



Getting to know N'awlins

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It happens every time — you're busy, in a hurry, and somebody starts blah-blah-blahing, making a long story longer. You wonder if he'll ever get to the point.

Maybe you even say that: Get to the point.

Everyone has a story.

In the new book "Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans" by Dan Baum, you'll read about nine people from the Crescent City — stories, bracketed by storms:

In 1965, Ronald Lewis found something more powerful than Mama: Hurricane Betsy. Betsy went through the Lower Ninth Ward like a hot spoon through a snow-cone. Still, the neighborhood couldn't be kept down by a storm, could it?

All his life, Anthony Wells heard about New Orleans, but it seemed that life took him everywhere but there. He was in Vietnam, Los Angeles, and later, he was bused to Tennessee.

John Guidos hid his secret from everyone, because he knew what they'd say: women's clothes are for women. But in his mind, John was a woman, believing he was alone in his feelings. By the time John became JoAnn, he knew otherwise.

For her first years of marriage, Joyce Montana slept restlessly before Mardi Gras. Tootie, her husband, was an Indian, and would often come home bloodied. But Tootie knew there was another way to fight: with splendor.

Billy Grace's father wasn't Uptown, so it was a surprise when Billy was enfolded into society. Still, Billy wondered if he'd ever be fully accepted.

All Tim Bruneau dreamed of was being a cop. But it took an accident — and a storm — to show Tim what life was like for the people he arrested.

When gynecologist Frank Minyard wanted to help his city, he ran for the office of coroner. His new job meant he would be in charge of New Orleans' dead, no matter how they expired.

Jazz jangled Wilbert Rawlins Jr.'s bones, right alongside responsibility. Wilbert was passing that legacy to his band kids. He was the only family some of them had, and no storm would keep him from that.

All Belinda Carr ever wanted was to leave New Orleans because she came up hard. When she married Wilbert Rawlins Jr., she hoped life would be different. It took a storm to see the preciousness of what she had.

Can I say now that I loved this book?

"Nine Lives" reads like a novel: it sucks you in with the first page, moving you along with short-short chapters, swaddling you in little dramas, making you gasp every now and then.

But it's not a novel. It's all true.

I loved how author Dan Baum unfolds each of his subjects' stories, telling most of them at a just-right pace, allowing one of them to blurt his own tale. I loved the brutal honesty between the pages, I loved the uniquely "New Orleans" feel I got when I was reading. I just plain loved this book.

When you're ready for good set of stories, don't miss this one. "Nine Lives" is a book you should make a point to get.

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Terri Schlichenmeyer reviews books for the Sunday Eagle-Tribune.

'Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans'

By Dan Baum, 352 pages, \$26

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