

★ **Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans** Dan Baum. Spiegel & Grau, \$24.95 (352p) ISBN 978-0-385-52319-6

Reporter Baum (*Citizen Coors*) arrived in New Orleans two days after the levees broke after Hurricane Katrina. He admits his initial accounts of the disaster were flawed, but with this captivating collection of nine linked profiles, Baum has rectified what he claims was his narrow interpretation of events. "While covering Katrina and its aftermath for the *New Yorker*, I noticed that most of the coverage, my own included, was so focused on the disaster that it missed the essentially weird nature of the place where it happened." Baum begins the narrative with the 1965 battering of the Ninth Ward by Hurricane Betsy and concludes in 2007. He captures the essence of the city "through the lives of nine characters over 40 years, bracketed by two epic hurricanes," people such as Billy Grace, the king of Carnival and member of New Orleans' elite; Tim Bruneau, the city cop haunted by images of Katrina's destruction; and transsexual JoAnn Guidos, who finds a home and, following Katrina, a sense of purpose. Baum, an empathetic storyteller, has nearly perfectly distilled the events, providing readers with a sensuous portrait of a place that can be better understood as "the best organized city in the Caribbean rather than the "worst organized city in the United States." Baum's chronicle leaves readers with a bittersweet understanding of what Americans lost during Hurricane Katrina. (Feb.)