

New Orleans literature explains the city

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In celebration of the tricentennial of New Orleans, author, professor of creative writing and 'New Yorker' and 'New York Times' frequent contributor Thomas Beller examines writers who have helped him understand the contemporary city. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

You can never step into the same river twice, as Heraclitus wrote, and the same may be true of a book. Except in the famous aphorism it's the river that's always changing, whereas with books, it's the reader.

I have a highly subjective list of books set in New Orleans that are important to me. Some I tried to read before I got here, but I never was able to until I arrived. The city was the key to opening the book. And there's a book I read before I got here—when I read it the second time around from within the landscape in which it is set, I

realized, the book was the key to the city, or at least one particular neighborhood.

In the months before I moved to New Orleans in the fall of 2008, I reached out to people in the world of publishing to ask for reading recommendations to help me get the lay of the land. An editor at the *Sunday New York Times Magazine* referred me to an article by Michael Lewis, “Wading Towards Home,” which had appeared three years earlier in October 2005. The piece is about Lewis’ visit to his hometown in the immediate aftermath of Katrina. Yet, despite the topical nature of the subject, it is his thoughts on the nature of time in New Orleans that have stayed with me.

“There’s a fine line between stability and stagnation, and by the time I was born, New Orleans had already crossed it,” is the faintly Tolstoyan lead.

That tension between what’s good about continuity and what is not good about continuity has been a useful, and inevitable, lens through which to see the city ever since.

On revisiting the article I see that the next lines of the piece have also stayed with me: “The difference between growing up in New Orleans, starting in 1960, and growing up most other places in America was how easy it was to believe, in New Orleans, that nothing meaningful occurred outside it. No one of importance ever seemed to move in, just as no one of importance ever moved away.”

An interesting observation coming from someone who moved away.

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“The act of reading a book is only partly about picking it up. The larger task is not putting it down.”

— Thomas Beller, professor of creative writing