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Local News

Strange 'Sound' piques interest

by Cheré Coen

Debut author Louis Maistros opens his novel, *The Sound of Building Coffins*, with a young mulatto boy removing aborted fetuses from a burlap sack and placing them in the Mississippi River, massaging them until they are reborn within the waters. As he tearfully lets his babies go as newborn fish, he sings “Jesus, I am troubled about my soul.”

It's at this point, just a few pages into the novel set at the turn of 20th-century New Orleans, when you know you're in for a ride like no other.

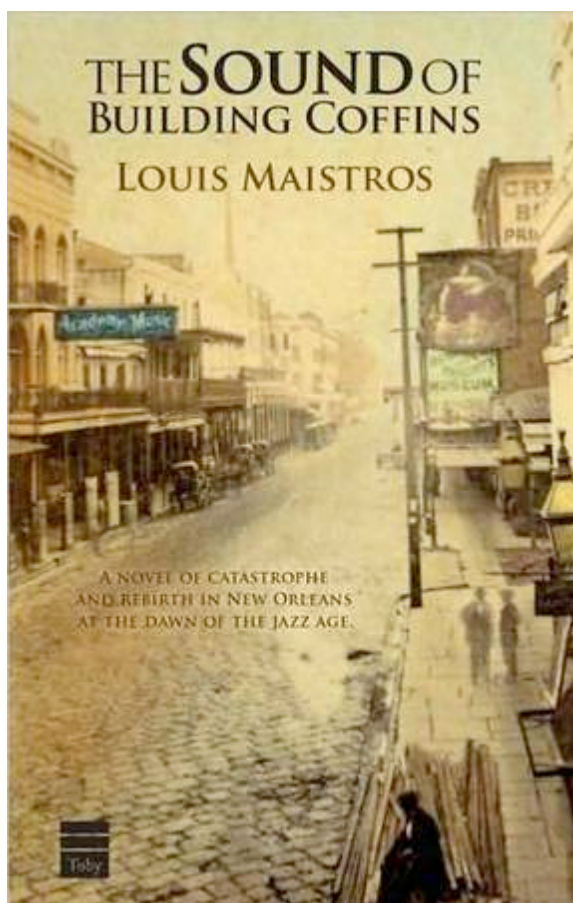
Maistros's young Typhus Morningstar, who has an understanding most boys his age do not, is only one of a complex cast of characters in this dark, creative affair. There's the gravedigger whose face is devoid of a nose, and whose history seeps out slowly to the reader. There's Buddy Bolden and his beloved cornet. There's jail guard Beauregard Church, whose duty one night leads to tragedy despite his good intentions. And there are a couple of voodoo practitioners who make grave mistakes.

The book opens with the infant son of a recently lynched Sicilian immigrant walking and talking years ahead of his age, spitting out codes that lead back to Typhus' burlap bag. Typhus' father, the Rev. Noonday Morningstar, tries to administer to the child, but hears God's warning to leave the house. He ignores God's words and returns, erroneously believing the “evil can still be fixed.” With him come Beauregard, Buddy, two men from a gin joint, Typhus and Noonday's daughter, Diphtheria (all the Morningstar children are named after diseases).

What happens at this house results in the death of Noonday, irrevocably changes everyone present and releases the first note of a new musical form called jazz.

The book then jumps ahead to 1906 and the time of Storyville. The Morningstar children are orphaned, but receive assistance from a phantom who lives in the nearby swamp — a ghost they label “Coco Robichaux.”

Circumstances lead some into prostitution, while one brother, Dropsy, becomes friends with the boy



who was exorcised as a child.

Readers also jump back in time to find out clues to where this evil originated, learning of a voodoo priestess who called forth an evil in the depths of grief, of her niece who was in love with the noseless grave digger called Marcus Nobody Special. This evil still lurks like death in the pink waters of the swamp, waiting to be reborn.

The stories weave in and out “like threads in a rug,” connecting in a lyrical prose that’s as unique to Maistros as his story. There are times when the surreal writing style becomes annoying or puzzling. Most of the time, however, his voice works well, drawing us in like a fish on a line. In the back of your mind, you know that Maistros’s absorbing tale will lead to a grand finale, one that will explain all.

And he delivers.

It’s hard to read a New Orleans novel with so many water references and not connect the story to the events of 2005. But this is not a Katrina book. Instead, Maistros displays what most of us realize despite the horrors of the past few years, that New Orleans flirts with death constantly, whether it be yellow fever, hurricanes or devastating fires.

And as Marcus Nobody Special learns, the waters come to wash over the city and all is reborn.

Author Events

- WTUL radio interview at 3:30 p.m. Tuesday with live streaming on wtulneworleans.com.
- Book signing at 6 p.m. March 5 at Octavia Books, New Orleans.
- Speaking at the East Bank Regional Jefferson Parish Library at 7 p.m. March 9.
- Book reading and signing at 7 p.m. March 12 at Marigny Perks Coffee House.
- Book signing at 1 p.m. March 14 at Maple Street Book Shop, New Orleans.
- Book signing at 3 p.m. March 15 at Barnes & Noble, 2590 CitiPlace Court, Baton Rouge.
- Speaking at The Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival March 27, tennesseewilliams.net

In Other Words ...

Some new titles about New Orleans and the surrounding area include:

- Bienville’s Dilemma: A Historical Geography of New Orleans by Richard Campanella, published by UL’s Center for Louisiana Studies.
- Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans, a collection of nine stories of New Orleanians between hurricanes Betsy and Katrina, by The New Yorker reporter Dan Baum.
- Squint: My Journey with Leprosy by Jose P. Ramirez Jr., who was diagnosed with leprosy and sent to live in Carville, La., at the only leprosarium in the continental United States.

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