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# Life and Death in New Orleans

By Andrea Ford

*Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans*

By Dan Baum

335 pages; Spiegel and Grau

## The Gist:

Monumental tragedies have a way of towering over a place, casting a shadow that dims both history and people. Former *New Yorker* staff writer Dan Baum's *Nine Lives* is a reminder of [New Orleans](#) as it existed before — and still exists in spite of — its darkest hour. After Hurricane Katrina, Baum conducted nearly 400 interviews with more than 200 subjects to recreate the experiences of nine New Orleanians, not only in the harrowing post-storm chaos of lawlessness and death, but in the four decades leading up to Katrina, starting with Hurricane Betsy in 1965. As the years roll by, each of the nine characters, who range from a trumpet-playing parish coroner to a transsexual bar owner, overcome their own personal storms while the city battles racial conflict, economic decline, the crack epidemic, and, ultimately, the greatest of catastrophes. ([See pictures of Hurricane Katrina: Survivors and Heroes.](#))

## Highlight Reel:

1. *On the unique personality of New Orleans:* "'Here we are. We're in New Orleans,' my dad says, and I'm seeing it, this place I been dreaming about. It's all jam-packety, pretty old houses lined up one beside the other, each one a different color, with curlicues and flowers, and, man, streets just full of people. White people, black people, mixed-race people, all jumbled up together and walking. Music right on the sidewalk...a whole band and drum set and everything, like the whole city is a big party. I'm looking out the window, eyes big as saucers — eight years old — and I'm thinking, this is a whole different way to be a Negro; I'm thinking, this is where Daddy gets his groove." ([See the special report on "Hurricane Katrina - Two Years Later."](#))

2. *On the city's peculiar resistance to change:* "What's wrong with us? he thought. Are we proud of being backward and insular? When New Orleans was awash in oil money, it had refused to invest in the harbor, which was now being superseded by such pikers as Mobile. It had failed, when it had the chance, to correct a school system that produced students who could barely speak English or do sums. When northern companies fled

unions and taxes for the Sunbelt, and cities like Memphis and Dallas were doing all they could to attract them, New Orleans turned a cold shoulder."

**3.** *On how the government's response to Katrina impacted the city's future:* "Sometimes he found himself thinking uncharitably about the people who hadn't returned, and had to make an almost physical effort to haul himself back from that. Everybody's got circumstances, he'd tell himself. Not everybody can set their own destination. But it seemed to Ronald that a fundamental mistake had been made after Katrina. The government dangled a lot of resources, and it made everybody freeze up. Nobody wanted to start in until they saw what they were going to get. We knew after Betsy we weren't going to get no help from anybody, Ronald often thought, and maybe that was better."

### **The Lowdown:**

With all that has been written about New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, few writers have been able to capture the essence of New Orleans as skillfully as Baum. Through exceptionally reported slices of life, *Nine Lives* reveals New Orleans as a vibrant, otherworldly land — a city in its own orbit. Beyond all the death, destruction and lives upended, one of the great jolts of the storm was that it forced a city that has always been somewhat out of step with the rest of American life to confront itself, in all its quirks and vulnerabilities. Baum's is a compassionate account of a most unique American city's long, strange journey.

**The Verdict:** Read

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