

BOOKS



A rainbow arches above Faubourg St. John and reflects off the waters of Bayou St. John. 'If I close my eyes and just listen and sniff,' Constance Adler writes, 'the humid air along Bayou Saint John stirs me in a place that can't be mapped.'

EIJOT KAMENITZ / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE ARCHIVE

A poetic memoir on life in New Orleans

By Diana Pinckley
Contributing writer

New Orleans author Constance Adler knows exactly where she belongs. And it's right on the banks of Bayou St. John.

In her first book, an evocative memoir titled "My Bayou: New Orleans Through the Eyes of a Lover," her subjects range from voodoo to pelicans, from the sweet mud of the bayou to the cracked dirt that paved the city in 2005, from loyal and personable dogs to somewhat-less-trustworthy humans.

As a blogger devoted to the work of Emily Dickinson (emilyeveryday.com), and a contributor to national magazines, Adler has a sharp eye for detail and a poetic voice. Here's how she responds when two pelicans sail over the bayou while she is cleaning up litter:

"They float low in the air, gliding on their huge wingspans just inches above the water's surface. It's a great gravity-defying trick of aero-engineering that still looks like pure magic to me. The pelicans make the ducks and herons and cormorants look like they are still practicing flight. These local birds, who appear just as harried and spent as the people, seem to belong here, pecking and paddling around in this cified waterbed while the pelicans make great sky circles with their wings... The pelicans offered an invitation to descend into this

place. To deepen my relationship to my bayou and the city it flowed through."

Adler grew up on the water in southern New Jersey, so the flow of the Crescent City feels right. "If I close my eyes and just listen and sniff, the humid air along Bayou Saint John stirs me in a place that can't be mapped. I may spend the whole of my life navigating the borders where water laps against my thoughts."

Adler first moved to New Orleans in 1995, after she tired of the freelance writing life in Manhattan. She went away for a year of graduate school,

MY BAYOU: NEW ORLEANS THROUGH THE EYES OF A LOVER

By Constance Adler
Michigan State University Press, \$24.95

AUTHOR! AUTHOR!

What: Constance Adler appears with six other authors as part of the Faulkner Society's "My New Orleans" series.

When: Tuesday, 6 p.m.

Where: Faulkner House Books, 624 Pirate Alley

Information: wordsandmusic.org



RUSTY COSTANZA / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

Constance Adler with her dog, Lance, at her home near Bayou St. John.

and returned to a house on Bayou St. John, where she's been ever since. "I had gone looking for a new life, and I found it. In addition to offering her many delights, this city also taught me that anything at all might rise up from the chthonic (stet) ground of being. New Orleans makes no guarantee of sweet dreams only."

While the book begins well before Hurricane Katrina, more than half of it is devoted to evacuation and homecoming. Adler memorably chronicles those dire days, as she and her family sleep in many beds offered by sympathetic hosts across the country, watching TV coverage of their beloved and drowning city as tears roll down their cheeks.

When she returns to the "honeymoon cottage," the sweet odor of wet dirt around the bayou seeps into the powerful smell left by Katrina mud.

"The scent summoned an instant visceral distaste, marbled with panic, as if I were being smothered in despair, nailed into a coffin before my time. Katrina smelled like wet dirt and mildew, mixed with human dust that has been cooking in late summer heat, a strangely florid and fertile smell that suggested unwholesome life forms brewing in it. ... a smell that signaled penetrating decay, sadness, destruction, loss."

Like her favorite body of water, Adler will recover from trauma, helped by Lance ("a muddy trickle of a dog") and her own distinctive points of view. "My Bayou" reflects a life open to experience, inspired by a beloved place.