



Old Creole Days

George Washington Cable

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Stories reflect Creole way of life during the transitory post-Civil War period.

Old Creole Days Details

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From Reader Review Old Creole Days for online ebook

Eileen Tsai says

Beautiful writing

Seth says

The story "Cafe des Exiles", and this collection of stories in general, makes me miss New Orleans terribly ... not that I do not most of the time anyway.

Paul Haspel says

Old New Orleans is truly George Washington Cable's main character. To be sure, the great Louisiana writer of the late 19th century populates his short stories with fictive personages who possess fascinating characteristics and do interesting things; but what ultimately gives Cable's work its power is the painstaking accuracy with which he conveys not only the physical locale, but also the spirit, of the fascinating and multicultural city of New Orleans.

The term "Creole" deserves some attention here, as the term can mean different things in various contexts. In Cable's time, the term had very specific associations within the social and cultural milieu of New Orleans; it referred to descendants of the original French and Spanish aristocracy of the city (the Confederate general P.G.T. Beauregard is a good example of a Louisiana Creole). The Creoles of Louisiana bitterly resented Cable's suggesting (accurately) that there had been intermarriage between those French and Spanish aristocrats on the one hand, and the colony-turned-state's African-American and Native American residents on the other. Cable is apt to point out his Creoles' excessive pride and insularity; and to this day, there are Creoles of modern New Orleans who respond with anger to the non-Creole Cable's depiction of their society and culture.

The Signet Classics/New American Library edition of *Old Creole Days* that I have before me follows modern editorial practice in including the novella *Madame Delphine* (1881) as well as the seven short stories that originally constituted *Old Creole Days* when the collection was first published in 1879. *Madame Delphine* provides a more in-depth treatment of a theme Cable had first engaged in an *Old Creole Days* story titled "Tite Poulette": the precarious and often untenable situation that faced the women known as "quadroons." The term referred to mixed-race women who often became the mistresses of wealthy Creoles; but as both "Tite Poulette" and *Madame Delphine* set forth, the death of a wealthy Creole protector would often leave a mixed-race former mistress alone and vulnerable. In both the short story and the novella, the former quadroon mistress has a beautiful daughter who loves, and is loved by, a white man; but the strict racial codes of slaveholding antebellum Louisiana forbid their marriage. "Tite Poulette" engages in a bit of *deus ex machina* to resolve its fictive dilemma; *Madame Delphine* provides a more troubling, and more honest, resolution. One senses at once the justice of Madame Delphine's riposte when she is told that the laws against mixed-race marriages exist "to keep the races separate" and replies, "They do not want to keep us separated; no, no! But they *do* want to keep us despised!" (p. 60).

To my mind, the two most powerful stories in the collection are probably “Belles Demoiselles Plantation” and “Jean-ah Poquelin”; and indeed, these two are the stories that one is most likely to see reprinted in American literature anthologies. “Belles Demoiselles Plantation” tells the story of one Colonel De Charleu, a Creole aristocrat who owns a Mississippi River plantation outside of New Orleans, sometime around 1850. Realizing that his plantation’s grand manor house is in danger of falling into the river, De Charleu considers defrauding his part-Choctaw relative De Carlos, or “Injin Charlie,” by arranging to trade the endangered Belles Demoiselles Plantation for De Carlos’ block of city property in New Orleans. The story’s powerful resolution calls to mind the conclusion of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and provides a singularly powerful image of the fall of the slaveholding Old South.

“Jean-ah Poquelin,” another story of great power, captures well the theme of change over time. Its title character, Jean Poquelin, is an elderly Creole whose New Orleans home was once in a remote and isolated locality; but as the story is set in 1805, two years after the Louisiana Purchase, Americans are streaming into the Crescent City, and Poquelin’s once-isolated home is now squarely in the path of future suburban and commercial development. As Poquelin firmly opposes any development of his area, the American “Building and Improvement Company” whose leaders want to move forward with development focuses upon the fact that Poquelin was once a slave trader whose beloved brother Jacques disappeared on a slave-trading expedition to the West African coast. It is not that the Americans care that Poquelin participated in the moral abomination that was the slave trade; rather, they hope that suspicions of foul play against Jacques will discredit Jean Poquelin and enable the company to go forward with its business plans. The company’s secretary, a man named “Little White,” conducts his own investigation and makes a crucial discovery that sets him in opposition to his own company’s policies. In the story’s conclusion, the shocking secret of what happened to the missing brother Jacques Poquelin is revealed, in a manner that calls to question the antebellum South’s obsession with issues of black and white, much the way Mark Twain in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* would one day describe Huck’s white racist father as “a tree-toad white, a fish-belly white.”

Cable’s fiction is not perfect; as fellow New Orleans writer Shirley Ann Grau points out in a foreword, he tends to err on the side of romance, and his depiction of his women characters is often lacking. At the same time, he represents an important early example of realism in Southern literature; he provides an important link between earlier Southern writers like Poe on the one hand, and later Southern writers like Faulkner and O’Connor on the other. And the imprint of his depiction of New Orleans is still very much in evidence in the modern city. Next time you are in the French Quarter, after you have enjoyed an oyster po’-boy or a muffuletta for lunch, walk down Dumaine Street and see “Madame John’s Legacy” at 632 Dumaine. The house, built in 1788, is thought to be the home that inspired Cable’s “Tite Poulette,” as an historical marker on the façade of the house proclaims. The house is today part of the Louisiana State Museum, and more information about it can be found at <http://www.louisianastatemuseum.org/m....> Whenever I am in New Orleans, and I walk by Madame John’s Legacy, I am reminded of what Cable achieved, fictively speaking, when he gave his literary New Orleans to the world.

Jeremy says

This is a collection of stories from George W Cable originally published in 1879 and reproduced using the same type face. I suspect that most of the originals of this book would have been lost to the floods after hurricane Katrina so re-publication has to be a good thing. The stories provide a fascinating insight to the society of New Orleans at the time with the segregation of communities that existed - if not overtly then due

to the rankings and strata's of society - as well as painting a prose picture of the French Quarter and the way new Orleans grew rapidly into the surrounding swamp area during the 1900's (see "Jean-ah Poquelin" for a lovely account of this). George Cable uses Creole patios and spells the Creole words phonetically (that is how they sound) so reading these stories takes some degree of effort. Effort to understand what the Creole are saying and effort to stay with the story due to the story telling style. Fortunately the French is written in English and the stories are quite short or I would really be lost!

A valuable book from an academic perspective and one or two of the stories are quite rewarding - "Madame Delicieuse" for example is very entertaining and "Posson Jone" (Parson - as in vicar) is a good read.

Humphrey says

Half of these stories are quite good, while the other half are a bit forgettable. That said, all of the stories exhibit the qualities and techniques that make Cable's prose so good. Chief among these are plots that advance in fits and starts with lots of backfill yet always with ambiguities and unanswered questions. These stories also frequently play with color, blurring and juxtaposing them in turn, and they frequently turn to gossip, rumor, and hearsay as an epistemological mode. Not unlike his novels, Cable occupies several different genres over the course of the collection and, at times, within individual stories. I would say that the best stories here are the haunting "Belles Demoiselles Plantation," the enigmatic "Cafe Des Exiles," and of course Cable's deservedly best-known story about interracial marriage, Catholicism, and New Orleans' transition into the republic: "Madame Delphine."

Kenneth says

I read this one in the summer during my high school years. Having no real familiarity with New Orleans, it was quite exotic but also intriguing. It gave glimpses into the life and mores of mid-19th century New Orleans which I appreciated, given my passion for history.

Susan Molloy says

This book was difficult reading due to some of the characters' voices written in dialect and some of the same background not written in dialect. It made for confusing reading.

Each chapter is written like a short story, and that reminded me of James Joyce's "The Dubliners," which I liked. Nonetheless, "Old Creole Days" left me flat.

Catherine Siemann says

Even in the nineteenth century, New Orleans was a subject for nostalgia. Areas that are now largely tourist dominated were then fading French- and Spanish-speaking quarters. Mixed-race women and the quadroon balls figure prominently here, so race and gender issues are, perhaps unsurprisingly, both predominant and

often problematic, though Cable himself was strongly pro-civil rights. Plots are often predictable, and there's even one that Cable uses twice. But these stories are fascinating, and the sense of place and time is strong; I was in New Orleans a few years ago and I felt as though I could picture many of his settings vividly based on that. I'm looking forward to reading his *The Grandissimes*.

Robert says

I enjoyed this book, but sometimes it was hard to follow with the dialect. Great story and history of the Creoles in old New Orleans and a nice collection of short stories.

Galicius says

Colorful dialogue, scenery in New Orleans in late 19C.

John says

Book was a series of stories taking place in New Orleans before the civil war. The author created some very good characters, all being Mulattos , but the stories did not have endings it seemed to me. He was obsessed with the laws against mixed marriages and the hiding of ones racial makeup. but well written.

Miles Smith says

A fantastic collection of short stories by Cable, who delves into the realities of race, class, and the creation of American nationality in Early Republic Louisiana.

Monte Lamb says

Short stories set in old New Orleans. Some of the stories were not so interesting to me, but you could definitely feel the flavor of the city and people with their language. The stories about the quadroons and other issues of race were pretty good. You get a sense of how the folks thought and how the laws affected the people and how they mixed. The vernacular was well represented and it sounds like you would hear a native speak today.

Rick says

It is an interesting book written in dialect, especially Creole patois. I found this manner difficult, in that I was distracted by the dialect. The stories are interesting and give a sense of New Orleans in the early 19th century.

Teresa says

In *Life on the Mississippi*, Mark Twain writes of children's disappointment at Joel Chandler Harris (the author of the Uncle Remus stories) being a white man. That reminded me that when I first learned of Cable, however long ago that was, I thought he must've been African-American or a Creole of color. Even reading this in the 21st century, it's unfortunately easy to see why Cable was basically run out of town (though that came later with his more overt support of racial equality and opposition to Jim Crow). These stories, despite some extravagant plots, reflect the absurdity of racial laws and the ridiculousness of the values of antebellum Creole society.

One of Cable's strengths is in his descriptions of the houses and neighborhoods of New Orleans. As far as the dialect goes, I struggled with only one story, "Café des Exilés". I enjoyed the dark fairy-tale quality of "Belles Demoiselles"; and I wondered if "Jean-ah Poquelin" was an influence on Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier".

Rereading this has reinforced to me how nothing much ever seems to change.

From "Posson Jone":

The lowest seats were full of trappers, smugglers, Canadian voyageurs, drinking and singing; *Américains*, too—more's the shame—from the upper rivers—who will not keep their seats—who ply the bottle, and who will get home by-and-by and tell how wicked Sodom is...

Donna says

Fly in amber of a place and time. A bit hard to follow because some dialogue written in dialect. When the Creoles are speaking French to each other, it's in standard English. If they're speaking English it's written in dialect. It took me a while to be able to hear them. There is a lot here about the careful measurements of racial composition. Many plots turn on the possibility of 'mixing' occurring or having occurred. Though some witness or document usually shows up to prove it wasn't really so. Cable has been called a precursor to Faulkner. I was questioning this a minute ago, but now that I have written this... Loving descriptions of the city. An evocative curio that's maybe not for everyone.
