

Katrina time in New Orleans

Author Dan Baum went to tell the city's post-hurricane story, and discovered a different way of life

BY JAMES MACGOWAN, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN MARCH 22, 2009



Unhurried life continues in New Orleans in this 2007 photo, two years after Katrina. 'The recovery to us on the outside looked kind of halting and disorganized,' says Dan Baum, inset. 'But people were coming back, and people were fixing their houses.'

Photograph by: Mario Tama, Getty Images, The Ottawa Citizen

It seemed only appropriate that on the day I spoke with Dan Baum, rain lashed against the window of my office and there was a wind warning in effect.

Appropriate because Baum's brilliant new book *Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans* takes place mostly before, a little during and somewhat after the devastating floods caused by Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. Not that what I was experiencing was anything more than a pleasant little tea party compared to what New Orleans went through, but it did set a fittingly murky mood.

As far as Baum is concerned, the devastated city has never got its due: "What happened on the Gulf Coast," he says, from his Boulder, Colorado, home, "was immeasurably worse than 9/11 -- geographically, in the number of people affected, in the dollar value, in the trauma. It was way worse than 9/11."

After 9/11, Baum says, Americans exploded with patriotism, displaying their love of country through the ubiquitous display of the stars and stripes. But after Katrina, no such orgy of patriotism occurred. The country just wouldn't rally around New Orleans the way it did around Manhattan. "I thought that was

very telling, you know, that this kind of national purpose and outpouring of patriotism in a crisis really only occurs in the context of war. I thought that was sad. It made me sad. But it was really striking."

Baum, who is 53, arrived in New Orleans on the morning of Aug. 31, two days after the levees began to collapse. He was there for *The New Yorker* magazine, where he was a staff writer, and quickly became frustrated with the direction he had to take in his stories. "It was the mayor this, the governor that, this commission, that commission, this plan, that plan," he says. "I wanted to write about this other thing, the weird, fabulous culture in New Orleans that was putting itself back together."

With little space in the magazine to do so, he and his wife decided in fall 2006 to do a book, but not a Katrina book, at least not per se. (His wife Margaret is uncredited, but she edited and plotted out the book and plays a huge role in shaping all Baum's stories.)

"First of all, Hurricane Katrina is well-tilled soil. I kind of think everything to be said about it as a disaster has been said. And ... I came to realize that Katrina is not the most interesting thing about New Orleans."

So he and Margaret looked for the one story that would say everything they wanted to say about New Orleans. Not so easily done. "We couldn't find one that would bring together people like Billy Grace (a well-to-do attorney) and Anthony Wells (an ex-con). These two have something in common in their New Orleanianess, but they don't physically encounter each other. One story wouldn't get both those guys in. So we decided to tell nine."

Nine Lives spends three-quarters of its time drawing the reader into a three-dimensional portrait of each of these nine people -- a transsexual bar owner, a cop, a coroner, a young black woman in search of a white-picket-fence life, a high-school band leader, an ex-con, an attorney, the wife of a Mardi Gras Indian chief, and a blue-collar city worker -- before unleashing the hell of Katrina upon them.

By that point the reader has been saturated with the sights, sounds and smells of New Orleans, and can grasp why, as Baum points out in the introduction, it is better to think of New Orleans not as "the worst-organized city in the United States," but as the "best-organized city in the Caribbean."

"People live in the moment there, to a degree that we outside of New Orleans just can't even imagine. So it is not a place for the ambitious. It is not a place you go to get something done -- unless you're a musician. So the recovery to us on the outside looked kind of halting and disorganized. But people were coming back, and people were fixing their houses. They just weren't doing it in any kind of citywide, organized fashion.

"It's just a different way of living down there. People are not all fixated on the future, they're not all fixated on getting ahead, they're not all fixated on making their homes better or their businesses bigger. They really just want everything to stay the same and for their lives to carry on in this sort of dreamy, slowed-down way. It's very seductive."

To craft the stunningly detailed portraits he paints in *Nine Lives*, Baum conducted endless interviews and amassed a million words of notes. The problem, he says, wasn't getting these nine to talk; it was

getting them to stop talking. New Orleanians are by nature storytellers. "You'd meet people for breakfast and the next thing you knew the waitress was coming around with lunch menus."

"There were two things going on," he says, about why they talked so candidly. "One, I think people were particularly inclined to talk because this was a year-and-a-half after Katrina and people were still pretty traumatized -- they still are -- and I think they had a sense of 'We could die tomorrow, let's tell our story.' And second, they had time. In the rest of the country people have more money than time. In New Orleans, they have more time than money."

As for the effect all that destruction had on him, it was, he says, considerable. There are passages in this book that, when he reads them now, make him tear up. He's also angry, and calls the government's handling of Katrina "shameful, hideous and inexcusable."

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