

## Our Stories Told By Us: The Books of the Neighborhood Story Project

A Review Essay by Susan Weinstein



Bolding, Ebony. *Before and After N. Dorgenois*. Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2005. ISBN: 1933368314.

Wylie, Arlet and Sam Wylie. *Between Piety and Desire*. Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2005. ISBN: 1933368292.

Nelson, Ashley. *The Combination*. Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2005. ISBN: 1933368284.

Dennis, Jana. *Palmyra Street*. Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2005. ISBN: 1933368306.

Jackson, Waukesha. *What Would the World Be Without Women: Stories from the Ninth Ward*. Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2005. ISBN: 1933368322.

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People don't know the real John Mac. John Mac isn't all that bad, but when someone does have a fight, the next thing you know the news people are filming the camera trying to make us look bad. Yup, they be putting us on beam when they show us on the news and you know they just tell their side of the story. (Bolding 41)

John Mac, a.k.a. John McDonogh High School, is where the Neighborhood Story Project (NSP) began, and where the writers for the series were students until Hurricane Katrina hit in September 2005. The New Orleans school system as a whole has not had the best of reputations, but McDonogh gained particular notoriety after a fatal shooting in its gymnasium in 2003. The one-sided representations of the McDonogh community in the coverage of the incident were the impetus for Abram Himmelstein and Rachel Breunlin, English teachers at the school, to organize a small elective class that would give students a platform for telling their stories from their points of view. Himmelstein had previously self-published one book and authored another (*Tales of a Punk Rock Nothing* and *What the Hell Am I Doing Here?: The 100 T-Shirt Project*, respectively), so he had some experience on which to base the belief that they could actually pull off this ambitious project.

Released in spring 2005, the five books tell the stories of New Orleans' Sixth, Seventh, and Ninth Wards. These areas are largely African American, largely poor, full of history, traditions, and rituals—the homes of second lines and Mardi Gras Indians, corner stores, well-worn porches, and misbelieve trees. Each book features a teenaged author (in the case of *Between Piety and Desire*, sibling co-authors) narrating personal and family histories as well as the lives of her or his particular neighborhood.

To the extent that these books resemble any other publication, the closest comparison is probably to *Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago*, a book narrated by

two teenaged Chicago youths who had originally been interviewed for a series of National Public Radio reports following the death of a child in their public housing complex. However, *Our America*—a powerful book in its own right—sticks more closely to the motivating event behind its writing, focusing on the difficulties and dangers of urban poverty as lived experience. For the NSP writers, on the other hand, the common goal is to challenge preconceived notions about their neighborhoods. In her dedication, Jana Dennis writes, “I want them to see that our block is not just negative.” Ashley Nelson says, “We do have problems in Lafitte [housing projects], but damn, it doesn’t mean you have to run away from us. The world has problems and we are all a part of them somehow, even if people don’t want to admit it” (8). The intelligence of this sentiment floors me—it’s part plea, part accusation, part invitation... and completely compelling. To counter negative perceptions, the books focus on how residents themselves experience life in these communities. This ethnographic sensibility is not accidental; co-director Rachel Breunlin has a Master’s degree in urban anthropology, and she coached the writers in interviewing, research, and photography.

Each book has a specific thematic focus. *Before and After N. Dorgenois* looks at the generation gap in views of the New Orleans ward system. *The Combination* examines the “combination” of good and bad elements that make up the author’s personal, family, and community experiences. *What Would the World Be Without Women: Stories from the Ninth Ward* moves from looking at the author’s personal relationships with older female family and friends to telling the stories of women throughout her community. *Palmyra Street* focuses on neighborhood traditions, particularly the Mardi Gras Indians with whom the author’s family paraded when she was a child. *Between Piety and Desire* (the title refers to the two streets that border the authors’ home) contrasts inside (the home, the family, their mother’s protectiveness and care) and outside (the boys on the corner, the barbershop, violence, and drugs). A number of the books also address the changing nature of their neighborhoods through interviews with new neighbors to whom the authors may never have spoken until the book gave them a reason.

The NSP combines elements of writing-as-social-action and writing-as-therapy, often in the same pages. Waukesha Jackson (*What Would the World Be Without Women: Stories from the Ninth Ward*) signals the former in her dedication: “This is for everyone who is struggling, especially my mom. Keep your head up, and tell your stories.” On the next page, in her acknowledgements, Jackson alludes to the emotional benefits of the project: “To Rachel, especially... for recognizing everything that I tried to hide, and letting me know that it was okay to let go.” Jackson acknowledges this blending of the social and the individual when she says, “things got personal as I began meeting and exploring the world” (7), a statement that reverberates with the echo of Freire’s famous claim that literacy can transform personal and social consciousness, that reading (or, in this case, writing) the word can be a way of reading (writing) the world.

There is, in some of the books, a clear consciousness of the community’s place in social history. Jackson tells us that her elementary school was the very one attended by Ruby Bridges, who as a child was the first to integrate the school. When the adult Bridges returns to visit the school, she is greeted with chants of “Ruby Bridges, we love you!” To Jackson, the irony of the greeting to this symbol of civil-rights-through-integration is clear: “All of the children were saying that, but I don’t think there were any white kids” (36). In *The Combination*, Ashley Nelson’s grandmother tells of being the first African American waitress to work the

diner floor at the local five and ten store. She says that she succeeded in large part because of the surreptitious support of the “blacks—and some whites” working in the diner: “People were getting my orders up, my tables set, and getting them cleared ... [They were] sayin, ‘You can’t girl, you can’t fail. You got to do this. You know what they’re waitin for: ‘We tried, but she didn’t work out’” (24).

The writers are eloquent when the subject turns to their parents. Both Jana Dennis (*Palmyra Street*) and Arlet and SamWylie (*Between Piety and Desire*) portray their mothers as protective, supportive, and hard-working. Dennis writes of her single mother, a Head Start teacher who feeds strangers and organizes family activities, “My mom wants us to leave home and go to college. She always says, ‘Don’t be like me, be better than me’ ... Sometimes I don’t think she realizes what a high standard she’s set” (7). The only male NSP author, Sam Wylie writes admiringly of his father; his two-page section entitled “Story About My Dad” is full of loving details of his father’s skills at woodworking, magic shows, preparing and eating shockingly hot peppers, and cooking huge meals of red beans and rice, ox tails, turkey necks, fried fish, and bread pudding (warning: do not read these books on an empty stomach).

Jackson and Nelson have more complicated stories to tell. Both young women face their mothers’ struggles with drugs, and both talk about the pain of their writing processes because of this subject matter. What stands out about these two books in particular is the straightforward, decidedly unsentimental way both young women reflect on difficult experiences. This is where the power of these stories lies—in their insistence on honesty together with a refusal to fetishize suffering. “Every time she was high,” Nelson writes, “drugs made my mother forget she loved us... But I forgave and loved her even if she forgot she loved me. The way I saw it was, ‘That high woman isn’t my mom. The woman deep down inside her is, and that’s who I loved’” (10).

Perhaps most striking about the books is that in the midst of the interviews and family narratives is some truly lovely writing. In *The Combination*, Nelson writes a song for her deceased mother. One of the lines reads, “In this life, none of my wishes even tried to come true” (34). Jana Dennis, talking about the young men who hang out on the corner, says, “The police don’t scare them. They are hard. They stand like stones” (42). It’s an elegantly simple series of statements, but one realizes its depth as one thinks about the rates of death and incarceration for such young men. They stand like stones, indeed: individually hard, but ultimately all too easy to kick aside.

It would have been easy to make this review about Hurricane Katrina—the losses the authors suffered, the questions about what will happen now. But that would be to once again reduce the experiences of New Orleanians, to position them as just victims, or just poor, or just [fill in the blank]. The Neighborhood Story Project’s first five books were researched, written, and published before Katrina hit, and although new meanings may have been added to these texts as a result of the massive changes wrought by the hurricane, the purpose and significance of the books haven’t fundamentally altered. They are still at root about real people claiming the right to tell their own stories, foregrounding the connectedness of people’s lives, and insisting on recognition of the multiplicity of every individual’s experience. Happily, this mission continues: Himelstein and Breunlin are currently working with members of the Ninth Ward’s Nine Times Social and Pleasure Club on a book about that group. They are also planning to set to work with a new group of McDonogh authors this fall.

## Works Cited

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