

# **LOUISIANA IN WORDS**



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EDITED BY JOSHUA CLARK



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Barry Gifford's "8:00 p.m." has been adapted from the original and used by permission of the author.

John Biguenet's "6:36 a.m." previously appeared in slightly different form in *The New Orleans Review*.



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## INTRODUCTION

# 4:33 A.M.

IT'S DIFFICULT FOR HIM TO SEE Louisiana in it anymore. The red highways have become arteries, the slight blue curves of rivers veins, the levels of brown contour intervals like fine wrinkles, the skin blotched with cities like graying bruises. Then, in the map's very bottom right corner the blue of the Gulf becomes dark, so dark the depth it conveys frightens him. It seems as though this is where the foot is headed, where it will scrape off the muck hanging from its sole—the southern parishes built of swamp, from New Orleans to New Iberia.

It's next to his bed, the only thing he has on his bedroom walls. It's about three feet tall and wide and, thanks to the United States Geological Survey, contains the most accurate geographical information humanly possible of our state, our state alone.

For years now, when sleep will not come, he has traveled around and around the state with his eyes, wondering what people are doing, dreaming right then in all those pinprick black dots joined by the crooked red roads thin as hair. He imagines the people there on his map, about the size of atoms, living their days, moving in circles, alone and together, bumping into one another in patternless rhythm. He wants to know them, these places, with more than his fingertip. He wants to grow them to life-size proportions, hear them, feel their light, smell their seasons, taste their waters, know them so well they in turn know him.

And so he has tried in the past years to touch as many of these places as possible, driven through them, slept in them, listened to them, ate, drank and breathed in them, but they are too many, and there is too little time for anything but a fleeting grasp at them, never any real hold, and never time enough for them to hold him.

Now, this morning, below the framed map are seven boxes piled

high with words telling him exactly what is happening in virtually every one of those dots, on every contour, every bayou, river, and lake. And so begins the long process of culling through submissions for *Louisiana in Words*. In these boxes, now in this book, are true stories, voices of generations, life and death, joy and sorrow, man and nature inside our state's borders.

After *America 24/7* was published, so was a similar book for every state. Like others before them, done the world over, these "day in the life" books, while necessary and remarkable in their own way, were mostly photographs. A picture can say a thousand words—an expression someone had to put into words, of course—but the right words can portray a million pictures, ones far more complex and meaningful than can ever be caught through the photographer's lens and squashed onto a silver halide negative or megabytes of pixels. Never before had a book sought to capture a single day in a state through short written pieces by different writers. Would it work?

Writing a true minute so that others can feel it, getting in so close they become a new person for a page, is quite different from snapping a photograph from a distance. Anyone can point a camera, take a thousand images, capture one that speaks to us—but to form a thousand words that brought together ring truth, to only have one shot?

Calls for submissions went out to every newspaper in the state (who knew we had well over a hundred?) and every public library, college, Web site, writing group, radio station, you name it, as well as international writing publications. The basic guidelines were fairly simple: In one page or less, write about one minute, anytime, anywhere in Louisiana. The response, in both quality and quantity, was tremendous, and many worthy pieces had to be excluded.

Though hurricanes inextricably frame our views of the world now, we asked that submissions not focus on them. Those minutes will continue to be told elsewhere. The words "Katrina" and "Rita" do not appear in a single story, yet some of these works presage not only the floods—such as the second piece—but the hope with which we've met our greatest challenge.

The stories' themes reveal our state in all its simplicity and complexity. And the writers range from MFA professors to people putting pencil to paper for the first time since grade school (and one who is in grade school).

Selecting the best writing would have been too easy. Selecting writing that best conveys the spirits of our state is another matter. Many didn't know how to write their first story any other way than to simply tell it. Their style is bare because there is none. And their every word wrenches truth from their minute.

There is no time to blink when you read these pieces. You might miss the magic. Some minutes are written after decades of intimate knowledge of a subject; others depict something their writers observed only briefly, something they will never see again. But all are firsthand observations. Many of the pieces are autobiographical, yet most writers refer to themselves as we would—in the third person.

There are conflicting perspectives on these pages, some that many people will not agree with, yet it would be dishonest to our state's nature to exclude them. As everywhere, ignorance rears its head in our state, and it will be shown here. And too, these pieces are not free of other "faults" that buck trends of modern literature. For instance, there's plenty of sentimentality, but only when the sentiment is honest to the story's, and state's, nature, rather than a romanticized notion of our place in the world.

The pieces run chronologically from dawn to dawn, spanning one single day, any day, merging past and present. They range from frost to swelter, from a man telling the story behind a picture of him taken in 1926 to the present day. Change and preservation, hand in hand, sweep across these pages beneath fleeting strokes of sun and sister stars. They are testament to what was, is, and always will be.

Of course, we cannot exhaust every last element of our state between these covers. But together these minutes provide a mosaic that conveys a whole Louisiana to the disparate regions within our state, to the outside world, and to the future.

A minute. The time it takes to defrost a couple of slices of bread in the microwave. The time it takes for your \$200 high heels to sink

into the mud around your mother's grave. The time it takes an old yardman whose name you never knew to save your young daughter from being kidnapped. Time it takes a levee to rupture. Teach your grandchildren to listen to the giant live oaks beneath which you grew up. To learn hate from men in white hoods. To bury a sparrow in the Mississippi.

And so he stands in his bedroom, facing the map on his wall, 4:33 a.m., above these pages, these words stacked below him. Now they are yours, ours.

—*Joshua Clark*



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