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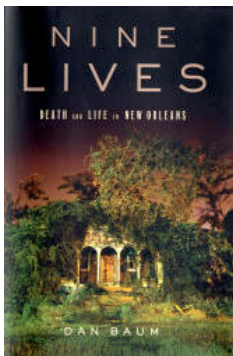
## Nine Lives examines hurricanes' effects on New Orleans

By ELIZABETH BENNETT  
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**NINE LIVES: Death and Life in New Orleans**  
By Dan Baum.  
Spiegel & Grau,  
331 pp. \$26.

How do you explain a city whose inhabitants want nothing more than for things to stay the same? What is the attraction of a place that— even before Hurricane Katrina — had the deepest poverty, the most murders, the sickest economy, and the most corrupt and brutal cops of any other American city?

And what is it about New Orleans that makes people who once lived there still homesick for it many years later?

Dan Baum explores those questions in *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans*, a close-up look at nine people who lived through the city's two epic hurricanes: Betsy, which transformed the city in 1965, and Katrina, which nearly destroyed it in 2005.

"While covering Katrina and its aftermath for the New Yorker, I noticed that most of the coverage, my own included, was so focused on the disaster that it missed the essentially weird nature of the place," Baum writes in his introduction. "The nine intertwined life stories offered here are an attempt to convey what is unique and worth saving in New Orleans."

The stories are an expanded version of Baum's New Yorker pieces. The result is a fascinating book that captures the magic and mystery of this beautiful and broken city.

One of the most interesting characters is Frank Minyard, a philandering, jazz-playing man-about-town and the city's premier gynecologist. Minyard's life is changed forever when he becomes the parish coroner and — after Katrina's devastation — has to deal with hundreds of unidentified bodies abandoned in attics, forgotten on rooftops or trapped underwater.

Two of the nine characters whose lives cross in the story are Belinda Carr and Wilbert Rawlins Jr., both black and from the wrong side of the tracks. Belinda, growing up in the Lower Ninth Ward, reads Nancy Drew mysteries and wants desperately to escape her shabby neighborhood and have a white-picket-fence life. Wilbert, who fell in love early with New Orleans music, wants to be a band director.

Belinda's dreams are shattered when she gets pregnant, feels trapped and marries the father of the child, divorces him and remarries a man who drinks away all her pay and beats her up. Wilbert gets several jobs as a school band director, but each school is rougher than the last. At George Washington Carver, a combined junior and senior high at the edge of the Desire Project, his students are right out of *Lord of the Flies*. If they had parents at all, writes Baum, "the mothers might be turning five-dollar tricks on the living room sofa."

*Nine Lives* also includes the fortunes and misfortunes of a lawyer from the city's posh Garden District who rises to the top of Mardi Gras society, and a transsexual bar owner in the French Quarter who was a husband and father in

his previous life.

Be forewarned: *Nine Lives* is not an easy book to read. The individual stories are introduced in short segments, two or three pages each, and it's frustrating at first to keep track of nine unrelated characters from the 1960s through 2007.

That said, Baum is a wonderful writer whose years of interviewing and research shed light on a complex, often misunderstood city. His book provides a better understanding of New Orleanians' live-and-let-live philosophy; of the importance of Mardi Gras in their lives; and sadly, of the city's ongoing racial problems.

The lives of some of the nine people featured actually improved after Katrina, Baum writes. Belinda and Wilbert, for instance, got together after divorcing their respective spouses and moved into that house with the white picket fence. Wilbert's determination to improve the lives of his underprivileged band students paid off more than he ever dreamed possible; he eventually took several groups to perform at the Rose Bowl in California and at the White House.

And Frank Minyard, the frustrated coroner unable to identify all those dead bodies after Katrina, eventually found some satisfaction by raising money for a resting place to serve as a memorial to the storm's victims.

The stories of the people in *Nine Lives* help explain this unique American city, but it is New Orleans itself, "perpetually whistling past the graveyard," as Baum puts it, that is the real protagonist in this impressive book.

Elizabeth Bennett, a freelance writer in Houston, started out in journalism at the *Times-Picayune* in New Orleans.

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