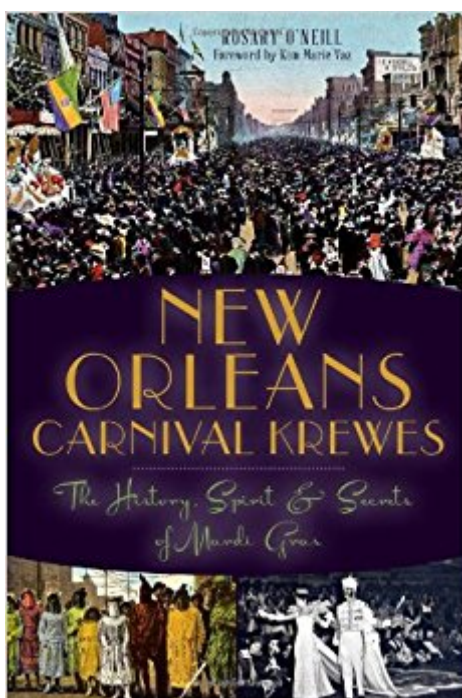


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# New Orleans Carnival Krewes: The History, Spirit & Secrets Of Mardi Gras



## Synopsis

New Orleans is practically synonymous with Mardi Gras. Both evoke the parades, the beads, the costumes, the food--the pomp and circumstance. The carnival krewes are the backbone of this Big Easy tradition. Every year, different krewes put on extravagant parties and celebrations to commemorate the beginning of the Lenten season. Historic krewes like Comus, Rex and Zulu that date back generations are intertwined with the greater history of New Orleans itself. Today, new krewes are inaugurated and widen a once exclusive part of New Orleans society. Through careful and detailed research of over three hundred sources, including fifty interviews with members of these organizations, author and New Orleans native Rosary O'Neill explores this storied institution, its antebellum roots and its effects in the twenty-first century.

## Book Information

Paperback: 240 pages

Publisher: The History Press (February 11, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1626191549

ISBN-13: 978-1626191549

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.3 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 13.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 11 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #278,291 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #29 in Books > Arts &

Photography > Photography & Video > Lifestyle & Events > Celebrations & Events #596 in Books

> Travel > Specialty Travel > Tourist Destinations & Museums #1600 in Books > Humor &

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## Customer Reviews

Rosary O'Neill is a native New Orleanian living in New York City. She is Professor Emeritus of Drama and Speech at Loyola University of New Orleans, a recipient of five Fulbright Senior Specialist Program Fellowship awards, Senior Fulbright Drama Specialist and author of twenty-two plays. Rosary is a member of the Playwright Directors Workshop, Actors Studio and founder of the Southern Repertory Theatre in New Orleans, the State of Louisiana's only actor's equity theatre.

Kim Marie Vaz is professor of education and the associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Xavier University of Louisiana. She is the author of *The "Baby Dolls": Breaking the Race and Gender Barriers of the New Orleans Mardi Gras Tradition*. Her book served as the basis for a major

installation on the Baby Doll tradition at the Presbytere unit of the Louisiana State Museum as part of the museum's permanent display on the history of Carnival in Louisiana.

I picked this up for research on a novel I'm working on. My wife and I had our honeymoon in New Orleans, years before Katrina, and so I've always been fascinated with the city--even though I'm not a resident. That said, I had NO idea about the extensive history of Maris Gras and the krewes behind it. What an incredible journey into an exclusive subculture the rest of the country (or world) likely has no idea about. For lovers of history, revelry and the Big Easy--check this out. From what I can see, no other author has been able to have such incredible access to these secret societies and she does a delicious job in lifting the veil. Well done!

If you're at all interested in the "behind the scenes" world of Mardi Gras, this is a, frankly, astounding book. I've read quite a bit about mardi gras, and I haven't yet found a book that is so well researched and presented. You get a history lesson about the socio-economic position of the rich and poor, presented in context of the political machinations of every generation for the past 150 years. As if that weren't enough information, she has spreadsheets that break down the average costs of everything from annual dry-cleaning and alterations of tuxedos and gowns, to the beads and throws for both Old-line and New Krewes. A special chapter focuses on African American Carnival. While the Gay Tableau societies are mentioned more than once, this may be one area where I might have liked to had more information. But on the whole, the book is a BIBLE for anyone who wants to learn more about Carnival, or, if you're like myself and you have a business that caters to the people in the Mardi Gras world.

Very Nice!!!

As described!

Great job, Rosary!

The book layout is choppy and not well laid out. Sections seem disorganized and very short lacking the detail I was looking for. We have gone to Mardi Gras every year in New Orleans for 15 years, but neither my wife or I found this book interesting.

I once toured the warehouse where they keep all the Mardi Gras floats and props. As a mask-maker and popular culture historian, I was in heaven. *New Orleans Carnival Krewes: The History, Spirit & Secrets of Mardi Gras*, by Rosary O'Neil Neill, reproduces that heaven. It's a behind-the-scenes look at the culture that created Mardi Gras in New Orleans. This unreconstructed Yankee was amazed. I recommend this book to historians of popular culture. I also recommend it to anyone who has ever been to Mardi Gras, or just to New Orleans. I recommend it to actors, directors, and designers—these folks can put on a show! O'Neil Neill, an historian and playwright, interviewed at least 50 people to gather the secrets she chronicles. (She also read a fascinating bibliography of books.) As a native of New Orleans, she understands its culture; as an historian, she analyzes the social structure of her native city. With a wealth of detail, she brings us through the history of the carnival krewes to an understanding of how they work today. "New Orleans attracted the rich and the dreamers," she says O'Neil Neill "from French aristocrats to Spanish conquerors to American entrepreneurs (along with their indentured servants and slaves.) Each group created its own aristocracy, and as the cultures melded, so did their love of theatre, balls, and extravagant celebrations. But the book gets really interesting as O'Neil Neill describes the old-line krewes, which are all about inherited power and prestige. I learned that krewes come and go; that they affect, and are affected by, changes in politics and culture; and that they are expensive. Member dues range from \$600 to \$2,900. New Orleans spends more on ball gowns than any other city in the world. A single costume can cost as much as \$6,000; the ball after the parade costs over \$120,000. Debutantes from important families receive all-calls, or invitations to dance. They are, of course, groomed for this event from childhood. Of course, things have changed over the years, especially after Hurricane Katrina. Super-Krewes parties are egalitarian bashes. Women and African Americans have created their own krewes. Debutantes now become career women. But the parties continue. Judith Pratt is a playwright, director, and theatre historian.

Beyond the day itself, beyond the street parades and outdoor festivities, beyond the riotous clamor of Bourbon Street, there are the mystic krewes of Carnival. What are, who are, and from whence came these mysterious, fraternal organizations? These questions are answered in a captivatingly thorough and touchingly affectionate way in Rosary O'Neil Neill's book of history, heritage, and drama. Yes, drama! And I mean that in the truest sense. If you think you knew a little about Mardi Gras, get ready for a most comprehensive yet fanciful and fascinating look at its genesis. Even though this reader grew up in the birth place of Mardi Gras, Mobile,

Alabama, and whose knowledge of Mardi Gras was more of the promiscuous masker type, that is, masking on Mardi Gras day and roaming the streets, this history completes the dots in the crazy puzzle of Mardi Gras lore, fact and fiction. It relates a vision of bygone customs, of theatrical whimsy, and, especially, of insider politics that are still very much in existence in present day New Orleans Mardi Gras. Even as it chronicles Mardi Gras's past, it reveals the history of the deep south, never masking the inherent racism of the Krewes. I appreciated very much this aspect of the book, for, as it is so masterfully portrayed, Mardi Gras is truly a dramatic reflection of the city, its society, and its people. Chapters on krewe budgets and ball expenses were interesting but slowed down the experience a bit. However, the myriad sections on all aspects of Carnival will leave you hungry for more. Comprehensively indexed and exhaustively sourced, this account of the history, spirit, and secrets of Mardi Gras will definitely whet your appetite for a real experience of the most wonderful day in the New Orleans year.

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