



Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans

By Dan Baum

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Nines Lives is a multivoiced biography of a dazzling, surreal, and imperiled city, told through the lives of nine unforgettable characters and bracketed by two epic storms: Hurricane Betsy, which transformed New Orleans in the 1960s, and Hurricane Katrina, which nearly destroyed it. Dan Baum brings this kaleidoscopic portrait to life, showing us what was lost in the storm and what remains to be saved.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Book Description

The hidden history of a haunted and beloved city told through the intersecting lives of nine remarkable characters.

After Hurricane Katrina, Dan Baum moved to New Orleans to write about the city's response to the disaster for *The New Yorker*. He quickly realized that Katrina was not the most interesting thing about New Orleans, not by a long shot. The most interesting question, which struck him as he watched residents struggling to return, was this: Why are New Orleanians—along with people from all over the world who continue to flock there—so devoted to a place that was, even before the storm, the most corrupt, impoverished, and violent corner of America?

Here's the answer. *Nine Lives* is a multivoiced biography of this dazzling, surreal, and imperiled city through the lives of nine characters over forty years and bracketed by two epic storms: Hurricane Betsy, which transformed the city in the 1960's, and Katrina, which nearly destroyed it. These nine lives are windows into every strata of one of the most complex and fascinating cities in the world. From outsider artists and Mardi Gras Kings to jazz-playing coroners and transsexual barkeeps, these lives are possible only in New Orleans, but the city that nurtures them is also, from the beginning, a city haunted by the possibility of disaster. All their stories converge in the storm, where some characters rise to acts of heroism and others sink to the bottom. But it is New Orleans herself—perpetually whistling past the grave yard—that is the story's real heroine.

Nine Lives is narrated from the points of view of some of New Orleans's most charismatic characters, but underpinning the voices of the city is an extraordinary feat of reporting that allows Baum to bring this kaleidoscopic portrait to life with brilliant color and crystalline detail. Readers will find themselves wrapped up in each of these individual dramas and delightfully immersed in the life of one of this country's last unique places, even as its ultimate devastation looms ever closer. By resurrecting this beautiful and tragic place and portraying the extraordinary lives that could have taken root only there, *Nine Lives* shows us what was lost in the storm and what remains to be saved.

Amazon Exclusive: Dan Baum on *Nine Lives*

Hurricane Katrina was the kind of event a reporter waits his entire life to cover. It was especially satisfying doing so for *The New Yorker*. While newspaper and television reporters chased about feverishly in their attempt to feed the insatiable daily news monster, I enjoyed the time to go deep and peel back the tragedy in all its complexity. I wrote half a dozen short “Talk of the Town” pieces and two long articles over the following year.

Even working for *The New Yorker*, though, covering Katrina and its aftermath became frustrating. The longer I stayed in New Orleans, the more I understood that huge as Katrina was, it is hardly the most interesting thing about New Orleans. New Orleans is the most unusual place I’ve ever been—complicated, sensual, self-contradictory, hilarious, infuriating—and it was the place itself, not the tragedy that befell it, that I wanted to write about.



So when my wife and I thought about writing a book, it wasn’t a “Katrina book” we had in mind. We finally settled on interweaving the life stories of nine New Orleanians—rich and poor and in between, black and white and in between, male and female and in between. *Nine Lives* begins in 1965, right after the last time a big part of the city flooded during a hurricane. By this we want to say: New Orleans was there a long time before Hurricane Katrina and it will be there a long time after. Katrina doesn’t show up in *Nine Lives* until past page 200.

We had two guiding principles: No bad guys, and all happy endings. All nine of these people are, in their own way, heroes. And while we could have ended any of their stories on a down note, we instead end all at a moment of ascendance. There are many ways of looking at New Orleans, but this is how we chose to do so in *Nine Lives*.

We were careful not to make *Nine Lives* the kind of “issue” book one must read to understand current events. We want people to read it for the same reason they read *The Kite Runner* or *The Bridges of Madison County*—out of love of the characters and a warm, delicious eagerness to see their lives unfold. New Orleans is above all, a fun place, and we tried to make *Nine Lives* as much fun to read. —Dan Baum

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Reporter Baum (*Citizen Coors*) arrived in New Orleans two days after the levees broke after Hurricane Katrina. He admits his initial accounts of the disaster were flawed, but with this captivating collection of nine linked profiles, Baum has rectified what he claims was his narrow interpretation of events. While covering Katrina and its aftermath for the *New Yorker*, I noticed that most of the coverage, my own included, was so focused on the disaster that it missed the essentially weird nature of the place where it happened. Baum begins the narrative with the 1965 battering of the Ninth Ward by Hurricane Betsy and concludes in 2007. He captures the essence of the city through the lives of nine characters over 40 years, bracketed by two epic hurricanes, people such as Billy Grace, the king of Carnival and member of New Orleans elite; Tim Bruneau, the city cop haunted by images of Katrina’s destruction; and transsexual JoAnn Guidos, who finds a home and, following Katrina, a sense of purpose. Baum, an empathetic storyteller, has nearly perfectly distilled the events, providing readers with a sensuous portrait of a place that can be better understood as the best organized city in the Caribbean rather than the worst organized city in the United States. Baum’s chronicle leaves readers with a bittersweet understanding of what Americans lost during Hurricane Katrina. (Feb.)

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

Since 2005, Hurricane Katrina and its immediate effects on New Orleans have been documented in numerous books, such as *Breach of Faith*, HHHJ Nov/Dec 2006, and *The Great Deluge*, HHHJ Nov/Dec 2006. What Dan Baum accomplishes in *Nine Lives*, though, is more than a time line of events. Critics unanimously praised the author's approach and style, and they compared Baum's effort to the documentary work of Studs Terkel and John Berendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, even if, at times, his jumpy, snapshot approach breaks the narrative flow. Baum, who immersed himself in the lives and culture that form the heart of his book, digs deep in search of the Crescent City's identity, coming as close as anyone has to defining the complexities of America's most haunted -- and, in many ways, its most elusive -- city. Copyright 2009 Bookmarks Publishing LLC

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Richard Martinez:

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