

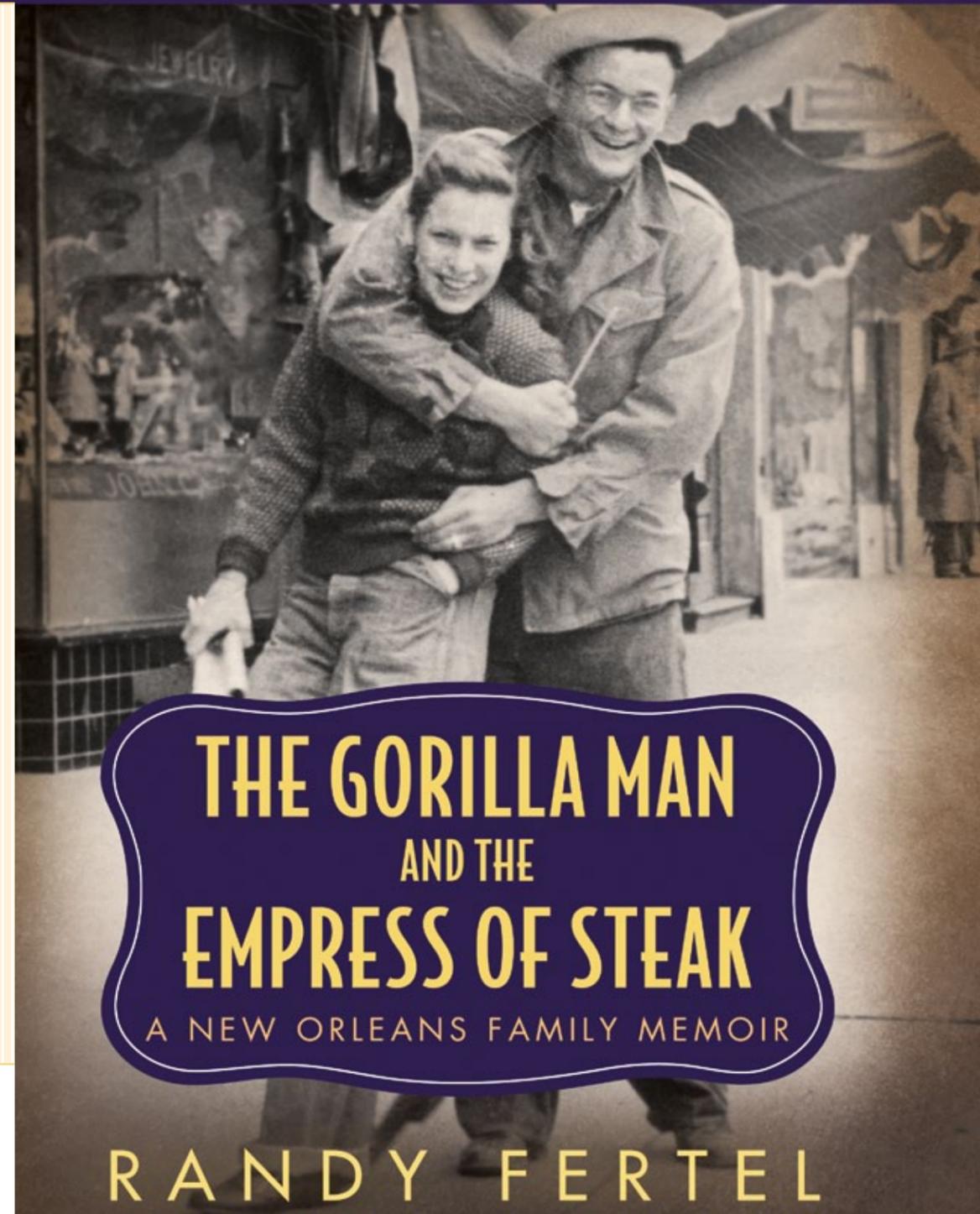
THE GORILLA MAN AND THE EMPRESS OF STEAK

A NEW ORLEANS FAMILY MEMOIR

The Gorilla Man and the Empress of Steak is the story of two larger-than-life characters and the son whom their lives helped to shape. Ruth Fertel was a petite, smart, tough-as-nails blonde with a weakness for rogues, who founded the Ruth's Chris Steak House empire almost by accident. Rodney Fertel was a gold-plated, one-of-a-kind personality, a railbird-heir to wealth from a pawnshop of dubious repute just around the corner from where the teenage Louis Armstrong and his trumpet were discovered. When Fertel ran for mayor of New Orleans on a single campaign promise—buying a pair of gorillas for the zoo—he garnered a paltry 308 votes. Then he purchased the gorillas anyway!

These colorful characters yoked together two worlds not often connected—lazy rice farms in the bayous and swinging urban streets where ethnicities jazzily collided. A trip downriver to the hamlet of Happy Jack, in the Mississippi River Delta, focuses on its French-Alsatian roots, bountiful tables, and self-reliant lifestyle that inspired a restaurant legend. The story also offers a close-up of life in the Old Jewish Quarter on Rampart Street—and how it intersected with the denizens of "Back a' Town," just a few blocks away, who brought jazz from New Orleans to the world.

The Gorilla Man and the Empress of Steak is a New Orleans story, featuring the distinctive characters, color, food, and history of that city—before Hurricane Katrina and after. But it also is the universal story of family and the full magnitude of outsize follies leavened with equal measures of humor, rage, and rue.



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"Funny, smart, poignant, and richly redolent of New Orleans, Randy Fertel's *The Gorilla Man and the Empress of Steak* is a brilliant memoir by a very talented writer indeed."

—ROBERT OLEN BUTLER, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*

"A vivid, engrossing evocation of New Orleans, an exceptional city, in part because of characters like Randy Fertel's parents, Ruth and Rodney, the Empress of Steak and the Gorilla Man. A wonderful reading experience."

—SUSAN ORLEAN, author of *The Orchid Thief* and *Rin Tin Tin: The Life and the Legend*

"Randy Fertel's soulful southern storytelling captures you instantly. I love how he uses the lens of family and food to tell the rich, complex history of New Orleans."

—ALICE WATERS, Founder, Chez Panisse Restaurant

"Ambition, abandonment, revenge, the Napoleonic code, broken promises, gorillas, bad contracts, evil intentions, and lawsuits never-ending; they're all here in Randy Fertel's feast of a memoir, served with a healthy side of New Orleans history, and, for dessert, *ville flottante!* Balzac would be envious; Tennessee Williams would feel right at home."

—VALERIE MARTIN, Orange Prize-winning author of *Property* and *Mary Reilly*

"A giant jambalaya of a book that throws into the pot a huge variety of ingredients that surprise, delight, burn the tongue, sear the heart, make you laugh until you cry—and beg for more. Randy Fertel's triumph, as a writer obsessed with history, is to have turned the story of his own disastrous family into the story of the city itself, and of its survival."

—BETTY FUSSELL, James Beard Foundation Award-winner and author of *Raising Steaks: The Life and Times of American Beef*

"His mother was the 'first lady of American restaurants.' His father was 'odd, self-centered, and nuts.' Randy Fertel leverages a raucous New Orleans upbringing, in which Salvador Dalí and Edwin Edwards play bit parts, to tell the story of an uncommon American family, defined, in equal measure, by bold swagger and humbling vulnerabilities."

—JOHN T. EDGE, series editor of *Cornbread Nation: The Best of Southern Food Writing*

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Cover photograph of Rodney and Ruth Fertel in Hot Springs, Ark. from the collection of the author

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RANDY FERTEL lives in New Orleans, Louisiana, and New York, New York. He is a writer and president of both the Fertel Foundation and the Ruth U. Fertel Foundation. He has taught English at Harvard, Tulane, LeMoyne College, the University of New Orleans, and the New School for Social Research.

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