

NEW ORLEANS: WHAT MAKES IT DIFFERENT?

Coordinators: Eileen Brener, Lisa E. Cristal

Where else do you find streets named Pleasure, Music and Mystery?
Where Piety and Desire Streets run parallel but in opposite directions?
Where Jefferson Davis Parkway dead-ends at Martin Luther King, Jr.,
Blvd.?

As Dan Baum, author of one of the books we read stated, “That New Orleans is like no other place in America goes way beyond the food, music, and architecture. New Orleanians don’t even understand such fundamentals as time and money the way other Americans do.”

This study group examines the city beyond the usual tourist delights, taking note of the geography, cultural history, music, art and unique traditions. In so doing, we hope to uncover the magic of this most interesting American city.

Readings and other Materials/Online Services:

Nine Lives by Dan Baum.

“A Streetcar Named Desire” by Tennessee Williams. Either read the play or watch the movie.

A coursepack with articles, excerpts and internet links is required.

Coordinators: Having previously coordinated a number of study groups, including one on New Orleans, **Eileen Brener** here takes a new look at the old city. **Lisa Cristal** has been an active participant in the differences reflected in New Orleans for over 35 years. This is her first time coordinating a study group.

* * * * * **Syllabus – A Work in Progress** * * * * *

Please bear in mind that the syllabus is always a dynamic document. It may change in its details during preparation and as the study group evolves.

The Coursepack

1. "The Muse Is Always Half-Dressed in New Orleans" by Andrei Codrescu from *Literary New Orleans*
2. "Letter to her Father" by Sister Hachard and Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Robert Livingston" from *Literary New Orleans*
3. Chapter Two from *The World that Made New Orleans* by Ned Sublette
4. Code Noir
- 5 "The Quadroon Balls" from *Fabulous New Orleans* by Lyle Saxon
6. "Cavanelle" by Kate Chopin
7. "La Belle Zoraide" by Kate Chopin
8. Excerpt from *A Confederacy of Dunces* by John Kennedy Toole
9. *Chained to the Land: Slave Narratives* by Mary Reynolds and Mrs. M.S. Faymen
10. Excerpt from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*
11. Excerpt from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*
12. *Excerpts from Up From the Cradle of Jazz* by Jason Berry, Jonathan Foose and Tad Jones
13. *Excerpts from Why New Orleans Matters* by Tom Piazza
14. *The 'Baby Dolls' of Mardi Gras A Fun Tradition With a Serious Side* (NPR 2013)
15. <http://www.neworleanscvb.com/calendar-events/mardi-gras>
16. <http://www.mardigrasneworleans.com/mardigrasindians.html>
17. *Excerpts from Roll With It Brass Bands in the Streets of New Orleans* by Matt Sakakeeny
18. *Excerpt from The Great Deluge* by Douglas Brinkley

The Study Group Sessions

Week 1: The people of New Orleans, their unusual perspective and their surprising interests.

Readings:

"About this Book," the introduction to *Nine Lives*

"The Muse Is Always Half-Dressed in New Orleans" by Andrei Codrescu from *Literary New Orleans*

Questions:

1. What shaped the city and its people?
2. How did New Orleans become "the city that care forgot?"

Week 2: Geography and History of the City

Readings:

1. "Letter to her Father" by Sister Hachard and "Letter" from Thomas Jefferson to Robert Livingston from *Literary New Orleans*
2. "The Gift of the River," Chapter Two, from *The World that Made New Orleans* by Ned Sublette

Questions:

Where was New Orleans when the pyramids were built? (Hint underwater).

How did the city acquire its well-known traditions?

Week 3: Africans in New Orleans, slaves and free men of color, lived under three regimes—French, Spanish, and American.

Readings:

Code Noir

"The Quadroon Balls" from *Fabulous New Orleans* by Lyle Saxon

Questions:

1. How did French slave law differ from Spanish and American?
2. How free were the free men of color?

Week 4: Voices of slaves from three different sources speak to us:

Readings:

Slaves' stories from *Chained to the Land: Voices from Cotton & Cane Plantations*

An excerpt from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

An excerpt from the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

Questions:

1. What surprised you in the stories of Mary Reynolds and Mrs. M. S. Fayman?
2. What is the worst aspect of life on a Louisiana plantation?
3. According to Frederick Douglass, how does a man become a slave?

Week 5: Mardi Gras as seen through local eyes.

Readings:

Nine Lives

<http://www.neworleanscvb.com/calendar-events/mardi-gras>

<http://www.mardigrasneworleans.com/mardigrasindians.html>

The 'Baby Dolls' of Mardi Gras A Fun Tradition With a Serious Side (NPR 2013)

Questions:

1. Did you swallow the baby in the King Cake?
2. What is the significance of the Mardi Gras Indians and the Baby Dolls?
3. What is a Krewe and how did integration change the Krewes?
4. Why is Mardi Gras considered a family event by New Orleanians?

Weeks 6 and 7: Music- A guest lecturer from Louis Armstrong Foundation covering roots of New Orleans music and Louis Armstrong

Readings:

Excerpts from *Up from the Cradle of Jazz* by Jason Berry, Jonathan Foose and Tad Jones

Excerpts from Roll With It Brass Bands in the Streets of New Orleans by Matt Sakakeeny

Questions:

1. Why in New Orleans is being in the high school band more prestigious than on the football team?
2. What were the effects of segregation on music?
3. What's special about a New Orleans funeral?
4. What is a second line? What is a first line?

Week 8: Drama

Readings (or watch Brando movie):

Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*—

Questions:

1. What's the significance of this streetcar's route?
2. How does Williams characterize New Orleans?
3. Is Blanche a tragic figure?

Week 9: Literature--three writers describe particular aspects of New Orleans

Readings:

Kate Chopin's stories, "Cavanelle" and "La Belle Zoraide"

An excerpt from Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*

An excerpt from John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*

Questions:

1. How does French Creole life in Louisiana differ from that of other cities in the US?
2. How does Hurston link the origins of Christianity and voodoo?
3. What aspects of New Orleans does Toole satirize in CD?

Week 10: Architecture, Art, Culture and Festivals- Visiting Expert Claude Sampson (need to confirm) has agreed to discuss the various forms of architecture in the city

Readings:

Course Pack (to be determined with Claude Sampson)

Questions:

1. From Creole cottages to shotgun houses, what makes New Orleans architecture so unique?
2. “Be Nice or Leave” is not only the credo of New Orleans life but the hallmark of what artist?
3. New Orleans has a festival a week. Which ones do you think would occur nowhere but New Orleans and why?

Week 11: Katrina and Aftermath

Readings:

Nine Lives

Excerpt from Why New Orleans Matters by Tom Piazza

Questions:

1. What caused the flooding?
2. What was it like to live through Katrina, the struggles during and after? Study Group members will discuss the impact of Katrina on their assigned *Nine Lives* character.

Week 12: Discussion of assigned *Nine Lives* character and summary by the group of what makes New Orleans different.