

Author
C. Rosalind Bell
has a taste for the
truth that emerges
from conflict
between nature
and woman.

It's late August of 2005 and a handful of native Southerners gathers in New Orleans. As each reflects on a personal slice of Louisiana life, a storm twists and swirls over the Gulf of Mexico: a milky white cataract carrying the winds that will shred houses and knock out power through much of the state, the rains and floodwaters that will burst levees and result in one thousand deaths.

Elaine, a gossip with a heart of gold, recalls growling at the drug addicts across the street, who she suspects siphoned gasoline from her car. A young man named Martin tried to persuade his 67-year-old granny suffering from dementia to flee the city. Sheila, the young mother of an infant daughter, had heard her share of hurricane warnings before and stubbornly refused to evacuate. Bernadette, a proud, middle-class homeowner, struggles to accept the death of her old life of privilege. Jill, a shrill and profane woman, claims the hurricane is man-made, part of a conspiracy to get rid of black folks.

Stones In My Passway

These people are characters in "New Orleans Monologues," a fictionalized account of Hurricane Katrina written by C. Rosalind Bell. It will be read on March 12 in Tacoma Actors Guild's New Plays in Performance series.

"Who were these people?" wonders Bell. "They were everybody. They were you, me . . . we don't know. We just saw these poor, bedraggled people in front of the Superdome. Like they don't have any story."

Though her work is ambitious and often tackles big subject matter far beyond Tacoma, Bell maintains a quiet profile here. She describes herself as a "writing, working stiff" and is a remarkably productive one. She has authored five screenplays and two novellas. *Tottie Pie*, a film based on her short story "First Friend," was screened last year at the Seattle International Film Festival. Her play "Stones in My Passway," about legendary bluesman Robert Johnson, was read in the Screenwriters' Salon Series at SIFF in 1997. Her work has drawn honors including a Washington State Artist in Residence grant, a residency at Soapstone (a writing retreat for women on the Oregon Coast) and a standing invitation to participate in writer Sandra Cisneros's annual Macondo Writing Workshop in San Antonio, Texas.

Two days a week Bell teaches poetry to fourth graders at the African American Academy, a Seattle public school, as part of Seattle Arts & Lectures' Writers in the Schools program. Plus she hosts "Good Eating with Ros," a TV show on Comcast

By Todd Matthews
Photo by Jennifer Adams

that highlights the scores of recipes she's collected over the years. She's now at work on an accompanying cookbook.

"She's just the real thing, very genuine and very sincere," says Sandra Cisneros, author of "The House on Mango Street" and "Caramelo." They met in 2001, when Cisneros was on a book tour and Bell escorted her around Seattle. "I felt, this is someone I want to spend time with," she recalls.

Bell's been in fast company before. While living in San Francisco in the 1980s, where she started to pursue her writing seriously, she dated the stage director Claude Purdy and was immersed in the city's theatre scene. Purdy was a collaborator and friend of playwright August Wilson. "I was thrown into this world of professional actors and writers and marveled at it," says Bell.

Bell ran with Purdy, Wilson and the actors Charles S. Dutton and Theresa Merritt, who created the title



role in Wilson's "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." At that point, she adds, "August's star was just rising. That world of dreams coming true was fascinating, a good place to be for a writer."

This was a creative period. Bell wrote "Stones In My Passway" and another play, "Le Cirque Noir," about "Papa Doc" Duvalier of Haiti. She also wrote a number of short stories. "There were so many things I wanted to say," she recalls, "and what better way to say them than in fiction?"

In 1995, Bell moved to Tacoma: she finally felt at home artistically. "I'm so taken with this city," she says. "When the writer is ready, there's an audience. Most writers ask, 'How do you bridge the writing with an audience?' Well, in Tacoma the bridge is there."

Bell was born and raised in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Her parents, Clarence and Geneva, were both teachers. "I grew up in a very middle-class home," says Bell. "If anything, my parents were running from the blues probably, rather than trying to make it part of our conversation." Dad was a history buff; this affinity bonded him and Rosalind. "I loved talking to him about history," she recalls. "He seemed to be a retainer not just of fact, but also of the reasoning behind issues."

She graduated from Southern University in Baton Rouge, where she majored in political science and thought about being an attorney. "After school, I

just wanted to experience life," she says. She moved to Washington, D.C., in 1979 and was hired as a civil rights investigator by the Treasury Department. Assigned to the department's West Coast division, Bell was sent to Seattle for a year, where she first glimpsed Pacific Northwest greenery. "I took one look around and said, 'Oh, my. This place is beautiful.'" Fifteen years later, Bell settled here.

Today, Bell lives in a two-story Craftsman-style home in Tacoma's North End. She works late into the night on the rewrite of a novel, "Love, Me," which she first wrote in the form of a diary. Two days a month, she heads out to a farm in Puyallup, where she tapes her cooking show.

Since September, she has collaborated with several faculty members at University of Puget Sound on "New Orleans Monologues." The current plan is to mount a full-scale production at UPS in the fall. Geoffrey Proehl, chair of the Theatre Arts Department at UPS, will direct the play. "What attracted me first was the level of detail," he says. "Ros gives us a very specific grounding that helps us get to know who these people are, how their experience of Katrina might have been lived."

Grace Livingston, professor of African American studies at UPS, is playing Elaine, the narrator. "The thing that moved me in the script is that it is so layered," she says. "Rosalind refuses to make all black people a monolith — one thing. Often that's what happens. But she gets into the guts of her characters."

How does she tap into an epic event in the South — from Tacoma? "It's all in my head," Bell explains. "In some ways, it's easier to write about it, being away from it. But I carry memories with me wherever I go. And I hear the songs, people's voices, calling me back home."

Bell's writing explores history, conflict and loss. She's still exploring. "I write from feeling," she explains, "about big deeds and questions. I write to find answers." <