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Book puts faces on post-Katrina New Orleans

By Jerry Shriver
USA Today

Anyone with more than a passing interest in New Orleans and its fate after Hurricane Katrina surely is fatigued today by the volume of commentary that has saturated the media since Aug. 29, 2005.

Who hasn't solidified his views about what did and did not happen, who was responsible and irresponsible, why this strange, seductive and tragic city is so vital to American culture, and why it is taking so long to set things right?

Well, buck up, folks: There's still a rich, complex and lesser-known back story to be explored - and a refreshing and engaging way of telling it.

In "Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans," journalist Dan Baum reveals often-neglected layers of the social landscape by interweaving the real-life stories of nine citizens who either grew up in or found their way to the Big Easy during the 40 years between 1965's Hurricane Betsy and Katrina.

Baum paints incredibly intimate portraits (expanded from a series of articles he wrote for The New Yorker) that attempt to show how the city's attitudes toward race, class, governance, religion and revelry have evolved, regressed or stagnated - and how those attitudes were reflected in Katrina's ghastly aftermath.

His subjects: a tough-as-nails blue-collar city worker turned community leader from the Lower Ninth Ward; a privileged son of Uptown who becomes a Mardi Gras king; a married upscale shopkeeper from the suburbs who emerges as a transsexual bartender; a jazz-blowing, womanizing and thoroughly decent and dedicated coroner; a studious young black woman whose white-picket-fence dreams keep getting derailed; an overcommitted band director/savior of at-risk young people; a hard-luck veteran of the streets; a young white cop wrestling with social justice; and the steadfast wife of a beloved Mardi Gras Indian chief.

Baum's kaleidoscopic, quick-cut approach can be unwieldy at times, but overall his style evokes the best aspects of John Berendt ("Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil"), Tracy Kidder ("The Soul of a New Machine") and Studs Terkel.

Though the characters represent archetypes to a certain extent, they aren't cliches, and their heroic, grim, gut-wrenching and life-affirming stories ring true as the Saint Louis cathedral bells in Jackson Square.

Additional Facts

The book

Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans

By Dan Baum

352 pages

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