

## Reading Guide for *The Unnatural History of Cypress Parish* by Elise Blackwell

### About the Book

The narrator of *The Unnatural History of Cypress Parish* is Louis Proby, a 95 year old man who is a distinguished scientist, a specialist in fluid mechanics who has developed a strain of chaos theory that has changed the way people in his field “do science.” He is writing to us on the eve of Hurricane Katrina, spurred by this forecast of “what the newscasters say will be more devastation by water,” to try to make sense of what he has come to recognize as the most important time of his life, when at the age of 17 he himself was caught up in a swirl of dramatic and chaotic events surrounding the great flood of 1927.

At its simplest, *The Unnatural History of Cypress Parish* examines what disasters do to both the people and the places they strike. At its most complex, this novel explores the various and incomplete ways we try to make sense of things that happen to us, differing ways of knowing the world – personal experience, family history, newspaper stories, factual historical accounts, scientific explanations, artistic expression.

The setting for *The Unnatural History of Cypress Parish* is a fictional place located south of New Orleans, on the Mississippi River. It is based upon the two home parishes of Blackwell’s grandparents, Vermillion and Livingston Parishes, plus a third, St. Bernard Parish. What Louis Proby calls “the few stories he will try to tell” about the events and the people of his youth add up to a beautifully written, richly evocative narrative of the changing face of the south in 1927. It’s also about the impact of men corrupted by power and money upon the lives and fortunes of ordinary people – especially the poor and powerless -- in a time of disaster, including the misguided – and unnecessary -- decision to dynamite the Cypress Parish Levee to keep New Orleans from flooding. At the same time it is a coming of age story, filled with loves and losses of many kinds, among them that of innocence, both personal and cultural.

Louis Proby is the eldest of 4 children. His father William is a highly capable man of ambition and drive. He’s worked his way out of poverty by way of the lumber industry, rising from his first job as water boy in a logging camp to company town superintendent of Cypress. As such, he is the most powerful person in town, even displacing the town constable, a racist thug with the gift for making any bad situation worse.

Just as ambitious for Louis, William reluctantly agrees to let him work as a driver for Charles Segrist, the lumber company executive who commutes back and forth between Cypress and New Orleans. The idea is for Louis to save money for college, but William, perhaps unwittingly, also wants him to learn something of the ways and manners of the larger world of the more sophisticated men of New Orleans. Charles is an enthusiastic mentor, who promptly introduces Louis to the big city ways of gambling, mistresses, and the notorious nightlife of New Orleans, which serves as the backdrop for all the dirty politics and wheeling and dealing going on to protect New Orleans’ money interests in the face of the coming flood. Louis is a willing pupil, but in his father’s eyes as well as Louis’, at least in retrospect, the lessons he learns from Charles do not serve him well, especially when the floods come.

In Cypress, Louis falls in love with a schoolmate from one of the French families, Nanette Lancon, with whom he becomes physically intimate, perhaps spurred on by Charles’ example, perhaps not. The course of their relationship plays out within the context of daily life in Cypress, including Louis’ trips with his father on company business to job sites and neighboring towns peopled by citizens from a diversity of racial and ethnic backgrounds; Louis’ home life with his parents, grandfather, and siblings; Louis’ French classes at school; and the annual town picnic, which

Louis has to leave to take his injured terrier Terrebone to Rabbit, an African American man who serves as the town veterinarian. And another key event at the picnic involving Nanette's brother Henri leads to a crisis in Louis and Nanette's relationship.

Just as important to Louis' coming of age is the story of his relationship with his other mentor, the one whose influence will last his lifetime – the painter Gaspar Anderson. While young Louis tries to write a Natural History of Cypress Parish in the manner of Pliny, Gaspar teaches him how to see the world in the manner of the Painter. Ironically, it is Gaspar who young Louis betrays when Cypress Parish is flooded, and it is through seeking out his work in later life that the older Louis is able to find some vitally important reference points in his quest to understand the deeper meaning of the events of his youth.

Finally, the events of the novel are interspersed with an array of fragments presumably written by the mature Louis on natural, political, economic, engineering, social and biographical history, related sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, to the time of the great flood of 1927 and its aftermath. These passages -- about river velocity, engineering, weather reporting, media coverage, Leprosy and the armadillo, the leper's colony at Carville, Louisiana, financial losses and reimbursements, the various fates of individuals who left the south after the flood -- all provide another layer of context, or way of interpreting the narrative events of this rich and complex tale of the not too distant past.

### **About the Author**

The daughter of biologists, Elise Blackwell is a native of Southern Louisiana, the setting for ***The Unnatural History of Cypress Parish***. She is also the author of a first novel, ***Hunger***, which was selected by the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* as one of the best books of 2003. It has also been translated into several languages. After graduating from Louisiana State University, she took the MFA from University of California -- Irvine. She now teaches at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, SC. She is married to the novelist David Bajo. They are the parents of one child, a daughter.

### **Interview with the Author**

#### **Where did you grow up and when did you start writing?**

I grew up in Southern Louisiana and I started writing when I was about five years old. About a year later my maternal grandfather saw that I had a knack for story telling and he offered me a dollar for every story that I wrote. That kept me going for a while, and I think I got too prolific for him, because he told me he couldn't afford me anymore, but he said I hope you keep writing but don't do it for the money, which was good advice (laughs).

#### **What can you tell us about the title of the novel, *The Unnatural History of Cypress Parish*?**

It's a play on a couple of the ideas in the book. First, young Louis Proby, the narrator of the novel, fancies himself a natural historian, and is writing a natural history of his home parish, Cypress Parish. And in the book, there's a juxtaposition between the natural and the unnatural – the flood of 1927 was a natural disaster, but the actions of men contributed to the devastation, so there was a man made component to it. Also, for better or for worse, national culture has penetrated the rural south by 1927, so I hope that idea was captured in the title.

And of course Cypress Parish refers to the setting. In Louisiana, we have “parishes” instead of counties, and Cypress Parish is a fictional parish. It is based on some three actual parishes in southern Louisiana – Livingston Parish; St. Bernard Parish, where the dynamiting of the levees actually happened; and I also drew some information from Vermillion Parish, where my grandmother hailed from, in a little town called Abbeyville, which is more of a French speaking town. My grandfather took a coaching job there and was invited to take some tea at the home of the David girls and there were five pretty French girls. My grandmother was the middle one, and he picked her.

### **How did the novel start for you?**

Well the grandfather that encouraged me to write sat down late in his life to write his memoirs about growing up in southern Louisiana in the 1920's. The novel is not based on his life, but the novel did start with his stories and with the stories told by all 4 of my grandparents. Later I started reading about the great flood of 1927 and it seemed natural to set this coming of age story against the setting of the great flood.

And I hasten to add that the book is not based on my family history, but it's hard not to take those morsels from real life and work them into my fiction.

### **You decided to rewrite the novel after Hurricane Katrina, right?**

I had finished a version of the book before the hurricane struck. The parallels between the 1927 flood and Hurricane Katrina are of course obvious and stunning. After Katrina, particularly because of the amount of the devastation, I felt that I needed to take the book back and revise it to somehow take some kind of account of the contemporary event.

### **What did you do?**

The events of the novel now are essentially the same as when it was told in third person. But my solution was to have Louis Proby tell his story of the 1927 flood on the eve of Katrina. And I think the knowledge that Katrina is about to hit and our knowledge of what that resulted in does bring the events of the flood into greater dramatic relief. Some early readers have called this novel prescient, but I don't think that is any more than just that all of us who come from Southern Louisiana and other places along the Mississippi and the Gulf are acutely aware of the dangers of water. I loved what Brad Watson said – that this is a novel where the past is haunted by the present.

### **This novel also reminds me of that French idiom: The more things change, the more they stay the same.**

It's true, and while Hurricane Katrina was a great tragedy it's not necessarily a surprise to those of us who have grown up in Southern Louisiana, knowing of course where we're located and what the history was and that a lot of the mistakes that were made in the great flood of 1927 were problems that were never solved since. And often we don't learn from history. Of course Mother Nature was the cause, but human response was another major issue and I think it is something that Louisiana is going to have to continue to cope with.

### **The parallels are staggering. I love the way you got in the part about the loss of all the animals, not just live stock but also people's pets. The same thing happened in Hurricane Katrina, and people died rather than leave their animals behind. Was that in the original version of the novel?**

Yes, it was. I think I capture that issue in the novel in the character of Rabbit, an African American man who has tried to find a way out of poverty by becoming a self taught veterinarian.

Not only are his animals creatures that he is attached to personally. They also represent his livelihood and function symbolically as his hopes for a better life, and for a better life for his children. And of course there is Terrebone, the Proby family's terrier, who Louis's father euthanizes when they have to go to the shelter in New Orleans, rather than leave him to starve to death on a rooftop, as so many dogs did in 1927, as in Katrina. It was a harsh decision for him to have to make, but he felt it was a necessary one, given the circumstances.

**In what ways do you think your character of Louis Proby was based upon your grandfather, or an inspiration for him?**

In a couple of ways. When I first started writing the novel, he was closer to my grandfather, but he increasingly became more fictional. For one thing, to the best of my knowledge, my grandfather was a person of extreme integrity and never did anything to feel guilty about, which makes him not a very interesting fictional character, so Louis became a more complicated person. But what he shared with my grandfather is a rise from very humble beginnings through education and a love of science to another life. My grandfather was born to illiterate grandparents and barely literate parents. And through the study of science he later became a university professor and a dean of a university. So that sort of drive to learn, to understand the world and to improve your life through education is a part of the character of Louis. I also used some actual family stories, like the one about Henri Lancon, who sticks pins into his fingers to impress the other kids. It turns out that was a sign of leprosy, and he was interred into the Leper Colony in Carville, La. That was an actual family story. And just some little details, like Louis's love for watermelon pickles. That was from my grandfather.

**The mature Louis has carefully tried to remove all signs of the south from his speech. Is there some stigma, in his mind, to being southern?**

Oh yes. My father, who is from Mississippi, has taken to telling people who give him a hard time that "Somebody has to be from Mississippi." And when I went away to California to graduate school, I was told that people would not think I was very smart if I kept my southern accent. So I tried very hard to get rid of it which I now realize was just stupid and have let at least a little of it come back. I think with respect to the southern cities, people aren't so prejudiced anymore, but still there is that feeling towards the rural south.

**How would you describe the thematic content of this novel?**

It's a coming of age story not just for Louis, but also for the place. The 1920's is the time when rural America for better or for worse was starting to be like the rest of the country. The first billboards were in place – there is a Burma Shave sign talked about by Louis and Charles Segrist on their first drive together into New Orleans, and people were also starting to order from the Sears Roebuck Catalog. I tried to get a sense of these changes into the novel.

Its also a story of greed and ambition and power. Like Hurricane Katrina, the flood of 1927 had human as well as natural causes. Rich people fared better than poor people. That's definitely a theme of the book. And for me it's also about our various and incomplete ways of knowing the world: newspaper accounts, personal recollection, personal history, family stories, science, art, historical fact. And we need all of them to make sense of anything that happened.

One of Louis's central flaws is that for a young man who wants so badly to understand things, to understand the world, to write a Natural History, to know how things work, to describe things, he has a shallow understanding of human motivations. And here he is, late in his life, and he is still having trouble understanding what his own motivations were back when he was 17 years old. The mysteries of the human mind, including our own minds, are among the deepest and darkest. Louis can understand Chaos Theory for instance, and yet he can't tell you what he did when he was 17.

**He is very concerned about finding the essence of things. What do you think is the essence of things for Louis?**

I think what he wants is the meaning of events. What does it mean about the human condition and about me, personally? He can remember being in love for the first time, for instance, but if he can't remember what it felt like, is he robbed of that experience? I think that's the kind of thing he worries about.

**What about closure? Is that also part of the essence of things for Louis?**

I think they are definitely intertwined. If he could have had closure, he could have written the end of the story for himself, and I think that is one of the things that disaster does to people, it robs them of closure, it interrupts their lives, all of their plans, their hopes, are shifted, interrupted. It creates crevasses analogous to the one made in the levy by dynamite. In Louis's case, he didn't get to see his first love play out. Would they have drifted apart, would they have married? Most of all, he didn't get to say good-bye to Nanette, and I think that very much haunts him, as it would anyone.

**Indeed, this novel is very much a love story, isn't it?**

Oh yes, like a lot of coming of age stories, it's among other things a story of the sexual coming of age, a story of first love which of course is like no other love. And what is Life without Love? (laughs)

**This is also a father and son story, too, isn't it?**

Yes, the father and son story is very important. Before the flood, William Proby is a man who knows how to get things done, a man who has ambitions to power, a man who is very capable and larger than life, and Louis looks up to him. During the course of the novel, he shrinks, sort of literally and figuratively, and they do have quite a blow up there at the end. Louis has questioned his father's moral decisions, but has made mistakes of his own. He finally comes to realize that, and feels a certain amount of shame for those mistakes and his harsh judgments toward his father.

**There is also the seduction of Charles Segrist and the world of New Orleans.**

And William Proby very much pushes Louis to do that because he wants him to rise in the world, but he doesn't like the outcome. And I think Charles, through exposing Louis to his relationship with Mignon, his mistress, contributes to Louis's sexual coming of age with Nanette. And then there is the world of jazz, short skirts, whiskey, and people who are corrupted by money. The immediate lessons in life Louis learns from Charles, but they don't serve him so well.

**Maybe the most important mentor to Louis, because he teaches him how to See, in the largest sense of the word, is the painter Gaspar Anderson?**

Yes! Gaspar teaches Louis probably more than anyone else, but it takes Louis a long time to see that. It's the lessons that Louis learns from Gaspar that are going to stick with him over his life, that are going to influence his career, and who he becomes as a man. It's also Gaspar who Louis betrays by not trying harder to rescue the paintings in Gaspar's studio when the levee is about to be dynamited, and he can't find Gaspar.

**Given how important Gaspar has been to Louis, how do you suppose the one painting he did rescue, that little canvas that Gaspar and he had talked about as Gaspar painted it, ended up, as we learn later, in a second hand store in Metairie Louisiana?**

<http://unbridledbooks.com/cypressparish.html>

Well again I think that is just representative of the crevasses that disasters create. Things get lost. But I also think that when Louis leaves Cypress Parish for college and his career he tries to put his past behind him, as with his southern accent. And when he travels to the Gaspar Anderson museum, where he finds that painting, he – and we -- are able to see the crevasse in Gaspar's work, created by the absence of the paintings from that period. He is also able to see, from the one painting done at the time of the flood, evidence that Gaspar had witnessed the loss of all his work to water, a specter which I find absolutely terrifying. As does Louis. I also enjoyed writing that scene because it gives us closure on Gaspar, who the novel has not tracked.

**There's another character we haven't talked about: his younger sister, Emily.**

A very interesting character. He feels very protective toward her, she is in some way hampered, but also gifted, in the way she sees the world, knows the world through smell. Because the novel is about different ways of perceiving, of depicting the world, I wanted to have a character whose perceptions were what most of us would consider skewed. That gives her a different access to the world.

**Louis' siblings are all pretty important in the novel. They function as foils to Louis, don't they?**

Yes, that was one of the things that I wanted to explore. When I was growing up, I always wanted brothers and sisters. I suffer from the terrible disability of being an only child, and I am married to a man who is one of 15 children! And I think that one of the wonderful things about having siblings is that everyone knows they're parents are weird, but only one's siblings know the particular ways in which they are weird. And I always felt like I had missed out on that. But a phenomena I've also noticed is that there are a number of people I have met who actually don't like their siblings, or don't like one of them, and Louis and his younger brother Pal just don't have very much in common. Louis doesn't much like him, and the feeling is reciprocated! His sisters, on the other hand, are very close to him. Luta is very no nonsense, practical, and optimistic, in contrast to Emily, who is very sensitive and optimistic. Again, for me, Louis's siblings represent different ways of seeing the world.

**Where did these characters come from?**

They're inventions. A combination of traits of various people I've known, things I've thought about, and things I've just made up.

**Where did you get that insight that the older we get, the less we understand of things?**

Well I think it has been a hard won insight for myself, because when I was 15, I knew everything! And then when I was 20, I realized maybe I had a few things to learn. Now that I am older, I realize I don't know very much at all, and I imagine that condition is only going to get better, or worse, depending on how you look at, it as I get older! I also had the privilege of knowing all four of my grandparents in an adult to adult relationship and I think I learned a lot from that. I think so many Americans don't spend enough time talking to people of other generations, and a lot of insight does come from that.

**As the author, what were you trying to leave the reader to take away from the novel?**

Oh, that's always such a hard question, because the fiction I love doesn't have any "messages" that are easy to boil down. But a couple of things: I hope the reader will come away with a new way of looking at some pieces of the world. A new way of thinking about people from the south, about art. I also hope they give some thought, of course after Katrina, about how we prepare for, react to, and treat each other through trying times, times of disaster. I'd like the reader to

understand the importance of history, that some of the things that have happened in this country aren't as far removed as we'd like to think they are. And it's important to look back from where we've come from, and why.

-- Interview conducted by Kay Callison  
-- Listen to the podcast of Elise Blackwell on [www.unbridledbooks.com/podcast](http://www.unbridledbooks.com/podcast)

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. What was your immediate response to this novel? Is there anything in your personal experience or of anyone you know that is similar to what happens in the novel? If so, how did that affect your reading of the novel?
2. How would you describe the tone of the novel?
3. How many parallels can you identify between the events of the Great Flood of 1927 and what happened during and after Hurricane Katrina? Brad Watson has said that in this novel, "the past is haunted by the present." What do you suppose he means by that? Why?
4. Describe Louis' brothers and sisters. What do they, and their interactions with Louis, both as children and as adults, tell us about Louis? Do you think their lives as adults are consistent with their personalities and lives as children? How would you describe and interpret the role of Louis' mother in the novel?
5. Think about Louis' relationship with his father, Charles Segrist, and Gaspar Anderson. How would you describe these relationships? What does he learn from each of these 3 men? What kinds of tensions are created by the lessons he learns from each? How are each of these relationships resolved in the novel, if they are?
6. Who is your favorite character(s) in this novel, among the "supporting cast?" Why? How do they add to the world of the novel?
7. How complete a picture of Southern Louisiana in 1927 do you feel like Blackwell has created? Is there anything that surprises you about it, or changes your mind about any ideas you might have had about that time? If so, what? Do you feel like there is anything important that is missing? If so, what and why? If not, why not?
8. How do you interpret Louis' response to seeing Gaspar's painting, "Le Deluge," or "The Flood," at the Gaspar Anderson museum?
9. Louis tells us both in the Prologue and in the closing line of the novel that he has "put together everything I know, [and] still I cannot say what happened." What do you think is the "what happened" of the novel? Do you feel satisfied that Louis has told us a complete story of all the events of that time? Why do you think Louis feels that way at the end of his account?
10. In the Prologue to the novel, Louis says this:

"Yet the older I get, and despite all my training as a man of reason and method, the harder I find it to understand anything at all. If you were to place, side by side, the historical account of something that happened, a painting of it, and a scientific explanation of how and why it occurred, you might still not understand it. . . ."

In what ways do these lines relate to the themes of the novel? In what ways do these lines relate to the structure of the novel?

11. How many “crevasses” can you identify that happen in the lives, events, and places of the novel?

12. How would you describe this novel to someone else? Would you recommend it to someone else to read? Why? If not, why not?

### **Recommended Reading**

*Rising Tide: The great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* by John M. Barry.

*Lanterns on the Levee* by William Alexander Percy (a memoir by the uncle and adopted father of the novelist Walker Percy).

*Insect Dreams* by Marc Estrin

*Lost Son* by M. Allen Cunningham

*River Rising* by Athol Dickson

*Old Man* by William Faulkner

*The Wild Palms* by William Faulkner

“Down by the Riverside” and “The Man Who Saw the Flood” by Richard Wright (short stories)

“The Flood” by Robert Frost

*In the Skin of a Lion* by Michael Ondaatje