



Plenty Enough Suck to Go Around

Cheryl Wagner

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Print and public-radio journalist Wagner describes rebuilding after Hurricane Katrina...Despite Kafkaesque experiences with the infamous bureaucratic mess that threatened to undo New Orleans once and for all, the couple held on to their optimism for the city and their little piece of it. Wagner captures the nostalgia, the heartbreak and the friendships spawned in Katrina's turbulent aftermath with raw emotional honesty free of sentimentality. Unflinching, humorous and heartfelt.—*Kirkus Reviews*

The cliché "New Orleans gets into people's blood" happens to be very true—just not always convenient. For Cheryl Wagner, along with her indie-band boyfriend, a few eccentric pals, and two aging basset hounds, abandoning the city she loved wasn't an option.

This is the story of Cheryl's disturbing surprise view from her front porch after she moved back home to find everything she treasured in shambles...and her determined, absurd, and darkly funny three-year journey of trying to piece it all back together.

In the same heartfelt and hilarious voice that has drawn thousands of listeners to her broadcasts on Public Radio International's *This American Life*, Wagner shares her unique yet universal story of rebuilding a life after it's been flooded, dried, and died...

"Dark, funny, generous and jarring—occasionally tragic but never sentimental." —Paul Tough, author of *Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada's Quest to Change Harlem and America*

"A wonderful, touching, thoughtful, crazy, loving book." —Frederick Barthelme, author of *Waveland* and eleven other works of fiction including *Elroy Nights*, a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award and a *New York Times* Notable Book

"A wild, blood and guts lived-to-tell-all memoir." —Porochista Khakpour, author of *Sons and Other Flammable Objects*

"The book would be heartbreaking if it weren't so funny, so clear-eyed, and so beautifully fierce." —James Whorton Jr., author of *Frankland*

"I love it." —Pete Jordan, author of *Dishwasher: One Man's Quest to Wash Dishes in Fifty States*

"Imagine if Jack Kerouac had lived through the flood and wrote you a long, personal letter from the wreckage." —Jonathan Goldstein, author of *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Bible!* and Host of CBC's and PRI's radio show *WireTap*

"Wagner writes with honesty and humor." —Annie Choi, author of *Happy Birthday or Whatever*

"A work of art, unsparing of everything, including itself." —Jack Pendarvis, author of *Awesome*

The Times-Picayune

Wagner's is a distinctive and funny voice, with that tone of the committed (and at times *should be* committed) New Orleanian.

The title comes, as if you can't guess, from those infuriating stories of comparative loss post-Katrina, when those who had lost everything were subjected to the litanies of minor inconvenience by the more fortunate. "Everyone's loss is big to them," Wagner kept telling herself. And so it was. "I was not interested in sifting and weighing suck on a bunch of tiny scales," she continued. "Suck was too hard to quantify. There was plenty enough suck to go around. Sitting around measuring it wasn't going to fix anything."

What makes this story uniquely memorable is Wagner's wise and wisecracking voice, the broken heart beneath the bravado. Working on a survey of gutted/non-gutted buildings, she writes, "By the time you finished hearing people's problems, you wished you were a professional busybody or the mayor or the governor or a city inspector or anyone who could and would actually do something." And who hasn't had that feeling, way back then or as recently as yesterday?

Finally, Wagner and her boyfriend end up with "the dogs, sanity and each other." And we end up with this fine book, with its searing honesty, its gallows humor and its survivor spirit.

Plenty Enough Suck to Go Around Details

Date : Published May 1st 2009 by Citadel (first published 2009)

ISBN : 9780806531038

Author : Cheryl Wagner

Format : Paperback 240 pages

Genre : Autobiography, Memoir, Nonfiction, Biography Memoir

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From Reader Review *Plenty Enough Suck to Go Around* for online ebook

Rashaan says

Every year, Saint Mary's College chooses a text for Freshmen to read, a narrative that unites the incoming class with a common frame of reference, joining students in a shared discovery of learning. This year's pick was Cheryl Wagner's memoir *Plenty Enough Suck to Go Around*. At the time Wagner wrote her book, our students were thirteen years old. They were familiar with the footage, and they knew Katrina was bad, but Wagner's story turns, what many of us might have experienced as an abstract national crisis, into a visceral and personal campaign of survival and re-building.

For those unfamiliar with the genre, the memoir, self-involved by nature, pulls readers into an intimacy that, often times, can be too close for comfort, especially for eighteen-year-olds who generally have a prescribed aversion to dislike any text they've been assigned to read. Though they grappled with the voice and style, the story stood out and shocked us all.

The hurricane season arrives with autumn raising heightened anxiety for anyone who lives in the Gulf, and, since 2005, this anxiety is multiplied by terrible memories. Tragedy happens everyday but tragedy of this magnitude, when so much of it could be prevented, is a national disgrace. In Wagner's memoir, The Hurricane itself is portrayed in a series of emails, capturing a small sense of the confusion and displacement that wreaked through three states. Wagner focuses on the brutal aftermath, and we shadow her personal recovery in the two years that followed after the initial catastrophe. Even before the storm, Wagner admits she was no optimist: "Injury was injury. I had never met a single person who emerged from a car accident or a house fire fundamentally better off than they were before they went in. I didn't believe in clouds with silver linings. I believed in clouds" (17). Despite her vegetarian, artsy ways, she maintains a pretty cynical outlook, which has sharpened her voice and perspective, giving audiences a particularly poignant lens to view the wake of the storm.

"People's minds are breaking" (32), she writes. "Around the city, there was heartbreaking garbage clotting the interstates. Toys, clothes, mattresses. My eyes could not get used to it" (53), Wagner describes a horrific world and guides us through the utter disbelief that we all feel: how could this happen here in the U.S.? Her voice is gritty and quirky at the same time. She does an excellent job balancing sharp humor with an adept ability to describe what so easily could be blanketed under the general terms of "shameful" and "tragic." Wagner's strength is in her skill to portray the reality without resorting to platitudes. Every frustration, every shock, and every moment of distress is uniquely addressed, and Wagner takes great pains to ensure her story-telling doesn't become repetitive: "I didn't know that you could leave your house one person and return another. That the planets can shift suddenly to make you four or five people all at once, none slightly resembling who you thought you were before. I did not start this summer as a haphazard victim, rescuer, roofer or adventurer" (61). Wagner puts these questions to the test as she scrapes her life together piece by piece: How do we define normalcy and, conversely, how do we act in a crisis or how do we budget stress and learn to take a hit?

Her narrative scrutinizes issues that we take for granted on a daily basis. Having shelter, being able to drink clean water, take a shower, and wear clean clothes, these were daily struggles for her and her fellow neighbors of NOLA. Owning things means being responsible for them, and being a part of a community means you have to take some ownership for your community. Most of the time we can just commute through without stopping to take notice of our surroundings. We're so busy with our lives, rarely do we care who we

live next to and what they do, but after Katrina, all of this changed for Wagner and her partner, Jake.

Unlike many of the interviewees in Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke*, Wagner and her peers had options, which really kept them afloat. They owned their home, had college degrees, and a place to stay when the storm hit. They could come and go as they pleased though the pull of their home ultimately keeps them rooted. Though her life wasn't as devastated as many of the survivors we've seen in many of the documentaries, Wagner still had her own challenges and difficulties to face, many of which were tinged with a strong sense of survivor's guilt that she may carry with her for the rest of her life.

The most palpable theme that Wagner emphasizes is the idea of home. It's so rare now for us to grow up and stay in the city where we were born. For many of us, this idea seems out-dated, but Wagner, like her mother, is determined to keep to her roots, which is what keeps her and Jake committed in their two-year struggle to rebuild their home. They tear down walls, pile garbage that's strewn everywhere they look, they fight with contractors and FEMA, and protect their property from looters and squatters. Home. Wagner tells us exactly what this word means through every experience she recounts and every sentence she stitches together.

In addition to the assigned reading, Saint Mary's also invites the chosen author to come speak to Freshman classes and share informal discussions with the graduate students in the MFA Creative Writing Program. Wagner visited with our class in the morning and also read for a huge audience of Frosh in the evening. Like her writing, she is sharp as a razor's edge and candid, at least candid enough to tell us from the start that she wouldn't answer questions about the neighborhood, her house, or the people close to her who were covered in the memoir. That book is closed she explained to a disappointed audience. "I don't want my life to become like *Jersey Shore*," Wagner makes it clear that she wanted to pay respect to the people who allowed her to write her story by giving them their privacy.

Here are some of the tidbits Wagner did share with audiences:

The experience in many ways was so much worse than what I wrote and also so much better. Fear so pervasive, can't drink the water without suspecting what might be in it, can't sleep at night without wondering how someone could break in, or, if they happen to spend an evening away, wondering who might be poking around our property. Constantly measuring, trying to keep things in perspective between big losses and small gains. We had solidarity in misery at times.

Before the memoir, Wagner explained how she had been revising a tragicomedy novel that took place in NOLA before the storm hit, and, afterward, that NOLA wasn't around anymore. The non-fiction was fantastical enough at the time.

Students asked her what NOLA is like today, and Wagner describes:

75% of the houses are recovered in her neighborhood. In the 9th Ward, 30-50% less recovered. New Orleans still needs to take care of its crumbling infrastructure like aging dams, and a lot of these things can only come from the Federal Government. The crime lab is still not open there. All the levies and canal walls still aren't fixed, so every hurricane season we have to think about it and have a little ambivalence. Try not getting attached to things and not having a lot of stuff. Some think their house is a camp and others have to do a mental trick and believe 'its not gonna happen again.' I try to keep it in the forefront but not obsess about it. Trying to stay flexible into the future. The psychological, social, and economic cost is greater than people had anticipated. Many friends and colleagues had lost time in their career trajectory. There were

articles in the paper that compared us to Japan after their recovery, and they said that recovery takes 8-10 years for rebuilding of infrastructure, but there's the social, cultural and psychological cost. There was that wave when everyone's elderly people were dying. Some people went crazy immediately after, and others who got hit later. You don't know who's going to be resilient. We thought the [mental] snapping would only go on for a certain period of time, but that's not true. There's another wave of snapping.

I haven't seen the Lee documentaries and know a lot of people who don't want to or can't see the images. You kind of pick what you can engage in. I have lost all hope on certain aspects that I don't think it'll ever come back to the numbers we once had in New Orleans though we are getting some modernizations like a bike path and re-thinking the school system, so there's some shaking up. There might be more libertarians, people who are both liberal and conservative but don't trust the government. We'll hope the Saints when again, and we have a general shared mistrust of the government, especially after the BP oil spill.

Another student asked how she managed to write so much tragedy, and Wagner responded, "In what way could I tell people this story and how I could get them to read this? I knew I didn't want to read about disaster or write a disaster story, yet how do you preserve or communicate an important cultural moment and overcome that human aversion to look away. There was an absurdity in this rubbyscape, seeing how humans can still act out in a lot of petty dramas." She wanted to capture the legacy of the storm, and Houston/NOLA thing. "The displacement caused a lot of commuting between the two places." She was always meeting waves of new people: "artists, coming and going. Before Katrina, our lives were band stuff, writing stuff, artists' stuff, but after the storm, now, there are these people who have had to rebuild their whole house like us, people who I'll be spending the rest of my life with. What do I have in common with a sixty year-old? But when we're rebuilding a wall or trying to make sure no hobo comes to squat, we now have everything in common."

In her evening talk, Wagner acknowledged the continued engagement SMC has committed over the years including the "Plenty Enough Stuff to Go Around," a school supply drive where pens, paper, and backpacks, etc were distributed in New Orleans. Wagner read towards the conclusion of her book dedicating her passage to Saint Mary's commitment to civic engagement. She also read from an essay on a follow up after the book. Before the Q&A, she shared a film called *Mouse Holes* from her friend Helen, a video artist. Helen had lost her life to random violence in NOLA, during some of the darker days that followed directly after the storm, which Wagner wrote about in her memoir. The film, a celebration of life, explores where loved ones come from and what happens to them after they leave us. Wagner warned us, the movie was shot on Super 8, "and many of you can probably do higher quality on your laptops now." *Mouseholes* is now in the Harvard Archives, produced by Peripheral Productions.

During Q&A, one of the graduate students asked Wagner about her craft in which Wagner, replied, "I think in scenes now. In comparing fiction to journalism there is a lot of explication and information in the latter, and the two genres are very different in this aspect." She knew that with her background in journalism she'd "Need to describe in a way that's tactile and scene-based with a little bit of history but try not to bog down the readers with the history." A lot of the book was reconstructed from memory and emails though some of the book was written concurrent with the reconstruction and often used as an exercise of escape. Writing was definitely preferable to being a carpenter's assistant. In regards to writing non-fiction, Wagner talked to the people who she knew she would see again and asked them if they wanted their names changed, and those she knew for sure she'd never see again, she explained how she didn't really bother for permission.

Five years after the footage, the crime and the uproar, Wagner's memoir *Plenty Enough Suck to Go Around* gives us a chance to zoom in and see the grand scale of catastrophe through a very particular and grounded perspective. The relationship between Jake and Cheryl is amazing in that they've been able to stay together through so much. It's interesting to see the choices she made in revealing who he is since we barely know what he looks like. In the memoir, Wagner expressly leaves out any description of height, clothes, or mannerisms, but we know Jake in the truest sense from what she does leave us on the page. Wagner keeps the memories fresh in honor of those who are still dealing with the catastrophe. There are wounds still bleeding, yet beauty and magic catches us by surprise, just as we're sure Wagner was caught unawares: "Sometimes I tried to picture what my yard had looked like underwater. In the less murky version it was not the pit bull puppy that had paddled up to my friend's dad's canoe. It was a sea garden with sea sprite ladies in old Nola housecoats tumbling on bright strawberry bottlebrush tree anemones. In the sea garden, old century plants were blue squids. A filthy Barbie backstroked" (97).

A student had asked her what kept her going through the re-building process, and she answered: "Visitors couldn't see what we saw. We moved at a snail's pace of progress." But what really pulled her through were the "Random acts of greatness like elderly ladies swooping in and cleaning up the place."

Emma says

Though there are some writing eccentricities here--a couple of places where perhaps the narrative jumps through time more than the reader is given cues for--this memoir completely captivated me. I learned a great deal about the New Orleans flood and its aftermath, and Wagner's tone really invited me in. Her focus is tight on her own neighborhood and experience, and yet her story reveals much about the whole disaster, without explicitly doing so. I am impressed by all she got this memoir of flood recovery--or perhaps I mean survival--to do, narratively and tonally. Her vision is pretty unflinching, and her insights are not highlighted or drawn out, but they are acute. Plus, the title completely rocks.

Teresa says

This book made me really angry at times (mainly because it revealed so starkly the gross failure of our government to protect and serve its citizens during a crisis, but also because it showed just how screwed you are if you are poor or mentally ill in America). Parts were also quite funny or touching or both at the same time. Wagner has a clear, honest voice and offers an important portrait of what rebuilding after Katrina has really meant for New Orleans.

Angela says

schedule 3 hours, sit down and discuss with your friend what happened in New Orleans post-Katerina; this is what reading Cheryl feels like.

a great story, cutting words and a format that feels like home.

J says

A good, but tough book to read. It's the kind of book you struggle through not because it's poorly written, but because the author does such a good job of making you feel her anxiety, frustration and zillion other emotions. It still blows my mind how colossally the government (federal, state and local) screwed up on Katrina and the rippling effects, even years later, that has had on the people of New Orleans and the other hard-hit Gulf-coast regions effected by this massive storm. Nothing like this should EVER happen again.

Catherine says

Wagner, a contributor on NPR's This American Life, writes about the long process of recovery personally, as well as sharing the changes within her community, after Hurricane Katrina.

The tone of her memoir is conversational and provides an excellent account of living through an enormous natural disaster, and literally and figuratively rebuilding her life despite unending obstacles and bureaucracy. Her story is engaging and honest and includes a great deal of humor.

Lauren says

Brilliant. Bird's eye view of life in Mid-City post-Katrina. Complete with cameo from my friend Chris.

Anne Phye Palmer says

Whipped through this terrific memoir about the years after Cheryl Wagner's Mid-City New Orleans home was flooded in Hurricane Katrina. She captures, with the perfect amount of closeness, the trauma and endless challenge she and her boyfriend Jake encountered and overcame in their dedication to NOLA and the things about it that exists nowhere else.

Dianne says

As you might imagine, this memoir is pretty depressing. It's a Katrina memoir, written by a woman who's in the vicinity of my age group, and tells the story of her and her partner's endless, miserable work to clean and restore their flooded home. The question she keeps asking herself (besides "should we run like hell") is, can New Orleans ever be the community it was, or did it drown and rot away with the stinking flood waters?

I really enjoyed the author's voice; it's not a funny story but she manages to infuse it with that quirky sensibility that makes New Orleans the one-of-a-kind melting pot it is. The only thing I didn't like was the abrupt ending, which wasn't an ending at all; I totally get the point, that the story was far from over and the work would go on and on, but it felt like the story needed some sort of thematic punctuation.

I have to admit the thought of doing what Cheryl and Jake did (I assume they succeeded) baffles me. I would have been one of the first people to say "screw it" and move away and not come back. But then again, the people of NOLA have something other cities don't - it's hard to define, but I've seen it in every person I've met who once called the city home. When you feel that connected to a place I guess it's worth the flood sweat and tears.

Anyway, if you want to know what life was *really* like in New Orleans after Katrina - written not as a horror story to exploit the suffering, but as an honest and gritty account of the months after a disaster when the rest of the world has moved on but your own home is still falling down - I highly recommend *Plenty Enough Suck to Go Around*.

Amanda says

Pretty good. Some cunning language. This is the story of a sort of young white? couple of freelancers who live in New Orleans and dutifully and painfully and triumphantly and slowly rebuild the house they own in Mid-City after Hurricane Katrina. There are some lovely dog anecdotes, some real live disaster inspired bickering, death of future planning and stuff based economies lost to the flood, death of humans and friends and violence, family dynamics, pests, garbage and unknown toxic waste. The people are between the people rich enough to move away or redevelop and the people too poor to return or fix anything up. They do the work themselves, learning all kinds of new skills and drawing on all kinds of relationships for small bits of inspiration to make the tiniest improvements inch by inch. Sort of heart breaking and heart filling if you know what I mean. My favorite line was about this anti-dog suburban? Floridian: "Probably a bug hater. I've always thought a bug hater is a life hater."

Tawny says

I wanted a book to give me an idea of what Katrina was like, and also what Nola felt like to a native. Wagner's story more than delivers on that, and with a writing style that makes the book feel like a different place. I was amazed at how long their personal cleanup took, and a little bit miffed by the total damage. Especially when I thought about buying this in the garden district last weekend & finding the city to be in good shape. (for those who don't know, as I didn't pre-visit, the garden district was not flooded during the storm.)

Thanks for the perspective, Wagner, on both Katrina and disaster.

kate says

got an advanced reading copy of this through the bookstore. LOVED it. & by that i mean -- this book is difficult & true & heartbreaking & hilarious. wagner makes me simultaneously feel pretty much like a jerk for leaving the south & also a little grateful that at least some folk with a sense of humor & a deep, abiding love for the city & stamina for bullshit are still there, piecing their homes & lives back together.

this book is filled with gorgeous moments: at one point, wagner & her boyfriend jake are recovering from a couple years of rebuilding by staying in amsterdam for a minute (if i remember correctly?) & she's pissed

about not being able to find any coffee shops with to-go cups. she muses that at least in new orleans, somebody would make you iced coffee in an MRE bag.

yes.

seriously, though, this book is out at the end of april. read it.

Joy says

A raw real account about what it must have been like to live through and rebuild after Katrina. For those of us who lived far away, we had absolutely no idea. This author tells the story with truth and humor and I found myself rooting for her and her friends all the way through. I love NOLA and would live to go back to find her renewed neighborhood.

Ellen says

I know its contrite to say that a book is "honest." But, that is really the only word I can come up with to describe this one. Wagner is funny, blunt, and completely aware of her relative luck. It shifts this from being another raw look at this tragedy into something deeper and longer-lasting. Pretty amazing.

Debbie Howell says

Post-Katrina New Orleans from the point of view of someone who returned to repair and live in her flooded Mid-City home. Cheryl Wagner writes conversationally (she's a radio commentator) and very personally about the what it was like to return with her boyfriend to their almost-deserted neighborhood and to do the exhausting work--physical and emotional--of restoring their home. Reading this book made me realize the incredible amount of energy and commitment it would have taken to return to New Orleans after the storm. It made me wonder if I would have taken one look at the same house and concluded that it was beyond hope. (Probably.) Wagner's descriptions of New Orleans culture and her pre-storm life provide a framework for understanding why she would choose to rebuild. To stay in New Orleans meant battling mold, rust, rotten drywall, rotten bureaucracy, rats & roaches, and as time went on, crime and violence in the disrupted neighborhood. The story is amazing and is told with humor, yet you can hear the pain throughout. An excellent "on-the-ground" version of post-Katrina New Orleans.
