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## Silent Witness

Ari Kelman | August 23, 2007

Mark your calendar. August 29, two years ago, Hurricane Katrina slammed into New Orleans. The howling wind shattered trees, moss-shrouded oaks that had shaded grateful pedestrians across centuries; it whipped roofs from shotgun houses, Creole cottages and antebellum mansions constructed by slaves brought to the city in chains; and it scattered people across the continent, whole families whose ancestors settled New Orleans before the United States became a nation. Then the water rose, an inundation caused by the storm's voracious tidal surge, the loss of thousands of acres of coastal wetlands sacrificed upon the altar of commercial gain, and levees built on the cheap and poorly maintained. The flood scoured away whole neighborhoods, leaving behind potters' fields.

No names of the dead will be engraved on walls; there will be no Freedom Tower. Instead, those responsible for this unnatural disaster hope that we will forget the storm's victims and survivors. For politicians, petroleum executives and engineers, there is little to be gained from our remembering Katrina--no wars to be ginned up out of this ruined city, no elections to be won by waving the stained garments of the dead. Meanwhile, New Orleanians are still on hold with insurance companies, busy hauling away moldy sheetrock or otherwise too consumed with sorting heirlooms encrusted with muck to scold us for ignoring them. What we have are scholars, memoirists, journalists and activists recalling the storm and foreshadowing what we'll miss if we continue on our path of forgetting. Their books, for now, are the best memorials to Katrina we have.

Douglas Brinkley's *The Great Deluge*, Jed Horne's *Breach of Faith* and Christopher Cooper and Robert Block's *Disaster* reject the Bush Administration's hollow plea not to play the "blame game." All three share subject matter--the run-up to the storm, the chaos after the levees failed and then, to varying degrees, the start of rebuilding--as well as a perspective of third-person omniscience. This point of view allows them to collapse time and space, surveying a panorama that includes Washington, Houston, parts of the Gulf Coast and New Orleans. But despite all they share, the three books differ on a critical question: how to apportion blame to characters ranging from the merely incompetent to the criminally negligent.

Take Brinkley's *Great Deluge*, a fine-grained account of the week surrounding Katrina. A historian at Tulane University, Brinkley crams huge quantities of riveting material into 700 pages. But working as a participant-observer, he's too close to the action. What results is less a work of "history," as promised, than a small archive--a trove of information and anecdotes--packaged as a disaster narrative, kin to David McCullough's *Johnstown Flood* or John Barry's *Rising Tide*. Brinkley, writing with fetid water still covering much of New Orleans, had to grasp for heroes where he could find them, usually in stories of regular people coping with the catastrophe. And he often resorts to cliché. Laura Maloney, an activist who saved hundreds of animals from the storm, "could have been a fashion model, with her long blond

hair, perfect white teeth, and eyes that implied an internal kindness." Still, most of these portraits, particularly the case of New Orleans disc jockey Garland Robinette, who never stopped broadcasting as he rode out the storm, command attention and flesh out the disaster. And on the particulars of the events Brinkley covers, his book should be the definitive account for years to come.

What's most questionable is his argument that New Orleans's embattled mayor, Ray Nagin, deserves the lion's share of blame. For Brinkley, Nagin failed in ways too vast and various to be forgiven: to provision the Superdome, to evacuate the needy, to coordinate rescue and relief. Many familiar horror stories--New Orleanians trapped on rooftops, starving in fetid shelters or dying for want of medicine--are punctuated in *The Great Deluge* with images of a callous Nagin. Rather than ordering an early mandatory evacuation, the mayor dithers as the storm approaches. With the water rising, he hides out at the Hyatt, ignoring havoc down the street at the Superdome. He later takes a luxurious shower aboard Air Force One, oblivious to a stream of displaced New Orleanians sweltering just minutes away.

On most counts, Brinkley's case has merit. But with drumbeat repetition, fair criticism becomes vendetta. It doesn't help that some passages flirt with racially coded language. Nagin is an Uncle Tom ("always deferential to whites"), a trickster ("spew[ing] anti-corruption jive"), all flash and no substance (a "show horse and not a nuts-and-bolts workhorse"), and he preens when he could be saving lives ("like a primping teenager"). *The Great Deluge* appeared on the eve of New Orleans's 2006 mayoral election, and it reads like campaign literature for the other side. But if that was the book's intent, it failed. Nagin won a second term.

Brinkley does catalogue the Bush Administration's ensemble cast of villains and buffoons. But his Nagin fixation and tendency to parrot Republican talking points--readers are asked, for example, to muster sympathy for Trent Lott, champion of tort reform, as he sues his insurance company for a payout on his Gulf Coast home--keep attention too tightly focused on local political figures. Horne's *Breach of Faith*, by contrast, feints at local and state politicians before focusing on federal officials: Congressional appropriators, enthralled by visions of small government; technocrats at the Army Corps of Engineers, as incapable of building stout structures as they are of telling the truth; Cabinet-level cronies, including Homeland Security secretary Michael Chertoff; and President Bush himself.

For Horne, an editor at New Orleans's *Times-Picayune*, Katrina's tragedy grew out of politics and policies--entrenched and complex systems--rather than anything so idiosyncratic as individual failures. Nagin is criticized for his mistakes but isn't demonized; his blunders are understood as byproducts of the disparate interests he must satisfy--including New Orleans's African-American and business communities?--and the complex city he governs. Horne also discusses Louisiana's lost wetlands, bemoaning longstanding regional economic priorities--petroleum production valued over ecosystem protection--that imperiled New Orleans. And he takes on the politics of flood control and the Byzantine relationships among agencies responsible for the city's decrepit levees and floodwalls. Horne's effort to fix blame for the flooding is excellent detective work and fine storytelling. He uncovers a variety of colorful characters, including the opinionated Ivor van Heerden, who waded hip-deep into controversy when he began investigating the levees' failures, excoriating the Orleans Levee Board and the Corps of Engineers.

The Corps isn't the only federal entity Horne unmasks. At FEMA, horse-show-promoter-turned-agency-director Michael Brown represented the norm, not the exception. People with no experience in emergency management filled five of FEMA's ten top spots when Katrina hit. The disaster thus became a case study for Grover Norquist's school of governance: The federal apparatus, though not yet small enough to drown in a bathtub, was no longer big enough to rescue New Orleans from the flood. And, Horne argues, the Bush Administration's obsession with terror compounded the problem. After 9/11, money once earmarked for levees or disaster response instead funded wars in Afghanistan and Iraq or

found its way to the Department of Homeland Security's budget. "What mattered in the narrower context of the Katrina response was that both tenets of the Bush faith--the small-government mantra and the conviction that the nation's gravest threats were posed by the likes of bin Laden not Katrina--conspired to gut the nation's disaster response bureaucracy in the name of making the nation safer," Horne writes. The storm, then, demonstrated that a secure homeland was little more than Republican spin.

In *Disaster*, *Wall Street Journal* reporters Cooper and Block also suggest that New Orleans should be remembered as collateral damage in the "war on terror." They argue that creating the Department of Homeland Security, which swallowed FEMA in 2003, left the nation more rather than less vulnerable. The authors' evidence includes "Hurricane Pam," a planning exercise conducted by FEMA in 2004 to study the impact a huge storm might have on the Gulf Coast. The ugly results, which suggested that the region was woefully unprepared for a disaster that might cause significant loss of life, particularly if the levees failed in New Orleans, prefigured Katrina's wrath. But FEMA couldn't pursue its findings because its abusive parent agency had raided its budget. The Department of Homeland Security then ignored natural disasters that were not merely predictable but predicted. This myopia extended to Congress, which slashed the New Orleans Corps district's budget by 44 percent between 2000 and 2005. And after the storm, the cavalry arrived late for similar reasons. Two wars stretched National Guard units to the breaking point, while commanders, heeding false rumors of armed mobs menacing the Superdome and Convention Center, planned, according to Cooper and Block, a "complicated military operation, one in which federal soldiers might have to kill American citizens, perhaps in great numbers." Military leaders, in sum, readied to put down a phantom insurgency instead of rushing aid to the dying. Here was compassionate conservatism's military wing.

Books written to provoke outrage rarely do. *Disaster*, though, unnerves by recalling incompetence in exacting detail, reliving decisions that, had they been reversed, would have saved lives. But it's not definitive, because Cooper and Block blur causation and correlation. It's never entirely clear, for instance, if, as they argue, the government botched Katrina due to bloated bureaucracies and turf wars or because of the hacks in charge: ideologues like Chertoff and bootlickers like Brown. Not to mention the President, who comes across in all of these books as out of his depth in crisis and focused on public relations rather than the public. Reluctant to cut his vacation short, President Bush first lingered on his Crawford ranch as Katrina's storm surge dissolved New Orleans's levees. He then flew over the Gulf Coast without landing. When he finally toured the ruined districts, he lauded Brown for doing "a heckuva job" and held up Senator Lott as the face of the tragedy.

The President eventually addressed the country from New Orleans's Jackson Square, promising to rebuild the city. His handlers managed to turn New Orleans's power on for the first time in weeks so that this bit of political theater could be staged just so. Then, with the flimflam delivered via satellite uplink, the city sank once again into darkness. Since then, despite the fact that fewer than half of the city's residents have returned, and those who have often live without basic services, the President has barely mentioned New Orleans. His silence is designed to foster a collective amnesia that serves his interests.

These books share a common flaw: They sometimes duck questions of race and class, the disaster's root rather than proximate causes. "To some," writes Brinkley, "the crowd stranded at the Superdome conjured up images of both slavery and slave insurrection. Of course, such over-the-top comments were irresponsible." Really? Why? He also writes about New Orleanians seeking high ground in the neighboring town of Gretna and the white police who blocked their way. Of officials who denied that race had anything to do with the confrontation, Brinkley concludes, "One might as well take them at their word on that." Indeed, one might as well--if one is crafting a colorblind account of events in which color mattered. For their part, Cooper and Block argue, "New Orleans, while uniquely fragile geographically and confusingly exotic culturally, is just an average place in the scale of risk." This assumes, somehow, that the scale of risk ignores variables like race, class and culture, that it didn't matter that New Orleans

was 67 percent African-American and among the nation's poorest cities when the storm hit. Horne is best on Katrina's racial and socioeconomic dimensions. He asks probing questions about the disaster's origins and then notes how black, white, rich and poor experienced and perceived the debacle in different ways based on history, culture and relative privilege. Some members of New Orleans's African-American community, for example, tended to view the ruined levees in the context of the city's long history of environmental injustice. Most whites instead saw the failures as emblems of race-blind incompetence. Even these issues, though, sit on the periphery of the analysis.

Michael Eric Dyson's *Come Hell or High Water* directly answers questions other Katrina books usually only imply. Why were poor and black people left behind? Why was relief so late arriving? Why was the nation surprised to discover poverty in its midst? And does George Bush care about black people? In order: Because poor people and people of color often live in harm's way and are forgotten. Because Republicans gutted disaster response in favor of limited government. Because cultures of conservatism and consumption render black people and the impoverished invisible. And, no, President Bush doesn't care about black people. It's nothing personal, writes Dyson, a humanities professor at Georgetown University: "The black poor of the Delta lacked social standing, racial status, and the apparent and unconscious identifiers that might evoke a dramatic empathy in Bush and Brown." Although the book relies heavily on Dyson's earlier work on rap music, African-American religion and popular culture, its insistence on the centrality of race and class during Katrina is powerful and well taken.

The authors whose essays appear in the anthology *What Lies Beneath* expand on Dyson's arguments. They suggest that New Orleans suffered because it was a blue island floating in a sea of red politics, that global warming supercharged the storm, that poverty and racism trapped people in the city. The book, in other words, incorporates many of the left's concerns. It's also occasionally a bit overblown. Nonetheless, it reminds readers of the moment after the hurricane when the nation forgot irony and revived dormant conversations about the impact of racial and socioeconomic inequities. It seems like an age ago, especially with the media making a mockery of presidential candidates for trying to continue these discussions. Pundits harp on one's haircut or ponder whether another is black enough to appeal to African-American voters. The noise is distracting. *What Lies Beneath* tries to refocus attention on Katrina's core lessons.

One of which was the value of high ground. Or so Mike Tidwell, author of the global-warming jeremiad *The Ravaging Tide* insists. He warns that "every coastline in the world" may soon suffer New Orleans's fate because of rising ocean levels. But even if true, fearmongering and reductive analysis--"September 11 happened because of oil, plain and simple"--undermine the message, ensuring nonbelievers will remain skeptical and offering Alexander Cockburn something to ridicule. By contrast, nobody will mock *Rebuilding Urban Places After Disaster*, because nobody will read this collection of scholarly essays on New Orleans's future. Such is the fate of published academic conference proceedings. Still, a highlight here is MIT professor Lawrence Vale's "Restoring Urban Viability," which considers conditions--economic, political, cultural--that historically have allowed cities to rise from ruin. This material, in more depth, appears in his book *The Resilient City*, required reading for anyone interested in context for New Orleans's reconstruction. In that volume Vale, his co-editor, Thomas Campanella, and several contributors all argue that cities do typically recover from disasters, but their rebirth takes a long time. And their resilience hinges on their economic centrality, utility as a symbol of state power and the sway of their citizens. For all these reasons, New Orleans's prognosis, Vale suggests, is murky.

And finally we come to the memoirists: Joshua Clark, Chris Rose and Billy Sothern. Forsaking the godly perspective of third-person omniscience, these authors have written first-person accounts of lives destroyed and remade. Their books are memoirs of metamorphosis, with the hurricane serving as the agent of change. Because they share personal stories, still raw, these books will help shape our collective memory of Katrina, reminding us of the disaster's impact at the smallest, most human scale.

Joshua Clark, an independent publisher who survived Katrina in the French Quarter, begins *Heart Like Water* as a romp through New Orleans's countercultural arts community. The book then becomes a libertarian screed, outraged not just that government failed but that anyone expected the flimsy social contract to withstand Category 3 winds. Finally, it arrives at a communitarian vision, in which the state and its citizens can only prevent another Katrina by working together to save the Gulf Coast's remaining wetlands.

Clark carried a tape recorder with him everywhere he went after the storm, and he includes many of the interviews he conducted verbatim. But the book doesn't succeed or fail based on this conceit so much as the author's willingness to include an unflinching self-portrait. Clark appears hypermasculine and self-absorbed for much of *Heart Like Water*. He treats his partner, Katherine, who wanted to leave before the storm, terribly. Then, after the city was devastated, Clark remained contemptuous of rumors of suffering and chaos, basing his opinions on the fact that he encountered so little mayhem himself. He was much taken with his own bravado (looting is hilarious!). Because of this narcissism, although Clark was often surrounded by friends, he remained isolated.

And then he gained perspective--literally. Clark climbed a bridge and took in a bird's-eye view of the drowning city. As quickly as that, his tone changes; he gains empathy. The transition, though not wholly convincing, underscores divisions within New Orleans and the way topography became destiny after Katrina. High ground in the Quarter suffered only minor damage, while flooding erased low-lying communities. Before the storm, Clark never considered many of the inundated districts part of his city: "We simply didn't cross the Industrial Canal." Then Katrina expanded his horizons, just as the storm brought many Americans face to face with the realities of race and class in their country.

In *I Dead in Attic*, *Times-Picayune* columnist Chris Rose is similarly self-reflective about the tragedy. This collection of essays, which were published in the year after Katrina, commemorates the day-to-day struggle of living in New Orleans after the storm: how to raise children without consistent government services; how to remain rooted as one's community fractures; how to survive behind decaying levees. The book includes happy tableaux--working traffic lights, neighbors watering flowers, Dr. John's music--but fatalism gradually erodes hope. The prose becomes angrier, dissonance builds to a crescendo and at last Rose acknowledges his depression. He visits a therapist, gets a prescription and, not without some bumps along the way, begins feeling better. *I Dead in Attic* should not be read in one sitting. The stories bleed together, like impressionism viewed too closely. But consumed over time, in smaller doses, these episodes become, if not a masterpiece, something stirring, beautiful and very sad.

Billy Sothorn, a New Orleans death-penalty activist, wanted to remain in the city throughout Katrina. Sothorn changed his mind only because of his wife's better judgment and a marriage counselor who helped the couple "make the right decisions in life." The couple's agonized decision to evacuate before the storm hit sets up *Down in New Orleans's* recurring themes: the ways money insulated the privileged from Katrina's hardships and the hold the city maintains on its residents. The book is only half a memoir, rounded out by Sothorn's essays on social justice.

These chapters are invaluable for providing context to Katrina. Disaster narratives typically are teleological, stories in which everything that comes before the destruction is preamble to what now appears inevitable. By including essays on the city's broken criminal justice system, local fights over the minimum wage, the politics of race in neighboring parishes and the history of a largely middle-class and overwhelmingly African-American community destroyed by Katrina's flood, Sothorn reminds readers that structural inequalities plagued the city long before Katrina. In doing so, he suggests, if only implicitly, that the storm was just another chapter in New Orleans's history. Tragic, to be sure, but not necessarily the epilogue in a long story peppered with hardship. At the same time, Katrina offered a lens through which Sothorn examines problems facing not just New Orleans but the entire nation: "The issues

that will define us to future generations--the consequences of conservative governance, our continuing national struggle to confront issues of race and poverty, environmental disregard, mass incarceration, immigration, and the 'war on terror'--appeared in New Orleans as magnifications of the thousands of instances in which these matters arise in daily American life."

Monuments and historic markers dot New Orleans's landscape: Andrew Jackson presides over the French Quarter, General Lee looms high above his eponymous circle, plaques adorn buildings throughout the city's preservation districts. New Orleans markets a usable past, a sanitized version of its history, to tourists in this way. There's no room for disasters in this romantic narrative; being accident-prone is bad for business. So the city sweeps the fires of 1788 and 1794, the yellow fever epidemic of 1853, the 1927 flood and many other disasters under the rug. Except for a small memorial located in the Lower Ninth Ward, paid for in part by a litigation firm trying to drum up business, Katrina has been similarly shrouded in official silence. But there are countless informal reminders of the storm--fallen signs, middens filled with the remains of gutted homes, abandoned FEMA trailers and bare foundations where buildings stood--scattered across the city. And there are books. So even if you can't travel to New Orleans, you can still bear witness to the nation's tacit decision to execute an entire city despite its powerful will to live. If nobody makes the effort now, New Orleans may soon exist only in our collective memories, no longer a living place where history gets made.

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