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October Read of the Month: *Dixie Bohemia*, by John Shelton Reed

October 22, 2012 By [Allen Mendenhall](#)

Reviewed by Allen Mendenhall



John Shelton Reed's *Dixie Bohemia* is difficult to classify. It's easier to say what it isn't than to say what it is.

It isn't biography. It isn't documentary. It isn't quite history, although it does organize and present information about a distinct class of past individuals interacting and sometimes living together in a unique, definable space.

It isn't quite sociology either, although Reed is, by training and profession, a sociologist, and sociology does, every now and then, sneak its way into the pages.

Maybe it's best to suggest that the book is a bit of all of these, but it's also an annotated edition of *Sherwood Anderson and Other Famous Creoles: A Gallery of Contemporary New Orleans*.

Written and compiled by William Spratling and William Faulkner, whom Reed affectionately dubs the "Two Bills," *Sherwood Anderson and Other Famous Creoles*, first published in 1926, was something of a joke: its oft-rambunctious subjects weren't really creoles, but simply friends of the authors, and most weren't, by most measurable standards, famous.

Reed's stated goal, one of them at least, is to provide an "introduction to a Bohemian crowd of artists, writers, journalists, musicians, poseurs, and hangers-on found in the French Quarter in the mid-1920s." This eclectic and creative crowd comprises what Reed calls a *social circle*, or, in more academic parlance, a "loose network of relationships linked by friends in common," "by association with the same institutions," and "by common interests."

Reed explains that social circles, by nature, "have no formal leaders, but they may have their notables," and they have their cores, too. The leader of the so-called "famous Creoles" is Sherwood Anderson, and the core, as you might have guessed, is the French Quarter.

Tulane University, with all of its energy, entertainers, and eccentrics, enabled and sustained the circle that produced the local arts, literature, and culture. The area and its residents gained a national, indeed international, reputation. As Meigs Frost, a reporter who made the cut as a famous creole, put it, "So many of us here are internationally famous locally."

Reed's subtly sociological introductory chapters place his subjects, which were also the two Bills' subjects, into their historical context—and what a wild, exotic, and at times erotic context it is. His comprehensive research is delivered with such wit and enthusiasm that one can forget this work is scholarship written by a former professor and published by a university press.

His occasional use of the first person and confessional, qualifying asides—"as far as I know," "Some may find it easier than I do," "to my mind artists should not be judged on what prejudiced observers see in their work," "It is difficult to discuss this," "I have mentioned," "I know of someone," "it's fair to say," "It's hard to imagine"—will let you know, or let you guess at, where he stands on an issue or acknowledges an assumption on his part. Such delicate humility—or is it just honest colloquialism?—is rare for a person who made his career in the university, and it would be a shame if readers neglected to notice it.

Peopled with absinthe-drinking, music-loving debauchers, 1920s New Orleans was a place where madams and brothels were as common as jambalaya and gumbo; where music poured into the streets, which smelled of spices, sex, and booze; where bootleggers (this was the Prohibition Era, remember) set up shop next to cops (who were customers of the brothels and the bootleggers); where the only limit on free love, it seemed, was the stultifying effect of alcohol; where parties—especially costume balls—were considered failures if nobody got naked; and where vivacious theater, daily newspapers, and edgy literary periodicals flourished.

If this milieu seemed excessive, radical, intemperate, even libertine, it was also in a way conservative: there was among its dwellers a ubiquitous impulse to preserve and maintain.

History, both that being made and that made already, was important to the artists and writers. The districts, the streets, the homes, the buildings, the sidewalks—all of them required and received care and protection, and all of them underwent systematic revitalization. The literati, as conservationists, were afraid that the world they had inherited, and to some extent made, was endangered.

Fans of Reed have come to expect certain things: the informal idioms and plain speech he uses while dissecting, with surgeon-like precision, complex people and institutions; the surprising clarity he brings to understudied topics; and the delightful, conversational prose with which he arrests your attention, transports you into another world, and then releases you back into your own world.

In this, his latest, he does not disappoint. As always, he delivers—and in so doing provides telling insights into a minor renaissance in American literary history. His discussions of race and sexuality will inspire (or provoke) future study, but more importantly he has addressed some of the least known phases of some of the most known American litterateurs.

Reed doesn't need my endorsement. But he's got it.

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