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New Orleans' story told well but oddly

By Steve Weinberg

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"Nine Lives" is not yet another book about how Hurricane Katrina devastated a Southern city while President George W. Bush and his cronies reacted listlessly. Instead, author Dan Baum, a non-New Orleanian, spent two years in and around the nothing-quite-like-it metropolis trying to figure out what had made it unique before the hurricane and whether the uniqueness could be resuscitated. Katrina does not make an appearance until Page 210.

Baum's reporting, which focuses on nine longtime New Orleans residents, is superb. So is his writing. As for the way he organizes the book -- well, every reader will probably agree it is daring. Whether it is effective will become an individual decision. More on that anon.

The book opens on Sept. 9, 1965, when Hurricane Betsy devastated New Orleans. It closes in 2007, as die-hard New Orleans residents attempt to recapture the look and spirit of their beloved city, no matter how hard forces try to prevent the rebirth.

The die-hards consist of:

> Tim Bruneau, a police officer who comes across as racist but is not devoid of humanity.

- > Belinda Carr, a resident laboring overtime to escape the special kind of poverty found in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans.
- > Billy Grace, king of the Mardi Gras carnival, who epitomized uptown society for better and worse.
- > Joann (formerly John) Guidos, a transsexual bar owner with plenty of empathy for those down on their luck
- > Ronald Lewis, a retired streetcar track repairman who created an unusual museum in the backyard of his modest home.
- > Frank Minyard, a gynecologist who became the city's coroner, with plenty of time for sleeping with women, playing jazz music and trying to level the economic disparities besetting New Orleans.
- > Joyce Montana, a fascinating person who lived in the reflected renown of Tootie Montana, her recently deceased husband who organized the ersatz "Indians" of the Mardi Gras festival while fighting the city's establishment.
- > Wilbert Rawlins, high school band director who did his best to give his novice musicians a surrogate father.
- > Anthony Wells, a drug user who has experienced prison as a second home to New Orleans.

Those brief descriptions fail to capture the protagonists in their fullness. Readers will complete the word portraits in their own minds, because Baum provides plenty of rich material.

All nine come alive on the pages, which returns us to the organization of the book: Baum supplies relatively brief accounts from each of his nine protagonists, more or less chronologically but otherwise in no obvious discernible order. Ronald Lewis, for example, might show up multiple times in a section before Joyce Montana shows up for the first time. My guess is that many readers will find the haphazard offerings a wise way to (dis)organize the book, while many other readers will find the decision puzzling. The book could be read in a manner alternative to what Baum intended -- by reading all of Lewis' passages beginning to end, then doing the same for the other eight chroniclers of New Orleans life.

The thoughts and actions of all the protagonists are offered in the third person voice, except for Anthony Wells, who comes to readers in the first person. Perhaps Baum can articulate the wisdom of the exception for

Wells. I do not grasp the reason and would have argued against it as disconcerting.

To end this review at the beginning, the book's title. "Nine Lives" carries multiple meanings, all justified, which qualifies the title as masterful. A cat in folklore enjoys nine lives, as will, apparently, the city of New Orleans. But if "Nine" is rendered a noun and "Lives" a verb, the title can be understood as focusing on the Ninth Ward, a portion of the city inhabited largely by low-income African-Americans. They felt the brunt of Hurricane Katrina, just as they have felt the brunt of so much human-made injustice. They deserve Baum's focus, and the hope for a better future.


Steve Weinberg is an investigative reporter in Columbia, Mo. His most recent book is "Taking on the Trust: The Epic Battle of Ida Tarbell and John D. Rockefeller."

NONFICTION

"Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans" by Dan Baum; Spiegel & Grau; \$26; 335 pages

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