

## Holding onto joy

With fatherhood, bestselling author Clint Smith finds way back to poetry

BY SUSAN LARSON  
Contributing writer

The joys of parenthood are many and varied, but for a writer like Clint Smith, a special pleasure has been watching his son learn to read.

“It’s so fascinating to watch the world become legible to him,” he said. “It’s like having had the wrong prescription for glasses and seeing the world suddenly come into focus. I want to hold on to those moments.”

And in Smith’s new poetry collection, “Above Ground,” that’s just what he does, cherishing joyful moments and asking a father’s essential questions.

His first book, “Counting Descend,” also reckoned with family life and the complications of lineage and kinship. It was the 2017 One Book One New Orleans selection, which marked a very special homecoming for the writer.



Smith

“I’ve gotten so many notes from teachers in New Orleans who were inspired by the program to share the book with their students, which means so much,” he said. “And having an event and reading at the New Orleans Public Library to celebrate the moment was especially wonderful because those libraries are where I first learned to love reading.”

### Next, a bestseller

His second book, a work of narrative nonfiction called “How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America,” rocketed to the top of the New York Times bestseller list. It recounted his travels to such places as Jefferson’s Monticello, the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, the Whitney Plantation, and the Blandford Confederate Cemetery, as well as other sites specific to America’s slaveholding past. This complicated journey into how and what is remembered firmly established Smith as one of our leading public intellectuals.

“Above Ground” has been a welcome return to poetry. “Poetry is where I started,” Smith said, speaking from his home in Maryland. “It’s my north star — even when I’m not writing poetry specifically, the music and the language are always with me. It’s always shaped my writing.”

These poems range from the wildly humorous — “Ode to the Electric Swing” (“my wife

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### BOOK SIGNING

6 p.m. Wednesday • Baldwin & Co. Books, 1030 Elysian Fields Ave., New Orleans • \$30 ticket includes a copy of the book

## RICHARD CAMPANELLA: WHAT HAPPENED WHEN NEW ORLEANS STARTED PUMPING WATER OUT OF THE GROUND?



PROVIDED IMAGE FROM THE HISTORIC NEW ORLEANS COLLECTION  
Part of a big pump, May 1916; gelatin dry plate negative by John Tibule Mendes, photographer; The Historic New Orleans Collection, gift of Waldemar S. Nelson, 2003.0182.32

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA | Contributing writer

Editor’s note: The following is an edited excerpt of contributing writer Richard Campanella’s new book, “Draining New Orleans: The 300-Year Quest to Dewater the Crescent City” (LSU Press).

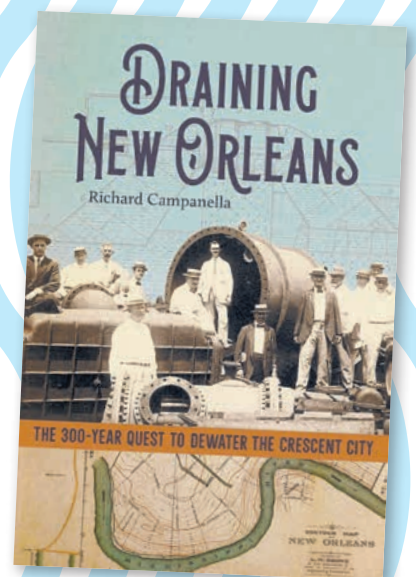
**P**hysics created the Mississippi River delta plain entirely above sea level. Be they marshes, swamps, relict beaches, barrier islands, distributary ridges, or natural levees, all terrestrial surfaces here originally lay above the mean level of the sea, albeit slightly along the coastal fringe. ...

Under natural conditions, these soils comprised a wide range of parent materials but only three particle sizes: sand, silt, and clay. Anything coarser, like pebbles or gravel, would have been too heavy to make it this far down the Mississippi.

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# DOWN THE

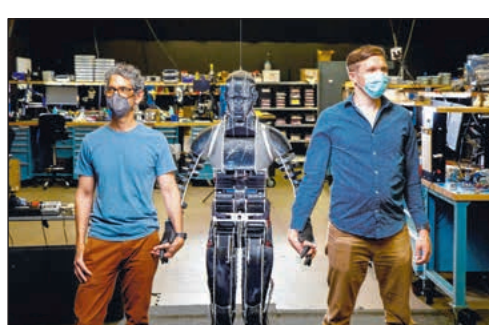
# DRAIN



## LAND OF TOMORROW

### Disney’s future may be filled with engaging robots

Walt Disney Imagineering scientists display a stunt robot prototype in 2021.



LOS ANGELES TIMES/TNS PHOTO BY JAY L. CLENDENIN

KATIE RICE  
Orlando Sentinel (TNS)

A robotic rabbit wearing a helmet and roller skates tumbled out of a crate and got to its feet alone, extending its arms to balance itself on a stage at Disney’s panel at the South by Southwest conference in Austin, Texas.

The robot, apparently modeled after the character Judy Hopps

from Disney’s 2016 animated film “Zootopia,” then skated across the stage into a somersault and returned to its feet in a triumphant pose, arms raised, as the audience cheered. A nearby Imagineer, Morgan Pope, steadied the robot as it leaned forward and lifted it onto his shoulders to laughter.

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## TODAY IN HISTORY

By The Associated Press

Today is Tuesday, April 4, the 94th day of 2023. There are 271 days left in the year.

### Today's highlight in history:

On April 4, 1968, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., 39, was shot and killed while standing on a balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee; his slaying was followed by a wave of rioting (Washington, D.C., Baltimore and Chicago were among cities particularly hard hit). James Earl Ray later pleaded guilty to assassinating King, then spent the rest of his life claiming he'd been the victim of a setup.

### On this date:

In 1841, President William Henry Harrison succumbed to pneumonia one month after his inaugural, becoming the first U.S. chief executive to die in office.

In 1865, President Abraham Lincoln, accompanied by his son Tad, visited the vanquished Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia, where he was greeted by a crowd that included former slaves.

In 1917, the U.S. Senate voted 82-6 in favor of declaring war against Germany (the House followed suit two days later by a vote of 373-50).

In 1945, during World War II, U.S. forces liberated the Nazi concentration camp Ohrdruf in Germany. Hungary was liberated as Soviet forces cleared out remaining German troops.

In 1949, 12 nations, including the United States, signed the North Atlantic Treaty in Washington, D.C.

In 1973, the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center were officially dedicated. (The towers were destroyed in the terrorist attack of Sept. 11, 2001.)

In 1974, Hank Aaron of the Atlanta Braves tied Babe Ruth's home-run record by hitting his 714th round-tripper in Cincinnati.

In 1975, Microsoft was founded by Bill Gates and Paul Allen in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

In 1983, the space shuttle Challenger roared into orbit on its maiden voyage. (It was destroyed in the disaster of January 1986.)

In 2015, in North Charleston, South Carolina, Walter Scott, a 50-year-old Black motorist, was shot to death while running away from a traffic stop; Officer Michael Thomas Slager, seen in a cellphone video opening fire at Scott, was charged with murder. (The charge, which lingered after a first state trial ended in a mistrial, was dropped as part of a deal under which Slager pleaded guilty to a federal civil rights violation; he was sentenced to 20 years in prison.)

**Ten years ago:** Connecticut Gov. Dannel P. Malloy signed into law sweeping new restrictions on weapons and large-capacity ammunition magazines similar to the ones used by the young man who gunned down 20 children and six educators in the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre.

**Five years ago:** Saying the situation had reached “a point of crisis,” President Donald Trump signed a proclamation directing the deployment of the National Guard to the U.S.-Mexico border to fight illegal immigration.

**One year ago:** President Joe Biden called for Russian President Vladimir Putin to be tried for war crimes after what he described as “outrageous” atrocities around Kyiv during the invasion of Ukraine.

**Today's birthdays:** Recording executive Clive Davis is 91. Author Kitty Kelley is 81. Actor Craig T. Nelson is 79. Actor Walter Charles is 78. Actor Christine Lahti is 73. Country singer Steve Gatlin (The Gatlin Brothers) is 72. Actor Mary-Margaret Humes is 69. Writer-producer David E. Kelley is 67. Actor Constance Shulman is 65. Actor Phil Morris is 64. Actor Lorraine Toussaint is 63. Actor Hugo Weaving is 63. Rock musician Craig Adams (The Cult) is 61. Talk show host/comic Graham Norton is 60. Actor David Cross is 59. Actor Robert Downey Jr. is 58. Actor Nancy McKeon is 57. Actor Barry Pepper is 53. Country singer Clay Davidson is 52. Rock singer Josh Todd (Buckcherry) is 52. Singer Jill Scott is 51. Rock musician Magnus Sveningsson (The Cardigans) is 51. Magician David Blaine is 50. Singer Kelly Price is 50. R&B singer Andre Delyrimple (Soul For Real) is 49. Country musician Josh McSwain (Parmalee) is 48. Actor James Roday is 47. Actor Natasha Lyonne is 44. Actor Eric Andre is 40.

## SMITH

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thinks I love you more than I love her”) or “It Is Halloween Night and You Are Dressed as a Hot Dog” — to the deeply serious and eerily timely, “We See Another School Shooting on the News.”

Smith said, “I was wrestling with and thinking about the idea of parenthood and how it reorients relationship to the world ... It’s also about the simultaneity of human experience. Our lives are so full of overlapping and complicated emotional textures. We can be pushing kids in a swing in the park and get a phone call telling us that a loved one was diagnosed with cancer ...”

### Never far from view

The larger geopolitical context, our responsibilities as global citizens — these are never far from view in “Above Ground.” As Smith said, “We can be at the dinner ta-

ble enjoying a meal while halfway around the world another family is hiding in a bunker as their town is being devastated by missiles.”

“My son, as he would tell you, is 5½, and my daughter just turned 4,” Smith said. “Their world is full of wonder and awe and silliness and joy and ebullience. It’s also,” he sighed, sounding like a typical parent, “exhausting. I’ve learned so much about myself.”

Echoes of Smith’s own childhood resound throughout the book. “New Orleans is everything to me,” he said. “I feel so enormously grateful to have grown up in a city that’s so dynamic, so socially rich and engaging. It’s a city that feels like a town that feels so distinct from everywhere else ...”

He recalls his first Thanksgiving spent away from home. “Where’s the gumbo? What are these mashed potatoes doing here?”

### Legacies of Katrina

Some of the poems in “Above Ground” are a legacy of Hurricane

## ROBOTS

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Though the robot did not speak, its childlike actions charmed the audience, which was exactly Disney’s goal. The panel “Creating Happiness: The Art & Science of Disney Parks Storytelling” showcased the company’s work to inspire human delight using innovative technologies and fan-favorite characters within Disney’s theme parks.

“This is our latest effort in making robots that we think can have an emotional connection with our guests,” Pope, a research scientist on Disney’s creative team, said during the event. “We are using high-performance materials and taking advantage of mechanical scaling effects, so she’s dynamic and tough.”

Engineers also used motion-capture technology, recording human movement and programming it into the robot, to make its gestures even more realistic, Pope said.

Theme park experts say advanced robotics technologies help bring popular film and TV characters to life in increasingly convincing ways, something visitors look for when they go to Disney.

“It’s an evolution of what Walt set out to do with the original park, and that’s about entertain-

ing the guests, engaging them into the experience and guaranteeing that emotional moment ... something that’s going to grab them by the heart,” said Joe Lanzisero, an Imagineering veteran and current executive vice president and chief art director of themed entertainment company Zeitgeist Design + Production.

But when and how the type of “dynamic robot” shown at South by Southwest could arrive at Walt Disney World is not yet clear.

Disney Parks chairman Josh D’Amaro said the rabbit robot is “much, much earlier in its development process” than another gadget demonstrated during the panel, a projection of a live actress playing “Peter Pan” fairy Tinkerbell that appeared small enough to fit in a pro lantern.

Disney’s theme park plans for “Zootopia” could lend a clue. Shanghai Disneyland’s “Zootopia” area is under construction and expected to open soon.

In September, D’Amaro presented long-range plans suggesting Disney is considering adding a similar land to Disney World’s Animal Kingdom, but that project would be years away.

Even so, theme park analyst Dennis Spiegel said he expects the dynamic robot technology will roam among guests at Disney’s

Katrina, with which Smith has just begun to grapple, citing the healing power of distance and time. But he is contemplating a longer project in the future. The Katrina year, his senior year in high school, marks the midpoint of his life so far.

“It bifurcated my life as a child and as an adult,” he said. “My parents’ home was destroyed and we moved to a new house in a different neighborhood. ... So it’s a bit surreal, it’s home, but not my home.”

What strikes him most forcefully is gratitude for the people who raised him. “I felt safe, I felt loved, and you may not appreciate what a blessing that was when you’re 7.”

### Grateful for a public voice

Smith is also grateful for his public voice, for the platform he has found for his thinking as a staff writer for The Atlantic Magazine and a popular TED talk speaker and award-winning slam poet.

“My life has changed in such pro-

parks within the next five years.

“To get it to the point where Josh [D’Amaro] could introduce that with his Imagineers was a big step,” said Spiegel, CEO of International Theme Park Services in Cincinnati.

Lanzisero and Ryan Harmon, Zeitgeist’s president and chief creative officer, estimated the robots could arrive within anywhere from six months to a couple of years, depending on how Disney decides to debut them in the theme parks.

The robot shown at this month’s South by Southwest was “all dark gray,” without any facial features or fur, Harmon said. Disney will need time to give it more character and figure out things like battery life and how it can safely roll out the technology in a busy setting.

That type of robotic model could easily be reskinned to fit other characters too, Harmon said.

During his time at Hong Kong Disneyland, Lanzisero worked with freestanding animatronics like Lucky the Dinosaur, a walking robot with the ability to give autographs, and the Muppet Mobile Lab, a spaceship-like cart hauling Muppets characters Dr. Bunsen Honeydew and Beaker. The former was operated by a puppeteer and the latter was remote-controlled.

Disney invented “audio-animatronics” in the 1960s, roost-

found way over last few years, and I’m still catching up to it,” he said. “I feel gratitude to all the people who have engaged with my work — the books or the Youtube series, Crash Course in Black American History, or all those people who came to see me give a talk.”

And he’s humble about his success. “I just try to be thoughtful, generous, to extend grace and empathy in the same way I would want it extended to me or my kids,” he said.

“I try not to talk about things I don’t know about ... I’m lucky to follow projects that are teaching me something, allowing me to wrestle with the questions even if I don’t come up with the answers.”

One thing’s for sure: His search for those answers will go on. Fatherhood has made that quest more urgent.

*Susan Larson hosts “The Reading Life” on WWNO-FM and is the author of “The Booklover’s Guide to New Orleans.”*

ing singing tropical birds in Walt Disney’s Enchanted Tiki Room at Disneyland in 1963 and rising an Abraham Lincoln lookalike out of his chair to deliver a medley of the former president’s speeches at the 1964 World’s Fair.

Half a century later, a lifelike, singing “Shaman of Songs” began beckoning to riders aboard Animal Kingdom’s Na’vi River Journey boat ride in 2017.

However, the majority of Disney’s recent advanced robots have not been released to mingle with theme park visitors the way analysts believe this new tech will.

In what could be a pilot program for future roaming robots, a human actor portraying “Star Wars” universe character The Mandalorian and carrying animatronic alien infant Grogu started wandering Disneyland and Disney World in recent months, drawing large crowds.

Spiegel predicts theme parks will eventually use robots to do everything from flipping burgers at quick-service restaurants to performing risky feats in stunt shows. He thinks the tech will likely be used to supplement, not replace, human workers.

“They will become a major part of the show, and it’ll be hard to tell who’s a robot and who’s human in the future,” he said.

## WATER

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As the river splayed out and deposited that alluvium upon its deltaic plain, the coarsest and heaviest particles (sand) settled first, followed by medium-sized silt particles, and finally fine clay particles. The natural levees, forming the highest terrain, attained a loamy texture of mostly sand and silt, whereas the swamps and marshes, the lowest terrain farthest from the river, were mostly silt and clay. ...

That was delta soil: sand, silt, and clay, intermixed with water and organic matter. Take away the soil, and water immediately occupies its place. Conversely, take away the water, and soil occupies its place. Desiccation of the soil body leaves behind air pockets, which induce biochemical oxidation of the organic matter, which reduces its volume, thus creating more air pockets. Finely textured particles then settle into the cavities, and the entire soil mass consolidates and sinks, or subsides.

Subsidence tends to be front-loaded; most sinkage happens shortly after dewatering, and later tapers off. Subsidence is also “unfair.” Like a regressive tax, the process sinks lower-elevation areas faster and deeper than higher lands. Because the lowest spots retain the most water, and therefore preserve the most peat, they suffer the most subsidence once drained.

Worst yet, the lowest areas generally have the most clay particles, which, on account of their minute size (less than 0.002 millimeters in diameter) integrate most efficiently into the abundant air pockets. As a result of this pedological trifecta, New Orleans’s bottomlands, upon being dewatered, sunk the deepest.

Fleeting mentions reveal some understanding of subsidence in nineteenth-century New Orleans. “The swamps may certainly be drained,” wrote the New Orleans Bee in 1836, “but as certainly, proprietors ... will have to elevate the surface of their lots by thick coating (because) drainage cannot give substance to the spongy soil.”

In 1864, engineer George Bayley insinuated that sinkage would follow drainage when he wrote that “the area to be reclaimed has to be drained several feet below the level of ... Lake Pontchartrain, con-

sequently the water required to be removed must be elevated (to discharge) into the lake. ...”

### A looming problem

As for drainage engineers, the closest they came to flagging subsidence was in 1895, when, upon inspecting Linus Brown’s contour map produced for the design of the system, duly noted “a large portion of the basin between the foot of the (natural levee) and Metairie and Gentilly Ridges is below mean gulf level.” But they did not speculate as to why, much less foresee that the sinkage might become an enormous problem.

One day in February 1913, a spiderweb of cracks appeared in a wall of St. Louis Cathedral on Jackson Square. It caught the attention of local architects, some of whom had predicted “this outcome for buildings in the downtown district...three years ago, when the city’s present drainage system was in infancy[.] Others laughed at the idea.”

Now, visible damage on an iconic building reopened the discussion. “Draining the city has unquestionably caused a lowering of the groundwater level,” one architect told a Picayune reporter. “It is what we call ‘subsardence’ (sic).”

In 1918, U.S. Weather Bureau forecaster Dr. Isaac Cline, an eminent name in the scientific community, issued a pamphlet confirming that “the pumping out of water caused some subsidence or sinking of the soil, with unfavorable effect on some of the older buildings, like the St. Louis Cathedral.” Watching the dewatering with a scientist’s eye, Cline sensed other changes were afoot — or rather, in the air.

“We do know theoretically,” he told scientists convening in Washington, D.C., in late 1916, “that the water having been removed from a considerable area, leaving the ground exposed to solar radiation, the land ... would heat twice as rapidly during the day and would cool by terrestrial radiation more rapidly at night than the water surface did.” In winter, he surmised, the reverse would be true.

### Getting warmer

To test his hypothesis, Cline analyzed temperature readings taken at the U.S. Custom House on Canal Street from 1885 to 1899, “the period just prior to the installation of subsurface drainage,” and compared them to “1900 to 1914, inclusive, the period during which subsurface drainage has been in

operation.”

Cline found that, before drainage, temperatures in downtown New Orleans reached 95 degrees or higher on thirty-five days, and hit or exceeded 100 degrees on zero days. In the post-drainage period, those figures were seventy-four days and seven days.

“The average monthly maximum for the period 1900–1914,” he noted, “is above the average monthly maximum for the period 1885–1899 in every month except December, in which there is no difference.” He also found that winter months in the post-drainage period tended to be cooler than those of the pre-drainage era.

Like any good scientist, Cline called for more research before anyone could “determine definitely” the relationship between drainage and climate. He probably would have been the first to acknowledge that there had been a fair amount of drainage during and before the years 1885 to 1899, and that street paving and concretization probably also played a warming role (now known as the urban heat island effect).

Nevertheless, the empirical data indicated that the turbo-charged subsurface drainage that started around 1900 had environmental consequences below and above the land surface — neither of which, Cline noted, had been observed in the otherwise comparable city of Mobile, Alabama.

### ‘New Orleans is sinking’

“From the foregoing study,” Cline told the Pan American Scientific Congress, “we conclude that the changes made in physical conditions at New Orleans have been the cause of higher temperatures.”

A consensus formed among architects, surveyors, engineers, and scientists that nearly 20 years of dewatering, and five years of accelerated subsurface drainage, had fundamentally altered the New Orleans environment. Warmer highs and colder lows were curious enough, but sinking soils could damage things, flood places and cost money.

The research made its way to the press, and on Sunday, August 3, 1919, reporter W. S. Callender broke the city’s geographical story of the century under the headline, “NEW ORLEANS IS SINKING SLOWLY BUT STEADILY DOWN TOWARD CHINA.”

Callender’s article was the first to introduce the phrase “below sea

level” to New Orleanians in a detailed and expository manner. In short time, the curiosity became common knowledge, though described in various ways. “One-third of New Orleans is at or below low tide level in the surrounding tidal lakes into which it drains,” one national journal explained in 1921; “over two-thirds of it is at or below high tide level in said lakes; and all of it is well below high water level in the Mississippi River.” Six years later, in an internal investigation, the Sewerage and Water Board extracted soil samples from Napoleon Avenue at South Johnson Street and photographically documented their dramatic “shrinkage in volume as a result of drying.”

### Good news and bad news

Shrinking, compacting, drying, settling, consolidating, subsiding, sinking: soon, “below sea level” would become the best-known topographical factoid about New Orleans, a peculiarity that seemed to suit the city’s sui generis character. The paradoxical quirk spread so quickly, like juicy gossip, that it dispensed with two important qualifications. For one, about 50 percent of the metropolis south of Lake Pontchartrain remains above the level of the sea. That’s the good news. The bad news is that 100 percent of the same area used to be above sea level....

Yet New Orleanians of a hundred years ago, convinced that the hydrological demons of their past had been slain by modern engineering, migrated enthusiastically off higher ground and settled into the very areas that were low to begin with and sinking the fastest and deepest.

Drainage engineers saw no reason to advise them otherwise, because they too bought the canard that topography no longer mattered, that “below sea level” was mere novelty, and that, as the triumphalist city booster Thomas Ewing Dabney put it, “Man every day is surpassing Nature.”

*Richard Campanella, a geographer with the Tulane School of Architecture, is the author of “Draining New Orleans: The 300-Year Quest to Dewater the Crescent City” (LSU Press), from which this excerpt was drawn. Campanella may be reached at richcampanella.com, rcampane@tulane.edu, or @nolacampanella on Twitter.*