



Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas

Rebecca Solnit , Rebecca Snedeker

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Like the bestselling *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas*, this book is a brilliant reinvention of the traditional atlas, one that provides a vivid, complex look at the multi-faceted nature of New Orleans, a city replete with contradictions. More than twenty essays assemble a chorus of vibrant voices, including geographers, scholars of sugar and bananas, the city's remarkable musicians, prison activists, environmentalists, Arab and Native voices, and local experts, as well as the coauthors' compelling contributions. Featuring 22 full-color two-page-spread maps, *Unfathomable City* plumbs the depths of this major tourist destination, pivotal scene of American history and culture and, most recently, site of monumental disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill.

The innovative maps' precision and specificity shift our notions of the Mississippi, the Caribbean, Mardi Gras, jazz, soils and trees, generational roots, and many other subjects, and expand our ideas of how any city is imagined and experienced. Together with the inspired texts, they show New Orleans as both an imperiled city--by erosion, crime, corruption, and sea level rise--and an ageless city that lives in music as a form of cultural resistance. Compact, lively, and completely original, *Unfathomable City* takes readers on a tour that will forever change the way they think about place.

Read an excerpt here:

Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas by Rebecca Solnit and Rebecca Snedeker by University of California Press

Listen to an interview with the authors here:

<http://www.ucpress.edu/blog/16097/new...>

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From Reader Review Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas for online ebook

Caroline says

A varied bunch of essays, super interesting on the whole.

Ken says

An informative series of essays, paired with unique maps, that delves into New Orleans. It's the best cultural/historical "travel guide" on that city that I've ever read. Doesn't do it justice, really, to call it a "guidebook." Even if you have no plans to visit NOLA in the near future, this is wonderful and highly recommended reading.

Lissa Notreallywolf says

American history is a loose designation for this book, but it's full of it. In another essay driven exploration of a major city we get to explore New Orleans, so multifaceted it's a gem. But it's also a "concrete lilypad" a dangerous and endangered environment from years of trying to subdue the Miss. R. and the coastal weather issues, not to mention the impact of so many humans. A very watery book which convinced me this was a city I might like to visit, but not live in. I most enjoyed the Native American take on situation and something stung me: Native Americans owned most of the land that was exploited for oil. They would have been the richest people if they hadn't been cheated. No surprise, but still, I had never thought about that. And that's what these atlas books do, they combine factors in surprising ways that make one rethink places, and place as a concept. I did not love the graphic representations of this book as much as I liked the San Francisco one, but that's largely because they were harder for me to read. I was hoping to get a greater sonse of my BF's hometown.

Ryan says

A beautiful and really fun collection of 22 short essays and accompanying maps/atlas illustrating the content of the essays about New Orleans. This book is oversize and stunning, but comes with what I consider two major flaws: 1), and this is a biggy, because it is a paperback book, and the maps span 2 pages, it is really difficult to see what the maps contain in the middle toward the crease without breaking the spine. In a book that is considered to be an atlas, and one where the maps are obviously created with such care and attention to detail, this feels like a huge design flaw. 2), and this is really a backhanded compliment, some of these essays are way too short. All 22 essays are the same length, about 4 pages, and for some of these subjects that is just the introduction. Granted, some of these things you could write entire books about, and people probably have, but I definitely wanted more on a few of these. But that's okay. The intent is not to be exhaustive, but to provide little snapshots of the culture and history of NOLA, and at that they succeeded. I'd love to see a whole series of these books on different cities. As it is, this is the second, the first one being about San Francisco, which seems less interesting, but I would still like to read it, simply because I love

urban history and maps so much!

Sean Chick says

A collection of maps, mostly with a very pronounced leftist bent. Even as a Progressive I found it mind numbing at times. A few maps are great (tribal lands, St. Claude Avenue) a few are mediocre (the one on Middle Eastern paraphernalia), and others are down right dull (bananas??!!). One map is a collection of places Billy Sothern likes. It is dreadfully self-indulgent. Another one on cemeteries repeats the lie that we bury our dead above ground because of the water table. I laughed out loud. This idiot (Nathaniel Rich) has never been to Holt Cemetery I guess. Nor seen the below ground burials in St. Louis Number 1.

The essays toe the leftist line: you get two on why levees are bad. White people discussed are 90% of the time corrupt, racist, incompetent, etc. A stunning example is the Katrina one about good and bad acts. The map itself is superb but the essay is awful; you would think only the cops did bad stuff during and after the storm. Sorry Solnit, but the looting was real. I knew several store owners who came back to find everything stolen or destroyed, one with a trail of urine and feces left behind as if to leave an extra "fuck you." I know people who stole for food. I also know you can't eat an Archie Manning signed jersey.

Let's be honest: this is in part why Trump won. This collection of maps follows a line of hard identity politics, a wilful disregard for facts that undermine that particular narrative, and a dogged adherence to that narrative. It needed actual diversity of opinions and views.

That said "Civil Rights and Lemon Ice" is a superb map, tracing the life path of Paul Trevigne (Free Man of Color and activist), Angelo Brocato (Italian desert mastermind), and Tennessee Williams (playwright without peer). Besides being nifty it was nice to hear about two lesser known men and get a mix of voices instead of the leftist monotone that pervades the whole thing. Without it, this book would get one star.

Avigail says

Obsessed with how this book tackles contradictions without ever being too clunky or obvious or didactic.

Favorite maps: People Who (3); Moves, Remains (4); Of Levees and Prisons (7); Hot and Steamy (11); Snakes and Ladders (18); Juju and Cuckoo (20); Lead and Lies (21)

Geoff says

I want to get to KNOW this city!

Ellen Prewitt says

Ah, I loved this book. It is gorgeously made. The maps are fabulous, the essays extraordinarily satisfying. One of my favorite writing techniques is to examine unlikely pairings, and this book does that over and over

again. A gift, I've had it for a while. I regret it took me so long to dive in.

Ami Stearns says

Her atlases are complex and thought-provoking; beautiful writing.

Ally says

A beautiful tribute to the complicated, wonderful city of New Orleans and especially its people. This book is an atlas, but nothing like you used to find (or maybe still do?) in a gas station convenience store. Within, there are 20 beautiful and heartfelt essays on topics that are relevant to the city's past, present, and future. Each essay is accompanied by an artistic and cartographically accurate map of the city, showing the impact of that particular topic on New Orleans.

One essay, called "Of Levees and Prisons" reflects on the ideas of freedom and containment in New Orleans and Louisiana as a whole. It discusses Louisiana's slavery and segregation, and how they are the state with the largest percentage of its population incarcerated. They are containing many of their own. In relation, through the building of levees and spillways, the state seeks to contain the Mississippi River within rigid borders. The essay suggests that there has to be a better way to function than this kind of containment, when has failed repeatedly. The accompanying map shows the location of the many prisons, customs offices, police stations, and levees throughout New Orleans and the surrounding area. It contrasts these vessels of containment with "flows of freedom" that seek to educate, empower, and assist the population of the area. These include ministry organizations, community aid groups, charities, and the Southern Poverty Law Office.

This book serves not only to tell where you are, but to tell you who is there with you. It gives you perspective on the Crescent City and its many inhabitants...far more deeply than you could ever get as a tourist. You get context, and may develop an appreciation for this area that the author describes as, "unfathomable, endless, protean, immortal, and fragile". I know I have.

John says

I've been to nola probably 20 times in the past 20 years and this book is the first thing to capture the spirit. It's well put together and draws some jaw-dropping correlations that are so damn and insightful it's frustrating!

Highly recommended to anyone who's been even just once or you live there to this day.

Phyllis says

The maps are wonderful and offer a unique way to approach New Orleans. There are also some rich,

interesting stories mixed in, but they're uneven. It's worth picking up for the pictures, though.

Becky says

Fabulous concept. I think I'll enjoy this more once I've actually been to New Orleans.

Kirsten says

Such a thoughtful, beautiful way to look at a city, any city; and with that, a remarkable testament to a particular city that so many think they've got pinned down.

blue-collar mind says

I wrote an earlier review of this book (I contain more multitudes than you can shake a stick at) and have now decided to update it since receiving the actual published book since I used the advanced reader copy for the previous review and now after reading more of it in a different location than the last time and viewing all of the maps that weren't in the ARC, and all of this new stuff done on All Saints Day, no less. Told you: multitudes.

I decided to do it without the previous cranky insertion of MY New Orleans up front that I had in the previous review and to simply state that this is a well designed, well-edited and at times beautifully written and illustrated homage to our mysterious city.

This book gives credit where credit is due. To the city's geography, to its outlandish robber barons of bananas and oil, to the nameless and named that have brought us and bring us music, food, and public displays and joy and sorrow and pain and punishment. It neatly shows a number of juxtapositions that may be uncomfortable for some to view and others that are certainly unfathomable, but it does show them. There. credit given.

Now, back to me:

If you look through my reviews, you can spot a certain fondness for maps. I love them and love poring over them before, during or in spite of actually traveling to the place depicted.

If you read my reviews, you will no doubt spot a serious fondness for essayists. I admire what seems to me to be honest human bravery in extending a point or a purpose to a new end. Taking a walk with an author is how I visualize an essay, and yes there are times that I turn back before getting to the end, but I still appreciate the offer. So maps and essays seem like two sides of one coin and when put together well can alter or color each other's point and purpose.

So that this is a book of illusory and real maps combined with odd and delightful essays, edited by two sensitive writers is enough for me to tell you.

Let me let the writers and artists tell you themselves in essays and maps such as:

Civil rights and Lemon Ice

Hot and Steamy: Selling Seafood and Selling Sex

Ebb and Flow: Migrations of the Houma, Erosions of the Coast

Juju and Cuckoo: Taking Care of Crazy

Stationary Revelations: Sites of Contemplation and Delight

The first essays introducing this book are alone worth poring over and sharing; how often is that true? That should tell you about the care and thought put into this entire work and offer the best reason to plunk down your money, open it and thumb through while having a Pimm's or a coffee in front of you, tucked away in a shady corner of our shared city. Enjoy it all.

Here's my earlier review, which should be no surprise to any of you, I like more now:

This is a gorgeous visualization of our city coupled with (some) serious and (some) quirky essays that make clear sardonic, satirical (and always sweetly, secretly hopeful) views of our place. Especially as it relates to government intrusions and the commodifying of our place by different corporate entities and how knowing what parts of our culture can and should be saved is so goddamned difficult to figure out.

Some say, well save it all. Really? the prison culture that our state is #1 in? The crime that is so random and brutal and particularly egregious to the citizens who most often get blamed for it in anonymous comment threads online? Sure, let's save the second lines and the music and the seafood and the old houses. But can we save any of it without some assistance from those mocked authorities? If we can, if we could save ourselves without the government's leading us, how can we do it without addressing what drove my white blue-collar grandparents 30 miles outside of the city and allows our schools to often create more levels of elite classes? That tangle of old and new, good and bad is what I search for in books about New Orleans. If they gloss over it or just as bad, miss the hope and humanity that keeps us here then I put that writing down, never to pick up again. Uh uh, I think- you missed it.

Here, the narrative and the maps-both by what is said and what is unsaid and what is pictured and what is left out-makes clear what these writers value now and what they hope or fear that we will have to value in the future. What else? I like the new voices coupled with the known ones (I love it when I have no expectations of an essay about a known subject and it hits me strongly and I look again at the name of the author and think, "who is this?" That happened to me long ago when I read editor Solnit for the first time as a matter of fact...)

I also appreciate how the clear imperialism of our past (bananas anyone?) shows both the complexities of the U.S. stage that we profit from as a region and the Caribbean reality that we often suffer from in daily life.

And the chance to think about how we see and sell things like "seafood and sex", which are remarkably similar in their pitch.

And although I gotta say, a few mileposts seem to be missing from my viewpoint in some of the maps and essays, it is because those writers were allowed to share their own personal and quixotic sense of our shared city in these pages that makes this book meaningful to me. Well done, neighbors.
