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The survivors

An intimate look at walks of lives in New Orleans, ultimately upended by Katrina.

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"If you're going to evacuate to your attic, take an ax so you can chop your way out," longtime New Orleanians warned me when I first moved to their city in the 1990s. "People drowned in their attics during Hurricane Betsy."

To anyone moving into New Orleans in those years, Betsy, the storm that swamped the city in 1965, was part of the local lore. It spawned anecdotes and warnings I heard repeatedly during my four years there.

Now Dan Baum uses that storm and the more recent Hurricane Katrina as bookends to an intimate story of life in the Crescent City in his new book, "Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans."

The book opens with a scene once thought unbelievable, but now all too familiar: mold clinging to bungalows, shotgun-style houses wiped away from their front porches, muddy slime covering everything.

Although the scene is viewed through the lens of Ronald Lewis, barely a teenager in 1965, it could substitute for the thousands of images broadcast worldwide just 3 1/2 years ago.

Baum takes readers on a journey through the intervening decades via dozens of short narratives tightly focused on nine characters.

There's Lewis peering out on his flooded Ninth Ward neighborhood. There's John Guidos, a Catholic boy who later becomes a transsexual bar owner. There's Frank Minyard, a wild young doctor who comes to an epiphany to help the downtrodden and decides to run for the highly politicized office of coroner. There's the eventual King of Carnival from an old-money part of town. There's the self-made Mardi Gras Indian chief from the

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other. such fundamentals as time and money the way other Americans do"), Baum mostly refrains from doing that.

Katrina doesn't figure into the book until roughly the last third. But even the reading up to that point is compelling. And by the end of "Nine Lives," readers are left with a fascinating read, rich in everyday lives that offer glimpses of what detail -- and a clearer understanding of makes New Orleans different from most the city that care forgot.

American cities. All along, readers know, there is a sort of doom cloud over them all. Pam Louwagie, a former reporter for the New Orleans Times-Picayune, covered the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina for the Star Tribune. She is at 612-673-7102.

I'll admit I cringed when I first picked up the book. Baum covered Katrina for the New Yorker and later moved to New Orleans for a while after the storm, but he hadn't lived there before the hurricane turned the city upside down. Interviewing subjects so wounded by their losses, could he really capture what it was like through the decades? Over the years, I had seen far too many writers take liberties by making sweeping statements about New Orleans, a city tremendously complicated by class, race and culture.

Fortunately, except for a few generalizations in the book's foreword ("New Orleanians don't even understand

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