasant ways to quit. Tomorrow I'll lower the dosage for the last time. For the first month of quitting, I walked around red and throbbing and sensitive like a thumb that's just met a hammer, or really, just like a raw nerve. Now, I hardly notice it. This year will be the first time quitting smoking hasn't had a seat near the top of my New Year's

2025 WASN'T ALL BAD, WAS IT?

Resolutions in probably a decade. Twenty years of smoking, ten of wishing I didn't, all finally over.

The world is fucked, in a big scary way, but more people care, and care more deeply, than I think

has been true in my lifetime. And I believe that care matters, that it will lead to action, and that action will slowly shift the paradigm. — SPRING PEARSON

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What was good about my 2025? Celebrating a ten-year wedding anniversary with my wife. We returned to Las Vegas, our honeymoon destination, again. We saved up for years and flew first class there and back. And you know, it really is first class, my first and likely last time there.

We stayed at Caesar's Palace and overlooked the Bellagio fountains so prominent in the *Ocean's 11* movies. We found a cheap blackjack table at the Luxor (due for demolition this month) and relished playing several hours. It's like paying for a concert — you pay your money and enjoy the experience. When it's over, it's over.

The rest of the visit wasn't as Vegas-like. We toured a Titanic exhibit, explored the Mob Museum, attended a raucous WNBA game (saw the eventual national champ Aces and the league's MVP), and ate the best steak I've ever had (at Peter Luger).

My wife and I continue to feel blessed to have found each other at this point in our lives. We both have two prior divorces (and two adult kids each, a boy and girl each).

Yeah, 2025 was a good year for us ... and more to come with her. — MIKE L. DOWNEY

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By any objective metric, 2025 was a shitshow of a year — globally, nationally, locally, and personally. I generally live life with low expectations, but even my cynical self severely underestimated the new year's potential for enshtification. No need to rehearse here what all went down; rather, I'll take a few minutes to jot down what helped get me through.

Short answer: some good people in my life.

Longer answer: ok, I just said I wouldn't lay out the gory details of what sucked in 2025, but a bit of context is in order. I'm a professor. I teach in a public university in Howdy Arabia. I teach history and the humanities of one of the world's oldest civilizations. This place's past is deeply

relevant to the present and future. In June, the powers that be in Austin decided that faculty will not be allowed to make certain curricular decisions, like what we can and cannot teach. As such, it appears that my classes will be targeted for elimination because they are "diverse," "equitable," "inclusive," and "non-foundational," in all cases, because I don't teach a sanitized version of the history of White American men. The law in question, SB 37 if you're curious, was passed in June and goes into effect on January 1, 2026. As of this writing, we have received no official guidance about its implementation. Also as such, I have been stewing about my employment status for the past six-plus months. Am I completing the last semester of my career? Do I have another one ahead (students have already registered in healthy numbers for my spring classes)? or will my classes be allowed to continue into the foreseeable future? Who knows? If anyone, they're not talking. This has caused considerable anxiety and some new and exciting health issues for me. Yeehaw!

What has kept me going has been our band. I've always enjoyed and appreciated the opportunity to make music with members of my family. The Sleepy Redhead and Mr. B are great musicians, and we genuinely enjoy spending time together. We recorded a new album late in 2024, and spent the first few months of 2025 with mixing, mastering, and post-production. It was released mid-year (June) and we got to spend the second half of 2025 playing songs from it in front of a bunch of nice folks around D/FW, Howdy Arabia, and parts eastward. This is where a lot of the aforementioned good people in my life come into play. A bunch of DJs at WFMU played the record on their shows. A bunch of online listeners said nice things about it on the playlist comments board. At the end of July, we made the trek to Angel Fire New Mexico, where we played two days at a skate fest organized by some folks who used to live in Dallas. In August, we hit the road heading east again and got to play with and hang out with music friends in Memphis and Asheville. Then, we rolled into Chapel Hill and joined forces with North Carolina family band Secret Monkey Weekend (check them out if you don't already know!).

We played with SMW for eight straight days/night; a first for us. It was fun to see them so many times in a row, to see how they approached their set lists, worked the stage, interacted with the crowd and each other. They are lovely people, and it was a real boost for me to play with them. Together, we played in a number of places where our band has a good fan base (Philly, NYC, NJ), and we had great turnout in those places, with a lot of our WFMU-derived fans showing up. one friend made it to all three NYC/NJ area shows, earning a free car wash next time we're in town! After parting ways with the Monkeys, we hauled ass down to Nashville, where we played in the backyard of our pals VOLK (again, check them out!), opening for a screening of the movie *Tank Girl*. it was a fun way to close out the tour.

The positive energy from these shows was transformative. The fun of being on stage, the applause, folks singing along, handpuppets attacking the audience, kind words at the merch table, generous folks letting us stay at their houses, and a score of other positive interactions were just what I needed. Prior to leaving for Angel Fire, my mind and body basically shut down from the stress (I literally had Black Flag's "Nervous Breakdown" on repeat in my head for weeks!), and my minor ongoing heart issues got a lot worse. I couldn't get out of bed, and honestly didn't think I would survive the day, much less a tour. My amazing primary care nurse practitioner took charge, made some adjustments to my meds, and got me in for a final checkup right before we were due to leave on the tour. She gave me the green light to safely travel, and then the Redhead and B picked up the slack for me. Each mile away from Howdy Arabia, each set we played, and each opportunity to hang out with friends along the way helped calm my mind and my heart. I'm sure the drugs kicking in helped too. Just a couple of days into the tour, I was feeling almost "normal". As we drove home from Nashville with a new semester just days away, i felt the anxiety returning. I was taking the same doses of the drugs, so it must have been the people who made me feel better.

Now, four months later, the semester is almost over. Not much has changed in regards to the shitshow of the year. I'm just glad to have made it through alive, surrounded by a large handful of wonderful humans, helping to remind me that not everyone out there is an owl.

I'm fully expecting 2026 to be more of the same, with the strong possibility of major life changes ahead. All I can do is keep making noise with my family and keep my friends close at hand, whether in-person or virtually. It's good people who make the difference, even if they have no idea their impact on me. — PROFESSOR FUZZ

CONT.→

2025 didn't entirely suck, meaning it was ok.

What was good in 2025: This year wasn't terrible. Bands I'm in recorded, released product, and toured. I'll spare you the indignity of plugging bands I'm in. The Punk Rock Bowling festival was excellent with a few old bands (Cock Sparrer, Gang of Four) showing they still had gas in the tank. That this festival will not be happening in 2026 is a black mark on year 2026.

2025 was a good year as for much what DIDN'T happen as what did happen. The USA isn't a complete banana republic yet; though it is well on its way. I've even seen some cautious signs that guzzling the Kool-Aid is losing its charm even with the most MAGA faithful (a pack of sociopaths don't play well with each other). I do worry that 2026 could be dicey as that side aren't known for being graceful losers. I also found out that a walking app actually works as a motivational tool for exercise and audio books on Spotify don't suck. — *RENTED MULE*

I'm not telling you anything you didn't already know when I say that 2025 has been... a lot. But despite the incredible suckiness that has been this year, there was also love, laughter, and a whole lot of joy. Amidst the anxiety, panic, and depression, there were glorious pockets of light and hope. Somehow, *that* is what 2025 will be for me. Not the mess, but the magic that kept showing up anyway.

1.) Turning 60 With Denzel & Jake: Let's start the magical weekend in NYC to see *Othello* on Broadway — starring Denzel Washington as Othello and Jake Gyllenhaal as Iago — *for my 60th birthday*.

Such a wonderful time with my brother (the gifter of said magical weekend), my soon-to-be sister-in-law, and, of course, the Babsie. Being with all of them was the true gift, but, not gonna lie, seeing Othello and then chatting with Anthony Mackie outside of our brunch spot on Easter morning, truly didn't suck!

2.) Officiating Love (and Crying Only a Moderate Amount): Then came Darren and Bridget's wedding — where I stood up front, in my official-ish capacity, pretending I wasn't about to break down in an ugly cry. There's a certain honor in being asked to speak the words that two people will carry into the rest of their lives.

And afterward, when they kissed and everyone clapped and pouring rain stopped momentarily so that a rainbow could appear... that was one of those moments that reminded me life is still tender. Even in 2025.

3.) Loveland Held Lots of Love: One of the best parts of 2025? Folks came to visit us in Loveland! Paul, Cesara, and Nicco; Darren and Bridget; Xandi; The McQuiggans... Loveland was a destination for a whole lot of people I adore.

Every visit reminded me that family and friends are the only real wealth worth holding onto... and this year I held on hard.

4.) The Dodgers Gave Me a Reason to Yell Joyfully Again: Ah yes. Baseball. The 2025 World Series — my Dodgers, back on top. As a life-long fan who grew up with Vin Scully on the radio as the background soundtrack of family life, getting to watch the Boys in Blue bring home another championship felt like being reunited with an old friend. One who says, "Hey, everything's a dumpster fire, but look — we still remember how to play."

When Will Smith hit that extra-innings Game 7 homer? Sheer baseball magic! Am I so shallow that a baseball win could make me forget about all of the shit that is truly devastating in the world right now? For one night... yes, yes I am.

5.) Back on My Mat, Finally: After years away, I found my way back to my yoga mat. Not to be "good" at it. Not to master anything. Just... to be.

My body remembered before my brain did. The quiet exhale. The gentle stretch. The soft realization that self-care isn't indulgent — it's repair work. I'm not trying to become a yoga goddess. I'm just trying to be kinder to myself. And that, friends, is a very good thing that 2025 made happen (out of necessity, perhaps, but we're gonna call it a win..

6.) A Chance Meeting That Felt Like Coming Home: One random afternoon at Tap & Handle, we ran into Katie Killer and Wonko The Sane along with a couple of other friends. Totally unexpected and unplanned... also, totally perfect. Bethany and I had actually finished our lunch and were headed out to the parking lot, but turned right around and found a new table where we all sat, laughed, shared, had snacks, and, of course, drank beer. Some of you will understand what I'm about to say... and, you'll be jealous: it felt like Rev. And, if you know what that means, you'll also know that I needed that afternoon more than I could have ever imagined. Sheer perfection, magic, and goofiness all rolled into a heart-filling moment of serendipity.

7.) The Best Good Thing (Please, Universe): One of the biggest personal sucks of 2025 was Bethany losing her job at the end of May. Here we are in December and though she works 8+ hours a day job hunting, still... nothing.

So now, the wish for one more good thing that I am actively manifesting into the world: Bethany getting a job.

It hasn't happened yet — but let me tell you, if we're compiling "Good Things About 2025," this would be icing on the proverbial cake.

If Bethany gets a job before the end of the year, I will count it as the best Christmas present 2025 could possibly deliver.

So... Was 2025 a Mess? Yes. But Also – no.

If I zoom out, sure, 2025 looks like a chaotic collage of stress. But when I zoom in – really look at the small squares that make up the picture – I see joy. Community. Art. Celebration. Connection. I see the people I love. I see the things that held me together. I see pockets of hope that glowed even on the hardest days.

And maybe that's the whole point.

Good things don't erase the hard things. They just remind us we're not defined by them.

2025 was messy. But it also gave me Shakespeare and baseball and yoga and laughter and weddings and unexpected reunions and a kaleidoscope of people who make my life better just by being in it.

So yes, the year was rough. But the goodness was louder.

And honestly? That's what I'm taking with me into 2026. – *PAMALYN ROSE-BEELER*

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I've taken up a ton of column inches complaining about 2025, but there are things that happened positively this year.

1.) Friends reached out, sometimes beyond their immediate comfort level, to check on one another and to make sure everyone was at least keeping their heads above water. It's rueful that it took a national emergency to inspire it, but I think it's very positive that at least in my sphere of influence people were looking out for each other.

2.) Asheville is rebuilding after Hurricane Helene. It is still weird here and not 100% back to normal. A lot of politicians, activists, and business owners are using this opportunity to begin to question what "normal" is for our area. We suffer from housing insecurity, low wages, and a post-hurricane high unemployment level. We can build back to where we were, but should we? Can we build back better? Those conversations are going on and I am hopeful that we will see some dividends from these conversations.

3.) We moved my mother-in-law into assisted living. We would have dragged our feet forever on doing what was ultimately the most caring decision for her and us that we could have possibly made. It has had the unfortunate side effect of increasing her dementia but it has preserved my wife's sanity and our marriage. It is perhaps good choice left in her life. All that is left for her moving forward is decline.

4.) We completed our first full year of publication with *The Dirtbag Times!* We talked about reviving the 'zine format after we laid our previous 'zine, *979Represent* to rest but it took several years to get it off the ground. Looking forward to processing 2026 through the pages of this publication. – *KELLY MENACE*

Overlord Menace has decided we should write something we are grateful for in 2025. If I'm being completely honest, I am grateful for so much. I am grateful for my health. I am grateful for my continued sobriety. Because I am sober, I do shit like take care of myself. Because I'm taking care of myself, I am keeping up with things I should like, mammograms, women's wellness, and dental appointments. I've lost so many to cancer, so I have peace of mind when test results come back cancer-free or disease-free. I've lost nearly 30 pounds and walk more and more than ever before. I got my medical marijuana license for PTSD and Chronic Pain in November. I'm part of the Underground weed scene in Chicago. I live in Downtown Chicago with a view of the Sears Tower from my bed. I wake up to that every morning. I also go to bed looking at that. I'm in school full-time and able to be in programs that really support me in ways I could have never imagined. I may have an opportunity to study abroad in Japan next fall. I get to graduate with honors and go to graduate school. My family has returned and we are working on ourselves together. I am watching my siblings heal years of trauma and I have new little grand nieces. As bad as things have been, and they've been bad, I still can see good for what it is. I hope to go to a Korean spa in Chicago for Christmas, eat, sleep, and just relax. I always find something to look forward to. I want to taste the world and experience everything I ever want in this life. I am grateful for my friends. Their support in some of the hardest times in my life has been immense. I am grateful they are cared for and loved in their relationships.

I ain't scared of 2026. I live in Trump's America in the heart of Chicago. There are a lot of families that have been torn apart. ICE has brutalized this city with Immigration on a war path for the MAGA constituency. I imagine the war cry is just bah wid da bah by Kid Rock blasting through all-terrain vehicles in city streets. I am white passing, no one will ever hold me against my will, believing me to be an illegal immigrant. Especially once they hear my southern twang. I am grateful I don't have a family affected by this terror. It is, I assure you, very real. Life finds constant reminders of what I should be grateful for. I saw a man the other day on the red line. There was a medical emergency on the tracks at a stop ahead. We were not just delayed, but we had several trains ahead of us. It was 2pm and he had only one or two shots of cheap vodka left to get him home. He was moody and angry. He really had to get back home, he should never have left, damn it! He was abruptly lucid and made quick small talk before tucking into his winter coat, obscuring his face as he shrank into himself, doubling over. I was grateful to be free from that hell. I wanted more than anything to tell him life didn't have to be that way, but what could anyone tell me? We have to want it. We have to be willing to really fight for once in our lives and it sucks and it's hard. It's the best thing I ever did for myself. My life is fucking rad. I may be broke. I may have to deal with more bullshit but it's my life and I'm grateful. – *CREEPY HORSE*



Time for change

TISHIA JACKSON



WILLIAM DANIEL THOMPSON

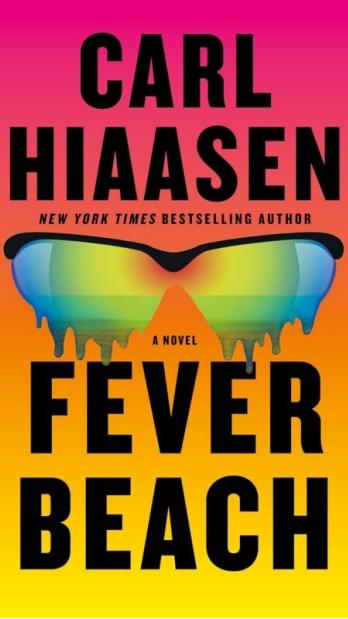
READING ROCKS

Book reviews are challenging to write. You want to impart what you like about a certain book, but you don't want to just copy and paste great language (ruining that discovery for readers) or give away the plot (see previous). So you prattle on about the safe stuff and maybe steal a bit of the beauty of the author's prose.

Carl Hiaasen is my favorite comic writer, but that implies he's just funny. He's more than that. He's angry at the ruination of his beloved Florida and corruption in general, has been for decades, and he's poured that anger into more than a dozen crazed comic crime novels as well as a number of young adult novels. Hiaasen hates fraud and stupidity and venal greed, and he rails against them all with every word written ... except or even when being funny.

Fever Beach is almost on par with his previous *Squeeze Me* that featured a wildlife wrangler, a missing old-money widow, a corpulent president's First Lady's affair, and some really strange goings-on. *Fever Beach* stars Figgo, a hapless racist sex-toy factory worker who's working with an equally-racist congressman plotting to ensure his re-election. These yahoos exude every bonkers conspiracy theory out every pore.

Combatting them are a millionaire environmentalist with anger issues and a love-damaged woman intent on doing better.



And one thing's for certain in every Hiaasen novel: the vile and unprincipled always get theirs in the end. This doesn't mean horrific things don't happen, and some deaths occur, but the wicked and corrupt pay. So, yeah, there's a happy ending, sorry if I spoiled that for you.

Just a few tidbits from Hiaasen: Figgo's penchant for misspelling — "He had a tank top that said 'White Lives Madder' but spelled like 'M-A-D' mad."

"... the Democrats had been financing their heathen war on American values with gold bars seized by Barack Obama from Saddam Hussein's hidden stash."

"The tallest appeared to have thinned his beard with a rusty garden rake; the other had a fake soul patch and an altered nose that reminded Zhou of hog genitalia he had dissected in school."

I could go on and on (saved the best for you to discover), but you can't go wrong with Hiaasen for outrageous characters and circumstances. My favorite of his is still *Basket Case* that mixes rock music and newspaper writing. Hiaasen was a friend of the late Warren Zevon; they cowrote the song of the same name.

Finally, how can you not like a book where racists and the corrupt are constantly getting the snot beat out of them by everyone they despise? Keep on reading. — MIKE L. DOWNEY



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