

Protecting the Spirit of the American South: Representations of New Orleans Culture in Contemporary Children's Picture Books

Abstract: This article explores selected aspects of southern culture as presented in contemporary children's picture books. It analyzes children's stories which celebrate New Orleans' residents and their traditions. Unlike many scholars who point to the end of the New Orleans spirit due to recent economic and demographic changes, children's authors perceive the culture as a resource which regenerates the city. By means of writing for children they keep the city's distinct black culture from disappearing. The aim of this article is to examine to what extent the spirit of the South has survived in the minds of contemporary authors and artists addressing young generations of readers. It discusses the presence of such cultural elements as jazz music, body movement and the ritual of parading in selected children's picture books set in New Orleans. Among others, it analyzes such titles as *Freedom in Congo Square* (2016) by C. Weatherford, and *Trombone Shortly* (2015) and *The 5 O'Clock Band* (2018) by Troy Andrews. The article focuses on the interaction between the verbal and the visual elements of the books, and the ways they convey the meaning of the stories.

Keywords: New Orleans, jazz, parading, Hurricane Katrina, children's literature, picture books

African American children's literature has always been marked with political struggle and resistance. Black authors regularly respond to social and political transformations as well as natural disasters which strike black neighborhoods. In many books they focus on the culture that binds the people and gives them a sense of identity in the time of crisis. This is what happened in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina of 2005. While scholars and journalists stress the fact that the disaster threatened the cultural existence of New Orleans, causing mass migration of residents to other parts of the country, children's authors represent the opposite view, claiming that culture kept the people together and brought some of them back to the city. By means of simple stories and the accompanying illustrations, they emphasize the transformative force of the storm, thus raising an important point in the post-Katrina conversation about New Orleans. To counter inadequate accounts of the place, children's authors argue that "the storm is part of a much longer history of people surviving and celebrating under difficult conditions" (Watts and Porter xv). Culture has always been considered a significant asset of the city, especially if created by the local people. Recently, however, many scholars fail to mention the fact that New Orleans' root culture cannot be preserved without its people. This point, frequently overshadowed in the post-Katrina debate, is the main argument of many children's books published after the hurricane.

New Orleans Culture

Apart from New York's Harlem, New Orleans, perceived by many to be the most cosmopolitan southern city, is one of the most popular settings of contemporary

children's books telling the stories of black communities. There is a specific reason why so many authors decide to feature New Orleanians and their culture. According to Jerry McKernan and Kevin V. Mulcahy, "Unlike the cultural assets of some other places, those in New Orleans are rooted firmly in its communities. Rather than its museums and symphony halls, it is the people, neighborhoods, local organizations, and small businesses of New Orleans that make it culturally distinct" (228). New Orleans popular culture can be defined by its music, customs, religion, architecture, food, and other material products. However, this kind of culture cannot be preserved without the people who create and consume it. Curators or scholars alone are not able to maintain New Orleans traditions if they are not practiced by the locals. Thus, once the inhabitants of the city had to leave as part of the Great Migration or due to the destruction of Hurricane Katrina, its living culture was at risk.

After Hurricane Katrina there were many initiatives on the part of the local authorities to keep the city's distinct black culture from disappearing. On 30 September 2005, a month after the storm, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin established the Bring New Orleans Back Commission, which was supposed to reconstruct the city's cultural economy. As Crutcher notes in his study, the committee set out five objectives:

1. rebuild our talent pool of artists, cultural groups, and cultural entrepreneurs;
2. support community-based cultural traditions and repair and develop cultural facilities;
3. market New Orleans as a world-class cultural capital;
4. teach our arts and cultural traditions to our young people;
5. attract new investment from national and international sources (Crutcher 117).

The fourth point was soon realized by a number of children's authors who celebrated the southern traditions in their stories about New Orleans. Writers of different races all over the U.S. have drawn their inspiration from the popular culture of the town. As Catherine Savage Brosman notes, "Like painters, dancers, and musicians, good authors devise, from the materials at hand, inventive expressions of the city – popular and accessible, yet appealing to readers' intelligence, to their sense of humor, historical curiosity, aesthetic feeling, and appreciation of local color" (Brosman 47). Over twenty children's books on New Orleans were published in the U.S. in the years after Hurricane Katrina. Most of them are picture books, in which the illustrations provide extra information about the place and expand the verbal narrative.

Although there are lots of scholarly publications on American children's literature, none of them focuses on the ways it represents local cultures. By combining elements of cultural geography and the existing systems of children's books analysis, and making references to the African American historical context, this article aims to examine the extent to which selected children's books reflect the spirit of New Orleans' popular culture. How do the authors communicate their concept of the city? Can these works become canonical in terms of presenting the ingredients of the city's local culture? The analysis of selected children's books will start with a close reading

of both the visual and the verbal narratives, and then it will look at cultural codes evoked by each of the stories. References will be made to recent research into the state of New Orleans culture.

Body Movement as a Form of Resistance

Congo Square, a nineteenth-century slave and Indian marketplace depicted as a site of resistance and freedom in New Orleans' historical district of Tremé, is the setting of Carole B. Weatherford's picture book. It was here that hundreds of enslaved and free blacks gathered on Sunday afternoons, which were work-free in Louisiana according to the Code Noir of 1724 (Crutcher 22). As well as seeing their family members, New Orleans' slaves were allowed to practice their African music and religious rituals at Congo Square. Being deprived of personal freedom throughout the week, on Sundays they could express their feelings by singing, dancing and drumming. Unlike anywhere else in the U.S., here slaves could preserve their African rhythms and customs. Mixing up different African musical genres with European or Caribbean ones led to the creation of new styles and traditions. Thus Congo Square is regarded as the birthplace of jazz music, celebrations such as jazz funerals and second-line dancing, and parades like Mardi Gras. Congo Square was also a marketplace, which – by allowing enslaved blacks to sell their produce – gave them a sense of freedom. But, most importantly, it was the center of communication, where blacks could share their concerns about living in bondage as well as their revolutionary ideas of how to resist slavery.

Weatherford's *Freedom in Congo Square* (2016) is a typical picture book, which consists of sparse text and exuberant illustrations taking up most of the pages. An analysis of the relationship between words and images is essential to an understanding of how meaning is constructed in the book. There is no specific narrative. The main focus is on the concept of enslavement and resistance. The days of the week are the underlying structure of the book. The first few pages depict slaves working hard on a daily basis and looking forward to the day off work, that is Sunday afternoon. The accompanying text on each of these pages is a rhyme about the hardships of slavery on every working day. It starts in the following way:

Mondays, there were hogs to slop
Mules to train, and logs to chop.

Slavery was no ways fair.
Six more days to Congo Square. (Weatherford, unpagged)

The accompanying pictures provide an overview of all kinds of plantation chores slaves did: plowing the fields, harvesting crops, feeding animals, and different types of household duties. Characteristically, most of the figures presented in the illustrations have their bodies bent while doing their jobs, which indicates their physical suffering. The second part of the book shows the same slaves in totally different moods and postures: dancing and drumming while communing in Congo Square. The silhouettes of both black men and women are presented in motion with their arms and legs stretched out. Some of them even seem to be flying, which is a popular symbol of freedom

in the African cultural context. One double-page spread of the book includes simple drawings of African masks and instruments, which are referred to as “triangles, gourds, and bells, banzas, flutes, fiddles, and shells.” Another one depicts elegantly dressed dancers, who strongly contrast with the figures of slaves on the previous pages. They are described as follows: “Women in gauze, silk, and percale, men in fringe and furry tails shook tambourines and shouted chants as rhythms fueled a spirited dance.” What is happening in Congo Square becomes an interesting attraction to white inhabitants of the town. The final pages of the book show some of them in the background observing skilled black dancers enjoying their temporary freedom:

They rejoiced as if they had no cares;
Half day, half free in Congo Square.
This piece of earth was a world apart.
Congo Square was freedom’s heart.

The spirit of Congo Square became part of the southern tradition of black people appropriating spaces to which they had limited access due to structural inequality. To this day the people of New Orleans gather in this place for cultural and political reasons. Since 2013, when the Black Lives matter movement rose to prominence, Congo Square has attracted a large number of African American artists and musicians who perform in defiance of established norms. They frequently organize concerts and dances that encourage the audience to join in the rituals.

Moving one’s body in protest is part of the long-lasting tradition which goes back to slavery times. As enslaved blacks were not allowed to move beyond certain limits, they moved their bodies in response to the social and political constraints imposed on them. As Hunter and Robinson observe, “How bodies move in place says a great deal about how they make and lay claim to places. In New Orleans, which had outlawed dancing of enslaved people in Congo Square several years before the Civil War, a confluence of African ethnic groups left a legacy of motion that persists today. To gather and to dance, even in the face of oppression, is a place-making practice of chocolate maps” (Hunter and Robinson 113). The tradition of using one’s body in protest was transferred to many black areas, which became sites of resistance and gave blacks the chance to speak out on political issues.

The Unifying Force of New Orleans Musical Gumbo

It is hard to find a literary work on New Orleans which does not mention its music. Irrespective of the historical period in which it is set, almost every story points to the power of jazz, its players and instruments. The musical spirit of the American South is a dominant theme in two picture books, *Trombone Shortly* (2015) and *The 5 O’ Clock Band* (2018), written by Troy “Trombone Shortly” Andrews, a well-known contemporary New Orleans musician, and illustrated by renowned artist Bryan Collier. While the first book focuses on the author’s early musical interests, the second one is a tribute to his hometown. New Orleans culture is defined by the author by means of three words: tradition, dedication and love. The young character, who is an embodiment of the place, makes a successful career thanks to the three values: he

upholds his family and hometown tradition, he is dedicated to developing his talents, and he does everything with love.

At the very beginning of the first book, the author says: "We have our own way of living down here in New Orleans, and our own way of talking, too" (Andrews, *Trombone*, unpagged). What he means by the way of talking is the musical language of the town. As we learn from the author's note, he was raised in New Orleans, always surrounded by music. He inherited the musical tradition from his brother James Andrews and his grandfather, and as a young boy he was already focused on maintaining this cultural heritage. Trombone's music is a combination of jazz, blues, gospel, rock and roll, funk and hip-hop. In the Author's note, he describes his music as "SupaFunkRock." In the story, the author compares his music to the way people cook in the South: "I listened to all these sounds and mixed them together, just like we make our food. . . . We call it gumbo, and that's what I wanted my music to sound like – different styles combined to create my own musical gumbo!" (Andrews, *Trombone*). The author mentions his early passion for music as he and his friends made makeshift instruments: "We were making music, and that's all that mattered" (Andrews, *Trombone*). Then he writes about his participation in different types of parades. The accompanying illustrations show crowds of people singing, clapping their hands and dancing to the music. The instruments loom large in the pictures. On some pages they are even more visible than the players. The main character's instrument seems to be the most important. It accompanies the boy whether he is at home or out in the streets. His first meeting with Bo Diddley, one of the most famous musicians from New Orleans, is the climax of the story. As a young boy, Trombone Shortly starts to play his trumpet among crowds of people during the New Orleans Jazz Heritage Festival. He is immediately noticed by Diddley and asked to join him on stage. For young Andrews this event is the beginning of his music career. The following pages of the book show images of places from outside of America, which focus on Trombone Shortly's worldwide music career. The book ends with the author's reflection on the significance of New Orleans for his personal development. He says he will never forget the town's parades, which gave shape to his musical style. Nor will he forget his first instrument: "I still keep my trombone in my hands, and I will never let it go" (Andrews, *Trombone*).

The 5 O' Clock Band is a follow-up to *Trombone Shortly*. It gives more information about Troy Andrews' childhood and how he was inspired by his hometown's local traditions. He is a leader of a boys' band called The 5 O' Clock. One day he gets "lost in his own music" and misses the afternoon rehearsal. He journeys through the Tremé neighborhood searching for his companions. He seems to be disappointed with himself and tries hard to improve his performance as a bandleader. Walking across the French Quarter the young trombonist comes across three iconic figures of the town: musician Tuba Tremé, Creole chef Queen Lola and a Mardi Gras Indian with his troupe. All of them welcome the boy with the local greeting "Where y'at!" and offer useful advice on how to make a career. Tradition, dedication and love are the so called "ingredients of success." On being asked what makes a musician successful, Tuba Tremé says: "If you understand tradition and you keep it alive, you will be a great bandleader," and adds that every musician "needs to know where music came from in

order to move it forward” (Andrews, *The 5 O’ Clock*, unpagued). Queen Lola offers the following advice: “As long as you love what you do, you will always be a success,” and the Indian chief first responds with a single word: “Dedication,” and then provides the following explanation: “Each year, all the Indians make new suits, hand-sewn from scratch. It takes a lot of time and patience, but when we hit the streets, it’s worth it” (Andrews, *The 5 O’ Clock*).

In both of the books the author conveys the spirit of New Orleans by making references to different senses. The sounds of the place, including such old melodies as “When the Saints Go Marching In,” inspire the boy to continue the jazz tradition of his forefathers: “Like so many other New Orleans musicians, Shortly had learned how to play his horn with this tune. Pride swelled in Shorty’s chest as he and Tuba played the same notes together that Louis Armstrong had played many years before them in these same streets” (Andrews, *The 5 O’ Clock*). Then music is compared to popular smells and flavors of New Orleans cuisine: “[Tuba] was as sweet as pecan pie – and the sounds that floated from his horn were even tastier” (Andrews, *The 5 O’ Clock*). The art of cooking is also mentioned in one of the central episodes when the young character meets Queen Lola, one of the best Creole chefs in New Orleans. The woman treats the boy to a meal of red beans, rice, andouille sausages, collard greens and okra with tomatoes. The accompanying illustration shows the lady with a bowl of food, out of which the steam is spreading to different parts of the town. Like the musician, the cook inspires the young artist to make his music with love: “There’s love in my food, because I love everything dish I make” (Andrews, *The 5 O’ Clock*).

The books’ illustrations perfectly reflect the mood of the stories and the liveliness of New Orleans culture. In both of the books, there are sound waves marked with rich colors and different shapes with strong lines that seem to be coming out of the young trombonist’s instrument, which indicate the resonance of jazz music and its far-reaching impact. In *Trombone Shortly*, the collage-style illustrations are enriched with numerous balloons floating around the figures of New Orleans’ musicians. At the end of the book these little balloons are transformed into a large hot-air balloon that is flying away from the city. From the illustrator’s note we learn that “This balloon first transports Troy’s musical message over the city of New Orleans, but as Troy grows, his music has the power to soar over the entire world” (Andrews, *Trombone*). The other book conveys the same concept of music by means of the illustration depicting Shortly playing his horn by the bank of the Mississippi River. A sound wave coming from the instrument reaches a northbound steamboat, taking the southern tones to other parts of the country.

The musical message of Andrews’ picture books goes beyond the beauty of musical creativity. The author emphasizes the fact that the southern black music gives people living there a sense of community. Despite the oppression they might experience in their lives, they feel totally free while playing the music, listening to the local bands or walking and singing in the parades. As were slaves during the Sunday meetings in Congo Square, so too are African Americans of this and the previous century relieved as they engross themselves in New Orleans jazz or blues. It is especially significant during political crises or natural disasters that inevitably break the community spirit. Thus Andrews’ books are a reminder of the healing nature of music, especially to

those who left the South geographically. He suggests that Mardi Gras parades are one of those occasions that bring together Southerners returning home from all over the country. Interestingly, those parades gather people of different social status. Thus it is not the material riches that keeps Southerners together but the unique power of their music. As is mentioned in *Trombone Shortly*: "People didn't have a lot of money in Tremé but we always had a lot of music."

Many children's authors stress the fact that music did not disappear from the streets of New Orleans even during the largest natural disaster of this century, Hurricane Katrina of 2005. The musical motif is present in numerous books on the theme of the tragedy. The aim of the publications is to remind young readers of the strong community spirit of New Orleans and to restore some musical traditions in the black areas of the South. *A Storm Called Katrina* (2011), written by Myron Uhlberg and published on the sixth anniversary of the storm, is the story of a ten-year-old black boy, Louis Daniel, whose family had to leave their New Orleans home due to the hurricane. The family try to save some of their belongings, but the boy's musical instrument, the brass cornet, seems to be the most important thing. Although the verbal narrative does not mention this, most of the illustrations depict the boy holding his instrument. First we see the cornet in his bedroom and on the kitchen table as the family are observing the oncoming storm. Once they decide to leave their place, the boy grabs the instrument and says: "I hugged my brass cornet close to my chest. I always feel better having it nearby" (Uhlberg, unpagged). The following pages of the book show Louis Daniel together with his parents and neighbors trying to find a rescue place in the Superdome. Whether the boy is wading through the water or floating on a piece of wood, the cornet is always on his lap, easily discernible due to its shiny yellow color. Having found a place in the Superdome, the family experience lots of difficulties, ranging from lack of food and water to arguments with other victims of the storm. One day Louis's father gets lost in the crowd but the boy has an idea how to find him. He takes his cornet and runs to the middle of the stadium to play "Home, Sweet Home." The sound of his music finds Louis's father, and the family are all together again.

The first-person narrative told from the perspective of the boy is what distinguishes the book from many other children's titles on Hurricane Katrina. The child's voice neutralizes the tragedy by instilling hope in many young readers that life can return to its normal state even after such tragedies as Katrina. The musical instrument is an important element of the story. It is like a living character which has a role to play. It gives the family comfort and a sense of continuity. They left their home in the face of the storm unified and accompanied with the boy's musical instrument – so too do they return.

Published six years after the tragedy and in the midst of public debate on the future of New Orleans, Uhlberg's book is a call for action to help the town's citizens return to their place and continue the long-lasting musical tradition of jazz playing. In his numerous interviews, the author repeatedly claims that southern music will survive as long as African Americans can make a living in such places as New Orleans. As Tom Piazza notes in his book *Why New Orleans Matters*, "[The people] spun a culture out of their lives – a music, a cuisine, a sense of life – that has been recognized around the world as a transforming spiritual force. Out of those pitifully small incomes and

crumbling houses, and hard, long days and nights of work came a staggering Yes, an affirmation of life – their lives, Life Itself – in defiance of a world that told them in as many ways as it could find that they were...dispensable” (Piazza 154–55).

Spatial Means of Celebration

In his social study on the historical district of Tremé, Michael Crutcher writes that African Americans have always used “spatial means such as parades” to celebrate their culture and to resist (Crutcher xi). In New Orleans black neighborhoods parading has a special meaning as it expresses the spirit of the community. It is connected with the jazz funeral tradition, which involves music parades to and from the cemetery. The “second-line” parading perfectly reflects the people’s solidarity. The second line of the parade is made by the district’s residents who follow the first liners, usually comprised of family members and a brass band. Thus, by joining in the celebration, the second-liners sympathize with their neighbors and support them in their mourning procession. As Crutcher observes, “Unlike the Main Street parade ... a second line winds through the streets of residential neighborhoods and particularly of black neighborhoods. Also unlike the typical parade, there is no separation between the parade and the audience. The audience is part of the parade, moving along with it as people dance to the music of the brass band” (Crutcher 16).

The authors of children’s books build some of their stories on this tradition. They emphasize the fact that the parades stopped due to the natural disaster, but soon after the hurricane people were collectively returning home together with the local bands. *Marvelous Cornelius: Hurricane Katrina and the Spirit of New Orleans* (2015), written by Phil Bildner and illustrated by John Para, depicts the ritual of parades just before and after Hurricane Katrina. It is the true story of a street sweeper, Cornelius Washington, who is exceptionally devoted to his work. Bildner was inspired to write the story after reading Katy Reckdahl’s article (2007) about this extraordinary man in *The Times-Picayune*. Cornelius embodies the spirit of New Orleans, which is marked with people’s attachment to music as well as their deep sense of belonging to the local community. The verbal narrative is rather scarce but the illustrations add more details by means of colors, symbols and the layout of the pages.

The first few pages depict New Orleans streets before Hurricane Katrina and the main character, Cornelius, who seems to do the same job every day – cleaning the streets, collecting rubbish and greeting the same people along his way. The illustrations are filled with exuberant colors indicating the positive atmosphere of the place. Although one can see typical New Orleans buildings, with large windows and balconies decorated with flowers and beads, it is not the architecture that creates the mood of the story but all the people in the streets. Cornelius, despite his low-status profession, occupies the central place in most of the illustrations. In some of them he looks like a giant, indicative of the illustrator’s intention to present him as a larger-than-life persona. While doing his everyday duties, Cornelius is incessantly involved in some musical activities. He communicates with the hooter’s driver by means of such rhythmic sounds as “Woo! Woo! Wooooo! / Rat-a-tat-TAT! / Hootie Hoo!” (Bildner, unpagged). He dances while collecting garbage bags and playing with

the bin covers. One illustration reflects the rhythm of Cornelius's work. It shows the man in several different positions as he holds garbage bags and dances with them along the curb of the pavement. The accompanying text is written in a swirling line, which is supposed to reflect the rhythm as well: "Cornelius front flipped to the curb / and flung the bags over his head / behind his back, between his legs / into the truck." The next page shows the enormous figure of Cornelius in the middle of the street playing the metal tops, as well as several smaller figures behind him who are playing musical instruments. The text on the double-page spread reads: "He clapped the covers like cymbals and / twirled the tins like tops. Whizzing and / spinning back and forth across the street." As other people join Cornelius, the street comes to resemble a parade. The book's author uses specific vocabulary to convey the spirit of those parades:

The old ladies whistled and whirled.
The old men hooted and hollered.
The barbers, bead twirlers, and
beignet bakers bounded behind
the one-man parade.

He even describes the people's movements with the names of specific dances: "Tango-ing ...Samba-ing ... Rumba-ing ...Cha-cha-ing ..."

This friendly atmosphere changes gradually with the text anticipating the oncoming hurricane. The illustrations are no longer so vivid and colorful. They are dominated by the blue hues of water as well as the grayish and brownish shades of garbage piled in the center of the town. Once the hurricane arrives, Cornelius is overwhelmed with his street work but his initiative and determination to restore the city encourages hundreds of volunteers to help him. There is a symbolic image which shows the man's determination and hope that the town will be restored, both in its physical and spiritual form. In the picture we can see the face of Cornelius under the intense sun rays which strongly contrast with the view of the devastated city. Additionally, the man is looking at a flying bird which is carrying a little green branch, a symbol of hope and peace. The following illustrations show the same people who were dancing with Cornelius on the previous pages. Now they are all cleaning the streets of New Orleans. Then they are joined by thousands of volunteers coming to help restore the town, whom the author calls "A flood of humanity." The last two illustrations portray a fine street in the town with people of different races playing instruments and dancing in front of their homes. The accompanying text is a reflection on the significance of such involved people as Cornelius:

And the great city rose again.
Marvelous Cornelius,
he passed on.
But as for his spirit,
That's part of New Orleans,
New Orleans forever after.

In his Author's Note, Bildner further explains Cornelius's contribution to the city's restoration: "On so many levels, Cornelius symbolizes what the city of New Orleans is all about – the energy, the spirit, the magic, the people."

The spirit of New Orleans is finally conveyed by means of several small images on the endpapers. Among others, there is a lily flower, which is a controversial symbol as it indicates the French rule of New Orleans. Nowadays, the city is a multicultural place with a diverse culture created by Europeans, Africans and the mixed race called Creole people. As Crutcher observes, the city "has never been totally black, but since the first half of the twentieth century, blackness has characterized the neighborhood" (5). The American flag, among other images, suggests that the place belongs to all Americans, and it is as diverse as the whole country. The most specific symbols reflecting the spirit of New Orleans are the musical instruments as well as masks and hats – the typical attire used by paraders.

Although *Marvelous Cornelius* focuses on the popular symbols of the town, it is an important contribution to the ongoing debate on the spirit of New Orleans as it stresses the individual and collective power of the people. Cornelius is an ordinary man who expresses his love of the city by means of simple gestures and everyday activities. Moreover, he is able to inspire people from the historical French Quarter not to leave the town but rebuild it and restore its unique atmosphere. The one-person parade which he begins turns into a "flood of humanity" as other people join the old tradition of street parading.

Conclusion

All of the discussed children's books educate young readers about the distinct black culture, which, according to many scholars, is disappearing in some parts of New Orleans. McKernan and Mulcahy write about the destruction of the local culture due to Hurricane Katrina, which they call "a cultural Chernobyl" (218). They believe New Orleans culture is "a way of life," which cannot be maintained if local communities stop participating in it. Another danger to the local culture is gentrification of the city. There is an influx of new residents who try by legal means to change the atmosphere of some neighborhoods by prohibiting late-night music or unsanctioned parading (Crutcher 5). The cultural survival of post-Katrina New Orleans is the theme of many academic studies. All of them outline the risks of the loss of the cultural memory and communicate new visions of the city, which are usually negative. The approach of children's authors differs from the popular concept of "culturecide" promoted by many contemporary sociologists and cultural geographers (McKernan and Mulcahy 218). By showing the strong traditions of the place, children's books establish New Orleans' cultural significance, especially the French Quarter and Tremé. They pay homage to the city's residents and the ways they create this unique culture, while seeking to highlight how Hurricane Katrina transformed the cultural image of New Orleans. Many authors maintain that the natural disaster made people realize the importance and impact of New Orleans traditions on the culture of the whole country. The topic has reached children's literature due to the belief that the youngest generation must be educated about the roots of African American culture so that its spirit does not fade away.

The focus of the stories on New Orleans communal life and its popular culture might exclude them from standard literary criticism. However, drawing on earlier cultural products is not mere imitation. What matters is how these concepts are identified and combined. All of the selected titles are packed with the local color of the town by means of verbal and visual narrative. Musical rhythms and people's performances inform most of the works. The significance of those traditions and rituals in modern times would not be exhibited if they were not placed in the new social context, which is the post-Katrina period in most of the books. As the city has been deserted by many of its locals, its popular culture has changed and gained new significance. The authors of children's books evoke some of its rituals with nostalgia and sentimentality. They also stress the fact that jazz music or street parading gives them a sense of belonging, not always to the place itself but the people of the place, the New Orleans local community. Unlike the sociological studies which point to the end of New Orleans spirit, children's authors perceive the culture as a resource which regenerates the city after the hurricane or the more recent transformations caused by gentrification (Watts and Porter 21). They convey the belief that the old New Orleans culture as well as its new products will resist any attempts to delete it from the cultural map of the U.S. Due to the growing interest of literary scholars in American children's literature, the books increase the visibility of New Orleans culture in the academy, which tends to accept children's picture books as canonical literary works. Like music, which has always been regarded as a "barometer of the city's recovery" (Watts and Porter 23), children's books celebrating the New Orleans way of life are a great hope for the city's cultural return.

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