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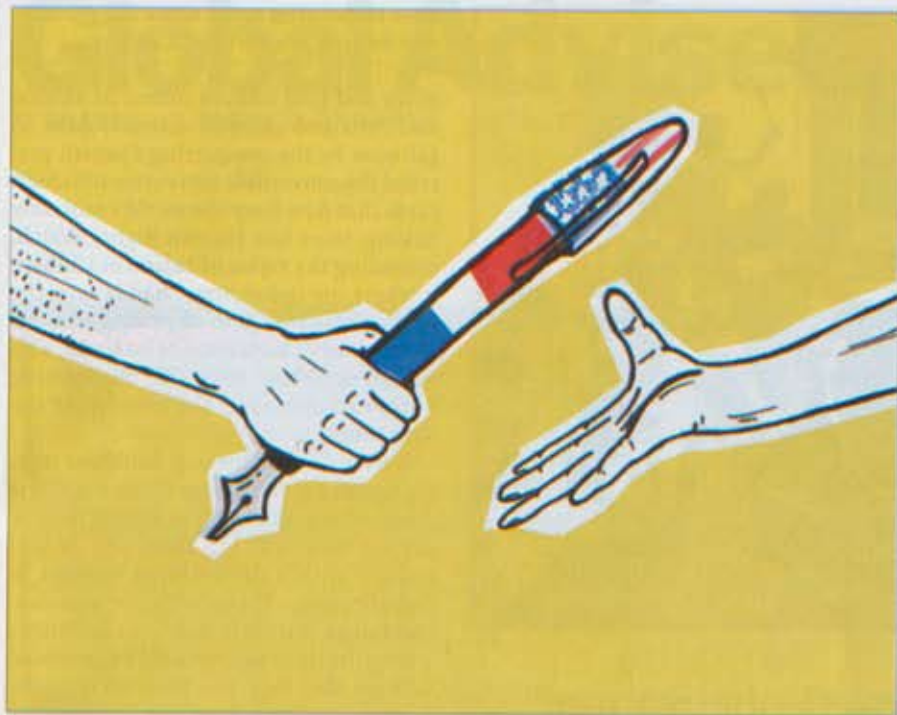
Why New Orleans Still Isn't Safe

Two years after Katrina, big money, inept engineering and environmental ignorance are combining to lay the groundwork for another catastrophe

BY MICHAEL GRUNWALD



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BOOKS

Pen Pals. Seven French writers team up with seven Americans to coauthor a book of playfully surreal short stories

BY DONALD MORRISON



THE EXQUISITE CORPSE WAS a parlor game played by the Surrealists, those convention-spurning artists, writers and pranksters who flourished in 1920s Paris. Its objective: to uncover the magic of accident. One person would write the opening of a sentence, fold the paper to conceal part of it, pass it to a companion for continuation, and so on around the table. The first attempt contained the nonsense phrase "exquisite corpse," and the name stuck.

History does not record whether visiting U.S. writers joined in the fun. But they were thick on the ground in Paris back then, so collaboration was likely. Today, after several years in which France and the U.S. have been at odds over everything from war to health-care systems, a group of writers from both countries has attempted a similar bit of serendipity, this time to help revive the corpse of Franco-American understanding. *As You Were Saying*, a slim volume dreamed up by French and U.S. cultural mandarins and published by America's Dalkey Archive Press, contains seven works of short fiction—or twice that many, depending on

how you count. Seven prominent French authors were asked to contribute the beginnings of a story. Each tale was then given to an American writer to complete, revise or otherwise respond to.

The results would have delighted the Surrealists. Aside from being great fun, *As You Were Saying* undermines literary stereotypes of the pop-culture-obsessed, narrative-driven Americans and the introspective, abstract-minded French. If the names had been switched, you couldn't tell who wrote what. Consider the book's first pairing: a ripped-from-the-headlines story by France's Marie Darrieussecq about a woman whose lover receives a full-face transplant; then an inside-out version by Rick Moody, who retells it from the man's point of view. "One day I woke to find that she was no longer attractive to me," he begins provocatively. Moody also sets up a finish worthy of Guy de Maupassant, the 19th century French master of droll dénouements.

Moody is out-Maupassanted by Prix Fémina-winner Camille Laurens and Pulitzer laureate Robert Olen Butler, who collaborate on a tale of a woman who spends her life waiting for something and hires a detective to help her figure out what it is. The narrative is inert enough to be a parody of Gallic opacity—until the last

line, when everything is illuminated.

For postmodern French self-reference, try Grégoire Bouillier's portrait of a man trying to forget a lost love; it actually mentions the California writer whose job it is to finish the story. "Neither the Pope nor Percival Everett, no, no one will die in your place," a character muses. Then Everett one-ups Bouillier by turning the hero's metaphorical search for a place in the world into a real quest for comfortable footwear.

The prize for allusion must go to veteran American writer John Edgar Wideman. In response to Luc Lang's subversive tale of a zookeeper who teaches kids a lesson by getting his birds to bite them, Wideman pens a single, luminous, 2½-page sentence about an American in Brittany who hears what he wrongly thinks is a demented young boy babbling incoherently. The story's title, *Wolf Whistle*, is the same as a 1993 Lewis Nordan novel about Emmett Till, the real-life civil rights martyr whose name Wideman's character eventually invokes: "... I saw for the first time two parrots singing, swaying, pecking gently at the bars of their rusted, oriental cages, two lynched birds I'd teach to warble *Emmett Till, Emmett Till...*"

Not all these cross-cultural matings warble. Philippe Claudel's pale meditation on the emptiness of suburbia is no match for Sarajevo-born American Aleksandar Hemon's moving account of an immigrant door-to-door salesman working the Chicago suburbs. France's Lydie Salvayre spins a ho-hum tale of a man with an untamable cowlick, and Rikki Ducornet responds with a limp portrait of the aging French cancan dancer La Goulue. But then, all of the writers in *As You Were Saying* (and their translators) contributed their services without pay. It is easy to imagine that some of the stories were dashed off not to be enduring literary masterpieces but merely to provoke and delight.

Most of the authors previously had work published in each other's countries. That puts them in a select group: only 3% of new titles appearing in the U.S. each year are translations (vs. about 20% in France). *As You Were Saying* is proof that foreign writers can be every bit as readable as the locals. Dalkey has printed a relatively ambitious 15,000 copies, and the organizers plan sequels, possibly in other languages. "This book was imagined as a place of discovery and dialogue between cultures," says Guy Walter, director of Lyons' government-subsidized Villa Gillet cultural center and one of the editors of *As You Were Saying*. "When authors decide to play this kind of game, there is always something unexpected, something magical about it." If magic is what Walter and his colleagues are after, then here's a tip: next time, conceal part of the original stories before passing them along. It worked for the Surrealists. ■