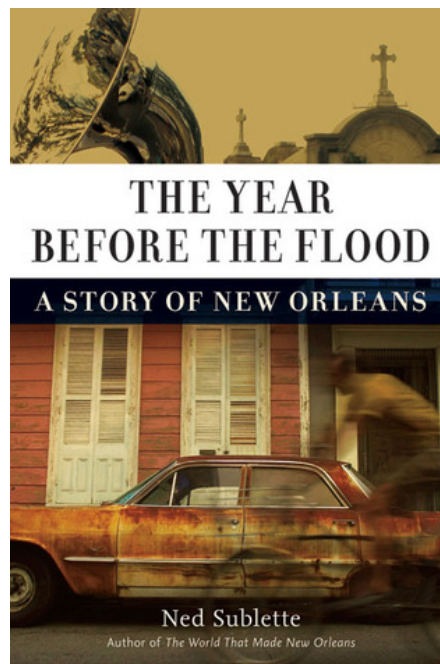




# The Year Before the Flood: A Story of New Orleans

*Ned Sublette*

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## The Year Before the Flood: A Story of New Orleans Ned Sublette

With a style the *Los Angeles Times* calls as “vivid and fast-moving as the music he loves,” Ned Sublette’s powerful new book drives the reader through the potholed, sinking streets of the United States’s least-typical city.

In this eagerly awaited follow-up to *The World That Made New Orleans*, Sublette’s award-winning history of the Crescent City’s colonial years, he traces an arc of his own experience, from the white supremacy of segregated 1950s Louisiana through the funky year of 2004–2005--the last year New Orleans was whole. By turns irreverent, joyous, darkly comic, passionate, and polemical, *The Year Before the Flood* juxtaposes the city’s crowded calendar of parties, festivals, and parades with the murderousness of its poverty and its legacy of racism. Along the way, Sublette opens up windows of American history that illuminate the present: the trajectory of Mardi Gras from pre–Civil War days, the falsification of Southern history in movies, the city’s importance to early rock and roll, the complicated story of its housing projects, the uniqueness of its hip-hop scene, and the celebratory magnificence of the participatory parades known as second lines. With a grand, unforgettable cast of musicians and barkeeps, scholars and thugs, vibrating with the sheer excitement of New Orleans, *The Year Before the Flood* is an affirmation of the power of the city’s culture and a heartbreaking tale of loss that definitively establishes Ned Sublette as a great American writer for the 21st century.

## The Year Before the Flood: A Story of New Orleans Details

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## From Reader Review The Year Before the Flood: A Story of New Orleans for online ebook

### edh says

I'd give this a 3-star rating for personal enjoyment of the topic but a 5-star rating for being an essential historical document of the early 21st century. So a 4-star compromise it is.

Ned Sublette's dramatic crescendo of a book is the culmination of pre-flood NOLA history. His 10 month fellowship at Tulane was during the pregnant pause before Katrina, just prior to the "murderly summer" that gave birth to the fall of a city. If you're not into musicology and serious southern history, this book just isn't going to work for you. Sublette is a professional musician, photographer, and erstwhile academic whose dedication to tracing the unbreakable connections between people's lives and their music. Most enjoyable for the lay reader are Sublette's anecdotes of New Orleans life, and how its inhabitants have traditionally teetered on the edges of danger and desire on both sides of the color line. There's a lot to love in this book, which should really come packaged with a go-cup from Parasol's.

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### Katie says

Well-researched and with some briefly interesting nuggets, but I wasn't that impressed with his writing and the book didn't feel cohesive at all. As he explains, he wrote the first sections pre-Katrina and then tacked on the last bit after Katrina, because he couldn't write about New Orleans without addressing it. An interesting time for him, certainly, but it just didn't feel like he had anything profound to say.

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### Michelle says

I really enjoyed the conversational style of this book, and seeing (what felt like firsthand) the culture of New Orleans, ecstasies and agonies all. The author does spend more time than expected on music history in this book, and that can slow the pace for people not picking up the book specifically for that. But he does a great job of representing the rich culture of New Orleans, and the shock that the hurricane wrought in that very unique way of life.

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### Grace says

I've read some other books about New Orleans, which I should have reviewed before I reviewed this to give more perspective, because they were better, or at least, I could relate to them more personally. I've never even been to New Orleans, but know people online from there, so this review is basically just my opinion.

While the author knows a LOT about New Orleans music and traditions, I never really felt like he connected that much with the city, despite living in Louisiana as a child (not the New Orleans area), he remains an outsider, in my opinion, except in his knowledge of the music from there. It's clear he was only passing through, for example he remarks he's glad his wife didn't overly connect with the city, because he wouldn't want to be there for a long time. Also, he left early, when he could have stayed 2 months longer. I felt he came

to like the city more as time went on, though, because eventually he was thinking of coming back to New Orleans as home ("Wait, did I say/ think that?"). This is basically a knowledgeable outsider's view of the city, different from books written by long time New Orleans residents (originally from other places) who truly think of it as home.

It is true that he had not so comforting experiences like accidentally renting as his home in New Orleans a place where a murder had taken place two years previously. But, apart from an incident where a spray can was thrown at him, he had no direct crime experiences in New Orleans, apart from those involving bad reactions to harmless drunken neighbors, (and I've known things to happen with harmless drunken neighbors, and I live in the very rural midwest). The stories he tells about crime in the book are darker, however, like the story about the drug dealers outside his friends' house. Had he lived there, I might see why he would have headed home as early as possible, but he didn't live there. He's certainly realistic about the crime problem in New Orleans, but I'm sure he had previous knowledge of this before living there. While it's part of life, being so fearful it ruins your opinion of the city or makes you fearful to enjoy much is a mistake, well, at least if you plan on living there for awhile. Bad things happen everywhere. Be cautious and use common sense, but it seemed he was really way too afraid, I think if he hadn't rented that house that the murder previously took place in (but with circumstances that wouldn't have been replicated in his case), he would have been less afraid.

The good part of the book is he knows so much about the music and traditions there, this book is good to read for that alone. It's also an interesting account of living in the city the year before Katrina, but the title is misleading because that's not what the book is about, it is more about the music/ traditions of New Orleans, black people in New Orleans, and things like that.

It's an honest account of what a reluctant outsider would feel if called upon to spend 10 months in New Orleans. It's tell it like it is. He could have left off some of the personal details (do we really need to hear how in debt he is many times?), but in that this is his personal story of living in New Orleans for a time, a lot of the details matter. However, sometimes you feel like he thinks it wasn't worth spending the time there (at least at first), for instance, because of how slow mail forwarding was (he hadn't changed his permanent address on some things) and thus that made him late on his bills..small price to pay for spending ten months in New Orleans, wouldn't you say? He comes across as more human and understandable when he writes about being worried for his wife's safety in New Orleans when he's not there, in the event of crime or a hurricane.

I felt like he ended up studying New Orleans like it was a subject or a course, rather than a personal interest of his. This book is like a study of New Orleans, not an identification with it, until towards the end. This book is very academic, not really a travel narrative and sometimes combining his vast knowledge of New Orleans music and traditions with his own personal experiences doesn't mesh, if there hadn't been as much of that in the book, it would have been a better, more coherent book. I skipped over some of those parts.

One of the best points of the book is the author writes with humor and is sometimes quite funny and entertaining, especially in the earlier part of the book. I found myself laughing. If he had done more of that, and less of the academic stuff, this book would have been better.

I felt that he put too much of his strong political opinions in the book, which would have been fine if he had been writing even a book mainly about Katrina, but coming in a book about other things, it made him sound a bit out of place and bitter. Politics are fine, in their place. Of course, he rightfully criticizes a lot of bad government response to Hurricane Katrina, but he doesn't need to insert his political views everywhere, so pointedly.

Hurricane Katrina was caused by the weather and the levees failing, not by the president at the time. I also felt he left out the fact, that many of the politicians of whatever party in Louisiana are inept, not just the ones

on the right. Incompetence on the part of politicians in general, not just conservative ones, hindered the response to and preparation about Hurricane Katrina, from what I understand and have read.

So while he offers interesting information on how badly conservative politicians like Bush have treated Louisiana and New Orleans, some of which I hadn't read or been aware of before (if what he is writing is correct), he isn't so much being defensive of New Orleans, really, but more just mentioning his own personal political views.

So, this book ends up being a mishmash of things, which is both bad and good. I recommend reading it and skipping over some parts, if you get bored. It has lots of great information, and lots of unnecessary information.

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### **Jennifer Dines says**

This book is very unique in that it combines memoir, ethnomusicology, philosophy, political perspective, and travelogue. I enjoyed Mr. Sublette's relaxed style of storytelling and critique of historical and present racial tensions in the Southern states of America. From his tales of childhood radio listening and a troubling statue of "The Good Darkie" up until his year in New Orleans, Mr. Sublette paints a picture of a life that has thus far been well-lived and takes the reader with him on his journey through his year spent in New Orleans.

He attends so many musical performances, eats po' boys and barbecue, makes friends, and spends days at the library at Tulane. What envy I felt about his grand lifestyle! Yet, danger and murder (the adjective murder is referenced in these pages) lurk just around the corner as New Orleans, while fanatic about song and dance, is also a high poverty, segregated city with a high crimes rate. Ultimately, Mr. Sublette comes to view New Orleans as a place where time is cyclical, history repeats itself, and festivals, music, dance, and costumes are a means of personal and cultural survival (much more than just a good time).

I read Mr. Sublette's *The World That Created New Orleans* a few years ago, and - as a musician, writer, and history lover myself - I found an immediate connection to his perspective. I enjoyed this book immensely, and I highly recommend it for history and music lovers.

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### **Nicole says**

I was blown away by the exceptional candor, voice, and righteousness of Ned Sublette. I haven't gotten over the political and governmental response, or lack thereof, to Hurricane Katrina. My opinion of my own government had never been so low. I love New Orleans; it's a place with so much soul, and the variety of music and culture has always captured my imagination. It seemed the Bush admins were less than interested in saving drowning citizens. After the false pretenses that the former presidential administration used to engage our country in two unjust and draining wars abroad, and certainly after the four horsemen's lack of concern for or response to the Louisiana victims of Katrina, Sublette rightly asserts, "George W. Bush should have been removed from office."

Actually, you can't completely blame the Republicans either. "The Democrats chose not to confront Bush and his gang directly but to wait it out. It cost this country dearly. With no government to stop them, the

doors were left wide open to the looters who ransacked the economy, culminating in the crash of '08." Still, who suffers the popular blame? The poor and working poor such as police and fire fighters, and teachers. Maybe we should have all been bankers, "Fuck taking a box of Pampers, steal fifty billion dollars." I'm including this quote, just 'cause it so truthful, and angry, and brilliant: "For their final act, the Bushists crashed not only the U.S. but the world, in a global economic Katrina. They didn't merely let it happen; they got up every morning for eight years, working hard to create the conditions for it to happen, packing slow dynamite around the levees of the world economy. For reasons of their own, they did to us what they did to New Orleans, leaving it to someone else to try to rebuild from the ruins."

Ok, a final nod to Sublette's word and the inspiration that is the City that care forgot, Sublette asserts, "Second lines had never seemed more essential ... We exist, they said. We will not stop being ourselves. We will not give up our culture. We will not go into exile. We need a second line for this whole hurting country. But only New Orleans has it." Maybe it's time for a second line to occupy Wall Street.

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### **Sarah says**

THis book has some small sections that I liked, like the history of WWOZ, NOLA's radio station. However, on the whole, I hated it. The guy moves to NOLA at the same time I did, and lives on the same block I did, and manages to earn my loathing. I don't know if it was just an age thing, since I moved there in my mid-20s and he was middle-aged, but we were both New Yorkers and you'd think I'd appreciate his perspective. Instead, he said things like "I found myself calling my wife Boo" and I wanted to vomit. He had a bottle thrown at his feet and after that they never walked anywhere. Funny, I never had a problem during the day, or walking to Tip's at night. I think this big difference is that I'm always a little cautious, because I'm a woman, and as a white man in a black city, he was feeling that caution for the first time. Well buddy, welcome to the real world. I couldn't even finish the book, since the disgust got to be too much. He actually says he's glad his wife is eventually disenchanted with NOLA, because he'd never dream of actually living there, just a quick 10 month exploitive outsider view of new orleans is all he's after, them back to nyc. Skip it.

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### **Jerrle Gericke says**

Very interesting. If you want a real sense of what New Orleans is like - culturally, historically, and more, this book is for you. I found the sections on the music particularly fascinating. There is also a good history of Mardi Gras. The author minces no words about the former administration's mishandling of the flodd.

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### **Afie says**

I thought this book was interesting given the history of New Orleans and the author's perspective but the editor needed to help him condense his information and histories of music to a more streamlined outline. Way too much detail on things like the entire history of rap music which has very little to do with New Orleans, etc, in my opinion. Found myself skipping a lot to find the interesting parts. I'm waffling between a 2 star and a 3.

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## Odessa Armstrong says

I absolutely LOVE Ned Sublette. He is such an incredibly smooth historical writer. The Year Before the Flood is a more personal tale of his which is great, along with a wonderful history of New Orleans and its amazing culture.

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## Celeste says

I'd give it more stars for the content, but it remains at three for rating as a whole. It's been slow going with this one, a long read, and I was finally able to finish it on my way back home on a plane. Great reading about New Orleans' history and music - and this guy really knows his music. I also really enjoyed reading about the history of Mardi Gras, and there are a few detailed chapters. It was fun to read about the author's personal experiences (most of the time), but I didn't really identify with him much. Seemed to be very nervous all of the time, overly paranoid, constantly concerned about danger.

Back to the book. I had no idea what I was getting into when I started it, and I think that's why it took so long. It has a little bit of everything, but I felt it was too heavy on the facts, could have probably used some more editing. Sometimes, there was JUST TOO MUCH information. I like reading about NOLA music history, but I don't need to know the entire history of hip hop. Things like that. Going beyond the expected scope of the book...and just making it longer. Still, even when I felt like I was getting lost in a sea of information, Sublette kept it pretty enjoyable for the most part.

The content? The book is set up in three parts. The first part contains Sublette's experience growing up in rural Louisiana (not New Orleans) throughout grade school. He falls in love with black music and early rock and roll, and gives us a history lesson in southern culture/race relations. The second part and bulk of the book follows the author's experience living in NOLA the year before Katrina (he received a fellowship at Tulane). He also discusses the more current music scene in NOLA, Mardi Gras, jazz funerals, and crime. This is all interspersed with his experiences while living there that year, in a shotgun house off Tchoupitoulas with his wife Constance. The third and final part discusses the aftermath of Katrina. Sublette reminisces and gives us updates on his friends, and gives us his personal thoughts on how the disaster was handled, etc.

Worthwhile read, I'd recommend to someone who had an interest.

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## Monique says

I loved the history of the music and the way the author weaves that history with the race relationship of the city and its history. The author and I are close in age and share the same political views which he isn't shy about expressing, so that is one of the reasons I found this book so interesting. This isn't really about the year before the flood in New Orleans, it's really an autobiography as well as a history of the music of New Orleans.

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## Leonie Starnawski says

This book details a great deal of American history in order to explain the origins of the city of New Orleans

and it's many distinctive musical styles.

The purpose of all this is, of course, to celebrate and appreciate this world that was, but also to show what was lost and most shockingly why this didn't matter (to the Bush Administration) when Hurricane Katrina rolled by – in fact, not even hitting New Orleans directly.

As colourful as a Mardi Gras parade itself, this book is a cacophony of sound which left me wanting the soundtrack.

Related: Read Dave Eggers' 'Zeitoun' for one man's account of what transpired in the immediate aftermath of the flood.

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## Monica says

New Orleans is like no other city in the US.

I thought very highly of Sublette's other books CUBA AND IT'S MUSIC and THE WORLD THAT MADE NEW ORLEANS so therefore looked forward to reading his next work, THE YEAR BEFORE THE FLOOD. Like TWTMNO, it provides a 'hip and erudite' insight into the city and consequently the entire county. This work is a more personal accounting of his first hand experience during a fellowship in the city, describing crime, housing projects, music, second lines and everyday life there.

His work is highly critical of the Bush administration's handling of the damage resulting from Hurricane Katrina, and gives a full accounting of the high crime and murder rate there. Learning about Sublette's academic, musical and social connections during his year there before the flood made the tragic loss resulting from Katrina even more traumatic.

I lived in Mid-City for four months during winter 2014 so understood the geography of the neighborhoods, the clubs, food and music. I went to 4 Mardi Gras parades. I did not know first hand how dangerous the Irish Channel was, nor how much crime existed there. I found the town fascinating, friendly and beautiful but Sublette's work 'tells it like it is.' I found the book too personal at times but wouldn't disregard the book for that.

If you watch HBO's excellent series TREME, you'll see what a great town it is. The show has done a lot to help the city's rebirth. Even between 2013 and 2014 the population has grown substantially. Sublette was consulted for the show. Many involved with the program read his books. During one of the commentaries, cast member Clarke Peters, who plays a Mardi Gras Indian Chief, names Sublette's work for it's insight to the history and culture of New Orleans.

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## Amar Pai says

I have to admit I skipped ahead to the chapter on New Orleans rap & No Limit / Cash Money, and just read that. Good stuff! One of the best takes on bounce music and the history of New Orleans rap that I've seen. Nice to see someone writing seriously about this topic.

Baby raised all his talent in house-- for the Hot Boys he was their legal guardian AND the head of their



label! Craze. I don't know if it's skeezy or evil or brilliant or all three at once.

The baby-faced Hot Boys were the same age as their audience. Baby, their mentor, looms as the center of gravity of the videos, and not only because he's bulkier. His image had great emotional power for children of single mothers: a violently protective, infinitely permissive, surreally wealthy, doting father, who was into the same things the kids were: whips (vehicles), ice (jewelry) and hoes (uh, women).

Sublette also writes about an interesting phenomenon that I've noticed but not seen written about anywhere else: the 'clean version' of a rap single is usually better than the uncensored original. The canonical example of this is the radio edit of 'The Humpty Dance,' wherein anything even mildly objectionable is replaced with ridiculous sound effects. ("I once got busy in a Burger King bathroom"-- why censor "Burger King" ?!) Another example is 'Big Ballin' by Big Tymers-- the uncensored version goes, "I told your motherfuckin' ass, I'd be back / in a brand new Fleetwood Cadillac," but the radio version changes this to, "I told you Young Jedi, I'd be back," which is way better.

Definitely buy your hip-hop at Wal-Mart, because the clean version is often better. I first noticed this in 1998, when Big Puns "Still not a Player" was on Hot 97 in New York once an hour: "I'm not a player, I just crush a lot." A weird and memorable line. I bought the album, but instead the track went, "I'm not a player, I just fuck a lot." Which had no charm at all.

Too bad you can't embed YouTube vids in GR reviews cos I would end this review with like, 6 pages of videos from Big Tymers, the Hot Boys, Juvenile, BG and Lil Wayne.

## **CASH MONEY IS AN ARMY**

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