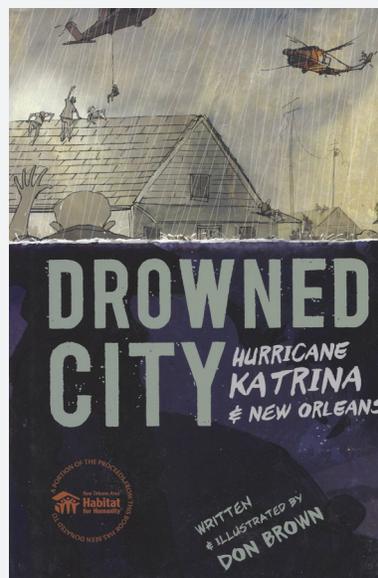


**First Opinion: Destruction, Breakdown, and Resilience:  
Remembering Katrina through Don Brown's  
*Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans***

Brown, Don. *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans*.  
New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015. Print.

*Melissa Comer*



In *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans*, Don Brown, author and illustrator of this poignant and at times disturbing recounting of the disaster, paints a vivid picture with words and art. Told in graphic novel format, Brown brings to life the facts most readers recall about Katrina (e.g., the hurricane hits New Orleans in August of 2005; the levees protect the city break; some cops loot businesses) and couples these truths with little-known tidbits (e.g., trains leave New Orleans empty of evacuees because the city declined their offer of transportation; local police in the suburbs of Gretna stop evacuees from entering; children hand-operate electric pumps, pushing air into sick people's lungs). He presents a factual story that highlights both the "tragedy and triumph of this American disaster" (dust jacket).

Though an evacuation is suggested, and later mandated, by Mayor Ray Nagin, it is too late. The people who had chosen to stay no longer have a means for escape. The city is under siege, held hostage by a natural enemy not easily conquered. Water proves to be a strong warrior. While some face the warrior bravely and win, others lose the battle. Plagued by ineptitude

and blame directed at political forces (sometimes aptly, sometimes misdirected), New Orleans and the rest of America witness the water's destruction. There is, seemingly, little being done for the people held captive. Criticism is lavished on the Army Corps of Engineers, responsible for building the levees that do not stand, but others are also cited for the disaster. Mayor Nagin fails to issue the mandated evacuation early enough; he doesn't stock the Superdome with adequate generator fuel, bedding, or food. Some police officers abandon their posts and loot businesses. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is overwhelmed; hospital workers calling for help are directed to voicemail or receive busy signals. The White House officials make promises and fail to deliver; the president's aides lament communication issues. They complain that "gloomy TV reports contradict information they are receiving from New Orleans" (59). Governor Blanco asks President Bush for 40,000 troops. There is no immediate response.

It becomes evident that disaster relief is stumbling, with "federal, state, and city officials [unable to] decide how to share responsibility" (67). Michael Brown, FEMA head, denies knowledge of the havoc at the Superdome, only to be asked if he doesn't watch TV (the media has repeatedly showed the mayhem occurring). President Bush praises Mr. Brown for his work, which confuses the American people, especially those in New Orleans. Governor Blanco and President Bush argue over control of the Louisiana National Guard. The disaster relief efforts, as the author describes through text and illustrations, leaves the various political parties struggling to, for lack of a better word, save face.

Brown's straightforward writing style and mixture of dark and light illustrations help to tell a story of anger, loss, and devastation, while also telling about hope, heroism, and appreciation. The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries officers, using small, flat-bottomed boats, "make house-to-house rescues" and save 10,000 people (36). The United States Coast Guard, "hoisting people out of the flood and off roofs," rescues 35,000 (39). The average, ordinary people, using their own boats, save "neighbors and strangers alike" (40). Others from all over the United States come in helicopters and boats to offer aide. Animal lovers save more than 15,000, forcing political forces to rethink the ban on pet rescue in future disasters. The Red Cross helps to shelter evacuees, along with several other states and cities across America. Private companies and generous individuals step up and support those in need. By October 2, 2005—more than a month later—New Orleans is dry. But, Brown reminds readers, the city doesn't snap back. By 2012, only 80% of New Orleans's residents have returned.

Brown, in *Drowned City*, describes the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina as a lesson of hope and of the resilience of people, and as a cautionary lesson about human failure and the power of Mother Nature. Readers from all geographical regions, socioeconomic circumstances, and ethnic backgrounds can identify with these themes because they are what help to make us human.

Using *Drowned City* as a classroom resource, students could:

- Investigate background information on Hurricane Katrina, using the facts presented about her path and velocity;
- Engage in a debate, examining the political breakdown and using the author's words as fodder;
- Scrutinize the author's use of dark and light colors in the illustrations; and
- Create a book trailer for *Drowned City*, selecting music, pictures, and text to produce a critical and creative summary of the book.

Ultimately, Brown's recounting is a historical overview of the destruction—of the good, and, yes, of the bad, of our political systems, and of the human spirit. Its relevance to a wide, general population speaks loudly.

### **About the Author**

**Melissa Comer**, Professor of curriculum and instruction at Tennessee Tech University in Cookeville, Tennessee, teaches literacy courses at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. Working closely with in-service and preservice teachers, she investigates methodology and pedagogy centering on innovative and active engagement strategies. Presenting and publishing at the local, state, regional, national, and international levels on various literacy topics, Comer's current focus is on integrating technology and instruction within the literacy curriculum. To this end, she has published several articles and is the co-organizer of the interactive wiki *Integrating Teaching and Technology*.