



A.D.

New Orleans After the Deluge

Written by **JOSH NEUFELD**

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#### NOTE TO TEACHERS

In *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*, nonfiction cartoonist Josh Neufeld paints a

masterful portrait of a city under siege. Through the stories of seven real New Orleans residents who survived Hurricane Katrina, *A.D.* chronicles a catastrophe of epic proportions—and the survivors’ attempts to rebuild in its aftermath. In *A.D.* we meet Denise, a social worker; “The Doctor,” a physician and French-quarter fixture; Abbas and Darnell, two friends who face the storm from Abbas’s family-run market; Kwame, a high-school-age pastor’s son; and the young couple Leo and Michelle. Each of the characters in *A.D.* is forced to confront the same wrenching decision—whether to stay or to flee—and to suffer the consequences.

*A.D.* is a book that takes as its subject the large-scale, the epic: this is visible in the full-page panels of cityscapes before and after the hurricane, and in the depiction of the masses of humanity swelling and wilting in the storm’s aftermath. It also focuses on the small, the intimate, in its blow-by-blow account of a diverse group of city residents who live through the storm.

*A.D.* poses timeless questions about the interplay of humanity and the natural forces that at once sustain us and also threaten our very survival. At the same time, it casts a spotlight on one of the most tragic government failures in recent American history, asking important questions about a society’s responsibilities to its citizens.

*A.D.* belongs to the tradition of journalism in which a writer captures an event by immersing himself in the experiences of witnesses and survivors. In 1946, journalist John Hersey spent three weeks interviewing survivors of the August 6, 1945, atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Japan. The result was the book-length article “Hiroshima” that chronicled the bombing and its effects on six Japanese survivors. *A.D.* extends this journalistic tradition to the realm of words *and* pictures. In doing so, *A.D.* expands the literary boundaries of one of our most popular literary forms—the comic book. Dave Eggers writes, “*A.D.* is one of the best-ever examples of comics reportage, and one of the clearest portraits of post-Katrina New Orleans yet published.”

As a teaching tool, *A.D.* allows students to grapple with seemingly unfathomable events by compassionately observing their impact on a few individuals. In this way, it follows in the footsteps

of the nonfiction graphic novels *Maus* and *Persepolis*, each of which explores major historical events from the perspective of personal history.

For the college-level educator, this is a text with cross-disciplinary application. *A.D.* gives students the chance to engage visually, analyze techniques of visual storytelling, connect with emerging journalistic practices, and discuss the manifold issues facing America at the dawn of the twenty-first-century: class, race, the role of media, communities, and institutions.

In high school classes, this is an excellent work to use with English Language Learners and mixed-level reading groups. The graphic format, with its detailed and information-rich panels, provides ample opportunity for students to identify context clues, make inferences about character, draw conclusions about theme, and identify author purpose. Teachers should be aware that *A.D.* has some adult language and should be reviewed before use in a classroom setting. In particular, the scenes that take place at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, in which Denise witnesses several deaths due to overcrowding and lack of resources, may be disturbing. However, the tone of *A.D.* is ultimately uplifting and speaks to the enduring power of the human spirit in the face of adversity. As the *Los Angeles Times* wrote, “*A.D.* is a work . . . of literature, of high art, and of reverence for nature and humanity.”

### **Thematic Connections:**

Natural Disasters  
Humans vs. Nature  
Family Ties  
Community  
Friendship and Heroism  
Loss and Adversity  
Hope and Recovery  
Triumph of Human Spirit

Grades 9–12 (selectively) and College-level

### **ABOUT THIS AUTHOR**

**Josh Neufeld** is a longtime artist for Harvey Pekar’s *American Splendor*. He is the writer/artist of the Xeric Award-winning graphic travelogue *A Few Perfect Hours (and Other Stories from Southeast Asia & Central Europe)*. Shortly after Hurricane Katrina, Neufeld spent three weeks as an American Red Cross volunteer in Biloxi, Mississippi. The blog entries he kept about that experience turned into a self-published ‘zine, *Katrina Came Calling*, which in turn led to *A.D.* Neufeld lives in Brooklyn, New York, with his wife and daughter.

### **TEACHING IDEAS**

#### **Prereading Activity**

In preparation for reading this book, ask students to share what they know about Hurricane Katrina.

Then have students read *A.D.*'s preface, "Hurricane Katrina," to gain context for the narrative. You may also wish to have students look at a map of New Orleans, its neighborhoods, and its placement among the canal system, the Mississippi River, and Lake Pontchartrain so that they can better contextualize the events as they unfold through each character's experience.

Additionally, have students read "Who's Who" (on the page adjacent to "Hurricane Katrina") to familiarize themselves with the book's characters. Based on these brief biographical sketches, discuss what particular challenges each of the characters might face during the storm and its aftermath

## **DISCUSSION AND WRITING**

### **The Storm**

1. Neufeld begins "The Storm" with a view of the Earth from outer space. What is the point of view being used here? How does the movement of the "camera" affect the pacing and the overall emotional impact of this sequence of images?
2. What visual details strike you? Do you find "The Storm" an effective way to communicate the power of a natural event and its impact on human habitation? How might it differ from a prose narrative of the same event?
3. What conclusions can you draw from "The Storm" about the differences in the way Hurricane Katrina affected New Orleans versus how it did Biloxi, Mississippi? If students are having trouble identifying the devastation caused by the storm surge and its recession (Biloxi) and the breaching of the levees (New Orleans), reacquaint them with the facts of the event and how it impacted various regions of the Gulf Coast differently, then have them analyze this sequence of images again.

### **The City**

1. What initial conclusions can you draw about each of *A.D.*'s characters? How does each respond to news of the hurricane's approach?
2. On pages 40–41, we learn that Leo is a comic book collector. When he talks about how hard it is to leave his comics behind, he says, "It's like leaving my friends behind." Do you think he is being materialistic—or are there ways in which things can be our "friends"? Are there objects in your life that fill this role? Explain.
3. One of the major decisions residents of the Gulf Coast—and of any area threatened by a natural

disaster—have to make is whether to evacuate or to risk staying. Which of the characters in A.D. decides to leave? Which characters decide to stay? What are each of their decisions based on? What conclusions can you draw about each of the characters based on their decisions?

4. Given what you know about the flooding that occurred in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina was over, what examples of foreshadowing can you find in “The City”?

5. A.D. is a work of comics journalism, which means that Neufeld has used visual references and interviews as the basis of these accounts. What sources might he have used for “The City”? Discuss how the experience of reading comics journalism is different from reading a prose work of journalism.

### **The Flood**

1. Describe Abbas and Darnell’s situation at the start of “The Flood.” How do they learn that the levees have been breached? What actions do they take in response?

2. In the first section of “The Flood” (pages 82–107), what visual devices of the comics form does the author use to communicate the passing of time? What visual devices create dramatic tension?

3. On p. 120, Abbas and Darnell are handing out bottled water. How is this action ironic given their original reason for staying behind?

4. Abbas and Darnell are initially excited about facing the hurricane. On page 51, they “fist bump” and Darnell says, “It’s going to be just like ‘Survivor.’” By page 131, however, they seem less certain. Compare their attitudes at the start of the book with their attitudes later on. What has changed? How have their expectations differed from the reality of their experiences?

5. How would you describe Abbas and Darnell’s friendship? How is it tested during their ordeal? Do you think it will survive? Why or why not?

6. What does the author’s depiction of the events at the convention center tell you about how rumors get spread? What might this depiction say about the origins of what is often referred to as “the madness of crowds”?

7. What does the full-page spread on pages 150–151 communicate about the state of things at the convention center? How do the author’s drawings and panel choices communicate the fear and

terror felt by those trapped at the convention center?

8. How is order kept at the convention center? What is ironic about this?

9. What words would you use to describe Denise's experience at the convention center? Explain.

### **The Diaspora**

1. What has happened to the characters in the year and a half since Hurricane Katrina? Why do you think Neufeld chose to pick up the story at this point?

2. On page 157, Neufeld appears in the comic for the first time. Why do you think he decides to draw himself at this point? How does "seeing" the author of the book affect you? How does it change the notions that inform the idea of objectivity in journalism?

3. The "New Journalism" of the 1960s and 1970s pioneered the use of fictional techniques—such as stream of consciousness, in-scene dramatization, the use of dialogue—for nonfiction reportage. The descendents of this movement often claim the term "creative nonfiction." The bulk of A.D. is told through in-scene dramatization, a technique common to fiction writing. The last two sections of the book, from page 157 forward, is mostly narration. Discuss why Neufeld might have chosen these two types of structures and techniques for different sections of the book. Discuss how A.D. does or does not fit within the tradition of New Journalism.

### **The Return**

1. Why do you think the author chose this bright color scheme for "The Return"? How does it compare with the color choice for "Diaspora"? How does the mood of these two sections differ? What effect does color choice have on tone?

2. On pages 176–177, Denise offers a glimpse into the emotional reality of loss—the loss of a deep connection to a place. On pages 181–182, Leo talks about the experience of losing his physical possessions. Discuss your responses to each character's struggle. How does the author visually juxtapose these two types of loss?

3. Show students an image of the fleur-de-lis and one of the Mardi Gras flags of New Orleans. Together or in small groups, research the origin of the ritual of Mardi Gras, which is such an important part of New Orleans' history and the ongoing culture of New Orleans. You may also want

to explain that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provided temporary housing in trailers to many New Orleans citizens rendered homeless by the storm, and that, unfortunately, many people remained in these trailers even years afterwards. Then discuss with students what the final image of the book—a FEMA trailer draped with Mardi Gras beads, decorated with a fleur-de-lis and a Mardi Gras flag—evokes for them as a symbol. How does the author use powerful local symbols to create meaning?

### **FOR IN-CLASS DISCUSSION**

- 1.** Discuss what media images students have seen—on TV, online, in photographs—of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. Discuss whether the illustrations in *A.D.* affected them differently than these images. In what ways are they similar in effect? How are they different?
- 2.** *A.D.* is divided into sections titled “The Storm,” “The City,” “The Flood,” “The Diaspora,” and “The Return.” Why do you think Neufeld organized the book in this way? Do you think this is an effective way of organizing the book? Explain.
- 3.** Compare and contrast the experience of those characters who evacuated with those who did not. What similar challenges do they face? How do they differ?
- 4.** Summarize where each of the characters is at the end of *A.D.* What challenges have they faced? Which have they surmounted? What challenges remain for the city of New Orleans as a whole?
- 5.** What happened at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center and the Louisiana Superdome in the days after Hurricane Katrina is the subject of numerous—often conflicting—reports. Neufeld has said that one of his reasons for choosing to tell Denise’s story was to set the record straight. He says in an interview, “I knew what she witnessed and went through would form the heart of the *A.D.* project.” Have students research the various reports that circulated about the convention center. How does Denise’s story in *A.D.* confirm or contradict these reports? Explain.
- 6.** *A.D.* has been called an example of “a comic with a social conscience.” Do you agree? What do you think the author’s purpose was in telling this story in this way?
- 7.** During a disaster, the prevailing social order breaks down, and people respond according to other codes or principles. This is why disasters are often studied by social psychologists for clues to the underlying conditions that affect human behavior. Comment on what the stories in *A.D.* might say

about human nature and/or human behavior. You might, if desired, position this discussion within a philosophical inquiry into human nature and Enlightenment ideas about the social contract.

### SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Keep a journal as you read *A.D.* Chart each character's personal experience with loss and subsequent journey toward hope and recovery. Make notes about the connections you find to these themes in your own life.
2. On page 92, a radio broadcast alludes to "the bowl effect," a reference to the particular geography of New Orleans that makes it vulnerable to flooding. Individually or in groups, have students research the geography of New Orleans in order to understand this phrase. Research New Orleans' levee system and look into the cause of its failure at this critical juncture. Additionally, have students research ecological changes to the area—such as the erosion of surrounding wetlands—that contributed to the post-Katrina flooding and what efforts are currently being employed to stop these changes.
3. Research the official response to Katrina and its aftermath. What did the local, state, and federal authorities do in response? Consider how each of the characters was helped or hindered by official actions. How would you evaluate the official response to the storm and its aftermath? Write an essay evaluating the official responses to Hurricane Katrina, using the experiences and words of *A.D.* characters to support your ideas.
4. Interview someone you know who has survived a disaster—anything from a house fire to a tornado to an earthquake. Ask them to describe how they faced the disaster, what skills they needed to survive, what they did in the aftermath, and how they felt throughout the ordeal. Take notes and share your journalist's report with others.
5. *A.D.* offers a chance to explore the relationship between print literacy and online literacy. It was serialized on the Internet before its print edition, and the web portions, accompanied by multimedia resources, are still available for classroom review and student research at [www.smithmag.net/afterthedeluge](http://www.smithmag.net/afterthedeluge). The site is a good example of participatory online community; it includes related links, audio and video interviews with the characters, reader comments, a Hurricane Katrina resource area, and a blog. Have students look at the online resources and share what they've learned about *A.D.*'s characters, Hurricane Katrina, the City of New Orleans, or Louisiana culture.
7. Compare and contrast two disasters and the civic response to each of them. Students can focus on one of the below or on one of their own choosing.
  - 1906 San Francisco earthquake and the subsequent fire that destroyed most of the city.
  - 1985 Mexico City earthquake.

- New York City during the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.
- 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake, which triggered tsunamis that killed nearly 230,000 people in eleven Southeast Asian countries.

## AWARDS

*Best American Comics, 2010*

*Mother Jones Top Books of 2009*

*New York Best Comics of 2009, Runner Up*

*MTV.com Best Nonfiction Comic of 2009*

*San Francisco Chronicle "Best in Comics"*

## REVIEWS

"Thousands upon thousands were affected by Hurricane Katrina, which struck Louisiana on Aug. 29, 2005. The magnitude of the catastrophe is depicted on a personal level in the new graphic novel **A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge**. . . .It is the latest example of the expansion of the graphic format to include nonfiction and reportage as well as superheroes and fantasy. . . . Mr. Neufeld deploys color to strong effect: it resonates like the soundtrack of a film." —*The New York Times*

"Who knew the tragedy could come so alive through vivid artwork and dead-on dialogue, but it does. It's comics with a social consciousness." —*USA Today*

"**A.D.**'s stunning panels retell the harrowing experience of what it was like to live through the disaster." —*Rolling Stone*

"Raw and painful, down to the detailed depictions of ruined homes and the frenzied dialogue among friends." —*Newsweek*

"Referring to **A.D.** as a 'comic book' is a bit like calling *Schindler's List* a 'talkie.'" —*Los Angeles Times*

"[**A.D.**]'s stirring images are sure to linger in memory, perhaps even longer than hours of news footage already have." —*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

"**A.D.** is a sterling example of comics with a social consciousness, and is exactly the kind of thing we need to keep the human dimension of this unimaginable disaster and its ongoing aftermath in the public eye." —*Wired.com*

"You don't have to be a fan of graphic novels to fall under the spell of **A.D.**, Josh Neufeld's haunting chronicle of Hurricane Katrina . . . presenting an unfathomable nightmare through the eyes of these very real and disparate individuals, Neufeld makes the loss tangible. Call it an art book, call it a novel, call it nonfiction, **A.D.** is, simply, an American tragedy." —*Salon*

"Neufeld's images of New Orleans and New Orleanians are powerful and immediate . . . It's that



kind of painstaking detail that makes **A.D.** such a moving book—real people, real stories, told with sympathy and smarts, giving it an immediate place among the Katrina classics. Neufeld’s comic style—larger than life at times, but always human in scale—is perfect for these stories of survival and endurance.” —*The Times Picayune*

“It’s not a light read, but it’s something you *should* read—if only for what it proves about the value of graphic novels as a form of journalism.” —MTV.com

“Josh Neufeld’s **A.D.** intertwines the stories of seven Hurricane Katrina survivors redefining their relationship to their deeply wounded home, New Orleans. . . . The dialogue is convincingly vernacular; the characterizations ring true; the revisionist history is credible; and the double-page spreads will make you want to take shelter from the storm.” —*The Boston Globe*

“Unforgettable, breathtaking chronicle of New Orleans before, during and after Katrina. I guarantee you will hungrily devour this beautiful, heartbreaking project.” —Glen Weldon, NPR

“**A.D.** is one of the best-ever examples of comics reportage, and one of the clearest portraits of post-Katrina New Orleans yet published. An essential addition to the ongoing conversation about what Katrina means, and what New Orleans means.” —Dave Eggers, author of *Zeitoun* and *What Is the What*

“*American Splendor* artist Neufeld beautifully depicts the lives of seven New Orleans residents who survived Hurricane Katrina. In the dialogue-free opening chapter, ‘The Storm,’ Neufeld powerfully intersperses images of the hurricane gathering speed with the cities it crippled when it hit Louisiana on August 29, 2005, specifically New Orleans and Biloxi, Miss. Readers are then introduced to seven New Orleans residents, from all walks of life and parts of the city. Denise and her family—mother Louise, niece Cydney and Cydney’s daughter, R’nae—join thousands of hungry and thirsty New Orleanians waiting to be evacuated after their apartment is destroyed. Leo, the publisher of a local music zine, and Michelle, a waitress, reluctantly leave the city for Houston and are devastated when their apartment (and Leo’s impressive comics collection) is flooded. Other characters flee, or try unsuccessfully to ride out the storm. Neufeld’s low-key art brings a deeply humanizing element to the story. Though the devastation caused by the hurricane and the government’s lackluster response are staggering, Neufeld expertly underscores the resilience of the people who returned to rebuild their lives and their city.” —*Publisher’s Weekly* (starred review)\*

#### **OTHER TITLES OF INTEREST**

##### **By Topic**

*Zeitoun*, by Dave Eggers

*Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans*, by Dan Baum

*The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast*, by Douglas Brinkley

##### **By Theme**

*The Perfect Storm*, by Sebastian Junger

*Into Thin Air*, by John Krakauer

“The Story of an Eyewitness,” by Jack London (magazine article first published in *Collier’s*, May 5, 1906)

*A Paradise Built in Hell*, by Rebecca Solnit

**By Genre**

*Maus*, by Art Spiegelman

*Persepolis*, by Marjane Satrapi

*Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea*, by Guy Delisle

*Safe Area Gorazde*, by Joe Sacco

**ABOUT THIS GUIDE**

This teacher’s guide was written by Sari Wilson. Ms. Wilson has taught writing and literature at Stanford University. She has given workshops on integrating comics into the curriculum for Teachers & Writers Collaborative and the New York City Department of Education.

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