

## City of a Million Dreams: A History of New Orleans at Year 300

### Jason Berry

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With a resident's in-the-bones understanding of the place, Jason Berry's *City of a Million Dreams* is a hypnotic biography of a unique American city.

Beyond its Mardis Gras, po boys, and jazz lies a richer and more complex New Orleans than anyone imagined. This history puts the emphasis on culture, and it marshals fascinating and seemingly disparate details and characters into a coherent, compulsive whole.

The *Laissez les bon temps rouler* merriment of Mardi Gras evolved out of the *liberté, égalité, et fraternité* sentiments of the French Revolution, the book reveals. Even before abolition, New Orleans had a large number of free black citizens, flaunted its Cajun and Creole cultures, and was a haven for escaped Caribbean slaves; in the twentieth century, it became a haven for gay communities. The Mardi Gras parade itself is a symbol of freedom, as are jazz funerals—a rare chance to be yourself without scrutiny.

Vivid portraits of the city's people—from household names like Louis Armstrong and Anne Rice, to less famous residents like Gertrude Morgan, one of earliest artists to exhibit “outsider art”—are included throughout. There are glimpses of neighborhoods, spiritual communities, haunted cemeteries, and ordinary people who join organizations with improbable names like the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club and the Tambourine and Fan Club.

Hurricane Katrina is not ignored or sugar-coated. It illustrates another of the book's themes: that however superficially unlike America New Orleans may be, it is hyper-American in its stubborn individuality and its ability to survive.

Over three dozen black-and-white photos bring the city to life, while numerous quotes and citations are sourced in well-ordered endnotes. *City of a Million Dreams* is history writing at its best, in which high-caliber prose manages to be as interesting as its subject.

SUSAN WAGGONER (November/December 2018)

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