

# Two books equally brilliant at chronicling bookends of society

Bluffton Today of Fri, 02-20-2009

by Terri Schlichenmeyer

**'Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans,'** by Dan Baum 2008, Spiegel & Grau, \$26, 352 pages

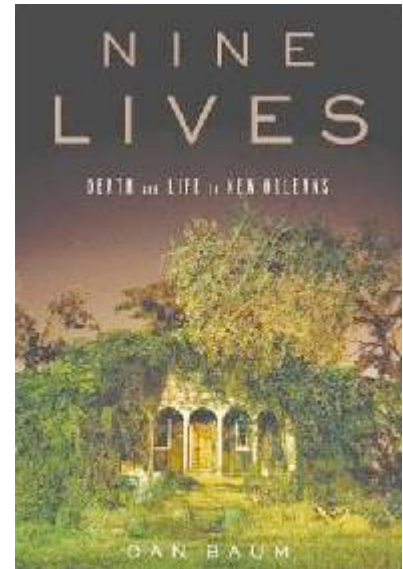
It happens every time: you're busy, in a hurry, and somebody starts blah-blah-blahing, making along story longer. You wonder if he'll ever get to the point.

Maybe you even say that: Get to the point. Everyone has a story. In the new book "Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans" by Dan Baum, you'll read about nine people from the Crescent City; stories, bracketed by storms.

In 1965, Ronald Lewis found something more powerful than Mama: Hurricane Betsy. Betsy went through the Lower Ninth Ward like a hot spoon through a snow-cone. Still, the neighborhood couldn't be kept down by a storm, could it? All his life, Anthony Wells heard about New Orleans, but it seemed that life took him everywhere but there. He was in Vietnam, Los Angeles, and later, he was bused to Tennessee.

John Guidos hid his secret from everyone, because he knew what they'd say: women's clothes are for women. But inside his mind, John was a woman, believing he was alone in his feelings. By the time John became JoAnn, he knew otherwise.

For her first years of marriage, Joyce Montana slept restlessly before Mardi Gras. Tootie, her husband, was an Indian, meaning he would likely come home bloodied.



But Tootie knew there was another way to fight: with splendor. Billy Grace's father wasn't Uptown, so it was a surprise when Billy was enfolded into society. Still, Billy wondered if he'd ever be fully accepted.

All Tim Bruneau dreamed of was being a cop. But it took an accident — and a storm — to show Tim what life was like for the people he arrested.

When gynecologist Frank Minyard wanted to help his city, he ran for the office of coroner. His new job meant he would be in charge of New Orleans' dead, no matter how they expired.

Jazz jangled Wilbert Rawlins Jr.'s bones, right alongside responsibility. Wilbert was passing that legacy to his band kids. He was the only family some of them had, and no storm would keep him from that. All Belinda Carr ever wanted was to leave New Orleans because she came up hard. When she married Wilbert Rawlins Jr., she hoped life would be different. It took a storm to see the preciousness of what she had. Can Isay now that loved this book?

"Nine Lives" reads like a novel; it sucks you in with the first page, moving you along with short-short chapters, swaddling you in little dramas, making you gasp every now and then. But it's not a novel. It's all true. I loved how Baum unfolds each of his subjects' stories, telling most of them at a just-right pace, allowing one of them to blurt his own tale. I loved the brutal honesty between the pages, I loved I loved the the uniquely New Orleans feel I got when I was reading.

I just plain loved this book. When you're ready for a good set of stories, don't miss this one. "Nine Lives" is a book you should make a point to get.

**'Madness Under the Royal Palms: Love and Death Behind the Gates of Palm Beach,'** by Laurence Leamer 2009, Hyperion, \$25.95, 368 pages

You're not allowed.

For most of your life, you've been under constrictions of allowance. Not allowed to cross the street by yourself. No staying up late on a week-night.

And school? Well, that brought a whole new set of "not allowed." No running in the halls, no talking out-of-turn, no gum chewing. It just wasn't allowed.

These days, you're given a little more freedom, but you're still not allowed. You're



not allowed to speed, steal or slander, and most of us are not allowed into the fancy parties or private clubs of upper society. But after reading "Madness Under the Royal Palms" by Laurence Leamer, would you want in there anyhow? Wanting to find a warm- weather spot to write his books, Leamer says that he was drawn to Palm Beach, a small island just off the coast of south Florida. It was beautiful there, and though Leamer says he and his wife didn't feel welcome on their first visit, they bought a duplex in 1994. Fifteen years later, the welcome mat is still relatively absent.



One hundred and forty years ago, Florida was mostly wild and sparsely populated. Henry Flagler, co-founder of Standard Oil, came to the region and built railways, ships and hotels. Luxury was also a Flagler standard, and Palm Beach personified it. For years, there were two main clubs on the island, and Jews weren't allowed to join either one. They still aren't, no matter how much schem- ing is done to present oneself as socially worthy.

But no matter. Donald Trump bought Mar-A-Lago, a fabulous mansion, and created a club that accepts all comers —as long as they have the midsix-figure membership fee and can pay five-figure annual dues. Palm Beach is where someone purchases property and tears down a 16,200-square-foot home (with two wine-tasting rooms; one for red wine, one for white wine) in order to build a man- sion of nearly 85,000 square feet, a "home" that takes an hour to walk through.

It's a place where weddings are preceded by prenuptial contracts ("It was 15 pages of different ways of saying no.") Where stepmothers hate their late husband's children so much that they order the dead man's wardrobe shredded to keep heirs from having mementoes.

A place where the law often looks the other way, except in cases of murder. Leamer is a factual writer, often given to wry understatement and only occasionally editorializing. When he does offer his observations, they're deliciously dead-on and oh- so-wonderfully snarky, the kind of comments that make you want to take the phone off the hook so you can read more. This made "Madness Under the Royal Palms" like peeking at a supermarket tabloid or watching a daytime talk show, only twice as much guilty-pleasure fun. I love a good scandal and I loved this book. If you've often wondered what goes on behind the gates at those areas you're not allowed to visit, pick up this book and allow yourself a few hours with it. "Madness Under the Royal Palms" is one you won't want to put down.

---

**From: <http://www.npaper-wehaa.com/bluffton-today;see-15S92Hbebd6K98hO;c-159100>**