

Understand New Orleans

NEW ORLEANS TODAY 188

New Orleans is undergoing a profound renaissance in arts and innovation.

HISTORY 190

How one of the oldest ports in America became jazz's birthplace, a modern innovation hub and an all-hours funkstorm.

ARTS & LITERATURE 202

Entropy, fecund trees and slanting sunlight make for a city obsessed with stories, art and aesthetics.

ARCHITECTURE 205

How to recognize the architectural dress this distinctive grand dame dons.

MUSIC & CULTURE 207

The music makes New Orleans, but just how did New Orleans make the music?

THE ENVIRONMENT 210

New Orleans is shaped by, and constantly shaping, its surrounding wetlands.

New Orleans Today

People still ask New Orleanians, with a concerned look, 'So, how's the city doing?' and they never have to elaborate that they're asking about Hurricane Katrina's impact. And while the answer of the New Orleanian depends on a lot of factors, there is one conclusive statement everyone can agree on: this isn't post-Katrina New Orleans. OK? It's just New Orleans. Whether that new New Orleans is a better place than the old one hasn't been answered yet, but the citizens of the city are trying like hell to make the answer 'Yes.'

Best on Film

A Streetcar Named Desire (1951)

Classic Nola drama, with Marlon Brando and Vivien Leigh.

Down by Law (1986) Jim Jarmusch, Tom Waits, Roberto Benigni, a prison break and a swamp.

King Creole (1958) Elvis hits up the old sleazy Quarter.

New Orleans Exposed (2005) Shoe-string documentary offers a harrowing look at Big Easy housing projects.

Abbott & Costello Go to Mars (1953) The comic duo thinks they're going to Mars, end up at Mardi Gras and never realize they haven't left Earth.

Best in Print

Bienville's Dilemma (Richard Campanella; 2008) Definitive guide to the city's physical and cultural geography.

A Confederacy of Dunces (John Kennedy Toole; 1980) Quintessential New Orleans picaresque novel.

Nine Lives (Dan Baum; 2009) Nine oral histories form a cross-section of modern New Orleans.

New Orleans Noir (2007) Short stories explore city's dark side.

The Awakening (Kate Chopin; 1899) Love, tragedy and gender roles; one of the first American novels written from a woman's perspective.

Divisions of Income & Elevation

New Orleans was not evenly hit by Hurricane Katrina. Areas such as Lakewood, Gentilly, Mid-City and the Lower Ninth Ward were destroyed. Areas like the Garden District, CBD and the French Quarter were untouched. Guess what we mainly cover in this book? That wealthiest strip, the literal high ground. It's not much higher, but that couple of feet was the difference between a dry living room and flooded attic for thousands. The point: in this city of divisions that play out along ethnic, racial, religious and economic lines, those who had nothing disproportionately bore the brunt of Katrina.

Losing Generations

Based on the most recent census (2010), it is estimated New Orleans lost about 30% of its citizens after Katrina. Most moved to the suburbs and other cities in the American South. In 2000, this was the 31st-biggest city by population in the USA. It is no longer in the top 50. The African American population has dropped from two-thirds to 60% of the population. New Orleans is actually more diverse as a result; whites make up a greater proportion of the population, but so do Asians and Hispanics. But much of the uniqueness of the city's culture is tied up in the rituals, music and folkways of its African Americans. That population not only constricted after the storm; today it is dying too quickly, and too violently. The murder rate of New Orleans is a staggering 50 times the national average, and the vast majority are black-on-black. The main question on the lips of every New Orleanian is: how do we stop young black men from gunning each other down?