

Another World Close to Home

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rrivet@tulane.edu

Sometimes a natural environment speaks to someone in a way that makes him have to write about or paint or photograph that piece of the world. For law professor Oliver Houck, the little sliver of land between the Mississippi River and the levee has proven to be a muse.



Law professor Oliver Houck says he never set out to write *Down on the Batture*, but became “seized” by the project, which he completed in a little more than four months. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Houck's new book *Down on the Batture* (University Press of Mississippi) comprises a series of 39 stories about the “rim of land and trees” he found 13 years ago while walking his dog.

“I have no way to describe what this book is about,” says [Houck](#). “And the place is as hard to define as the book.”

His stories are diverse; some are first-hand accounts about things he's seen or people he's met, and others add historical context to the often-ignored swath that blurs the boundary of river and land. The stories show a clear reverence for “the accidental little piece of terrain” and its ability to transport the author to another

time and place.

“One enormous value of this place is the removal you get in no other place in this city,” Houck says. “I found that when I hopped the levee and went into the woods I got instantly away from the sound of the city and even the feeling of the 20th and 21st century.”

Houck says the book began with a single story that was gradually followed by more stories about the objects, animals and characters he stumbled upon in this area he describes as “very New Orleans.”

“Like New Orleans, you can go through it on any given day and see nothing, but then when you're drifting down there with nothing in particular in mind, you'll come across something that can be a bit shocking, but also have its own attractiveness. There's something magnetic about the place. I get drawn down there.”