A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge
by Josh Neufeld

Katrina The Storm Graphically Illustrated

Book Description  A stunning graphic novel that makes plain the undeniable horrors and humanity triggered by Hurricane Katrina in the true stories of six New Orleanians who survived the storm. A.D. follows each of the six from the hours before Katrina struck to its horrific aftermath. Here is Denise, a sixth-generation New Orleanian who will experience the chaos of the Superdome; the Doctor, whose unscathed French Quarter home becomes a refuge for those not so lucky; Abbas and his friend Mansell, who face the storm from the roof of Abbas’s family-run market; Kwame, a pastor’s son whose young life will remain wildly unsettled well into the future; and Leo, a comic-book fan, and his girlfriend, Michelle, who will lose everything but each other. We watch as they make the wrenching decision between staying and evacuating. And we see them coping not only with the outcome of their own decisions but also with those made by politicians, police, and others like themselves—decisions that drastically affect their lives, but over which they have no control.

Overwhelming demand has propelled A.D. from its widely-read early Internet installments to this complete hardcover edition. Scheduled for publication on the fourth anniversary of the hurricane, it shines an uncanny light on the devastating truths and human triumphs of New Orleans after the deluge.

A Q&A with Josh Neufeld  Question: You follow the stories of seven characters and their various encounters with Hurricane Katrina. Tell us a little bit about each of these unique individuals and why you chose to tell their stories.

Josh Neufeld: When it comes to Katrina, that which links the population of New Orleans—not to mention that whole Gulf Coast region—is a devastating sense of loss: of lives, of possessions, of home, of community. Each of the characters in A.D. suffered that loss in a different way, and I wanted the story to reflect those different realities.

I selected Denise after hearing her on a public radio program. The mainstream media, in the days following the storm, inaccurately reported roving gangs, shootings, rapes, and murders at the New Orleans Convention Center. Denise witnessed what really happened, how the people there were abandoned by the authorities and how they did their
best to help one another--often with the so-called thugs at the forefront. I knew Denise’s story had to be front and center in A.D.

I found Leo (and, by extension, Michelle) online. Leo had been a reader of the blog I kept as a Red Cross volunteer, and when I then read his blog and learned that in addition to everything else he had lost his extensive comics collection, I felt an intuitive understanding for him. After all, besides being a cartoonist, I’m also a long-time comics collector. The idea of losing my prized possessions--and all the memories they hold--is terrifying to me.

I learned of Abbas and Darnell from a mutual friend, and even though Abbas and I couldn’t be more different--from our backgrounds to how we’ve lived our lives--I totally identified with the series of questionable choices that led to his being stranded in his flooded grocery store.

I read about Kwame in my alma mater Oberlin’s alumni magazine, about how his house in New Orleans East was totally flooded, how his school was ruined, and how he had to spend his senior year of high school in Berkeley. He then went directly from California out to Ohio for college. His story echoed that of so many other displaced New Orleanians. Having led a peripatetic childhood, myself, I strongly related to his tale.

And the Doctor, of course, is a real-life French Quarter raconteur --as well as being a key participant in the post-Katrina relief and recovery efforts. (He also hosted Larry Smith and me in his “slave quarters” guesthouse when we first visited the city.)

Question: Tell us a bit about the publishing story of A.D.

Josh Neufeld: The project began in the summer of 2006. My buddy Jeff Newelt, who is the comics editor of the storytelling site SMITH Magazine, had read Katrina Came Calling, my self-published ‘zine about my time volunteering with the Red Cross in the Gulf Coast after the hurricane. As a disaster response worker stationed in Biloxi, Mississippi, in October 2005, just weeks after the storm, I delivered hot meals to sections of the city without power. While I was there, I met many folks who had lost everything in the hurricane. Those experiences with the Red Cross gave me a sense of connection that later provided vital background and context for A.D.

I felt it was important to tell the story from the perspectives of a range of real people who had lived through the storm: well-off and poor, black and white, young and old, gay and straight, male and female, those who evacuated and those who stayed behind, people who were greatly affected by the flooding and even some who weren’t. So my first job was to act as a journalist: After I spoke with friends, friends of friends, tracked down accounts of the storm and its aftermath on the radio, in magazines and newspapers, and on the Internet, seven people emerged as A.D.’s characters: Denise, Leo, Michelle, Abbas, Darnell, Kwame, and The Doctor, whom I finally met in person in January 2007. It was then up to me
to weave the characters’ stories together in comics form, illustrating the storm and their disparate paths into and through it—while periodically fact-checking with them and keeping up with their changing fortunes.

A.D. was serialized on SMITH in 2007–2008. I had always planned for the comic to be a book, however, so when Pantheon agreed in the summer of 2008 to publish it, I couldn’t wait to get to work on reformatting and expanding it. The book edition of A.D. has about 25 percent more story and art than what appeared online; I also made significant changes and revisions to large chunks of the original material. That, combined with the different reading experience between online and print, in my mind makes the A.D. book a completely new animal.

Question: When your work was serialized, the characters in your book were reading and commenting on the webcomic in real time and, in some cases, the actual characters would e-mail you and say, Hey! You got this part wrong. Was that a helpful editing process for you? Is this the future of journalism?

Josh Neufeld: I don’t know if it’s the future of journalism, but in my case, feedback of any kind is really important to me. And with a large-scale project like A.D., doing it first on the web made creator–reader communication easy. Whether it was a New Orleanian reader correcting my pre-hurricane timeline (which I later amended) or one of the actual characters responding to his or her portrayal, I was grateful for the feedback. It was like having an entire community as my research and fact-checking team!

There was one case early on that sort of set the tone. When I first introduced Denise in the strip, she was concerned that her character might be perceived as a stereotype. I decided that the best way to deal with her concern and to avoid similar issues in the future would be to run my scripts by her beforehand. I was totally happy to do that, because it is her story after all! My main goal was to get it right.

I was gratified a few months later by Denise’s reaction after a reader commented that he was gripped by the episode in which the storm hits Denise’s house, but winced at one piece of ripe dialogue that sounded

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My Personal Review:
After Hurricane Katrina struck in late August 2005, Josh Neufeld volunteered with the Red Cross. Stationed in Biloxi, Mississippi, he witnessed firsthand the horrors left in the storm's wake—the lives lost, the homes destroyed, the people displaced.
Little of that firsthand experience makes its way into A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge. Instead, the book focuses on several residents of New Orleans Neufeld came to meet through various ways, and it details their intense struggles for survival during and after the hurricane. The book begins with what Neufeld calls a "God's-eye view" of our little blue marble of a planet, zeroing in ever closer on the formation and impact of the storm. This zooming doesn't stop with the superficial damage to property. Neufeld is wrenchingly able to capture the pain of the individual human through his artwork, and his writing takes us deep into the psyche of the victims. Why did some stay behind? Why didn't they get out sooner? Why has it taken so long--and why does it continue to take so long--for things to improve for so many people?

The answers, of course, are complicated and never easy. Neufeld began his work as a blog, which later grew into a book called Katrina Came Calling. But it's in the pages of this graphic novel, where we can see the pain so vividly etched on people's faces--or the fear, or hope, or desperation, or stubborn perseverance--that the stories come so touchingly to life. The art of the book is layered behind dual tones that make it hard to miss the jaw-dropping events unfolding. Reading A.D., you'll find yourself reliving the drama, asking yourself again and again, How did this happen? Why? And you'll find yourself riveted by the individual stories (an afterword fills in more details that have occurred after the finishing of the book, which is nice).

A.D. is as tight and gripping as any fiction graphic work. The fact that it's all real just drives home even further the lesson of what we learned after Katrina...and what we still need to understand.

-- John Hogan

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