

AFTER THE DELUGE

A WEBCOMIC TELLS THE STORIES AFTER KATRINA

BY LEO MCGOVERN

Josh Neufeld has become adept at telling graphic stories of a personal nature — his comic series *The Vagabonds* chronicles his and wife Sari's travels around the world, his artwork frequently tells Harvey Pekar's unique slice-of-life stories in *American Splendor*, and his 2004 graphic novel *A Few Perfect Hours (and Other Stories From Southeast Asia & Central Europe)* won him a prestigious grant from the Xeric Foundation. Neufeld's latest projects feature both personal and, for the first time, communal stories. In early '06 Neufeld released *Katrina Came Calling*, a chapbook-style collection of prose journal entries written in late '05 during a three-week tour of duty with the Red Cross in Biloxi and Gulfport, Mississippi. In January '07 the prologue of Neufeld's new sequential art project, *New Orleans: After The Deluge*, premiered on SMITH, an upstart website that celebrates personal storytelling and, in 2006, published *Shooting War*, a highly acclaimed webcomic about the war in Iraq. *After The Deluge* features several real-life people affected by Katrina (including AG editor Leo McGovern), and Neufeld intends to weave those people's stories together in an attempt to show readers that New Orleans isn't a city full of statistics; that the populace of the Gulf Coast isn't simply full of people either with or without the means and/or desire to leave, return and rebuild; that our region, even a year and a half after Katrina, is brimming with grey area.

ANTIGRAVITY spoke with Neufeld about the reasons he created *A.D.*, what he hopes readers take away from these stories, and how this project is different from anything he's done before.

ANTIGRAVITY: For people who weren't able to get hold of your 'zine, *Katrina Came Calling*, tell us a bit about why you chose to enlist in the Red Cross and where you traveled to.

Josh Neufeld: I volunteered for the Red Cross because I was absolutely compelled to. The feeling I had was undoubtedly the closest experience I'll ever have to a religious calling; in the aftermath of Katrina I just knew I had to do something to help. Originally I volunteered at my local (New York City) chapter, helping evacuees who had made it to New York with temporary resettlement. Eventually I signed up for disaster training and deployment to the hurricane zone. Six weeks after the hurricane I landed in Biloxi, MS, where I drove around in an Emergency Response Vehicle for three weeks distributing hot meals to local residents.

AG: How did *After The Deluge* come about?

JN: I'd long been contemplating doing a comic book treatment of my experiences in the Gulf Coast. Meanwhile, SMITH Magazine was running a serialized graphic novel called *Shooting War*. After that finished its run, SMITH's Comics Editor Jeff Newelt independently contacted me about doing their next comic — one about Hurricane Katrina. The fates were obviously pointing in this direction! After discussing the project a bit with SMITH editor Larry Smith, we decided to focus the project on New Orleans

(although it will also touch upon my experiences in Biloxi).

AG: Why chose real people to use as characters in *A.D.*, rather than create characters that you could mold into a dramatic story?

JN: It's long been my belief as a cartoonist that real people's stories are inherently dramatic, and that it's important to celebrate real life as much as fantasy/fiction. (My work as an illustrator for *American Splendor* and David Greenberger's *Duplex Planet Illustrated* really cemented those ideas for me.) With an event as monumental as Hurricane Katrina, I feel it doubly vital to tell real people's stories, and remind readers that the hurricane continues to reverberate in the lives of millions of folks from that region. And since SMITH's motto is "Everyone Has a Story," that dovetails perfectly with my goals for the project.

AG: What led you to the people you chose?

JN: From the beginning we felt it important to represent as wide a range of experiences as possible. We wanted subjects who covered the gamut: well-off and poor, black and white, young and old, male and female, those who evacuated and those who stayed behind, people who lost everything they owned and those who salvaged almost everything. The people we ended up choosing came from multiple sources. Some (like yourself!) presented

The Cast of *A.D.*



Denise
Sixth-generation New Orleanian poet, singer, and kickboxer.



The Doctor
Medical man about town, often found at the legendary Galatoire's.



Hamid
Father of two and owner of a family-run supermarket in Uptown.



Kevin
College-bound son of a local pastor.



Leo
Local music-zine publisher who lives with his girlfriend, Michelle.

themselves early on. Others came via articles, radio programs, and various personal contacts. We cast a wide net, did tons of legwork, and, in the end, are taking our best guess that this mix works — for us, the reader and the “characters” themselves who make up the mix. It was only a couple of weeks ago that we “nailed down” all five main subjects, and got to meet everybody in person on a short trip down to New Orleans. We felt it was important to get a sense of people in person, and let people get a sense of us. The amount of information we took in in those meetings was truly intense, and we believe will serve our characters, comic, and readers well.

AG: How close will the comic be to those people’s actual stories?

JN: I always try to hew as closely as possible to actual events in my stories. However, there are times when I am forced to make certain editorial decisions about compressing events, combining characters, or other relatively minor details, in order to make a scene work. What’s most important to me is to remain faithful to the emotional truth of the events, and to my subjects’ experiences.

AG: How familiar with New Orleans were you before Katrina?

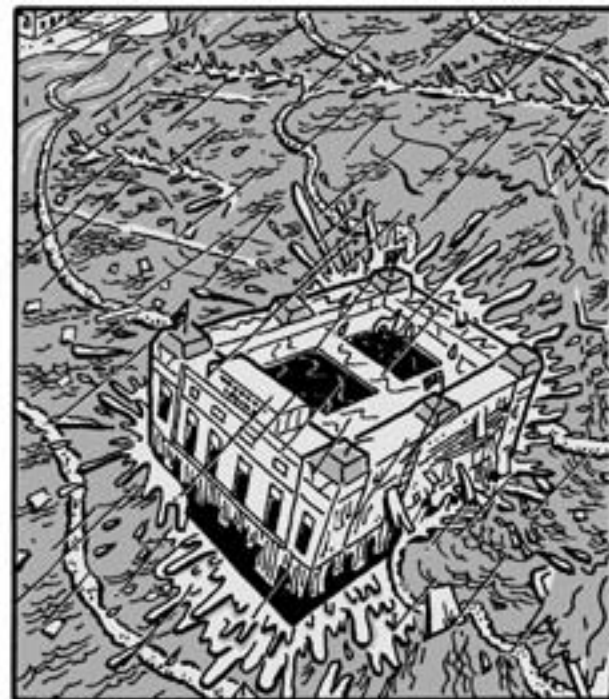
JN: Well, I had spent about a week there in 2003 visiting my friend Rob Walker and touring the city. Rob lived in NOLA for about five years and really loved the city. He showed my wife and I a great time, talked a lot about the city’s political and social life, and took us to many off-the-beaten path destinations. He also wrote a series of thoughtful essays about the city and the region (which he eventually published under the title *Letters From New Orleans* [Garrett County Press]), which I read avidly. So, despite my relative lack of expertise about New Orleans, I felt a great affinity for the city, which had really imprinted its character on my psyche. That was in many ways why I was so horrified by the post-hurricane flooding, and was so motivated to do something — anything — I could do to help.

AG: A lot of comparisons have been made between the aftermath of Katrina and 9/11. You’ve been involved in both. What similarities and differences do you see?

JN: Hmmm. Without being a resident of the Gulf Coast, it’s hard for me to make that comparison. Both events were historical in proportion, and both affected the relevant urban centers (New York and New Orleans) in profound ways. But it’s important to remember that 9/11 was the result of a deliberate attack by a group of terrorists, while Katrina was the result of a toxic combination of nature and government neglect and incompetence. Also, as horrific as the attack on the World Trade Center was, the physical effects were limited to the relatively small area of “Ground Zero,” while Katrina cut a swatch across thousands and thousands of square miles. Katrina also directly affected far more families than 9/11. The burden of infrastructure recovery and rebuilding is *much* higher in Louisiana, Mississippi and the other Gulf Coast states than in New York. Another major difference between the two events is the symbolic significance. The attacks of 9/11 were felt as an attack on our whole country; whereas Katrina laid bare the realities of decades of poverty, discrimination, and government corruption within our own country.

AG: How does it feel to be from New York and tell the stories featured in A.D.? Do you worry that people might not take it seriously because you’re an “outsider?”

JN: No, I don’t worry about that — should I? Seriously, I’m approaching this project in my best journalistic way. I’m constantly interviewing the subjects, I’ve visited New Orleans a number of times, done lots of research,



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etc. All the same, as I think I mentioned before, I feel my main burden is to get to the essence of the story, the emotional/psychological/spiritual “truth” of it — as opposed to being obsessed with the literal truth. That said, I am doing my best to get the basic facts — as well as the details — right.

AG: How does your work on A.D. differ from *The Vagabonds* or *American Splendor*? Is your preparation different?

JN: A.D. is the first major project I've embarked on which focuses mostly on other people experiences. In my previous work, I either told my own stories or illustrated Harvey Pekar's autobiographical tales. So the burden on A.D. feels much larger. I really want to “do right” by the stories of the folks whose tales I'm telling. And given the subject matter, there's a lot of extra emotional weight involved. But I'm really excited to do it: because it will test my limits as a storyteller, and because it's such an important story to tell. And, yes the preparation is quite different from my previous work — from interviewing folks in-depth about their lives and experiences, to doing extensive photo research, to weaving multiple storylines together into (hopefully) one coherent narrative.

AG: What's the long-term intention with A.D.? What are the possibilities of a print edition at some point?

JN: My long-term intention is definitely to publish a book edition of A.D. For one thing, a graphic novel will reach a whole other group of readers, and also because I am a die-hard fan of books and printed materials. There's nothing that can replicate the feel of a printed, bound, graphic novel in your hand.

AG: All in all, what do you hope readers glean from A.D.?

JN: In terms of the form, I'm excited about the platform that SMITH Magazine has built and we're playing with: complementing the web-comic with a blog, podcasts, video, and a rich resource guide. The net sum is something we've been jokingly calling “*American Splendor 2.0.*” In terms of the emotional experience of reading A.D., we've really just begun, and even we don't know how it will end — so in that sense it's hard to say. But I'd like to think that New Orleanians and other Gulf Coast readers touched by the hurricane will feel that I represented their story well. I also want the book to reach the eyes and hands of readers all over the country (and, dare I say, the world), to remind them that the story of Hurricane Katrina and the city of New Orleans is not over. The fact is that the eyes of the world were on the region for a time in the fall of 2005, but as other news events, both large & small, enter the landscape, people inevitably begin to forget. For anyone living in New Orleans, the story of Katrina will play on for generations. That's a lot of people, and a lot of lives, in turmoil. My goal is for A.D. to be a document, however humble, of this period. **AG**

A.D.: New Orleans After The Deluge is now available for viewing at SMITHmag.net.

For more info on Josh Neufeld, go to:
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<http://4-eyez.livejournal.com>

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