

Baum, Dan

NINE LIVES: Death and Life in New Orleans

The Crescent City beyond Bourbon Street.

When people think of New Orleans, the first thing that comes to mind is usually Hurricane Katrina, likely followed by Mardi Gras, jazz and nightlife. Baum (*Citizen Coors*, 2000, etc) demonstrates that there's much more. Expanding on the series he penned for the *New Yorker* amidst the maelstrom of 2005, the author captures the soul of this city with a unique cultural identity that continues to persevere against chaos, the elements and the odds. He plunges into New Orleans' living arteries and pulsing heart, exposing its deepest aspects as well as its eccentricities. He gives the historic city a human face by exploring nine lives, including those of a coroner, a cop, an artist and a transsexual bartender. We learn about their upbringings, fears, hopes and the different ways they see the world. New Orleans has a complicated class structure, and the author ranges across its social spectrum, its precincts and wards, its gender and race lines. He begins in the mid-1960s, when many of his subjects came of age during Hurricane Betsy. Short vignettes about each, captured in their own words as well as Baum's descriptions, take us through the years leading to Katrina, revealing a city in the throes of change. Employing appropriately florid prose and a novelistic approach to narrative, Baum masterfully conveys sympathy, compassion and, most importantly, a critical understanding of an oft-misunderstood city that stands as an important pocket of American culture.

One of those rare occasions when journalism crosses the threshold of art.

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