

A Library of Desire

Amos Lassen

I was born, raised, and partially educated in New Orleans, and though I have lived in many places, I always think of myself as a native New Orleanian first. New Orleanians keep the city with them every day of their lives. Those hot summer days when steam rises from the “banquettes” after an afternoon rain and “making groceries” have become traditions just like Po’boy sandwiches, doing laundry, and cooking red beans and rice on Mondays.

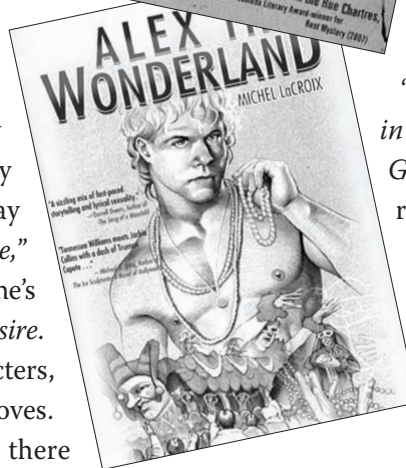
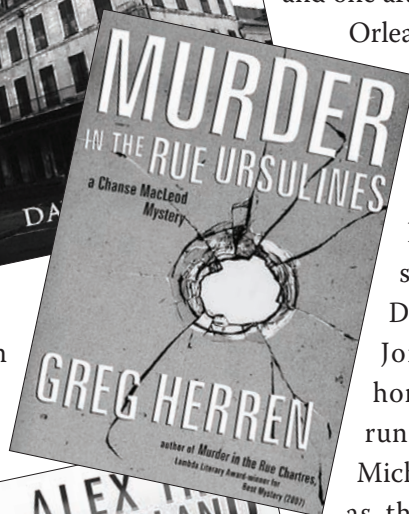
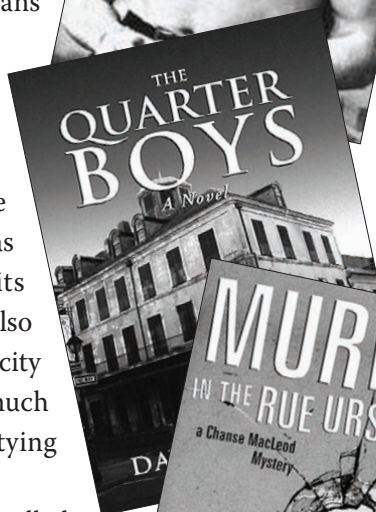
There is an exuberant attitude about New Orleans that is hard to define. I suppose it has to do with being known as “The City that Care Forgot.” We see this during Mardi Gras when the city rejoices with all of its citizens and guests. New Orleans is also nicknamed “The Big Easy” since the city gives the impression that nothing much matters (except for eating and partying and letting the good times roll).

“The Crescent City,” as it is also called, since it sits at the bend of the Mississippi River, has also had a tremendous influence on gay-themed literature, a result of the bohemian spirit that has historically saturated the French Quarter. We certainly cannot overlook the impact of the city on the works of Tennessee Williams, who lived and wrote in New Orleans for many years. While Williams was not “officially out,” his most famous dramas have gay characters—Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*,” Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and Blanche’s young husband in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Many of his short stories have gay characters, and his memoir relates many of his gay loves.

Taking a look at recent gay fiction there

are several authors who have written a series of books that are set in New Orleans. Greg Herren has used the city for twelve books, including two popular series of detective novels, one with Scotty Bradley (five books) and another with Chans MacLeod (six books). Herren resides in New Orleans with his partner, Paul Willis (head of the Saints and Sinners Literary Festival), so his descriptions are spot-on and I often become homesick and nostalgic while reading his work. He captures the beauty, off-beat characters, and the grit of the city that he calls home. Herren also writes remarkably of two cities of New Orleans, one before Katrina and one after the storm. Having been in New Orleans during Katrina, I can vouch for the honesty behind his work.

Another current mystery writer, David Lennon, has written six books that are set in New Orleans. In his Quarter Boys series, his main characters, Michael Doucette and Alexandra “Sassy” Jones, are former New Orleans homicide detectives who are now running their own business. Author Michel LaCroix has used the Big Easy as the setting for his three-volume “Wonderland” series, which includes *Alex in Wonderland*, *Through with the Looking Glass*, and *Down the Rabbit Hole*, which revolve around Alex Summer, a good looking twenty-six year-old who came out on the day he was to be married to another New Orleanian. Michael Holloway Perronne has also written a three-book series set in New Orleans. He deals with coming out in his first



volume, *Falling into Me*, the story of gay teen Mason who has come to New Orleans from rural Mississippi and experiences the decadence and liberation of the French Quarter. The other two volumes, *A Time Before Me* and *A Time Before Us*, follow Mason as he matures and accepts himself as gay.

Poppy Z. Brite, who began writing gothic horror novels and stories, has also written a series of linked novels featuring Rickey and G-Man, a gay New Orleans couple who love to cook as much as they love to have sex. They are the central characters in the superb novels *Liquor*, *Prime*, and *Soul Kitchen*.

New Orleans may be one of the most haunted cities in the world. Every day guides escort tourists through cemeteries and at night lead others to ghostly hotels, mansions, and bars, and the supernatural has had an enduring impact on gay literature set in the city. Anne Rice chose the city as the setting of her first novel, *Interview with the Vampire*, gaining a legion of gay fans and followers and ushering in a resurgence of vampire novels and ghost tours. *Interview* was published in 1976 and it reached all audiences with a simple story and a reinvention of the vampire myth, but from a gay perspective. Rice transformed the vampire from an ugly predator into a charismatic, sympathetic, seductive, seemingly human figure.

Lee Thomas has also utilized the supernatural background of New Orleans to superb effect in *Dust of Wonderland*. The hero of his novel, Kenneth Nicolson, returns to the city after learning that his son was in a coma after having been beaten by an unknown assailant. As he waits for news, he has visions of something evil that has caused several deaths at Wonderland, a gay bar. Jameson Currier takes a humorous approach to the supernatural in his novel *The Wolf at the Door*. A recent death at Le Petite Paradis, a gay guest house in the French Quarter,

unsettles the spirit world and the over-worked proprietor, Avery Green Dalrymple III (a New Orleans name if ever there was one), tries to reconcile his tendency to overindulge in bottled spirits with the hallucinations he has been experiencing.

New Orleans is also proud of its literary heritage. At one time the city was home to William Faulkner, Walt Whitman, Walker Percy, Truman Capote, and Lillian Hellman. I read William Sterling Walker's *Desire: Tales of New Orleans* hanging onto every word and re-reading many of its fine descriptions of the city. Walker has tuned into the literary heritage of New Orleans and has captured it in prose that is reminiscent of those who came before him. *Desire* is a collection of short stories about gay life in New Orleans before Katrina. Walker's characters are very real and he writes of them from his heart. I was flooded with memories of the Louisiana Purchase, a seedy hustler bar that is now Good Friends. Walker imbues his stories with a sophistication that is truly a New Orleans characteristic—or as we used to say “trashy elitism.”

Author Jim Grimsley has also used New Orleans as the locale for his literary coming-of-age novel. In *Boulevard*, naïve country boy Newell arrives in the city in 1976 and soon becomes a favorite “number” in the bars of the French Quarter. And a new writer, Jacob Campbell, uses the vibrant, sexual milieu of the French Quarter as a setting for his novel *New Orleans Knights*, set during 1980 and focusing on the misadventures of a promiscuous gay youth. Campbell has captured the New Orleans gay scene as it was before the specter of AIDS. Sexual liberation was the word and sexual opportunity was everywhere. It was a different time where care was non-existent and quick hot sex was the trend. Being gay was celebrated on



a daily basis, the bars were packed, and the bathhouses were never empty.

And if ever there was a great big gay New Orleans novel, it would have to be John Kennedy Toole's Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Confederacy of Dunces*, featuring Ignatius J. Reilly, an obese, fastidious, fractious Don-Quixote of a character. While Ignatius says that New Orleans does not have gay people, it is clear that Toole has written about a New Orleans which does have a gay community and that Ignatius himself might be one of them. Written before the Stonewall riots, Toole even has Ignatius ponder about organizing a modern gay movement, a "huge orgy" which would result in everlasting peace. I'm all for that too.

Recommended Reading List

A Confederacy of Dunces by John Kennedy Toole

A Time Before Me by Michael Holloway Perronne

A Time Before Us by Michael Holloway Perronne

Alex in Wonderland by Michel LaCroix and Robert Bush

Blue's Bayou by David Lennon

Boulevard by Jim Grimsley

Bourbon Street Blues by Greg Herren

Desire: Tales of New Orleans by William Sterling Walker

Down the Rabbit Hole by Michel LaCroix

Echoes by David Lennon

Falling Into Me by Michael Holloway Perronne

Fierce by David Lennon

Gay Gourmet: The Queer Cuisine of New Orleans by Trey Bienville

Getting Past Almost by Donovan Lee

In Exile: The History and Lore Surrounding New Orleans

Gay Culture and Its Oldest Gay Bar by Frank Perez and Jeffrey Palmquist

Interview with the Vampire by Anne Rice

Jackson Square Jazz by Greg Herren

Landscape with Gravity by Barbara Lazear Ascher

Let the Faggots Burn: The Upstairs Lounge Fire by Johnny Townsend

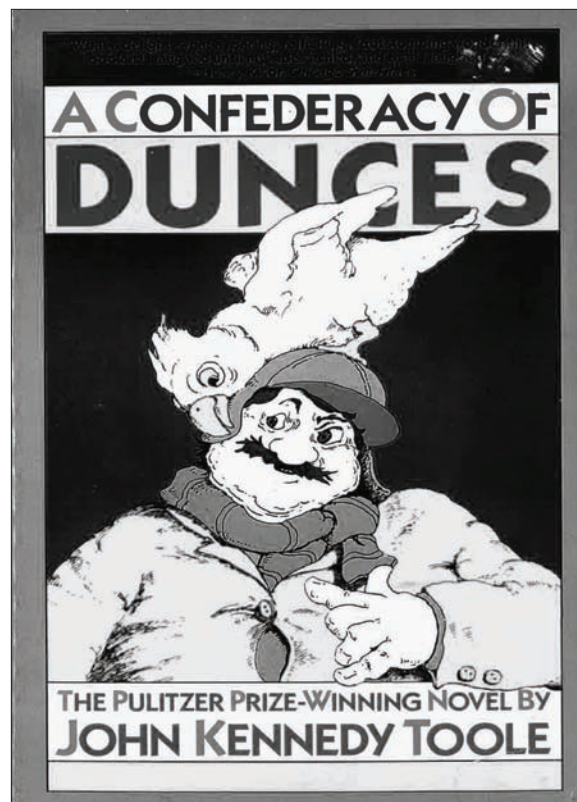
Liquor by Poppy Z. Brite

Love, Bourbon Street: A Celebration of New Orleans by Greg Herren, Paul J. Willis and Poppy Z. Brite

Mardi Gras Mambo by Greg Herren

Murder in the Garden District by Greg Herren

Murder in the Irish Channel by Greg Herren



Murder in the Rue Chartres by Greg Herren

Murder in the Rue Dauphine by Greg Herren

Murder in the Rue St. Ann by Greg Herren

Murder in the Rue Ursulines by Greg Herren

Need by Todd Gregory

Prime by Poppy Z. Brite

Reckoning by David Lennon

Second Chance by David Lennon

September at Esplanade by Roy Kirby Chaudoir

She Ain't Heavy, She's My Mother: A Memoir by Bryan Batt

Soul Kitchen by Poppy Z. Brite

The Coffee Shop Chronicles of New Orleans by David Lummis

The Dust of Wonderland by Lee Thomas

The Glory Hole Murders by Tony Fennelly

The Quarter Boys by David Lennon

The Wolf at the Door by Jameson Currier

Through with the Looking Glass by Michel LaCroix

Vieux Carre Voodoo by Greg Herren

Who Dat Whodunnit by Greg Herren

Amos Lassen has published more than 5000 LGBT book reviews. He currently resides in Boston and can be found on the Web at reviewsbyamoslassen.com.

Reading Material

Talking with William Sterling Walker

Vance Philip Hedderel

Desire: Tales of New Orleans, William Sterling Walker's collection of short fiction set in New Orleans, was recently named a Lambda Literary finalist in Debut Fiction. Earlier this year, author Vance Philip Hedderel sat with Walker to discuss his new book and his writing and publishing success.

Vance Philip Hedderel: How did you come to write *Desire: Tales of New Orleans*?

William Sterling Walker: I was always a proficient writer in school. When I was thirteen or fourteen, my mother gave me her old Underwood typewriter. I wrote sappy poetry in my teens and a novella in my sophomore and junior year of high school. But it wasn't until college that I took myself seriously as a writer and started keeping a journal. I was working full-time in a supermarket and going to the University of New Orleans part-time, periodically changing majors. After ten years I finally got my B.A., then moved to New York to do graduate work at Brooklyn College. I've lived there ever since.

In 1981, I read James Joyce's *Dubliners* and Ellen Gilchrist's *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, and knew that I wanted to write short stories. Being from New Orleans, of course they would be about New Orleanians, where eccentricity is highly prized but not sufficiently compensated. (Neither is discipline, for that matter.) My stories and characters are filtered through my impressions, experience, and sensibility. I respect the meaning of words, and strive for clarity in my writing. I believe I have a good ear for dialogue. In one of the stories I quote Alfred Hitchcock, who said that he didn't film slices of life, but slices of cake. I hope I serve up dessert, but even more: a whole meal—at Galatoire's! And I hope that readers will find some of what I've written funny.

Hedderel: Can you tell us how you came up with the title?

Walker: The book was originally called *Odd Fellows Rest*, after a cemetery in Mid-City. That's also the title of one of the stories. My publisher, Jameson Currier, wanted something that would make it immediately clear to readers that the book is about New Orleans, which he considers a selling point. So I used the title of another story in the collection, for its resonance and echoes of Tennessee Williams, and added the subtitle, and we're both happy with it. Jim has been great to work with, and I'm very pleased to be a Chelsea Station Editions author.

Hedderel: What places in the city inspire you and why?

Walker: The whole city inspires me—people and places. I have many memories of my life there and I draw on them for my stories.

Hedderel: You mention Tennessee Williams. Would you care to comment on your influences?

Walker: I've already told you about James Joyce and Ellen Gilchrist. I worship E. M. Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *Maurice*. *Howards End* is probably my favorite book. I love how he forms a sentence. *A Confederacy of Dunces* was published during my junior year in high school. It influenced me in the same way that *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* did, and Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* and *Lancelot*: I knew that I wanted to write about where I lived. I was familiar with the story of how John Kennedy Toole killed himself in despair after failing to get a New York publisher, and how his mother took the manuscript to Percy, who got it published locally, by LSU Press, and it became a bestseller that won the Pulitzer Prize. The story intrigued me. The other book I remember reading that semester was *Crime and Punishment*—it blew me away. But the biggest influence was Edmund White's *Nocturnes for the King of Naples*, although it was only the second gay novel I'd ever read.

Hedderel: The stories in *Desire* are book-ended by tales set in New York. Do you consider yourself a Southern writer?

Walker: Yes, an expatriated Southern writer. Because I still have family and friends in the city and the Gulf Coast, I return quite a bit (though not nearly enough) and when I do, I always have the sensation that I continue to live a parallel life there—even after twenty years in New York. In an ideal world, I would keep a house in the Marigny and reside there in the Spring and Fall.

Hedderel: Are you working on something now?

Walker: A historical novel about John Singer Sargent. It's challenging, not only because it's about an actual famous artist in another century, which involves a lot of research, but because of the length. The short story or novella feels natural to me. I love to write them, and the "space" between a short story and novella—35 to 75 manuscript pages—is comfortable for me. But it probably has less to do with my attention span than with not having the luxury of uncluttered time to think and write while holding down a full-time job to earn a living, a familiar problem for writers.

Hedderel: Are you writing any more stories set in New Orleans?

Walker: I'm finishing a few stories that I decided not to include in *Desire*. That's part of my process. Each time I thought I had finished *Desire*—about three or four times—I realized I wasn't done. There was always room for polishing. And I think it made *Desire* a better book. I eventually plan to collect these stories into another book. It will be called *The Summer for Ex-Lovers* after one of the stories.

Hedderel: What advice would you give to other writers?

Walker: Keep a diary (or journal or notebook—whatever you wish to call it) and write in it religiously. Don't be afraid to let a piece sit in a drawer for a month or two without looking at it. And read Dorothea Brande's *Becoming a Writer*.



William Sterling Walker
Photo by Lenora Gim

Hedderel: What are you reading now?

Walker: I always read a few books at a time. Right now I'm juggling Henry James's *Roderick Hudson*, Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and Christopher Bram's wonderful biographical history, *Eminent Outlaws: The Gay Writers Who Changed America*. I just finished the latest installment of Robert Caro's biography of LBJ, which took forever—it's very dense reading—but was worth the effort. I recently discovered Roberto Bolaño, the late Argentine writer. I love his short stories. And between all of that, I continue the research for my novel.

Vance Philip Hedderel, a New Orleans native now living in the Washington, DC area, is a poet and performance artist whose work has appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Chelsea*, *Poetry East*, *Cape Rock* and the *Eugene O'Neill Review*. His performance pieces include *A Seminar on Hate and Desire*, *Should Women Hang?* and *This Is London (Not New York)*.

LAMBDA LITERARY FINALIST

"William Sterling Walker is a wonderful writer, fluent, warm, intelligent, and real. His stories about gay life in New Orleans are firmly rooted in place, and all his characters, gay and straight, are observed with a wise heart and a deep soul."

—Christopher Bram, author of *Gods and Monsters* and *Eminent Outlaws: The Gay Writers Who Changed America*

"*Desire* is a sensuous, nostalgic, and evocative collection of stories set in sultry New Orleans before that dreamy dream got washed away."

—Valerie Martin, winner of the Orange Prize for *Property*

"These are stories that ask to be lived in—gorgeous, moody, sophisticated—not unlike the vividly conjured New Orleans that William Sterling Walker's haunted characters inhabit, flee from, inevitably return to. Walker is a brilliant guide through the labyrinth of this city and these seething lives, fluent in the mutually reinforcing tropes of desire and regret."

—Paul Russell, author of *The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov*

"This beautiful collection is not so much a set of stories as an intricate song cycle, one that arranges and rearranges recurrent fragments of memory and sensation—light, fragrance, and music—like the tesserae of a mosaic, the shifting patterns converging into a haunting panorama of the life of our ecstatic, fated generation of gay men."

—Mark Merlis, author of *American Studies* and *An Arrow's Flight*

"*Desire* is dreamy and affecting, stories of a New Orleans that was gone before Katrina ever got there. It's been a while since I've read a collection so well written, so intricately composed, with such beautiful and evocative descriptions of a time and a place."

—Caroline Fraser, author of *God's Perfect Child* and *Rewilding the World: Dispatches from the Conservation Revolution*

"William Sterling Walker's *Desire* feels to me like a welcome heir to Ethan Mordden's classic *Buddies*—picking up perhaps where he left off and setting us down amid the lives, loves, and sexual adventures of a community of gay men in New Orleans. These linked stories are alternately poignant and seductive, and the structure is elegant and deceptively casual—they build in force until you feel like they belong to you, or you to them."

—Alexander Chee, author of *Edinburgh*

"Full of vivid characters, *Desire* serves up a delicious slice of gay life in pre-Katrina New Orleans with plenty of nostalgia and heart, with stories as steamy and sassy as the city itself."

—Jameson Fitzpatrick, *Next*

"A wonderful book. Walker's characters are very real and he writes of them from his heart and he imbues his stories with sophistication that is truly a New Orleans characteristic."

—Amos Lassen, *Reviews by Amos Lassen*

"This compilation of short stories stands to prove that gay men are not always the exuberant, fun-loving queens portrayed on TV. Each story looks at how New Orleans has played into the characters' identities, how the city has shaped them, how it has

sucked them in."

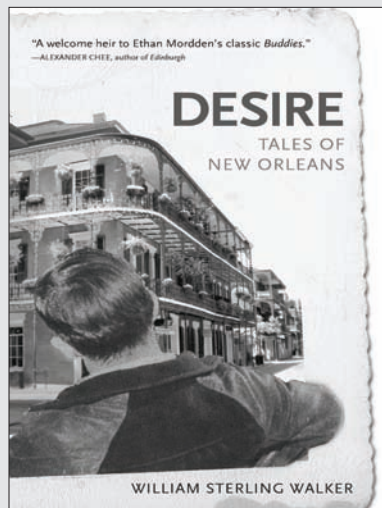
—Katie Abate, *Edge*

"*Desire* is a guilty pleasure of a read, conversational and conspiratorial. It's almost as if these people are welcoming you into their private chats, dishing out the latest neighborhood gossip about who picked up whom, whose ex is now someone else's current."

—Sandy Leonard, *Lambda Literary*

"Equal doses of wit, longing, poignancy, hope, seduction and loss, all woven together by this talented author. I give it a full five stars out of five."

—Bob Lind, *Echo Magazine*



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by William Sterling Walker

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