

Bohemian New Orleans: The Story of the Outsider and Loujon Press

By Jeff Weddle

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Cleveland, Ohio, in the early twentieth-century hummed with the energy of a soon-to-be-thriving middle class. Ethnic neighborhoods created a patchwork of east European residents whose migration to Cleveland made it the seventh largest U.S. city. A major league baseball team, state-of-the-art amusement parks on the shores of Lake Erie, public transportation, progressive mayors, and the financial investment of captains of industry the likes of John D. Rockefeller put Cleveland on the map as a city on the rise.

It may seem odd to begin a review of a book about Jon and Louise (“Gypsy Lou”) Webb of *Outsider* bohemian New Orleans fame with a portrait of Northeastern Ohio in the early twentieth-century. It’s fitting, though, since Cleveland’s history as an industrial giant in an area without a social welfare safety net is central to Jon and Lou’s story as outsiders.

As Jeff Weddle succinctly writes in *Bohemian New Orleans*, Jon Webb was born in Cleveland in 1905, married young, had a family, and by the depression was trying to scrape by on the meager salary of a reporter for the *Cleveland News* and the *Toronto Star*. But by the early thirties, he had become one of the victims of the Great Depression, which left about one-third of Cleveland’s population unemployed. Desperate for money to support his family, he robbed a jewelry store, was soon caught and convicted of armed robbery, and spent the next three years in the Ohio State Reformatory in Mansfield (yes, the Victorian-era prison where they filmed *Shawshank Redemption*). It was there that Webb began to remake his writing and editing career.

After his release from prison, he moved back to Cleveland, where he began to remake himself into an artist, continued to write, and eventually met Louise Madaio. The two fell in love. Jon divorced his first wife and married Lou, but unable to meet alimony demands as an artist, he and Lou soon set off for St. Louis and then New Orleans, heading west to lose themselves and start over. In lucid, non-sentimental prose, Weddle reveals how the Webbs played out this bohemian narrative time after time over the next thirty years, in the process creating and sustaining one of the most important little magazine presses in American literary history.

The saga of the *Outsider* begins in New Orleans, and Weddle artfully recasts for his readers important relationships enabling Jon Webb, who turned out to be a mediocre writer, to make real his dream of a literary magazine that promised “new forms, new approaches, new creative uses by individual styles, new writing of any kind” (56). The heart of Weddle’s history of the *Outsider* is actually a two-threaded narrative: that of Jon and Lou’s relationship and that of the literary network that conjoined a number of American avant-garde groups during the sixties. Regarding the former, Lou Webb did

have some fiction published in the magazine, but not unlike Hettie Jones and *Yugen* magazine, Lou was a workhorse for the newly formed Loujon Press, setting and resetting type, as well as creating illustrations, and keeping the press afloat with her art stand (“Gypsy Lou’s Little Studio”) on a street corner in the French Quarter. However, unlike LeRoi and Hettie Jones, it appears that the two had a long and loving relationship until Jon’s death in 1971 in Nashville, Tennessee, the last stop on their bohemian journey. After his death, Lou continued to travel, back to Cleveland and eventually New Orleans, claiming to carry in a locket bits of Jon’s bones on which she would occasionally nibble (169). Also of relevance is the story of Jon’s supportive relationship with his son, Jon Jr., who lived in Cleveland and who Weddle acknowledges as “generous, enthusiastic and supportive” of *Bohemian New Orleans* (xiii)

The literary avant-garde narrative features figures such as Walter Lowenfels, Jory Sherman, John Corrington, Norman Mailer, Kay Johnson, and Marvin Bell who emerge as part of the extensive literary network that Jon Webb built in order to market and sell the *Outsider*. If nothing else, Weddle’s portrait of Webb reinforces the reality that any publisher of a little magazine has to be a shrewd entrepreneur, which Webb was. It also reveals that Webb was an equally calculating, if not despotic, editor, whose vision overrode the personal wishes of his contributors. For instance, according to Weddle, against Jack Kerouac’s wishes, Jon Webb changed one word in Kerouac’s “Sept. 16, 1961 Poem,” with at least seven variations spread over multiple copies of the magazine. He also substantially rewrote and retitled William S. Burroughs’s “Cuts from ‘Word Line’ William Burroughs for Hassan i Sabbah,” one of Burroughs’s cut-up poems (80-81). Weddle refrains from overt commentary on the ethics of Jon Webb’s editorial persona, suggesting through silence that perhaps both writers benefited from the editorial changes, especially since readers had no idea that changes had been made.

Much of the story, however, centers first on the Webbs’ relationship with Charles Bukowski and then on Kenneth Patchen and Henry Miller. The Bukowski chapters, primarily 6 and 7, showcase the Webbs as enthusiastic supporters of Bukowski, going so far as to name him the *Outsider’s* first OUTSIDER-OF-THE-YEAR in 1962, which garnered enthusiastic responses from small press editors and artists across the country. The relationship eventually cooled, however, as Bukowski became disenchanted of the Webbs’ persistent vagabondage (boxes, press machinery, dogs, et al. on a train seeking a promised land) (125). The Webbs’ publication of Bukowski’s *Crucifix in a Deathhand* in 1965 won Bukowski a Pulitzer Prize nomination (he lost to Richard Eberhart). Subsequently, the Webbs moved to Tucson, Arizona, where they began to court Henry Miller for a book project, publishing *Order and Chaos chez Hans Reichel* in 1967.

Loujon Press books were stunning examples of both innovative literature and the art of the book itself as material object. It’s unfortunate that *Bohemian New Orleans* doesn’t present more images and/or descriptions of the actual books themselves, since they were meticulously constructed, some, including Miller’s *Order and Chaos*, featuring handmade paper, different colors of ink for different pages, laid-in photographs, and cork bindings. Readers interested in the material aspect of the *Outsider* should see the documentary *The Outsiders of New Orleans: The Loujon Press* (Wayne Ewing Films

2007; director: Wayne Ewing), in which Lou Webb recalls the joys and drudgeries of the production process (one can view the trailer at <www.loujonpress.com>). However, Weddle does provide powerful then-contemporary responses to the productions, such as Bukowski's hyperbolic response to *Order and Chaos*: "How does one talk about a Lou & Jon creation—*Order & Chaos [sic]*—? I could roll cigarettes and drink beer all night and write about it and end up with the all the pages, and perhaps myself, on the floor and still not have said it" (129).

Bohemian New Orleans ends with the Webbs publishing in 1970 and 1971 Miller's *Insomnia*, in nine separate editions, which Jon Webb was counting on to make them financially independent. Again the *Outsider* publication garnered staggering praise but it failed to make them wealthy. Jon died soon thereafter and so too did the *Outsider*. Fortunately, Weddle provides a "what became of them" postscript, so a reader has some sense of how Jon Jr., Corrington, Jory Sherman, Miller, Bukowski, Patchen, and others lived on. In addition to an extensive bibliography and index, he includes as well a postscript about Lou and her efforts to keep Jon's memory alive. Lou Webb is still alive and living in Slidell, Louisiana, although in failing health.¹

The notes section, unfortunately, is difficult to read, requiring that readers remember and search for key phrases. However, much more useful to scholars and bibliophiles is the book's appendix, which lists all texts published in each edition of the *Outsider* from the first issue (Fall 1961) to the *Outsider*'s Book Issue Homage to Kenneth Patchen (1969). What a marvel of names as one scrolls through the list: Diane di Prima, Charles Olson, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Margaret Randall, Michael McClure, Tuli Kupferberg, Kay Boyle, Joel Oppenheimer, Ed Dorn, Anselm Holo, Jean Genet, Jack Micheline, Miriam Patchen, Harold Norse, Allan Kaprow, Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Durrell, Jackson Mac low, Jean Cocteau. . . . And Lou Webb, publishing as both Louise Madaio and Louise Webb.

Readers may be disappointed not to find much in Weddle's narrative about New Orleans as a cultural bohemia—the book truly deserves a better title—and while the book could have benefitted from more of that history, one can gather that from other sources. What readers will find is a compelling narrative, written by an accomplished scholar and skillful storyteller, recounting the intersection of personal, cultural, geographic, and literary interests that cast two poor young people from Cleveland, Ohio, as creators and caretakers of mid-twentieth-century America's avant garde.

¹ Weddle, Jeff. "Louise Webb questions." Nancy Grace. March 16, 2011.