

## **Hurricane Katrina in Popular Non-Fiction: A Bibliography**

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### Abstract

Hurricane Katrina and the events following had a profound effect on the entire United States, but most particularly on the political, environmental, commercial, and social situation in the state of Louisiana. As may be expected from such an important event, it also inspired a wealth of literature on the topic ranging from personal survivor accounts to expert research and every step in between. This work attempts to highlight a representative sample of non-fiction monographs accessible to the educated reader without requiring academic expertise in any particular area. Effort was made to ensure that the selection represents a wide variety of perspectives on Hurricane Katrina and its impact on the city of New Orleans, Louisiana. It is the author's hope that this annotated bibliography may assist librarians in the state in choosing titles to purchase and recommend to their readers.

## **Hurricane Katrina in Popular Non-Fiction: A Bibliography**

### **Introduction**

Hurricane Katrina made landfall near Buras, Louisiana, on August 29, 2005 as a very large Category 3 storm on the Saffir-Simpson scale. It then turned east, avoiding a direct hit to the city of New Orleans, and slamming into the Mississippi and Alabama coasts (Knabb, Rhome and Brown 2006, 3). What followed was one of the worst natural disasters in the history of the United States; a disaster that was exacerbated and compounded by human error. The official National Hurricane Center report published in August of 2006 placed the total cost at approximately \$81 billion – other estimates place the cost well over \$100 billion. Even the lower estimates make it by far the costliest hurricane in US history, more than double the cost of the previous record-holder, Hurricane Andrew in 1992 (p. 12). This same report places the human cost at more than 1800 lives, with nearly 1600 of those in the state of Louisiana (p. 11).

Why so many lives lost in Louisiana, when by all accounts Mississippi and Alabama were hit harder? The short answer is that the city of New Orleans flooded, catastrophically, when several of the levees protecting the city failed under the pressure of Katrina's storm surge. The short answer is, of course, rarely the whole story. Katrina was a Category 3 storm when she made landfall, but by the time her west side hit New Orleans, the winds were only in the Category 1-2 range (p. 8). The levees built by the Army Corp of Engineers were designed to protect against what was called the "Standard Project Hurricane" – a hypothetical hurricane that corresponds to a Category 3 on the Saffir-Simpson scale (Mittal 2005, 1). Katrina was not a greater storm than these levees had been designed for. In addition, response to the disaster was incomprehensibly slow, with thousands trapped in deplorable conditions within the flooded city, many of them elderly and in need of medical attention, which too often came too late.

The combination of a devastating natural disaster with the human failure caused by inadequate planning and sluggish response that cost even more lives has inspired a number of books from experts trying to make sense of it all, as well as simple survivors wanting to tell their story. And this is a story that needs to be told. We cannot prevent hurricanes, much as we might like to. But we can plan for them and prepare for them and minimize the damage and the loss of life. But this will only happen if the people of this country understand what happened during Katrina, and what needs to be done to make sure it never happens again.

With that hope in mind, what follows is an annotated bibliography of selected books written for the general public about Hurricane Katrina and its affect on Louisiana, and the city of New Orleans in particular. This emphasis is not intended to slight those in Mississippi or Alabama or to denigrate the very real damage and suffering experienced there. But what happened in Mississippi and Alabama was primarily a natural disaster – the proverbial ‘act of God’. What happened in New Orleans was far more a man-made disaster – allowing what should have been a relatively minor amount of damage become a catastrophe.

For those more academically-minded, there are a number of good scholarly reports, technical papers, and government documents relating to Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. For the scope of this paper, however, the annotations are limited to those books which can reach a broad audience, and do not require a scientific degree to understand. While not exhaustive, this list is representative of the many stories that have come out of this disaster. When putting together the list, several factors were considered. In order to produce a list of books that would appeal to a large audience, as well as provide information on the event, the choice was made to limit selection to non-fiction book-length works published in the years immediately succeeding Hurricane Katrina. Those that were chosen range from publication dates of 2005 through 2008.

The choice was also made to exclude works that were primarily focused on photos or illustrations, such as “coffee-table books,” of which there were many. Finally, in the interest of providing a bibliography of readable length, eleven books were chosen to represent the sheer breadth of contexts and intentions that make up the bulk of Katrina literature. The books included here come from a variety of perspectives – environmental, political, personal, and more, and are written by a variety of individuals, including journalists, scientists, professional writers, and simple people who survived the hurricane. Some of these books are primarily factual, while others are clearly written to convey the author’s feelings and opinions. What these authors have in common is the desire to get this story out there – to make people both within Louisiana and beyond understand the magnitude of what happened here and how it could have been prevented – and how it *\*must\** be prevented from happening again.

Although the list was selected specifically for accessibility to the general populace, its usefulness is not limited to non-academic settings. For anyone doing research on the impact of Hurricane Katrina on public opinion, policy, social efforts, or the media, the books included here will be invaluable in providing not only a variety of perspectives, but also an idea of how the hurricane has been represented in popular non-fiction. These books represent the side of Katrina that has been made accessible to the non-specialist, and that in itself is a subject worthy of inquiry. In addition, this bibliography is an excellent starting place for undergraduate-level “position papers.” Finally, the mission of any university is to give its students a well-rounded education. The issues surrounding Hurricane Katrina and its impact on the city of New Orleans are something everyone student in Louisiana should be educated in, not just those specializing in Politics, Environmental Sciences, or Sociology. It is my hope that this bibliography will help

academic librarians make information on this extremely important event accessible to a wider range of students.

### **Works Cited**

Knabb, Richard D., Jamie R. Rhome and Daniel P. Brown, “Tropical Cyclone Report: Hurricane Katrina, 23-30 August 2005.” Silver Spring, MD: National Hurricane Center, 10 August 2006. Accessed at [http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/pdf/TCR-AL122005\\_Katrina.pdf](http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/pdf/TCR-AL122005_Katrina.pdf).

Mittal, Anu, “Army Corps of Engineers Lake Ponchartrain and Vicinity Hurricane Protection Project,” Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, September 2005. Accessed at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d051050t.pdf>.

## Bibliography

Jenni Bergel et al., *City Adrift: New Orleans Before and After Katrina*, Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2007; 168 pages.

*City Adrift* is a collection of essays published by the Center for Public Integrity. Each essay focuses on a particular aspect of the Katrina disaster and recovery effort, including the environmental factors, health care failures, politics, the fate of prisoners and the criminal justice system, and housing and insurance. Each essay explores either a contributing factor to the disaster, or a social system that failed in the aftermath, and provides a basic overview of the historical and social contributions to and consequences of the near-destruction of New Orleans in 2005. The chapters are by no means comprehensive - entire books could be written about each subject individually. But taken together, the collection provides a good variety of perspectives on Katrina's impact Louisiana in general, and New Orleans in particular.

Walter M. Brasch, *Unacceptable: the Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina*, Charleston, SC: BookSurge, 2005; 100 pages.

As the title suggests, this is an inflammatory, highly partisan critique of the federal response to Hurricane Katrina, placing particular blame on President Bush and top Republicans in his administration. This does not mean that the information contained within is not valid. Brasch's position is well-supported, although he fails to clearly distinguish between authoritative scholarly and government sources and subjective interviews and newspaper articles. Considering

the proliferation of rumor and misinformation after Hurricane Katrina, even in the mainstream media (unsubstantiated claims of snipers firing at rescue operators comes to mind), this oversight is a significant one. Brasch presents his case, and leaves it up to the reader to determine the reliability of his sources. In addition, although he consistently states his sources within the text, there is no bibliography or endnotes giving complete citations, so fact-checking can be difficult. Despite these drawbacks, the prose is clear and the thesis well-argued.

Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge*, New York: William Morrow, 2006; 736 pages.

This book chronicles the week of Katrina, from the Saturday before to the Saturday after. It is organized roughly chronologically, although a few sections span several days. Brinkley attempts to give a full picture of the scientific, political, and social contexts that surrounded this great tragedy, and for the most part, he succeeds admirably. The balance between dry facts and engaging personal stories is well-done, although in some cases the transition is a bit abrupt. The information is exhaustive and comprehensive and the prose is clear and well-written. This is a good general overview of Katrina.

Joshua Clark, *Heart Like Water: Surviving Katrina and life in its disaster zone*, New York: Free Press, 2007; 356 pages.

This is the most ‘literary’ of the Katrina books. It is primarily a memoir, written by Joshua Clark, a publisher and journalist living in the French Quarter, who stayed during Katrina. He writes about his own experience, and the experiences of those he met, focusing on the French Quarter and the strong community of holdouts that sprang up in the aftermath of the storm. It is

also the story of relationships – how Katrina brought people closer together and tore them apart. The language is dreamlike – almost stream-of-consciousness – and sometimes goes too far and falls into incomprehensibility and pretentiousness. But overall, the book does a good job of capturing the surreal nature of life in New Orleans during and after Katrina.

Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*, New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006; 258 pages.

From Kanye West's famous statement that "George Bush doesn't care about black people" to the Associate Press photo captions that depict white people "finding" and black people "looting" food, Dyson examines the role both race and class played in the preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina. Dyson argues that hidden biases toward and misconceptions about the black poor who made up a large section of the pre-Katrina New Orleans population, negatively affected both the amount of money spent on flood prevention prior to Katrina, and the speed and quality of the response after the hurricane. Nor does he stop at holding the various levels of government responsible for exacerbating the disaster. Dyson analyzes the media response and its culpability in spreading unfounded rumors of black violence in the aftermath, as well as its unquestioning acceptance of negative stereotypes. He castigates the conservative religious who openly promulgated the view that Katrina was God's punishment for the people's sins and the large, politically-connected corporations who swept in to take advantage of the disaster, and who are planning on rebuilding a whiter, more gentrified New Orleans. And through it all, Dyson examines the history and tradition of racism and classism in America, the



South, and New Orleans and examine the elements in our society today that conspire to oppress poor minorities while abrogating responsibility for their suffering.

Jed Horne, *Breach of Faith: Hurricane Katrina and the Near Death of a Great American City*, New York: Random House, 2006; 432 pages.

Of the many Katrina books, this one focuses much more on the politics and bureaucracy surround the relief effort than anything else. This means that it has some very useful information, but that it's also dryer than some of the other books that focus on the environmental or social aspects. Horne delights in throwing blame, and there is plenty of it to go around. Everyone did wrong, it seems, in some cases to a truly ludicrous extent. Witness the fact that FEMA spent over \$170 a square foot to tarp damaged roofs; a project that went through approximately 5 middlemen before getting to the men who actually did the work -- for \$2 a square foot. The book jumps around a bit more than strictly necessary perhaps, each chapter capable of standing alone with little to any transition from one to the next. And Horne does provide the reader with a few success stories -- such as the Community Grounds project that went from a handful of friends volunteering to one of the most successful relief groups in New Orleans.

John McQuaid and Mark Schleifstein, *Path of Destruction: the Devastation of New Orleans and the Coming Age of Superstorms*, New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2006; 384 pages.

This is a great book about the geological history of South Louisiana, the civil history of New Orleans, and the many and myriad reasons Katrina was as catastrophic as it was. The book explores in detail many of the seemingly small things overlooked that in the aftermath caused large problems, and explains some of the many miscommunications that occurred that allowed the crisis to escalate. It serves as a good overall introduction to the issues and events surrounding Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans.

Phyllis Montana-Leblanc, *Not Just the Levees Broke: My Story During and After Hurricane Katrina*, New York: Atria Books, 2008; 240 pages.

Phyllis Montana-Leblanc was one of the main voices in Spike Lee's documentary *When the Levees Broke*. In this book, she gives her voice free reign, telling her whole story in conversational and deeply personal language. Phyllis writes as she speaks, and this may make it a difficult read for some, with its profuse profanity, strongly colloquial phrasing, and random, stream-of-consciousness style. Montana-Leblanc paints an intimate portrait of a life nearly destroyed by the hurricane and its aftermath, interspersed with opinionated diatribes on politics, racism, corporate culture, morality, and numerous other subjects. This is not a comfortable read in any sense, but it is starkly real.

Chris Rose, *I Dead in Attic: After Katrina*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007; 384 pages.

This book is a gem -- a collection of essays written by Chris Rose, a columnist for the New Orleans Times-Picayune, about his experiences in post-Katrina New Orleans. It is a tribute to both his writing ability and to the spirit of New Orleans that the book makes you want to laugh more often than it makes you want to cry. This dark humor is typical New Orleans and a fitting representative of the spirit of its people.

Cathy Scott, *Pawprints of Katrina: Pets Saved and Lessons Learned*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 2008: 244 pages.

This is the story of the animal victims of Hurricane Katrina - the pets who were left behind, usually by well-meaning owners who believed they'd be back within only a few days. In some cases, the animals were left by those forced to evacuate by government officials, who forcibly separated residents from their pets. Scott tells the story from her point of view as a Best Friends Animal Society volunteer, working for one of the largest animal rescue operations to respond to the disaster. Although the book is filled mostly with success stories, there are sobering mentions of the failures - the animals who didn't make it home - and what is being done to assure companion animals are not abandoned on this scale ever again.

Ivor van Heerden and Mike Bryan, *The Storm: what went wrong and why during Hurricane Katrina – the inside story from one Louisiana scientist*. New York: Viking, 2006: 294 pages.

Ivor van Heerden was the deputy director of Louisiana State University's Hurricane Center, and one of Louisiana's foremost experts on hurricanes and their effect on populated areas. He and his team were involved with Hurricane Katrina from the start - situated in the crisis center in Baton Rouge before, during, and after the hurricane. Van Heerden also headed "Team Louisiana" - the state's contribution to the investigation of the levee failures. Van Heerden has a reputation for being blunt and outspoken in his criticism, and that quality is obvious in his book as well. He is clearly coming at the situation from a scientific angle, and he often goes off on diatribes on the bureaucracy, finger-pointing, money-grabbing, and currying favor that he calls 'politics as usual' and sees as standing in the way of good science. And the science is good. Despite his blunt nature and a clear unfamiliarity with non-academic writing, van Heerden explains effectively the complex conditions that led to the flooding in New Orleans. The book is peppered with illustrations, most of them crude pencil drawings obviously done by van Heerden himself, which nonetheless illustrate the forces at work. He explains in detail the construction of the levees, why and how they failed, and how they should have been built to properly withstand the storm surge of a hurricane even stronger than Katrina.

In the last section of the book van Heerden lays out in detail an ambitious plan to protect South Louisiana from future Katrinas. Based on the Dutch flood control system, van Heerden's plan includes miles of new levees, flood control gates, and other engineered protections, in conjunction with aggressive wetland creation and conservation and barrier island reconstruction. He shows how his plan can be enacted relatively cheaply, but requires strong cooperation among federal, state, and local administrations. He calls for the state, and the country, to step up do what

needs to be done in South Louisiana, regardless of politics, letting science set the policy for flood protection in the region.