



## Tom Piazza

**City of Refuge**  
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The Story Behind *City Of Refuge*  
By Tom Piazza

*City Of Refuge* pretty much insisted on being written. I didn't sit down one day and think, "How can I write a novel about Hurricane Katrina?" In some ways, it was the last thing I wanted to do.

Immediately after Katrina, in September 2005, while my partner Mary and I were evacuated to Missouri from our home in New Orleans, I began writing my short book *Why New Orleans Matters*. It was completed in five weeks, and HarperCollins published it that November. After it was published, I found that I had turned into a kind of spokesman for New Orleans' recovery; I crisscrossed the country for months, speaking at colleges, doing television and radio interviews, all of that. I was proud to do it,

and I considered it a privilege.

But by the spring of 2006 I was a little burned out on speaking about New Orleans. I needed time to process my own emotional trauma from the storm. Sometime that March, Sweet Briar College in Virginia invited me to visit and do a fiction workshop and a public talk on New Orleans. Along with that engagement came a gift: two weeks' residency at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts—time to mend, reflect, and think about what life might look like after this disaster. Friends had died, friends had lost everything, Mary's house had been flooded, the house I rented had been damaged and was unlivable for six months. There was a lot to think about, a lot to reckon with.

Then something strange happened. On my way to Virginia, the characters in *City Of Refuge* began appearing in my mind with an almost hallucinatory immediacy. I could see them—Lucy, SJ, Craig and Annie and Alice, Wesley—with an eerie clarity. SJ, a carpenter in the Lower Ninth Ward, working on his house on a hot August afternoon, Craig, a Midwestern transplant to New Orleans, taking his seven year-old daughter Annie to a street parade, SJ's sister Lucy waking up at an evacuee camp in Missouri and not knowing where she was.... I could see them all, hear them all, and everything I was seeing and hearing felt urgent and important.

In nine days at Virginia Center I wrote ten thousand words about these characters, as well as a complete synopsis of what happened to them, starting about a week before Katrina and ending right around Mardi Gras six months later. I have never had a writing experience like that, and I won't count on having another one like it anytime soon. It was like having a high fever.

That fever lasted for the nearly two years it took me to write *City Of Refuge*. I wrote it at my home in New Orleans—damaged, resilient, depressed, inspiring, unbearably hot New Orleans—as well as at arts colonies like Yaddo, the MacDowell Colony, and Virginia Center, and various other places in Virginia, Missouri, and Cape Cod. I did a lot of driving while I was writing this book. In the course of that time, my landlord decided to sell the house where I had been living (I ended up buying it myself three months into the writing of the novel, a process I'd just as soon never go through again), I broke my ankle and spent two months on crutches, several friends in New Orleans committed suicide, and one of my oldest and dearest friends died just as I finished the first draft.

Through all of this, these characters kept insisting on coming to the page; they forced me to listen to what they had to say, and to feel what they were feeling. Nothing has ever felt so important to me. Craig and Alice, their friends Bobby and Jen, SJ and Lucy and Wesley and SJ's cousin Aaron and his wife Dot, and Dot's cousin Leeshawn who brings SJ back to life after all he went through . . . these characters became as real to me as anyone I have ever known in life. I hope they become just as real for anyone who reads *City Of Refuge*.

What happened in New Orleans, and for all the New Orleans people scattered around the country because of the disaster, is, on one level, particular to New Orleans. But on another level it is an anthology of universal experience—exile, family separation and reunion, the loss and reclaiming of home, the yearning for community, the need for love. The disaster affected not just New Orleanians but the entire nation, and will continue to do so for a long time. If my book helps people understand, empathize, and share some of that experience as if it were their own, then I will feel that I have done something good with my work.