

Born and raised in coastal Louisiana, Ernest J. Gaines is the author of eight books of fiction, including *The*

# Where have you gone New Orleans?

by Ernest J. Gaines



**New Orleans** Built for drainage, the London Avenue Canal carried floodwaters into the city.

**Yes, New Orleans will bounce back.** Taxis and buses and limousines will leave hotels and casinos, cutting in and out of traffic to deliver passengers to Louis Armstrong International Airport. They will pass by homes and apartments and offices and neighborhood grocery stores and neighborhood bars that had been, now gone but for the debris.

Yes, New Orleans will bounce back, because the taxis and buses and limousines will bring people back from Louis Armstrong airport to hotels and casinos, passing by the debris of Katrina. New Orleans will come back because the debris of homes and lives will eventually be cleared away from the streets, and the people in the taxis and buses, and especially those in limousines, will look out the window and forget what had been. Yes, after clearing all the debris of clothing and toys and furniture—refrigerators and TV sets and armoires and chifforobes (bought from Sears, Roebuck in the forties) and dressers and washstands and old pianos—and handbags and tricycles and broken dishes and dolls with one arm and no head and old laceless boxing gloves—after all this has been cleared away, New Orleans will come back.

New Orleans will come back after the old sidewalks and potholes in the streets have been repaired. Yes, New Orleans will come back after bulldozers have knocked down homes in the Ninth Ward and cleared away all remnants of the people who lived there. New Orleans will come back when streetcars run up and down St. Charles Street, and tourists won't be afraid of getting off anywhere. New Orleans will come back when infrastructure is back in place on streets like Gentilly, when trees and flowers like azaleas and camellias and magnolias are blooming again on Esplanade. New Orleans will come back when you can go to Dooky Chase and order your favorite Creole meal, and later visit Snug Harbor, where the bartender knows exactly how you like your martini. Yes, for some New Orleans will come back.

There will be times when you can cross Bourbon Street in front of traffic, knowing all the time they won't dare hit you because this is the Big Easy, and you can do anything you like. You can walk down Royal Street and look into antique shops, dreaming but never buying. Or you can go to Café du Monde for beignets and café au lait. There will be musicians out on the sidewalk—they may not be the same ones as before Katrina, but there will be music. And

## Let us not worry, there will always be a New

there will be the old carriages, driven by old men, with tired old mules, and you can go for a ride in the French Quarter or along the French Market. . . .

Yes, New Orleans will come back after politicians have argued over what part of the city should be rebuilt, and what part of the city should not be rebuilt at all. There will be town meetings, and there will be private citizens screaming at politicians, but in the end New Orleans will be rebuilt. Let us not worry, there will always be a New Orleans.

But I imagine stories of loss, and I wonder.

**The Joseph sisters**—so we will call them, for this is only a story—used to walk two miles to church every Sunday in starched white dresses and white hats and white gloves. They walked Indian style on the narrow, broken sidewalk, the older sister in front, the younger one a pace or two behind. Every Sunday they would go to the nine o'clock service. They would come back a couple of hours later, take off their neat white dresses, hats, and gloves, and put on everyday wearing clothes and sit out on the porch. But Katrina changed all that. The older sister was drowned when six feet of water came into the house. The other sister was rescued and taken away. Some said she was taken to Houston, some said Detroit. Others said they believed she went to Atlanta, but they weren't sure.

Or imagine a man standing among the crowd on Canal Street watching the Mardi Gras floats go by. There were thousands of people, but the man remembered one voice, a little boy who called out to the floats: "Throw me something, mister, throw me something, throw me something, mister, throw me something." There were thousands and thousands of screaming voices, but the man remembered that one voice. Each time one of the revelers on the floats would throw something—a doubloon, a string of beads, a plastic horn, or a plastic whistle—someone else would get to the prize before the boy did. Then the man had the luck to catch a red plastic horn, but when he looked for the boy, the boy was not there. Who was that little boy? Where did he go? Why did he leave before he got his treasure? The man heard another voice behind him, a woman's, saying, "You gon' keep that little horn, mister? I got some beads for my little girl, but nothing for my little boy. He sure would like that little red horn."

## New Orleans. But will it be my New Orleans?

That was years before Katrina. Two months after the storm, imagine this same man driving down South Claiborne Avenue, where he noticed a little red plastic horn on a pile of debris. He wondered if it could possibly be the same one he had given to the woman. No, no, it could not be. The people on the floats must have thrown thousands of those things since then. But he still wondered. What had happened to the woman? What had happened to her children? Were they alive, scattered all over the country, or were they dead?

There are other stories—true stories—just like these.

**New Orleans**, New Orleans, New Orleans, you will come back. But will you be my New Orleans, or the little boy's New Orleans, or the woman's New Orleans, or the Joseph sisters' New Orleans? I doubt it. Katrina and the politicians have made you a different New Orleans forever.



**New Orleans** Cracked mud upholsters the pews of the Greater St. Rose Baptist Church in the Lower Ninth Ward, where water rose more than 12 feet after the Industrial Canal levee failed.

**Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

Katrina felled a pine that cut the Jenkins family's trailer home in two. Since then, they've lived most of the time in a hotel room an hour away, cramped by salvaged possessions. Piles of hand-copied paperwork document their appeals to FEMA, the agency that pays for the room, for disaster aid to replace their uninsured trailer. "I don't know how we ever work our way out of this hole," says Delos Jenkins III, far right. He's disabled by a congenital heart defect, while his wife, Peggy, has frequent seizures. Son D. J., 12, separated from his friends and familiar school, now gets D's in subjects in which he once excelled.









### **New Orleans**

The force of rushing water blew out doors and windows of a house in the upscale Lakeview neighborhood, leaving only a handful of belongings (above) for homeowners to pick through. More than three million people were displaced by hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma. A year later, many of them are still scattered throughout the country.







### **Biloxi, Mississippi**

Harrah's Biloxi Grand Casino barge was condemned after Katrina swept it ashore. Even though Gulf Coast gambling palaces sustained severe damage (Katrina knocked out all 13 casinos on the Mississippi coast), they are one part of the local economy that is roaring back, to the relief of state and local officials, who collect hundreds of millions of dollars in gambling taxes. Three casinos were back in business by late 2005, and Harrah's said it would reopen the Grand this year.





### **Punta Gorda, Florida**

The FEMA trailer park is wedged between a cow pasture and a jail. More than a hundred white trailers filled with hurricane refugees are lined up on a field of blinding white sand and gravel. Fights and drug deals are common. "I wish we could go somewhere with houses and plants and colors," says Cory Arsenault, 14, who moved to the facility after Hurricane Charley tore up southwest Florida in 2004. The trailer park is overdue to be closed, and Cory's mother, who works in a day-care center, is seeking housing assistance so the family can move into an apartment nearby. □

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📌 **Dramatic Effects** Photographer David Burnett demonstrates his unusual technique, and teenagers from New Orleans record Katrina's aftermath in words and pictures, at [ngm.com/0608](http://ngm.com/0608).