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Here's a guide to New Orleans today

By Bert Emke

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Growing up in New Orleans, I used to wonder what it must be like to live in a normal American city -- one where your great-aunts didn't insist on speaking French, where there were no cockroaches the size of armadillos, and where men didn't wear their wives' clothes, at least not in public. Most of all, I wondered what it was like to step outside on a summer afternoon and not feel like you'd stumbled into the Sauna from Hell.

I didn't really appreciate my hometown until I was long gone. I've now lived more than half my life in a normal city -- yes, I'm talking about Louisville -- and I've never regretted my decision. But New Orleans still tugs at me, and reading Dan Baum's *Nine Lives* made me realize how much I miss the city's craziness.

Baum got the idea for his book while visiting New Orleans in 2005 and writing about Hurricane Katrina for *The New Yorker*. He arrived two days after the levees broke, stayed for three weeks, and returned repeatedly to follow the fates of New Orleanians he had met and interviewed for the magazine.

But this is not just another recounting of the storm and its aftermath. The stories of the nine characters he selected begin earlier -- in some cases, 40 years earlier, when another big storm, Hurricane Betsy, smashed into the city and flooded great swathes of it. The characters are as diverse as the modern TV sitcom -- white and black, rich and poor, straight and transsexual. One is a cop, another a petty criminal. Frank Minyard, Orleans Parish's trumpet-playing coroner, has a big role, as does Billy Grace, a former king of Rex, the city's best-known Carnival krewe. The character I admired most is Wilbert Rawlins Jr., a serenely optimistic high school band director who never gives up on his kids, however unpromising their prospects. You may have seen him in Spike Lee's documentary, "Children of the Storm."

These nine lives occasionally intersect. For instance, Ronald Lewis is a civic activist in the Lower Ninth Ward, and Joyce Montana is one of his neighbors. Joyce's late husband, "Tootie," was perhaps the most famous of the "Mardi Gras Indians" -- African Americans who dress up in fantastically elaborate costumes on Carnival day and on the Feast of St. Joseph. (To see what some of these costumes look like, go to Google Images and type in "Tootie Montana.") Tootie died of a heart attack shortly before Katrina, while addressing the New Orleans City Council about police misconduct at a Mardi Gras Indians parade.

The advantage of Baum's kaleidoscopic approach is that we see the city and its rich, tumultuous culture from many different angles. But this comes at a price. The narratives are choppy, and I found it difficult to keep all the life stories and relationships straight.

At times, *Nine Lives* reads like the sort of nonfiction novel Truman Capote pioneered with *In Cold Blood*. Baum clearly did not witness many of the scenes and conversations. They are

based mostly on interviews -- hundreds of hours of interviews.

Are the characters convincing? On the whole, yes. I had a fairly privileged upbringing in New Orleans and never visited the Lower Ninth Ward until my wife Jane and I returned to the city 14 months after Katrina. But the dialogue and descriptions sound right. And when Baum turns to life in uptown New Orleans, he confirms my suspicions when I was growing up. Here's his take on the Whitney Bank, where Billy Grace's father once worked: "Whitney was more than a bank; it was almost a cult -- clubby, intimate, and discreet to the point of being secretive. ... A surprising number of the elegantly mannered clients had little or no money, and Whitney existed largely to help them maintain appearances."

But at least one of Baum's characters, John Guidos, is tired of trying to maintain appearances. A former high school football player, John is a husband and a father -- and a secret cross-dresser. By the end of the book, John Guidos has become Joann Guidos, a compassionate transsexual whose Cajun's Pub on St. Claude Avenue is a haven for an assortment of misfits seeking comfort and shelter during and after Katrina.

Nine Lives isn't the best book about New Orleans. It doesn't have the imaginative sweep of John Kennedy Toole's *Confederacy of Dunces* or the philosophic depth of Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*. But for anyone who wants to get an idea of how contemporary New Orleans actually works (or doesn't work), *Nine Lives* is a good place to start.

Bert Emke retired in 2001 as The Courier-Journal's chief editorial writer. He lives in Louisville

Additional Facts

Book Review

Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans By Dan Baum

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