

# Literary New Orleans, Post-Katrina

by Nicole Cooley

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August 29, 2010, is the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. In the wake of so many other subsequent environmental disasters—including the horror of this spring’s oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico—it would be easy for some to forget the anniversary of the storm. But several local and national arts organizations, including the Pirate’s Alley Faulkner Society and the Poetry Society of America, are presenting readings in New Orleans this summer to commemorate all that was lost—the lives, homes, businesses, and communities—and to celebrate a flourishing of the literary arts in the area since the storm.

This spring I returned to New Orleans, where I grew up, to visit my family and to give a reading. Walking along the streetcar tracks on St. Charles Avenue, on my way to 1718, a reading series that was started by local college students at the Columns Hotel two years after the storm, my belief in the strength and resilience of the city was reaffirmed. And yet I couldn’t help wondering if I felt this way because I’d spent my time in “the isle of denial,” or the “sliver by the river,” as the locals call the parts of New Orleans that escaped major flooding and where you can believe the city is “recovered.” I didn’t see the landscape that is still the daily reality for many citizens of New Orleans: the void left by missing houses, lost businesses, communities that no longer exist. Plot after plot of empty land is for sale. Houses have been razed, reduced to scrub grass. People are gone, never to return.

For creative writers in New Orleans, the questions raised by the storm remain. How do we approach the enormity of Katrina and its legacy in order to write about it? And how has the literary community of New Orleans changed since the hurricane? Fiction writer, translator, and playwright John Biguenet articulates this dilemma in an essay he wrote for *Before During After*, a collection edited by Elizabeth Kleinveld, forthcoming later this year from the University of New Orleans Press. “What conventions exist to depict something that has never happened before?” he writes. “What American novel traces the eradication of one of our cities, the exile of two hundred thousand citizens, the obliteration of a set of intertwined cultures centuries old?...We are only now just beginning to discover what it’s done to us.”

The writing community, always important, has become even more crucial to the city and its recovery. “Everything we valued gained heightened importance, including the arts,” says poet Brad Richard, chair of the creative writing program at Lusher Charter School, a new school that is thriving in post-Katrina New Orleans. “In the first months after the storm, people wanted to be part of every cultural event because it mattered. I remember packed audiences at Preservation Hall for the premier of Tom Piazza’s *Why New Orleans Matters* and at the Saturn Bar for Chin Music Press’s collection *Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?*, sponsored by the Press Street art and literature cooperative. It made the unbearable a little more bearable.” Richard was so inspired by the way the literary community came together after the storm that he founded the New Orleans New Writers Literary Festival—now in its third year—to show young people in the city that they have a crucial part in rebuilding a lasting literary community.

When I think about my beloved New Orleans, I often turn to literature because it reminds me of our capacity to empathize, to enter another’s perspective, to understand our fellow citizens. The recovery of our city depends on our writers, now and into the future.

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