

Patricia Smith on BLOOD DAZZLER & Hurricane Katrina Excerpted from an interview with Moira Richards

Patricia Smith: The physical destruction was to be expected. The Gulf region is prone to hurricanes. But there was a damning psychological undercurrent with more strength than any storm. At the root of it was the fact that most of the people affected by Hurricane Katrina were poor and black, a fact that ? in the eyes of many ? made the tragedy much less important. After all, bad things happen to black folks all the time ? this one was just riveting to watch.

And the depth of government deception was numbing. We've leapt to the aid of countries thousands of miles away with more fervor than we aided New Orleans. Racism was rampant, from our own government's fumbling and tepid response to media coverage that described blacks as ?looting? and whites as ?searching for food to feed their families.? Even those not directly affected by Katrina were shocked by their country's true face.

It helped to think of Katrina as a human story, not a regional one. Animals are trusted to the weather and lost all the time ? Luther B just happened to live in New Orleans. Our elderly are often thought of as disposable. George W. Bush is just the latest in a long line of dangerously clueless politicians. As the saying goes, if you miss one ? just wait. The specifics of the situation weren't as important as the raw emotions, the unflinching truths, the psychological trauma that made it so devastating. I'm writing as a witness, not as a journalist, and I strove to point to the experiences that were so frightening because they so closely parallel our own. Writing about Ethel Freeman, I wasn't saying ?Look at her.? I was saying ?Look at us.?

If you weren't angry after Katrina, you had to be in the market for a soul. There we were, as a country, standing at the juncture of blatant incompetence, commercial greed, political cluelessness and barely veiled racism. There was anger, yes, but I was also bewildered and incredulous ? even after seeing it, time and time again, it's always somewhat surprising to see just what this country is capable of.

There was a storm, and the land was scarred and buildings were broken and may never be rebuilt. Many people died. But for every person who was affected, there's an invisible trauma that radiates outward and touches a hundred other people ? displaced children who must forge new lives in places where they are so clearly ?the other?; elders who saw their family home destroyed, along with generations of mementos; members of the ?search teams,? who can't stop seeing those bloated bodies; the son or daughter of someone who died in that nursing home will wrestle with guilt, remorse and anger for the rest of their lives.

During Katrina, the tragedies were just piled one upon the other, and it was numbing. I wanted to write a series of very short persona poems, just to give those thirty-four people a few seconds of their voices back ? just enough to say ?I was here. Here is who I was.?

I didn't start out with the idea of writing a book. Every writer knows that feeling, when they're nudged by a vision or a story, and the nudging gets harder and more insistent, until it's clear that you're supposed to be writing. For me, that story was the one of the thirty-four St. Rita's Nursing Home residents, twenty miles southeast of downtown New Orleans, abandoned and

left behind to die as the floodwater from Hurricane Katrina rose to the roof of the home. I read that story, written in that terse and factual journalistic prose, and was immediately accosted by the plaintive wails, the feel of humidity on the skin, the sudden darkness, the sour smell of drenched bedding. I thought of an aunt who'd died in a nursing home, and one of the main things I remembered was a little yellow button at her bedside. Whenever she pressed that button, a nurse came in to attend to her needs. When I thought about St. Rita's, I pictured all those feeble fingers pushing, pushing, and no one coming. The lights were out, the water was rising, and no one was coming.

At the time, I had no intention of devoting an entire manuscript to the disaster, but I was driven to create a piece that began with dim flailing images, the sound of frantic prayer and the eerie whisper of rising waters. With the deaths of those thirty-four people, an insistent tribute took shape, trying to push silenced voices to the surface. After I finished that poem, I was reading it at a poetry festival in Palm Beach, Florida, and a woman almost directly in the center of the audience seemed to be very disturbed. She was checking her watch, fidgeting, looking as if she'd rush from the room if it wouldn't draw too much attention. After the reading, I approached her. You never know ? reading poetry is a learning experience, and you always have accept the fact that someone in the audience may have a sharper perspective, more knowledge, a personal experience that trumps what you've written. So, without being confrontational, I said something like, ?It looked like you were bothered by the poem. Do you mind if I ask why??

She looked like a rat trapped under the stove ? eyes wild and darting everywhere, mouth moving with no sound coming out. Finally, she blurted out, ?But they had Mardi Gras, didn't they?? which, to this day, may be the most illogical thing I've ever heard a human being say.

It made me think. To some people, Katrina was a jolting wake-up call, a focal point for a national conversation with no end. Other folks just wanted the damn thing to go away. The woman had seen revelers throwing beads from balconies during that first Mardi Gras after Katrina (the one I call the ?false gaiety Mardi Gras?), and she took that to mean that the city was fine, let's stop talking about it, case closed. I was horrified to realize how many people were waiting for the next big thing. After all, a hurricane that killed and displaced thousands of poor (mostly black) folks had nothing whatsoever to do with them. They're partying? Well, good for them.

So that's why I kept writing. And when I did, I realized how many voices, how many visions, I had internalized. I kept writing. And writing. I guess all I can hope for is that some day someone will pluck the book from a remainder bin, read the synopsis on the back, and say ?That's right. Katrina happened.? I want to keep people talking about it for as long as I can.

Once I realized that the poems would be released as a book, I admit that being accused of appropriation was my biggest worry. After all, I'm not from New Orleans, I have no relatives in New Orleans, I have no connection at all to the region. I experienced the story of Katrina that same way thousands of other people did ? on television, on radio, in newspapers, online. I had a bit of an insider advantage ? at the time, my husband was still at his job as a news features editor at the Associated Press, and he'd tell me stories about what his reporters were encountering. But, aside from that, I didn't have any insight that wasn't available to everyone else. Plus, there's such a textured cultural backdrop to New Orleans ? the language, the food, the music, the gospel ? that no one outside of the area is privy to.

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