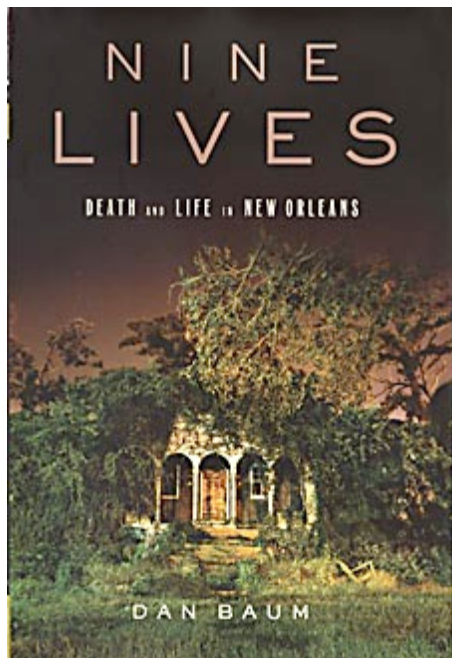


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## Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans

By Kevin Allman



In January 2007, as many in the media gave in to their own Katrina fatigue and left New Orleans to its own devices, *The New Yorker* sent down writer Dan Baum to begin a chatty Web feature called "New Orleans Journal." For six months, Baum and his wife Margaret chronicled the city from a rented house in the Faubourg Marigny, sending out two important messages from New Orleans to *The New Yorker* readership: We are not destroyed, and yet we are not OK.

Baum's entries about his discoveries (Mardi Gras Zone! The Spotted Cat! King Roger's Seafood!) were always good-natured, if a bit wide-eyed; his was the voice of the guy at his first Jazz Fest, dazzled and delighted, in his new seersucker suit and stingy-brim porkpie hat. When *The New Yorker* pulled the plug on "New Orleans Journal" after six months, Baum returned to Boulder, Colo. and decided to make it into a book. The result, *Nine Lives: Death & Life in New Orleans*, could have been a well-intentioned look at the city by a journalist from Elsewhere, U.S.A. who stayed just long enough to collect a few colorful stories and wring some tears out of the tragedy. Fortunately, it's not.

Baum, shrewdly, extended his timeline from Betsy to Katrina, and chose nine folks from a cross-section of New Orleans castes to tell his story. It's quite a collection, from Billy Grace (Rex 2002) to Joyce Montana, widow of Mardi Gras chief Tootie Montana; from New Orleans coroner/trumpeter Frank Minyard to Ronald Lewis, a take-no-mess NOPSI employee turned labor organizer. And then there's gun-toting JoAnn Guidos (nee John Guidos), proprietor of Cajun's Pub on St. Claude Avenue, who kept her bar open after the storm, in defiance of evacuation orders, until she and her ragtag army of refugees were forced to leave by the NOPD.

Most of Baum's subjects would seem to have nothing in common but a hurricane, except a stubborn resiliency and a sense of humor drawn from their own circumstances. Katrina doesn't make an appearance until 200 pages into the book, but what's to come looms large throughout. When Wilbert Rawlins Jr., band director at Carver High, scrapes together enough money to buy a house in New Orleans East in 2004 ("He had roots now. He was somebody."), that simple fact resonates as strongly as any storm tale.

By focusing on the city and its people before, rather than in the aftermath of Katrina, Baum has created something more than a history: *Nine Lives* is a tapestry of improbable stories about an even more improbable place. New Orleanians will recognize it; more than that, they'll get it. In the words of Anthony Wells, one of Baum's profilees who finds himself trapped in Kentucky after the evacuation and has to take a bus back to a blasted-out Ninth Ward:

"Always been f—ked up here, man, but it's home. Till you been someplace else, you don't know."

Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans

By Dan Baum

Spiegel & Grau. 334 pp. \$24.95

Baum Signs Nine Lives

6 p.m. Tue., Feb. 17

Octavia Books, 513 Octavia St., 899-7323; [www.octaviabooks.com](http://www.octaviabooks.com)

Baum Reads from Nine Lives

7 p.m. Wed., Feb. 18

Beth's Books (behind Sound Cafe), 2700 Chartres St., 948-0817

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