

BOOK REVIEW

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## A picture of a city in all its complexity

By Chuck Leddy, Globe Correspondent | February 28, 2009

'Nine Lives,' Dan Baum's absorbing, insightful look at the troubled recent history of New Orleans, began as a series of magazine articles for The New Yorker written around the time of Hurricane Katrina. As Baum makes clear, New Orleans confronted a slew of problems long before Katrina devastated the city in August 2005; it "was by almost any metric the worst city in the United States - the deepest poverty, the most murders, the worst schools, the sickest economy, the most brutal and corrupt cops."

Yet Baum also illustrates the profound cultural richness of New Orleans, showing us its powerful sense of community, its laid-back lifestyle, and its unique blending of rich and poor, black and white. Using the lives of nine residents, from different strata of the city, Baum conveys what makes New Orleans so special and so worth preserving. One example is Frank Minyard, a white doctor living in luxury who changes his playboy ways to help the city's poor.

The richness of Baum's research is everywhere on display. After hundreds of interviews and countless hours of on-site observation, he comes to understand New Orleans and love it. It is the contradictions of the city that are the most striking: "In New Orleans, no matter how much money you had in the bank, you looked on poverty every day."

The city can be an insular place, suspicious of outsiders and new ideas: Billy Grace, a tax attorney, "recalled the times he'd had to explain to newcomer executives that, no, you had to wait to be invited onto a Mardi Gras krewe. No, you can't just walk into the Boston Club. No, it's not simply a matter of fees."

Several of the lives Baum follows eventually intertwine. Belinda Carr is an African-American who dreams of attending college. Yet not long after she's accepted, she finds herself unexpectedly pregnant and compelled to marry. She defers her college hopes but is soon divorced. Wil Rawlins Jr. becomes a high school band director whose job goes far beyond music. Working in the city's toughest high schools, he becomes a kind of surrogate father to his band members. Wil and Belinda meet and get married, and Baum shows how Wil's commitment to these students creates tension in his marriage.

Baum also describes the dramatic life of a New Orleans cop, Tim Bruneau, who's every bit as flawed and contradictory as the city itself. During Katrina, Tim watches helplessly as looters clean out a Walmart. When he tries to arrest one of them, he's told to release him because there's no room for him in jail. On another occasion, Bruneau gets into a street shootout with looters.

While many evacuated the city during Katrina, one proprietor stayed and heroically kept her New Orleans bar open, serving the few customers crazy enough to come. JoAnn Guidos, a transsexual, had previously been John, a football player. She views her bar as a haven for the city's excluded: "Life in New Orleans was hard for everybody now, but it would always be hardest on those who, for whatever reason, didn't fit in. She was responsible, in an odd way, for all of them."

*Chuck Leddy is a freelance writer who lives in Dorchester.* ■

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