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Katrina still echoes through lives, and deaths

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This week's two-year anniversary of the natural and human-made disaster known as Hurricane Katrina brings a second wave of books from the stormfront.

French Quarter resident Joshua Clark, only vaguely aware of the scope of the tragedy unfolding around him, never abandoned New Orleans; he reported from his home directly after the storm for Slate.com and NPR. "Heart Like Water: Surviving Katrina and Life in Its Disaster Zone" is his account of the bewildering days following the failure of the federal levees, dirty Atlantis as seen from the largely undamaged, undrowned "sliver by the river." Clark's writing is gonzo, high-octane stuff, dispatches from an American Baghdad where cold beer was plentiful but cold water was nonexistent . . . as were electricity, law, justice, and government.

Impressionistic, hallucinatory and informed with transcriptions of on-the-spot interviews, Clark's man-on-the-wrecked-street reportage is a cinema-verite take on the tragedy as it unfolded, presented by a witness who traveled his hometown on a battered bicycle in search of whatever truth he could find, slowly understanding the scale of the disaster. By the end, Clark's relationship with his girlfriend is in smithereens but his love for his city is painfully alive, a jagged YouTube video in words, a valentine from the apocalypse.

Michael Tisserand and his family did evacuate, and his "Sugarcane Academy: How a New Orleans Teacher and His Storm-Struck Students Created a School to Remember" is that seemingly impossible thing -- a gentle, hopeful tale about the displaced and the small Cajun town where they landed. Groping for normalcy amidst chaos and uncertainty, Tisserand, his pediatrician wife and their New Orleans friends attempt to keep their families intact with the help of an inspirational teacher who sets up a schoolhouse in the cane fields.

It's an Oprah-worthy story sure to resonate with young urban parents, but "Sugarcane Academy" has a bittersweet punchline: The Tisserands' home is relatively undamaged, but the physical and emotional landscape around it has changed for good. Like so many other families with kids, the Tisserands return home for a while, then reluctantly leave New Orleans to begin again in a city where the streets are clean and the schools exemplary . . . but the children sometimes weep for their former lives and the adults "struggle to make sense of the series of events that brought us there." Quiet and powerful.

The agony of displacement also informs Patty Friedmann's wicked, hilarious novel "A Little Bit Ruined," the sequel to her critically acclaimed "Eleanor Rushing." A wealthy, earthy belle whose figure and mind are both passing their sell-by dates, Eleanor lives off her family's past, her existence circumscribed by her tony Uptown mansion and the mean streets around it. When she attempts to ride out Katrina, floodwaters force her to take refuge in the home of her unenthused maid, and the two eventually flee the city. But it's not the hurricane that leaves Eleanor a little bit ruined; it's some ill-advised plastic surgery and an evacuation to big-box, big-hat Houston (standing in for modern America) that scars both her delicate body and her tough soul.

Formidable Eleanor is a symbol of New Orleans in all its contradictions -- lunatic and down-to-earth, gracious and sardonic, elegant and seedy -- and in her Friedmann has created the female counterpart to Ignatius Reilly, the opera bouffe lunatic hero of "A Confederacy of Dunces." As Eleanor and New

Orleans come undone together, you'll cringe at their excesses and self-delusion, but more often you'll laugh.

And then there's the reissue of "1 Dead in Attic: After Katrina," a book that's been on countless Louisiana nightstands since Chris Rose, a columnist for the New Orleans Times-Picayune, self-published it last year (it sold 60,000 copies). Now reissued by Simon & Schuster in an expanded edition, Rose's collection of contemporaneous columns begins with shock and horror, then a burst of jazzy can-do spirit, followed by numbness . . . and then, a few months post-K, the first suicide of one of Rose's friends. It won't be the last.

What follows is a slo-mo 9/11 of the human spirit, culminating in a scene in a filling station where Rose literally and figuratively runs out of gas, suffering a mental breakdown that parallels the city's collective civic mental fatigue. He's luckier than his co-workers, though, one of whom rebuilds her home only to have it flattened by a freak tornado six months later, and another whose own nervous collapse ends with him Tasered on a public street, begging the cops to shoot him.

Named for a ominous graffito Rose spotted on a destroyed house, "1 Dead" is full of New Orleans-specific references that will be inside-baseball to non-natives, but as a chronicle of the first year after The Thing, this blunt public diary is socio-personal history of the highest order, and far funnier than it has the right to be. You want to know what it was like? This is what it was like; this is still what it's like.

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