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Book Review: A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans

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Book Review

Kelman, Ari. *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. ISBN 0-520-23432-4. \$29.95

This is the story of a relationship. Like many relationships, it is complex, multi-faceted, and continually changing and evolving. It functions smoothly for years, then becomes troubled before settling down again. Conflicts may be resolved in favor of one party or the other, but each has unique needs and compromise may be difficult. The relationship chronicled here is that of the Mississippi River and the city of New Orleans, emphasizing the waterfront, a public space where the two are in constant juxtaposition and “where people interact with urban nature” (p. 10).

In *A River and Its City*, Ari Kelman, assistant professor of history at the University of Denver, explains the reciprocal nature of this relationship and describes how competing interests have vied to control the waterfront where river and city meet. After an introduction covering the evolution of the Mississippi and the founding of New Orleans, Kelman focuses on six critical events in the relationship: the batture controversy, a land-use dispute that changed the public character of the riverfront by opening it to commercial development; the advent of “artifice” (now called technology), especially steamboats and the wharves necessary to accommodate them; the arrival of an unwelcome immigrant--yellow fever--and its impact on the riverfront, where the epidemic of 1853 centered; the roles of postbellum railroads and of man-made barriers that distanced the city from its river; the devastating flood of 1927 and the measures taken to ensure that never again would the Mississippi fill New Orleans with water; and, finally, the aborted efforts to construct an elevated riverfront expressway that

would separate the river from its city. Examining these episodes leads to the conclusion that “nature and public space are more complicated and resilient than we typically assume.” Represented by the Mississippi River and the city of New Orleans, “the two are often intertwined, often inextricably so” (p. 221).

“To understand the ties between river and city, [Kelman] turned to where New Orleans and the Mississippi collide, where the urban meets what has been called the natural--the riverfront” (p. 7). Based on the author’s Ph.D. dissertation (Brown University, 1998), *A River and Its City* illuminates how, and by whom, the riverfront has been shaped physically and culturally. The result is a perceptive, instructive, and engaging environmental history of what has happened at the water’s edge and the impact of those events. It is a cautionary tale, offering insights as to how a city should treat its river and what may be the consequences of mistreatment, however well intentioned. Although the specifics are unique to this particular relationship, many of Kelman’s insights and observations offer the potential to inform similar relationships between other rivers and their cities.

One might complain about Kelman’s choice of critical episodes; for example, he omits pollution, which may or may not be considered outside the scope of a waterfront study. Or one might want more about the controversy over an elevated expressway. What *is not* here should not lessen the importance of what *is* here. This is an important and pathbreaking study that is highly recommended for academic and major public libraries, especially those serving clientele concerned with the environment and with urban history and development.

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