

Lecture, Week 15: *Crescent City Rhapsody* and "The Lottery"

Meet Kathleen Ann Goonan

This week's lecture include an email interview with VT grad Kathleen Ann Goonan, author of this week's novel *Crescent City Rhapsody*. Be sure to visit <http://www.goonan.com/> to read her talk in the link below (quiz items from this talk) and look for her in one of our forums--see announcements.



www.goonan.com

A Tour of New Orleans, 2009

The novel opens with Marie Laveau in New Orleans in fictional 2012, not so many years into the future. Though it's a fictional world, we might reasonably imagine that it's not too different from the New Orleans we'd see now. Here's a brief image tour, just for the pleasure of it—photos by Jim Ruggiero, spouse of ENGL 1654 instructor Cheryl Ruggiero who was in New Orleans in April 2009 and adds a few personal comments to the tour.

Crescent City: As you can see at right, the city is spread out along a crescent bend of the Mississippi River, which gives it the popular nickname that's used in *Crescent City Rhapsody*.



Marie's Balcony:

Marie lives in the French Quarter, the old part of the city, sensibly built on high ground, and little damaged in

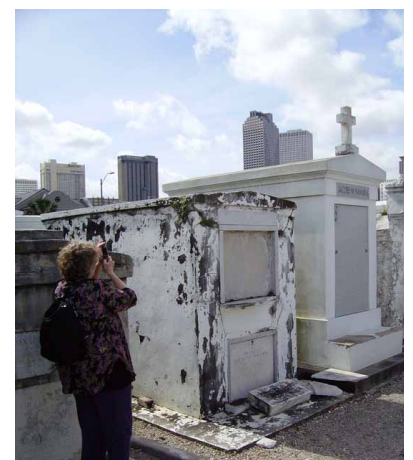
Katrina flooding. I can testify that "The appetizing smells of hot spices and garlic vanquished the sweetish, sickly smell of spilled beer that cooked up from the bricks around 9 a.m. like steam" (p. 2). Here's a balcony with hanging ferns, perhaps like Marie's, though hers is on the 4th floor, a rare and expensive height in the Quarter.

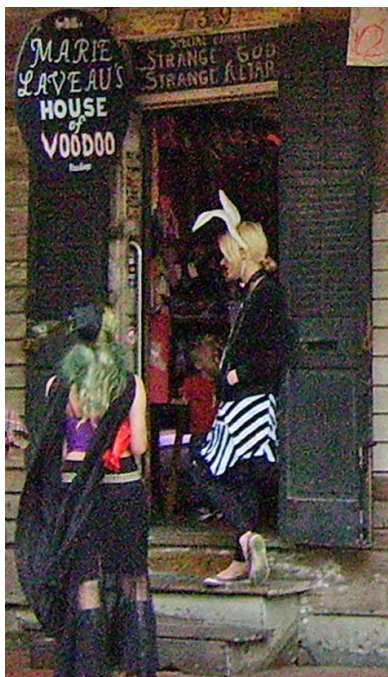


Street life went on around the clock: partying, clowns (like those who shoot Marie?), dancers, Easter parades: downtown

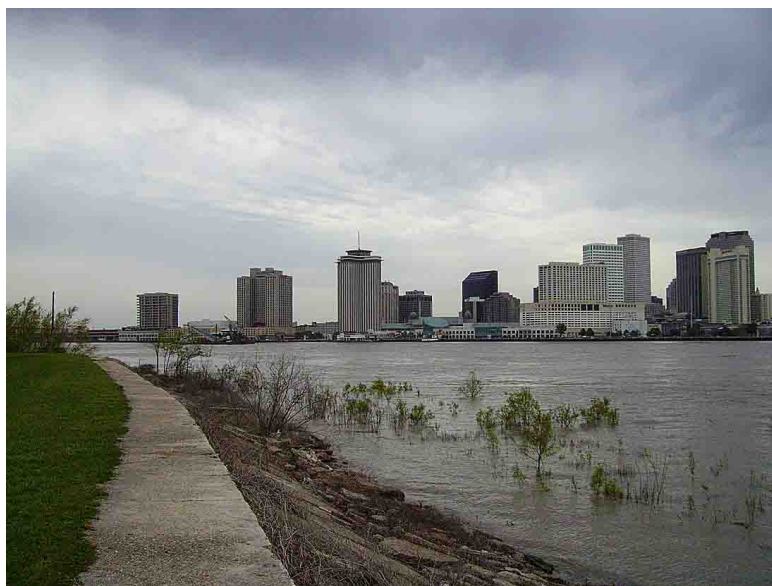
parades with floats and jazz bands; hymn-singing parades; wedding parades with marching brass bands (traditionally for funerals, now for weddings too), the bride throwing *mardi gras* beads.

St. Louis #1 Cemetery: Marie's daughter Petite Marie ("little Marie") is buried here. Because the water table is so high, graves in the city are above ground. I saw graves dating from the late 1700's to 2005.





Marie Laveau, voodoo Queen: Goonan's Marie is from a long line of Marie Laveaus, including the "voodoo queen of New Orleans" (p. 5), a figure in the real world. Here is "[Marie Laveau's House of Voodoo](#)" on Easter Sunday in 2009, which may explain the rabbit ears worn by one of these local residents.



The Ferry from Algiers: Marie returns to New Orleans by river, getting off on the Algiers side and crossing by ferry (p. 97). I took that ferry—at left is the levee just downriver from the ferry dock, with the water rising, and the city center across the river.

Rhapsody in Hokie territory: Angel's Rest, on the Appalachian trail, is only a short drive from Blacksburg, on Pearis Mountain. Some of you may hike there.



<http://tgaw.wordpress.com/2007/11/08/angels-rest-evolution-of->

Crescent City Rhapsody
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Opening Note

PRELUDE Swiftly; With Gravity

THE FIRST MOVEMENT

First Solo

Motive in a Fleeting Key

Blued Duet

BREAK

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BREAK

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SECOND SOLO Japanoiserie

Jump Joint Break

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THIRD SOLO Dissonant Swing

Ascending Triplet

THE SECOND MOVEMENT

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Final Note

Music in *Crescent City*: A WIKI CHALLENGE.

It would be impossible to discuss, in a brief lecture, even the surface layers of musical meaning in this novel, since its very form is that of a musical work, a rhapsody, defined in the book's front matter as "an instrumental composition that is irregular in form." This rhapsody, also defined in the book as "a literary work consisting of disconnected pieces," comes in five Movements made of Solos, Breaks, a Diminuendo, a Glissando, a Tonal Change, Syncopations, a Crescendo . . . every chapter named for a musical form. At first glance, the story lines (or melodies?) seem disconnected, joined only by the Silence. But they ultimately meet to form a complex harmony. Some of the terms are from classical music theory, many from jazz. It may help you to see the structure with the movements and chapters laid out at left.

Since it would take ten pages to give even brief definitions of some of the less familiar terms, and since you'll get more out of discovering their meanings for yourself than from reading a longer lecture, I'm proposing a new page in the wiki on these musical terms--you'll find it in the index: **Crescent City Music.**

Ms Goonan has said that she's always hoped someone would do such a study of musical terms in her book, and it got started in a forum in Fall 2009, but now it can be part of our wiki for many people to enjoy!

Directions: define a musical term of your choice from the menu at left and then show a connection between the term and what happens in the chapter. If others have already defined your term, feel free to expand on that definition with your own insight or choose another term.

Exploring the musical terms will help you make your way through this mysterious and complex novel!

Conversations with Kathleen Ann Goonan.

Crescent City Rhapsody is a very complicated novel, with many plot lines that at first appear not to connect at all. The story moves from one character's focus to another, and sometimes it's a long time before it comes back to a character. You don't need to struggle to remember them, though--Goonan writes skillfully enough that once you get into, say, the second chapter involving Tamchu, you'll be reminded who he is via the context. Just let this story carry you along like music might--flow with it. It will all come together by the end, and you'll have had quite a voyage!

Here are two items that will add some depth and background to your experience of Crescent City Rhapsody.

1. A TALK: At her website, <http://www.goonan.com/>, you'll find the text of this 2001 talk by Ms Goonan:

"The Biological Century and the Future of Science Fiction"
Thursday December 13, 2001 at [The Library of Congress](http://www.goonan.com/loc.html).
<http://www.goonan.com/loc.html>



2. EMAIL INTERVIEW from Fall 2009: Ms Goonan addressed several questions in an email "interview," and here are her responses.

Q. Pheromones, nanotechnology, radio astronomy, biomagnetic receptors, extraterrestrial intelligence, bees, communications . . . how much and what kinds of research did you have to do to write this book?

Kathleen Ann Goonan: When I write a novel, I invest a lot of time in research. For Queen City Jazz, my first novel, I had already done a lot of the necessary research about bees--how they communicate with pheromones and by dance, how their senses work, and their lives in general. They are fascinating. I read a lot of the research done by Karl von Frisch and his students, most of it painstaking and groundbreaking. I recommend Mark Winston's The Biology of the Honeybee.

Likewise, the nanotech information. I read The Engines of Creation, Drexler's book, in 1990 or 91, and went on from there. At this point in time, 2009, nanotechnology has been broken down into more mundane applications than those envisioned by Drexler, and is used as an advertising term to denote "cool and sexy and you'll never figure out how it works--or if it does." But Drexler's vision is quite extreme--what I call "hard" nanotechnology, the kind that has the potential to be truly and radically transformational, as Gibson notes in his blurb for Queen City Jazz": "An unforgettable vision of America transfigured by a new and utterly apocalyptic technology. Greg Bear's Blood Music is perhaps the only other novel to have dealt so unflinchingly with the paradigm-shattering possibilities of a functioning nanotech." Since QCJ came out, I have met a lot of the

people who work for the NSF, which has been working to keep nanotech from being thought of in any way that might strike fear into people. And, in fact, it would take a lot of leaps to make it as Drexler feared, as I have used it in my books. But-- "nevertheless," and, "what if?"

I have just been going through the huge library of radio astronomy and related physics books I accumulated while doing this research, some of which I read while working on *The Bones of Time*, my second novel, but also new ones that had come out, which I now have to sell to make room for new books. There were a lot of them. I found the "Biogenic Magnetite" bit in "Break With Four Sections" online, and when I contacted Dr. Kirschvink for permission to use it, he first asked if I was one of the cranks who wanted to prove that living near power lines makes people sick and stupid. When I explained my work, he was delighted to give me permission. I think I had also seen a piece about it in *Science News* or *Nature*.

And then, there was the basic research about New Orleans, which I visited several times, and Marie Laveau, and voodoo, and African-American history in New Orleans. I read *Tell My Horse* by Zora Neale Hurston, and anything else I could get my hands on. I grew up in Washington, visited Japan with the help of a Japanese friend, toured Thailand, and tried to be as accurate as possible about everything. Someone wrote to me that my okinomi-yaki description was all wrong, but that actually varies by region. Poul Anderson, who lived there for a while, wrote me a very nice letter praising my depiction of Japan.

Oh, the short answer? Lots of research.

Q. What sparked your interest in these technologies?

Kathleen Ann Goonan: I've always been interested in our relationship to the physical world, and in how ours differs from other creatures, who have evolved to be aware of other facets of the universe. Our senses have everything to do with how we think about what is going on. Until we had tools to sense phenomena that we otherwise could not hear, see, or touch, science was quite limited. And extrapolating from that, how would we think about things if just one little factor was tweaked? World-changing, possibly.

I rather work backwards when it comes to a lot of things. For instance, *QCJ* evolved from a vision I had when running. I used to run four miles a day, which takes one into a different mind-frame. Generally, I would be contemplating how to deal with a problem in whatever I was working on. The vision was one of a city with giant flowers on top of the buildings. Naturally, this suggests large bees, and to make this work, one has to know a lot about bees and flowers and their relationships. So you could say that the things I wanted to write lead to my interest in getting it right.

One thing I was not expecting--that my migraines would lead to anything except pain and suffering. They developed suddenly, and I didn't know that they were migraines--I'm not the kind of person who has migraines! But they came in handy when I was writing CCR.

Several years later, after Light Music came out, my husband and I were moving from Lakeland Florida to Tennessee. I had packed for a week, and the movers had moved all day, and I was sitting on the floor of the empty living room, exhausted and . . . in pain! The phone rang--the last phone call we got in that house. My husband answered it and carried it to me, a puzzled look on his face. "This woman wants to talk to you. She thinks you're in pain." I laughed and laughed. Yes, I was in pain--severe pain. I wondered how she had gotten through his salesperson defenses. However, she turned out to be the editor of the Journal of American Pain Practitioners, and she had noticed that my characters had very realistic migraines. She wanted me to write a piece for the journal, which I eventually did.

Q. How do you think we're doing in the real world with these technologies--too far too fast, not fast enough?

Kathleen Ann Goonan: Technologies move at the speed of how much money they can make, or what wars they can win, or what diseases they can heal. I don't think that anyone is putting on the brakes, really, in various areas, except that funding for technologies fueled by science are often constricted by the ideologies of whoever holds the purse strings. I think it would be quite wonderful if more money was invested in figuring out how we really learn and developed a truly effective science-based approach to education that did not tragically waste so much of student's time, young and older--not to mention that of their teachers, and the money spent on their education. E-communication has changed everything radically in the past fifteen years, and yet it seems quite normal to all of us now, and I think that other technological changes will "feel" that way to society, too. For instance, the public attitude about in vitro fertilization has made a one-eighty since the idea was first put forth for use in humans.

Q. Music! Would you tell us about the role of music in this book--more than we might see for ourselves?

Kathleen Ann Goonan: I always try to envision a governing structure for my novels--most novelists do--and I believe that American music, particularly jazz, is culturally important besides being intellectually stimulating and beautiful.

[Ms. Goonan stopped the email interview at this point so she could get on the road for a 500-mile trip. She joined the Fall 2009 course forum the following evening, as I hope she will do for this Spring semester course. On behalf of all the students and instructors, THANK YOU to Kathleen Ann Goonan for her participation!]

“The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson

Our only other reading for this week is Shirley Jackson's landmark story "The Lottery."

Realism: Garyn G. Roberts, our anthology's editor, notes in his introduction that “the realism Jackson employs in ‘The Lottery’ is unsettling.” You may wonder how a story could be called “realistic” when it describes a stoning ritual that we’re all sure could never take place in any American town. Roberts is not commenting on the central fantastic device of the story, but rather on its words, its substance.

Consider the details of the scene. The June weather, the dusty square, the children’s play, the politics of the small town, the way the box was stored in places like “underfoot in the post office,” the “faded house dresses” of the women, Mrs. Hutchinson’s remark about her dishes, the complaints about loss of tradition . . . it’s all recognizable. All of that could happen in any small town we’ve ever been in—well not the house dresses, nowadays.

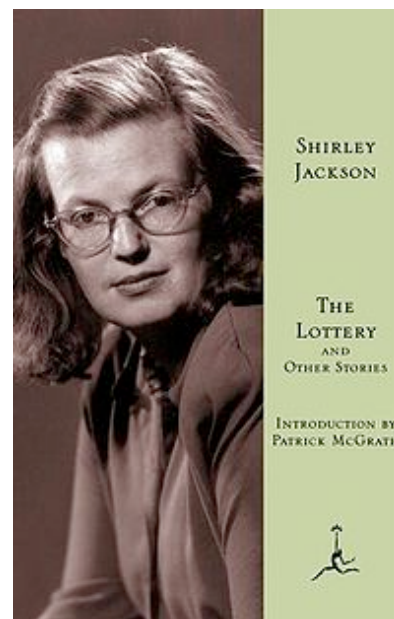
Further, consider the psychological realism—doesn’t Mrs. Hutchinson’s plaint of “it’s not fair” seem entirely believable, once we grant what has befallen her? The relief of the others? The group behavior? That’s what’s unsettling: it could never happen, but the scene and the people are all too familiar.

That’s what’s realistic. Contrast this presentation with, say, *The Hobbit* or *A Wizard of Earthsea*, and the differences may be illuminating.

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These two tales are quite different, of course, since Jackson's is a compact short story and Goonan's is a very long novel with multiple story lines. They both present visions that we want to believe are impossible. We don't want to think humans would sacrifice each other to ensure a good harvest (but in ancient times, humans did). We don't want to think that nanotechnology could provide the means of such drastic intervention in human lives as we see in *Crescent City* (but nanotech is developing very rapidly). We don't want to think that our current technology could crash for unknown reasons (but there are an awful lot of unknowns).

What if we did lose our comforting cyberspace buzz? What if nano-elixirs could be made that could cure schizophrenia, resurrect the dead, and insert the jazz genius of Ellington into a fan? Would we want these "advances"? What if the fertility of our land were believed to depend on human sacrifice? Would we do it? Just how different from us are those people in Jackson's "The Lottery" or Goonan's *Crescent City*?



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lottery