

It All Started with Evangeline

By Paul F. Stahls Jr.

Why is it such a pleasure to read adventures, romances, mysteries or any tale set in familiar territory? Do we become more thoroughly absorbed by the story? Is it ego? Here are some old Louisiana titles worth seeking.

Somehow you knew Longfellow's *Evangeline, a Tale of Acadie* (1847) would head the list. The epic was filmed (and Finis Fox's screenplay, *The Romance of Evangeline*, was published) in 1929. Lafcadio Hearn's *Chita* (1889) focused world attention on the great Last Island hurricane disaster. Maurice Thompson's *The King of Honey Island* (1896) was based on the exploits of pirate Pierre Rameau.

Late in the 1800s came George Washington Cable, Grace King, M.E.M. Davis and Kate Chopin. Cable's Creole tales (*The Grandisimes*, *Bonaventure*, etc.) made him a much sought speaker, and he often traveled the circuit with Mark Twain. Kate Chopin's work, still internationally known and often reprinted, includes *The Awakening*, *A Night in Acadie* and *Bayou Folk*, and her settings range from Natchitoches to Grand Isle.

John Uhler's *Cane Juice* made local headlines in 1931. Uhler was an LSU English professor, the novel was set at LSU, and in one sequence a coed commits an indiscretion. Uhler was banished from the university, but, to silence public furor, he was recalled.

National hits of the 1930s included E.P. O'Donnell's *Green Margins* and *The Great Big Doorstep*. The latter became a successful play, and both concerned life on the delta below New Orleans. Others were Thad St. Martin's Cajun comedy, *Madame Tboussaint's Wedding Day*, Lyle Saxon's *Children of Strangers* about the mulattos of Cane River-Lake, Hamilton Basso's *Days Before Lent* and Gwen Bristow's famous plantation trilogy.

Robert Penn Warren still says his Pulitzer-winner, *All the King's Men* (1946—the movie later won Academy Awards), wasn't a Louisiana story, but *Band of Angels* was. The 1940s also produced the prolific Frances P. Keyes, Frank Yerby and Robert Tallant.

Pulitzer-winner Shirley Grau made her debut in 1955 with *The Black Prince and Other Stories*, and she gave us *The Hard Blue Sky* in '58, *House on Coliseum Street* in '61 and *The Condor Passes* in '71.

Betty Martin's *Miracle at Carville* in 1950 touched the hearts of Americans and focused attention on Louisiana's leprosarium. Paul Wellman wrote about Jim Bowie's pre-Alamo days in Louisiana in *The Iron Mistress* (1951—Alan Ladd later played the hero) and about St. Denis' adventures in *Ride the Red Earth* (1958).

In 1961 came *The Moviegoer*, followed by *Love in the Ruins* (1971) and *Lancelot* (1977). Who, now, can imagine life without Walker Percy—without Binx Bolling and Thomas More?

Alice Green's *Cibola* in 1962 was set on a fictitious ox-bow lake plantation in Northeast Louisiana. In 1965, *Hotel* (set in New Orleans) made Arthur Hailey famous and established The Subplot as an American literary institution. John William Corrington's *And Wait for the Night* in 1964 concerned Shreveport in war and Reconstruction, and his masterpiece, *The Upper Hand*, appeared in 1967.

After *The Long Habit*, his splendid 1948 story of Grand Isle summer folk, Tulane philosopher James K. Feibleman amply rewarded those who had waited by writing *Great April* in 1971. In 1975 came Thomas Harris' gripping *Black Sunday* (about Arab terrorists at the Super Bowl in New Orleans).

Now some recent items, still available in retail bookshops:

***World's End* by James Conaway, 1978, William Morrow, now in paperback.**

Conaway, who earlier gave us *The Big Easy* and (note this) the Leander Perez bio called *Judge*, sets his new novel in World's End Parish, a river parish below New Orleans. It concerns parish boss Rory O'Neill, whose power extends to Baton Rouge and Washington. More fictitious than the story is Conaway's disclaimer: "...There is no World's End Parish in Louisiana and no real family resembling the O'Neills."

***Feast of All Saints* by Anne Rice, 1979, Simon and Schuster, \$14.95.**

Rice has a talent for giving depth to people who, in previous literature, have served only as stage scenery. She did it in *Interview with the Vampire*, and in *Feast* she brings to light the self-contained culture and autonomous class structure of the French Quarter's free people of color in the 1840s.

***Charlie Boy* by Peter Feibleman, Little, Brown & Co., 1980, \$12.95.**

Feibleman, son of James K., is a master of character portraits (as he proved in his 1958 *A Place Without Twilight*). *Charlie Boy*, albeit with flaws, is a penetrating story of murder in New Orleans.

***A Confederacy of Dunces* by John Toole, LSU Press, 1980, \$12.95.**

It's all been said. Ignatius Reilly will be as well-known a literary character 500 years from now as he is today. □

Paul F. Stahls Jr. is associate editor of Louisiana Life. He is a long-time collector of Louisiana books and is the author of Plantation Homes of the Lafourche Country and Plantation Homes of the Teche Country.