



Review

Reviewed Work(s): THE BEST OF PETER FINNEY, LEGENDARY NEW ORLEANS
SPORTSWRITER by Peter Finney

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To compensate for teacher shortages, fifty ETV stations in nine Deep South states participated in *Sesame Street's* "virtual educational community" (p. 151)

Coles, Cosby, and Cooney were "modernizers," who endeavored "to close a racial divide between Americans." (p. 26) Nevertheless, since the 1960s, "American society has grown more economically and socially segregated," as local school boards respond to and reinforce local community attitudes. (p. 172)

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Marcia Synnott

THE BEST OF PETER FINNEY, LEGENDARY NEW ORLEANS SPORTSWRITER. By Peter Finney Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2016. xii, 252 pp. Introduction, index. Cloth \$29.95, ISBN 978-0-8071-6306-1).

The proximity of most to sports and athletic spectacles is mediated by those who chronicle and interpret the games and events, who take, for example, the testosterone-fueled ramblings of several dozen men in helmets and body-padding and make it recognizable as football, as something in which readers or watchers or listeners should not only invest time, but also emotion, allegiance, and effort. Those chroniclers who best facilitate that recognition become just as vital to the sports of a given city as the teams who wear that city's name. For New Orleans in the second half of the twentieth century and the first part of the twenty-first, that chronicler, that vital conduit between sports and meaning for Louisiana's largest city, was Peter Finney. In the new LSU Press collection, *The Best of Peter Finney, Legendary New Orleans Sportswriter*, seventy-five of Finney's columns from 1959 to 2012 stand as testimony to that vitality, to the mythmaking that generates such devotion among those seeking proximity to sports in the city.

To contextualize Finney's impact, an introduction by his son, a former sportswriter himself and editor of the *Clarion Herald*, tells the story of "a philosopher, telling stories on a French Quarter balcony." (p. 25) The elder Finney was born in 1927 and grew up staring through the bars of a wrought-iron balcony on Chartres

Street, imbibing the sounds and smells of the city. He began his career as a stringer for the *New Orleans States* while a student at Loyola University, graduating from first covering local high school sports to reporting on LSU football. He began covering the Tigers in 1954 when the team had a losing record and chronicled the team's growth through its 1958 perfect season. His football interest turned to the Saints when the team was founded less than a decade later. The Saints, too, suffered early losing seasons, but Finney covered them for decades and was able to chronicle the professional squad's growth through its 2010 Super Bowl season. In his son's masterful telling, Finney was a devoted, multitasking journalist whose work was nothing if not a labor of love. He was also a devoted family man who raised children and remained married for sixty-one years. Finney interviewed every major sports figure of the late twentieth century and won every major award a sports columnist can win. But his effect came not from the forest but the trees, not in the totality of the whole but in the individual moments that Finney related to those in his home city. Such is the strength of this collection.

The columns included in *The Best of Peter Finney* run the gamut of Finney's legendary career and Louisiana sports' greatest milestones. They are divided into sections organized by the various sports that Finney covered. His writing on Louisiana's Ron Guidry and his time with the Yankees led to coverage of Billy Martin and George Steinbrenner. Closer to home, LSU's version of a baseball dynasty provided equally compelling fodder. The school's Dale Brown, Pete Maravich, and Shaquille O'Neal similarly captivated the state's basketball fans, as did north Louisiana's Willis Reed. LSU's football team, though, was the school's big draw, and Finney chronicled it with a passion only eclipsed in his coverage of the New Orleans Saints. The collection also includes Finney's columns about boxing, golf, horse racing, and the Olympics. He described a day in the life of Muhammad Ali in preparation for his Superdome rematch with Leon Spinks in 1978 and the passion and drive of young Jack Nicklaus as he played the Western Amateur at the New Orleans Country Club in 1961. Finney covered everything from professional wrestling to championship chess, but the soul of his writing remained in New Orleans, and it was in the role of mediator, of the interpreter of

the city's sports to its citizens, that he remained so valuable for so long.

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GETTING OFF AT ELYSIAN FIELDS: *Obituaries from the New Orleans Times-Picayune*. By John Pope. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015. xii, 348 pp. Introduction, acknowledgments. Cloth \$30.00, ISBN 978-1-4968-0375-7).

John Pope's *Getting off at Elysian Fields* collects 123 obituaries that the author wrote over a period of thirty-four years, beginning in 1980 and ending in 2014. There is also a shorter section of the book that provides a vivid description of four funerals that took place between 2008 and 2013 for Warren McDaniels, Al Copeland, Revius Ortique Jr., and Lindy Boggs. The book's layout is one of its great strengths. The obituaries are arranged chronologically by publication date, and each one begins with a name followed by a brief description of the dead's major accomplishment in life. For the judge J. Skelly Wright, for example, Pope notes, "He desegregated New Orleans' public schools." Ruthie the Duck Girl, who died in 2008, is noted for being "A bar-hopping eccentric on roller skates." Such a layout helps the reader navigate the book, and it also gives a quick sense of the vast range of the people that Pope chose to commemorate.

Pope's dead span the rich and the poor. They stretch across races, ethnicities, religions, and genders, and their chief occupations in life are just as varied. They are writers, visual artists, musicians, preservationists, judges, journalists, politicians, doctors, grocers, mob bosses, chefs, morticians, political activists, philanthropists, bartenders, hoteliers, waiters, restaurateurs, professors, lawyers, ministers, and quirky characters of the French Quarter. The causes of their deaths, too, are diverse. Many died from cancer, heart attacks, liver failure, and complications from AIDS. Some died from their diseases; others died from their treatments. But what unites them all is death—death and the city of New Orleans. Individually, these obituaries offer small sketches into the lives of other people: where they came from, how they walked the earth, and what they left. Read together, however, they offer a fascinating story of New Orleans in the twentieth and early twenty-first century.