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'Nine Lives' by Dan Baum: Author talks to New Orleans residents about the years between Hurricanes Betsy and Katrina

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books@dallasnews.com Beatriz Terrazas is a Dallas-based freelance writer and photographer. Her essay "Before" can be read in *Skirt magazine*, at www.skirt.com.

Hurricane Katrina focused the eyes of the world on New Orleans in 2005. Dan Baum proves in his new book that, despite the intimacy we've discovered with the city since then, this is a place and a people we only thought we knew.

By delving into the personal histories of nine New Orleanians in the four decades before Katrina, he puts our fingers on the city's heart and helps us explore its poverty, wealth, politics, culture, racism and resilience.

The stories of Ronald Lewis, Frank Minyard, John Guidos, Joyce Montana, Tim Bruneau, Billy Grace, Anthony Wells, Belinda Carr and Wilbert Rawlins are bracketed by Hurricane Betsy in 1965 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. They offer a cross-section of society: black, white, straight, transsexual, rich, poor.

The book opens just after Betsy hits the Gulf Coast: "Miss Odette's immaculate cottage had become a spooky old hollowed-out skull. Miss Pie's swaybacked shotgun was knocked clean off its bricks so that the

porch seemed to be kneeling in the mud. ... Ronald Lewis was 14 years old, and he'd finally encountered a force of nature more powerful than his mom."

New Orleans rebounds, and by the 1980s, Wilbert Rawlins is finding his way through junior high and feeling the music pulsing through his veins. "He'd turned away offers to use his height on the basketball court, his bulk on the football field. ... Band was the thing. ... All the jazz musicians in New Orleans talked about the band teachers from their high school days. Band meant something in New Orleans. It's where the music was born."

At the same time, Belinda Carr, who lives in the impoverished Lower Ninth Ward, is growing impatient with the placid acceptance of those around her who thought "the Lower Nine was the most wonderful place on Earth." She knows college is the key to changing her life, though "in truth she didn't know what college was, other than something for the shirt-and-tie people on television. That was good enough for her. Eight years old, and she wanted out of this life so bad she could taste it."

Frank Minyard Jr. mirrors the chasm between rich and poor New Orleans because he carries the divide within himself. Born to working-class parents, he becomes the first white OB-GYN to treat black patients and is elected coroner. Along the way, he discovers that accumulating great wealth does nothing to quiet the voice of his mother: "Uptown folks don't like us poor downtown whites." Perhaps that's why he eschews the "uptown swells" to find within himself a genuine love for his fellow man, regardless of skin color and economic status, though it costs him his marriage.

What makes these people so compelling is not where they live, nor that you know what lies ahead for them. It's about skill and craft. Baum, a former writer for *The New Yorker*, knows how to plumb the depths of emotions, bringing to the surface intimate dreams and secret fears to reveal them as being simply and absolutely human. You will want to see how these lives converge, and how each of them meets the unimaginable challenges of August 2005.

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Nine Lives

Death and Life in New Orleans

Dan Baum

(Spiegel and Grau,\$24.95)