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AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

On the Hurricane Coast: Trauma, Memory and Recovery in the Land in the Eye of the Storm
Douglas Bennett Lee
Create Space
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Three Stars (out of Five)

On the Hurricane Coast is a memoir-cum-travelogue that tells the story of journalist, photographer, and Philadelphia-native Douglas Bennett Lee's experiences of living on and reporting from the Central Gulf Coast. Though a northerner by birth, Lee's connection to the region runs deep: "My parents were both raised Gulf Coasters, my mother in Port Arthur, Texas, my father in Mississippi and Louisiana…" In impressive—but at times overwhelming—detail, his book celebrates personal heritage as it elegizes a culture ravaged by natural and manmade disasters.

The narrative is divided into two sections rich in personal and regional histories steeped in the lore of killer hurricanes from Audrey (1957) to Camille (1969) to Katrina (2005). The first section chronicles Lee's memories of the summers he spent as a youth in the 1960s and 1970s working on his uncle's farm "at the edge of the Mississippi woods" and just north of the "starlight coast." It also recalls episodes since 1980 and the present when Lee, now a staff writer for *National Geographic*, explored the Gulf basin with—among others—his tough-as-nails cousin John, field biologist Steve Berwick, and renowned nature and wildlife photographer C. C. Lockwood.

The second section begins in contemporary New Orleans, a city that in its post-Katrina sufferings mirrors the writer and his struggle to cope with alcoholism. In Lee's eyes, the now-humbled "Babylon of the Mississippi" emblematizes what could easily happen to other coastal cities in Mississippi, Alabama, and East Texas, some of which, like Port Arthur, have already become sad shadows of what they once were. "Dirty tricks of geography" combined with "social—and, in the case of New Orleans, political—weaknesses" can and will create the conditions that will kill a once-thriving urban center. Lee writes, "…this is how a city dies—not overnight, but over decades, after absorbing a series of body blows from which it's never given time to quite catch its breath or regain equilibrium."

The profound love that Lee so amply demonstrates for the Gulf Coast region and its people is inspiring; however, it may also be the source of a major flaw. The narrative is hyper-descriptive and meandering, which makes for slow reading, as does the large, rather unwieldy format of the book itself. Still, Lee's work is admirable for the honest way it speaks about the corruption that is the tragic political inheritance of many Gulf cities, and for the warning it sounds about the slow disappearance of cities, lands—and indeed an entire way of life—along one of the most beautiful and fragile stretches of coast in North America.

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