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A journalist's compelling look at life in the Big Easy

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NONFICTION

If you grow up in New Orleans, as I did, you start out thinking every city is like your hometown. Eventually, though, you figure out you're living in someplace different from any other.

It may take an outsider such as Dan Baum to explain what makes New Orleans one weird city: "In the context of the techno-driven, profit-crazy, hyperefficient self-image of the United States, New Orleans is a city-sized act of civil disobedience."

In his illuminating "Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans," Baum tells the city's story in a gripping narrative that makes this nonfiction book read like a novel. Baum, a journalist who covered Hurricane Katrina for The New Yorker, did not miss the other story: "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."

So he moved to New Orleans to figure that weirdness out. The result is "Nine Lives," the most compelling nonfiction I've read in a long time.

Baum found nine people willing to submit to many hours of interviews. They allowed him to talk to their

colleagues, friends and relatives as well.

He says finding his nine subjects wasn't that difficult, thanks to the city's culture, "where nothing is ever 'none of your business.'"

"One can't really ask a question in New Orleans that is too personal, even of a stranger. For someone in my unseemly profession, it's a paradise."

He focused on these nine: a privileged king of carnival, a streetcar-track repairman, a transsexual bar owner, a cop, a felon, the wife of a Mardi Gras Indian, a high-school band director, a trumpet-playing parish coroner and a woman who decides at age 8 to make a better life for herself. Some meet; two marry. Others, such as carnival king Billy Grace, live essentially unaware that parallel universes exist nearby.

One Mardi Gras, bicycling to the Rex parade's float den, Grace encounters groups of blacks decked out in the beads and feathers of Mardi Gras Indians. Just blocks from his mansion on St. Charles Avenue, Grace finds himself in a world so different, he wonders later if he dreamed the whole thing.

Baum bookends individual stories such as this one with two hurricanes: Betsy in 1965 and Katrina in 2005.

When Katrina finally hits three-fourths through "Nine Lives," the horror of the storm and the outrage at the bungled relief response come flooding back.

But this replay's different: The horror and outrage have intensified, because now we know some of the affected people as well as our next-door neighbors. Remember the woman slumped in the wheelchair outside the convention center, whose image we saw over and over on the cable-news loops? She was Aunt Polly to Belinda Rawlins, one of Baum's nine.

That's the real power of "Nine Lives." In addition to explaining what makes New Orleans so weird, Baum puts an indelible face on her people.

Jann Malone has been a writer and editor of magazines and newspapers in Georgia and Virginia for 37 years. She retired from The Times-Dispatch in 2008.