

ORLÉANS EMBRACE: A MAGNIFICENT TRIBUTE TO A CITY'S SOUL

by Ron Kenner

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LOS ANGELES, Calif. — If you believe what's been displayed on controversial satellite imagery of New Orleans lately—a pristine, lush landscape with fully developed neighborhoods, all somehow magically put back together after Katrina - no doubt you believe in Santa Claus.



In late August 2005, some 80 percent of New Orleans flooded, whole neighborhoods disappeared, and all too many died — needlessly — in the costliest and most devastating hurricane in U.S. history.

An angry sky and a looming, rain-streaked Vieux Carré await readers in a gorgeous new book honoring New Orleans.

Photo:

Louis Sahuc Photo Works

Many New Orleans residents (and others) were stunned by the use of outdated satellite images. A snafu, some said, but others were cynical, wondering if this wasn't one more bad p.r. response to disaster — spanning the prelude to the war in Iraq all the way to the Walter Reed scandal- as if our problems could be solved by a more pleasing image. If only it were so.

Yet occasionally there is still real progress. And why not in New Orleans, in the French Quarter, blessed with the high ground but also, nowadays, persevering as one of the world's more indomitable places?

Morgana Press — a local publishing house threatened by Katrina only days after agreeing to publish its first book, some of its principals forced to flee the deadly hurricane, many of those remaining utterly discouraged and investors growing queasy about other projects - is solidly back in business now, with pleasant new offices in the storied French Quarter, and has taken on that task.

Less than a month after moving in, the fledgling publisher officially launched its debut title, "Orléans Embrace," on Sunday, April 1. Morgana Press has produced an impressive book that has won a major national distributor, garnered warm compliments from the likes of Francis Ford Coppola, Jimmy Buffett and other celebrities, and glowing reviews.

The handsome, \$50 coffee-table volume, with text by TJ Fisher and Vieux Carré resident Roy F. Guste, Jr., the past fifth-generation proprietor of the world-renowned Antoine's Restaurant, interleaved with incredible photography by Guste and New Orleans native Louis Sahuc, is a profoundly beautiful study of the famous Vieux Carré (Old Square), the French Quarter of New Orleans. It is, said "Godfather" director Francis Ford Coppola, "An enchanting peek inside the elusively secret and mysterious parts of the indomitable French Quarter... the real Vieux Carré rarely glimpsed by outsiders."

Fisher states the case for the book in one dramatic line: "No great American city should be left lying spread out as a mutilated carcass with bits of people's lives strewn clear across the horizon."

Her inspired, eloquent text is the anchor for what are actually two volumes. "Orléans Embrace" is her paean to the secret life of New Orleans. Her text layered on a book of photographs and text Guste published in 1993 as a coffee-table volume called "The Secret Gardens of the Vieux Carré." That 1993 book sold out and was never reprinted until it was incorporated in the new work. Now, the title has become, "Orléans Embrace with The Secret Gardens of the Vieux Carré," but don't let the hefty title put you off. Any aficionado of the secret parts of American cities, or of New Orleans, will find it an amazing work.

Fisher is among the first to acknowledge using an "abundance" of words and is proud of it; but the problem is not that she doesn't care what she says but that she sometimes cares too much; a problem, if you want to call it that, that apparently led to a serious case of writer's block

"There was a time when beautiful photo books spotlighting exceptional places gave readers a glimpse of people and wildlife that would always be there. These days, the underlying message is we are lucky to view these now, because their existence is more fleeting than we may have imagined." -- San Francisco Chronicle

Photo:

Louis Sahuc Photo Works



(helped along by the tragedy of Katrina).

The problem didn't unblock and resolve itself until she got going full blast in "Orléans Embrace," turning a brief introduction into what soon became the nexus of a significantly expanded work.

The book is also being celebrated by the internationally distinguished Celtic singer and musician Danny O'Flaherty with a special song. A grand party last Sunday evening in the Vieux Carré at the Café Amelie, in the Princess of Monaco Courtyard, launched it with signings and the donation of two \$5,000 checks for two New Orleans groups dedicated to preservation of the French Quarter.

Lissy Peace, media spokesperson for Morgana, announced in March that the Vieux Carré Property Owners, Residents and Associates, Inc. (VCPORA) and the Friends of the Vieux Carré Commission (VCC) would share in Sunday's award and in future revenues from the book; both are non-profit

organizations.

In a statement, Morgana Press said "The VCC is empowered with the purpose of protecting the historic landmark district known as the Vieux Carré, a national treasure of architectural and cultural importance. The VCPORA, an advocacy group of residents and business owners, shares in the same overall visions, philosophies and goals of the VCC, in preserving the age-old district — 'the preservation, restoration, beautification and general betterment of the Vieux Carré'" — a storied neighborhood and tourist mecca destination known throughout the world.



Among its best-kept secrets are quiet courtyards given to peace and reflection - qualities most don't associate with the French Quarter.

Photo:

Louis Sahuc Photo Works

Publisher Irene Singletary's letter of thanks to the Publisher's Marketing Association poignantly recounts the struggle the book faced before publication: "Distributor after distributor had turned down our title, the republication of a hauntingly beautiful 1993 New Orleans classic pictorial, and we were devastated. We wanted to give up, but did not. We forged ahead, continuing to immerse ourselves in crash-course 'publishing 101'.

"After an exhaustive revamping of the work we surrounded the original unaltered material with a timely New Orleans narrative [by TJ Fisher] along with more than 150 additional photographs, thus developing our original title into a powerful new 1st edition

compilation featuring a trio of French Quarterite contributors."

The final product is an elegant, beautifully printed, 5.3-pound, oversized coffee table book with 378 exquisite and moving photos. Like New Orleans, it has an attitude, an over-the-top character with a flamboyant hat and ditzy charm that sometimes cloaks a penetrating intelligence. Just look at TJ Fisher's [photo](#). She's cute, but not dumb!

In her text, Fisher often dances gracefully on that thin line between sentiment and earnestness and what could easily fall into melodrama; her words were somewhat restrained by the editor, but she avoids melodrama because of the great credibility of her words; a little overflowing, perhaps, at times, a little rambling here and there, but she knows what she means and means what she says.



The ornate ironwork of its proud and defiant balconies

She says, along with Guste and Sahuc, saving New Orleans there's not even a Paris? Would you save Rome? Would of New York after 9/11, she asks — but

Many Americans have special memories Orleans, and, not least for the French Quarter as the hearty soul of of the city, a place with a special appreciation of American tradition, diversity, tolerance, sophistication, artistry, subtlety, irreverence and compassion.

Of course, it will take more than a tribute to save this wonderful city. Its businessmen wonder how they can return while New Orleans suffers just the shadow of its former economy, and former residents hesitate to return to neighborhoods without jobs or housing. A huge financial commitment to fully restoring the city is obviously more than the state or the nation is capable of amid the costly war in Iraq. But this beautiful appreciation New Orleans and its fabulous French Quarter is a genuine start that makes the task less daunting.

In a March 15 review in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, critic Regan McMahon poignantly observed, with reference to "Orléans Embrace" and several other works, "There was a time when beautiful photo books spotlighting exceptional places gave readers a glimpse of people and wildlife that would always be there. These days, the underlying message is we are lucky to view these now, because their existence is more fleeting than we may have imagined."

Many things don't feel right these days; all the more reason, I think, why we can draw sustenance from the special spirit of New Orleans. It is a place that has recovered from disaster more than once and doesn't give up easily; and we need the erudition and passion of Fisher and her hugely talented companions, Guste and Sahuc.

As the Louisiana Book News said, "Small independent Morgana Press of New Orleans has taken on a huge undertaking. And it's gorgeous."

Colleen Mondor of the American Library Association described the book as "Unusual, gorgeous, and intriguing," And Bookviews' Alan Caruba said, "Orléans Embrace ... [is] "a magnificent eyeful.... An emotional portrayal of the Quarter that shares 378 photographs of the gardens concealed behind the brick walls and iron gates of the district's breathtaking architecture... It is a real treasure that is bound to become a family heirloom."

Fisher, TJ, with Guste, Roy F., Jr., and Louis Sahuc Photo Works; editor, Ron Kenner: Orléans Embrace with The Secret Gardens of the Vieux Carré. New Orleans: Morgana Press, 2007. Illustrated with 378 photographs by Roy F. Guste, Jr. and Louis Sahuc. \$50.

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is a universal symbol of the French Quarter and New Orleans.

Photo:

Louis Sahuc Photo Works

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