

HEARSAY
FROM
HEAVEN
AND
HADES

New Orleans
Secrets of Sinners
and Saints



*HEARSAY
FROM
HEAVEN
AND
HADES*

*New Orleans
Secrets of Sinners
and Saints*

TJ Fisher

Illustrations by Jennifer Porter



MORGANA
PRESS

Compilation copyright © 2008 by Morgana Press

Hearsay from Heaven and Hades: New Orleans Secrets of Sinners and Saints
narrative copyright © 2008 by TJ Fisher

New Orleans illustrations copyright © 2008 by Jennifer Porter

Front and back cover photograph copyright © by Sandra Russell Clark

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

First edition

ISBN-13: 978-0-9773514-3-5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2007937443

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

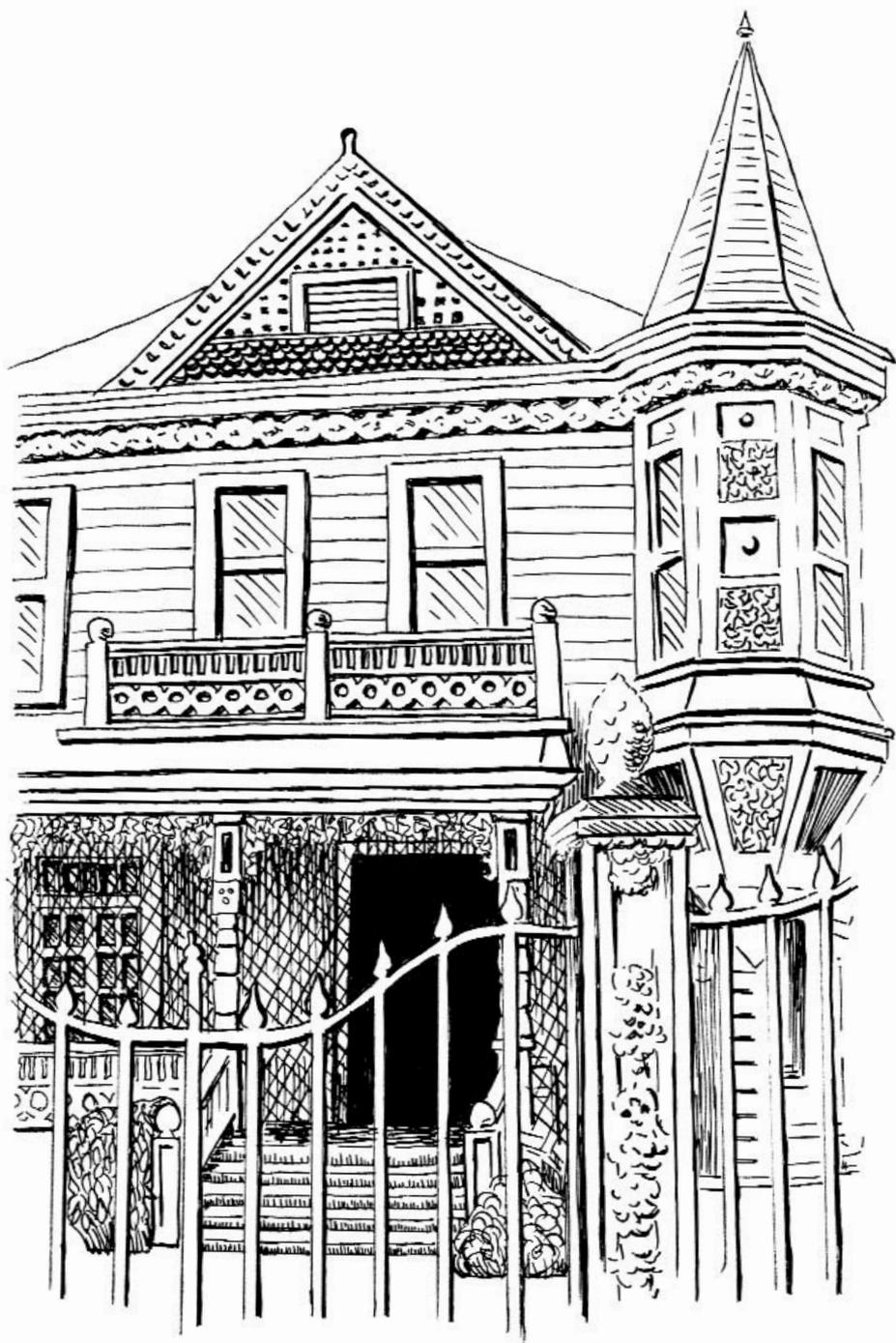
Front cover design: Jedd Haas and Skip Bolen

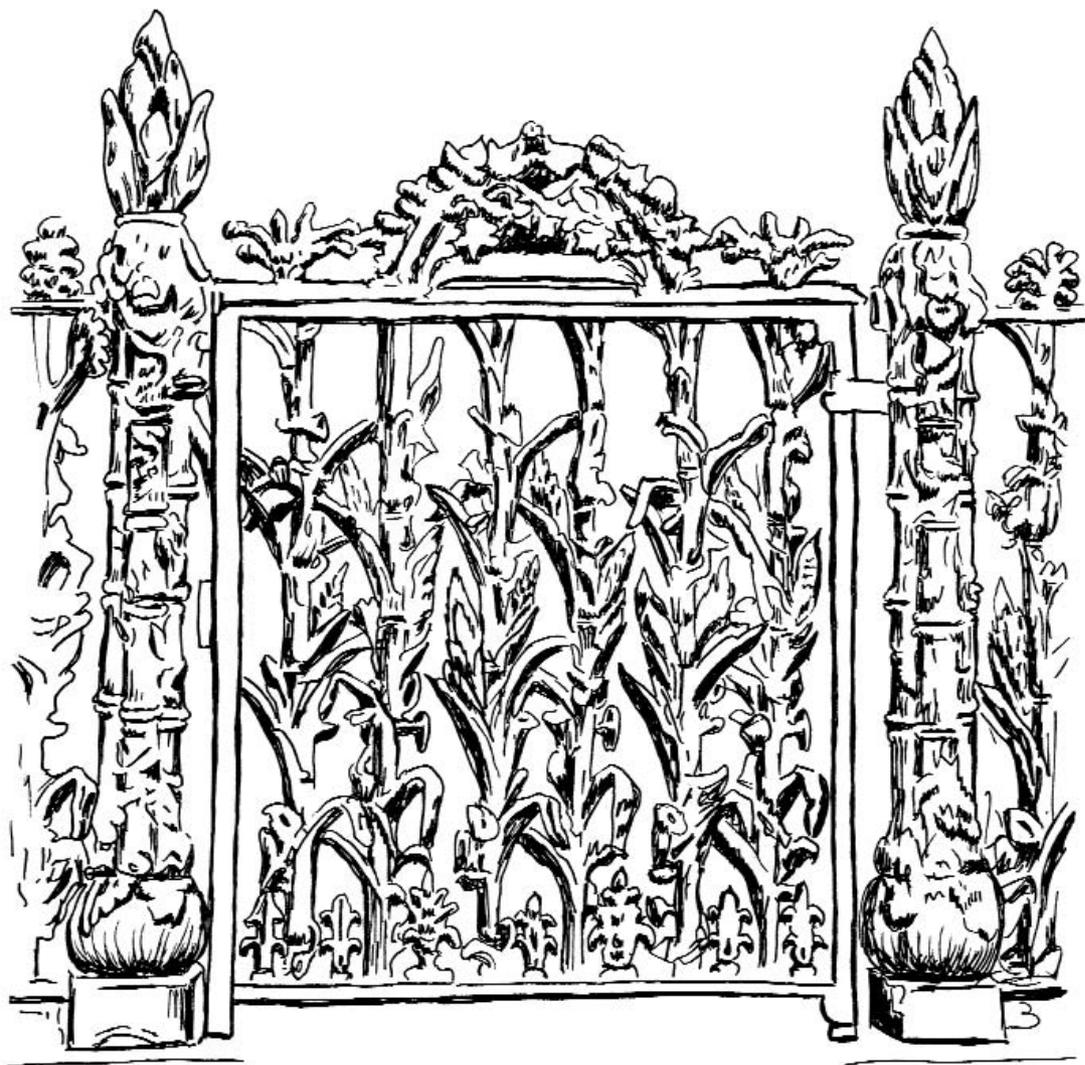
Back cover and book design: Jedd Haas

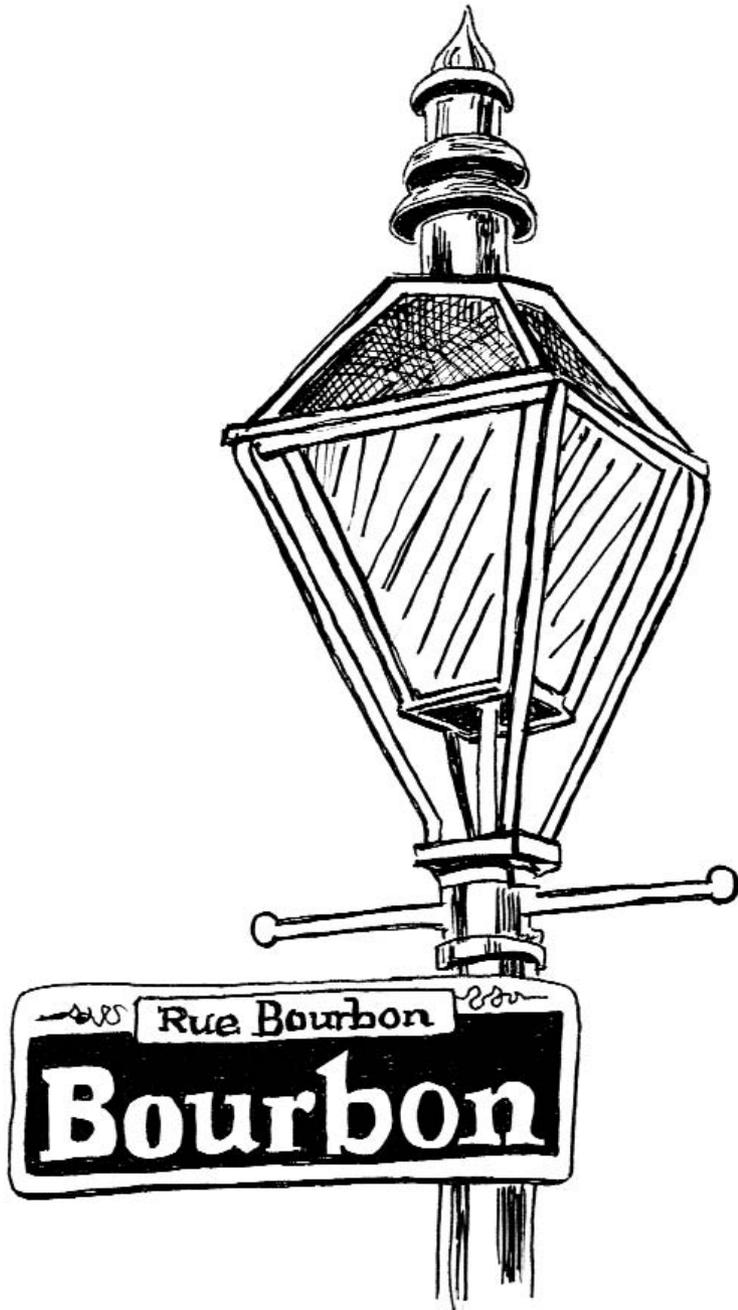
Editor: Ron Kenner

Printed in China by Imago

Published by Morgana Press
822 Chartres Street
New Orleans, LA 70116
Visit our website at www.morganapress.com







Prelude from Rue Bourbon

I am TJ Fisher and I live on Bourbon Street in New Orleans, a town like none other, a magical place filled with whimsical and firebrand people who relish a “never-a-dull-moment” sense of daring and commitment. We French Quarterites are long recognized as impetuous, idealistic romanticists with a curious proclivity for surreal drama. You could say we are unafraid of lending fodder for gossip. Here the time-honored circle of rosary beads, revelry and rue come together. We engage in famously public feuds and vocal challenges. A colorful citizenry, we share a sharp sense of humor and a flamboyant nature. Intriguing tales of our unconventionalities abound. And post-Katrina, we are more outspoken than ever.

A wildly personal place, our customs, sacraments and superstitions do not fit easily into any one category. That is what makes us particularly interesting, entertaining, amusing and controversial. We are a community of rich ethnicities, religions, opinions. Our ancient city is a unique place of worship and frolic, introspection and self-discovery — for the holy and hedonistic alike. We are mainly spiritual and yet

separate and aloof, sometimes religious and sometimes not, as we are deeply influenced by our existence and death on the edge. Known to be unorthodox, ideological, cryptic and philosophical, we often take what we want from Catholicism, Baptism, Judaism and Voodooism — forming new conjunctions with our own cherished traditions. The truth is that we take in life with a different set of eyes, with an open and caring “anything-goes” attitude. *Le Bon Temps Roule*. Some call us idiosyncratic and iconoclastic, and it is true. Passions run rampant. Emotions are poured, provoked and stirred. Senses ignited. The spirit and soul of our city — our unique history, culture and customs — reign supreme.

New Orleanians understand the intrigue and inspiration of traipsing beyond life’s detours and dreams deferred. Life here is fraught with extraordinary troubles, struggles, conflicts and complications; yet that which we grapple with and enshrine causes us to flourish as we climb and descend the up-down winding spirals of destiny. Illusions shatter but we continue to find deep reflections, inspiration and solace in the ring of memories captured in the shade of ancestors and in what the past has taught us. Yes, Louisianians court danger and controversy without a second thought. Especially the illogical, the complicated, the impossible and the soulful appeal to us. We value listening to the heart over the head, trusting in

spontaneity and risk over calculation; we believe in the power of instinct over reason, in forgiveness over judgment, in impermanence over permanence, in tradition over the trendy. We believe in these things but are not brainless and, highly alert to the substance of things, are often astute; not least with the benefit of painfully sharp perceptions.

Those who choose to live and visit here on the edge of timelessness find the draw, allure and exotic personality of New Orleans irresistible and inexplicable; our characters are presumed eccentric and quaint, outlandish and secretive, yet keenly intimate and warm. This is a consuming and compelling place that charms, captivates, galvanizes and unleashes people in equal measure. New Orleans is our muse, our love, our heart, our spirit, our joy, and our sorrow. We are wedded to her and to her mists of time, to the continuation of the past in the present. New Orleans is a place of reoccurring themes, enfolded and new again. Here history and timeworn images are treasured, not feared. That as well as echoes. I believe there are truths in truisms. Evocative. Old stories remain, remembered and relived.

New Orleanians do not follow trends or do things “by the book.” We are immune to what is passé. You do not have to be a seer or a sage to see that in an increasingly bland world where many endlessly seek novelty and newness, people will always

find comfort in and connection with familiarity, repetition, customs, heritage, ritual and things that reek of old age, patina and soul. The roots and threads of cliché take hold and twist into something original.

The attributes that the national media often uses to malign New Orleans are in fact true. Depending on where you stand, our city is immersed in ethos, mythos and pathos, truth and lies. Yet all can be portrayed in a gripping or malicious way. Enigmatic and veiled or stark and dark. Pre-Katrina we were regaled for the distinctive qualities that set us apart, what made us different, what attracted people; post-Katrina, the naysayers of the world damn us for possessing many of those very same characteristics that previously kept us from being Anywhere-USA. Yes, we have artists and the card readers in Jackson Square, ghost tours, carriages, second-line parades, street entertainers, formality and debauchery cohabiting; in my block I like seeing a miniature horse, an alligator-size lizard, a guy with a snake draped around his neck, and costumed people rubbing shoulders with those cloaked in black-tie attire (with requisite drinks in hand) as they saunter beneath my balcony. I like *Theatre d'Orléans*. It would not be the same if recreated in suburbia. It is not the same at (the French Quarter of) Disney World or Las Vegas. We love the French Quarter precisely because it is the Quarter, not prissy and perfect. A

place where blemishes and imperfections are welcome. Applauded. We rebel against gentrification and homogenization. Frankly, most of us here prefer a little poison in our paradise.

My life and my work revolve around the French Quarter. She has left her indelible imprint on me. Each work is wildly different, yet I see a continuation of the twisty gossamer and braided threads that entangle me. We can never close our eyes to what we have seen and loved. That probably gives some slight clue as to my current state of mind and why I am so hopelessly enmeshed in the paradoxical terrain that is New Orleans.

Locals are free to pursue and investigate the dark fringes, dramas and complexities of the human condition, the mystique and mix of mingling with flawed people. We ricochet between the paradigms of high and low culture, between scandal and sanctity. Our multilayered alluvial sludge makes for a rich and inviting back-story, a siren's song from which to draw creativity, courage and inspiration. This *is* New Orleans, Louisiana, where the people, places, voices, memories, stories and visions are not only memorable but also unforgettable. Come share our cocktail and church chitchat secrets, our obituaries and risings, our gossips and misgivings, and live our life....

What is *Hearsay from Heaven and Hades*?

It is a mischievous work meant for those with a sense of satire, a mocking heart, a deep soul, and a knowledge of what

both heaven and hell on earth feel like, up close and personal. If you fear turmoil in real life or consider yourself overly innocent and prim and proper, read no further. These aphorisms have not been cleansed. They are uncensored and contentious, irreverent and satirical, sad and funny; just like the contradictory flow of conscience that flashes though all our heads — things we think but rarely say aloud.

New Orleans is an inescapably epic city that is fragile, beautiful, haunting, tragic and erotic; teeming with life and death, and the ties of memories. Yet beware. The New Orleans lifestyle and our philosophies are not for those who seek to be perpetually stranded in a stunted land of vapid and syrupy crystallized happiness of fake goodie-two-shoes positiveness with no dark edges. Here in Louisiana we dance, dream, scream and cry in the city, down in the swampland, and on the floodplains. Another world unto ourselves, we are allowed to parade our sentiments and convictions on our seersucker sleeves and tattooed arms. We emblazon our comments on our balcony flags that flap in the fragile shadows of the vanishing wetlands and the mighty old Mississippi River. We wear our fears and angers on our faces and we say what we really think about love, loss, lust, betrayal, backstabbing and survival on the brink. There is no other place like New Orleans and there never will be.

Our soil is richer than any character study or scenario of right or wrong, good or bad, politics or peccadilloes. Indeed, mother does not always know best. Beyond our prayers there are curses, and even spells. Sometimes it is okay, even essential, to take off the white kid gloves, to crawl and fight and get mean, lowdown and dirty; to take the dare and the challenge like the “gentleman” duelers of days of old. Seeping like mist from our crumbling walls, hidden deep within our secret gardens, locals and outsiders hear whisperings of embedded dark and enchanted satire, musings and witticisms and rumblings that expose a deep swatch in the psyche. The lifestyle here is one of saints and sinners, of elegance and decadence, all festooned and melded together into an odd collective consciousness. The silt of our convoluted lives is steamy and storied, and once you drink from the fountain that is the Vieux Carré it is impossible to willingly give up the strange communion of camaraderie; it infiltrates the French Quarter, along with the rest of our flood-and-hurricane-prone city.

Indeed, Katrina was the high disaster that seemingly stripped us to the marrow of our bones, forcing us to grapple with runaway misery, anger and sadness, and to this day, and probably forever, torrents of emotional upheaval and words still flow out of us like floodwaters. But we are not the first and will not be the last to see the other side. Nowadays, as in

decades and centuries past, we overtop the rules of normal convention and polite society. Our unrestrained thoughts, attitudes, actions and voices cannot be turned back or tamed or silenced. Sometimes we run from — yet rush to and embrace — the hush-hush subject matter that sneakily slips behind the eyes, into the head, underneath the skin. I am speaking of an unusual willingness to go deep, to ask questions and probe the boundaries, emotionally, psychologically, physically and spiritually. The picture is not always rosy, but it is vivid and meaningful; at times enchanting, at other times dank, even horrifying. From the hallowed halls of stylish tycoons to the underbelly of pop-culture and fractured people living in the abyss, from beyond the revelry and merrymaking, the guises and disguises, here in New Orleans lies a quirky shadow dance of quips, dark-jewel slices of life, rapid-fire lessons and rules to live by.

New Orleanians are a pithy people. A flinty bunch. Edgy. Playful. Passionate. Resourceful. Introspective. Poignant. Sweet. Sarcastic. Wicked. Sad. Droll. Funny. Raw. Bracing. Transporting. And so here is to those who refuse allegiance to stone, who seek truth beyond the masquerade and façade. We know that death waits outside the door. Yet we still laugh, parade, celebrate, dance, worship, mock ourselves and others — and throw a party like nobody can. The horrors and

nightmares (and, yet, enlightenments and even redemptions) of Katrina, the unspeakable devotions and truths we have seen laid bare, the things we now know, have forced us to unlock ourselves as people, as writers, as storytellers. Those who know what it means to miss New Orleans love to bask in, laugh at and cry for juicy and delectable ruminations; that which raises eyebrows, curls lips, snags heads and will not let go. We give credence to things unseen, and unknown and unproven, as well as to that impossible-to-silence “little voice” that lurks inside all of us.

People willing to walk on the edge of dawn and darkness are drawn to seek out chronicles of contemplative and introspective prose written on water — motley assortments of lingering pulp-truth rhapsodies, riddles, ridicules, treacheries and obsessions. Our own self-deprecating and stylized depictions of French Quarter-style manners and morals include witty inquiries into the “celebration” of a place that straddles the precipice that lies just above and below sea level. New Orleans is, and will always be, a fascinating tableau of time and vicissitudes.

When you live here or visit here, seeing the slant and coloring of our multi-hued streets and alleyways, one cannot help but find an engrossing loaded powder keg of quixotic 24-karat angel-devil dust.

Here you see and unveil images that rise from the humidity and come to life: walking journals and dancing ghosts of the inner thoughts of cinematic characters — of paradoxical proverbs and provocative murmurings, of unscrupulous ideas, mutterings, sayings, ironies, warnings and regrets, of aspects overheard, stated, repeated, dreamed, promised, prophesized, lamented, of words written, rewritten, polished and sharpened over the years. I believe it is impossible to write anything about New Orleans without the fierce emotion and attachment of a lover. She has a soul that lives in the sodden soil that can never be erased or stripped away; it seeps into us, clings to us, and we carry it with us everywhere we go.

Our city is a renaissance of what French Quarterites have embraced for three hundred years — an unvarnished carousel of life at once capricious, cruel, kind, entertaining, murky, dreamlike, dangerous, mysterious, mad, mocking, contradictory, absurd, otherworldly, farcical and allegorical. This sardonic handbook is intended for anyone with a yen to be a saint, sinner, survivor, winner, loser, pathbreaker, tastemaker, rebel, renegade, maverick, rogue, rabble-rouser, nonconformist, malcontent, misfit, visionary, hero, coward, pirate, prophet or philosopher — that is, for those who seek to explore and fan the flames, the ecstasy and agony of the human existence. No prerequisite experience is required to

jump down the rabbit hole of Louisiana soil. To get bitten by the Creole and Cajun fever.

You ask, why is the book and “voice” born of the French Quarter? Louisiana, New Orleans and the French Quarter in particular have always been an intriguingly ripe Mecca, an historic convergence point for writers and artistically creative persons of all types. Those who love a colorful life, an existence permeated with jagged-edged wit, barbed black humor, sophistication and wisdom find the “home of their heart” here in New Orleans. For here we are free to openly gallivant through conscious and unconscious feelings, fears and personal knowledge, recapturing an awareness deeply buried yet simmering within the ever unfaithful and sly head, heart, body and soul. Whether born here or transplanted, New Orleanians somehow instinctually understand that the age-old griefs and galas go hand-in-hand. We are perfectly free to tilt off center with socially, politically, morally diverse viewpoints. We clash, but we get along. New Orleans has always eagerly espoused a slanted-eyed logic guided by pleasure, pain, romance, lust, menace and fond illusion. Today, as yesterday, in the French Quarter it is thankfully okay to be flamboyant and flawed. Unquiet minds are welcome. So are stargazers and those with a stormy heart, soul, spirit and emotion; people who live head-on with fantasy and reality, illusion and truth, merging and layering

themselves into a surprisingly compelling, absorbing, profound place. In the Crescent City vestiges of grandeur, culture, myth and strange serendipity abound and intertwine.

Beyond the faded walls and day-to-day struggles, New Orleanians strive to live and savor life, to mark the celebration of triumph over adversity. Taboos are few. Mirth and merriment prevail, trumping sadness. Hardships are many. Corruption and debauchery, grace and elegance meld. Rejoicing takes hold alongside mourning. Something intensely powerful persists in a crumbling city with a battered and bruised soul. The local French Quarterite can be outrageous and eccentric, a total over-the-top character yet totally clandestine, hidden in the murk and shadows beneath the cloak of anonymity. Most find this unfettered, rebellious attitude uniquely enticing and attractive, provocative and seductive, dangerous and intoxicating, inspiring and primal, impious and uncanny, cloistered and oxymoronic.

French Quarterites live with abandon in the temperamental moment yet remain firmly wedded to the specters of yesterday. It is okay to joyfully and stubbornly parade in streets, dance and sing, have a conversation or shed a tear with ancestors who sleep in the Cities of the Dead. In Louisiana the Patricians are free to sup with the sinners and saints of Bourbon Street. New Orleans, an historic locale and artistically fertile mix of

stimulation with isolation is where you delve into the dark mirrors, comedies, tragedies, and intricacies of life.

Once you have lived this lifestyle and partaken of the peculiar promised land shared with scandalous and sassy people, it is impossible to relinquish the confections, concoctions, incarnations and incantations of New Orleans; few can do so, as Lafcadio Hearn said in 1876, without regret.

Welcome to the inner sanctum of our little world. Whether upright, blighted, twisted, sinking below water or turned upside down, nobody can take away who we are inside; we will survive, we will battle extinction, and we will continue to influence mankind and humanity with our unique culture. From near and far around the globe, the applause is great. All know our name and more love our city than not. Come join us for prayers in purgatory and Hail Marys in heaven, for beignets and chicory coffee and a round of cryptic cocktails and sweet madness at the edge of the earth....



Cold people stand stoic as a petrified forest.

Dark, painful places decay us, but we step through it.

Celebrate rather than surrender.

We admire outlaw people who say and do what
they want; what we are too polite or repressed
to express.

Those touched by the fire are lovers of unreason.

We pace in our towers; a part of us waiting for life
to begin.

Life seldom proceeds in an orderly sequence.

We cannot be protected from pain.

The raven waits for us.

Eat, drink and be merry, for then you think you
will never die.



Postscript: Our Defining Moment

Grappling through writing with the dark shadows of loss, uncertainty and self-torment — to know you made a mark — helps to tame the pain. Commemoration and valiant hearts transform the face of tragedy. Once someone survives catastrophe the future looks different; suffering takes on a different meaning, and laughter, too. As I have heard and now believe, if you bring forth what is inside you it will save you; if you do not it will destroy you. Our city creates and memorializes something tangible and intangible, something poignant; it makes us feel less consumed and devoured by remembrances of disaster.

We often think our pain separates and alienates us, but actually it unites us in a profound manner. It is shocking, humbling and eye opening to face the panoramic picture of how isolated we sometimes think we are when swimming in a pool of pain, suffocating in the hurts of tragedy and trauma. Although others rarely experience our particular devastation, expressive storytelling appeals to and links the human spirit in a special way. We feel alone in our own vale of tears and in our individual pond of pandemonium when actually it is a vast global ocean, a universal waterway that connects and enlightens. To

recall our own private purgatories and personal nightmares, we are able to transcend the moment.

As we learned with Katrina, and as others learn with their own adversities, we are capable of more than we learned or imagined. I think all post-disaster writing takes on a deeper, more esoteric meaning and significance with an urgency to seek truths and search out answers even when they might not exist. We see beyond our fond illusions and delusions. There is no painless passage. I notice that after Katrina I call upon ecclesiastic words and imagery far more often than in the past, in a way that still baffles me; it flows straight through me from a deep and mysterious well inside. Disaster bares us, strips us of our veils and yet, curiously, empowers us.

The clock and the church bells toll, and the band and the music play on. We know we will lose in the end but we intend to have fun along the way. New Orleanians accept that the edge of the abyss is always nearby and unpredictable, and that is what attracts us to angels in the mud and cherubs in the window.



