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Nine Who Survived

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Review by Jason Berry
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NINE LIVES

Death and Life in New Orleans

By Dan Baum

Spiegel and Grau. 335 pp. \$26

When Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, four-fifths of New Orleans filled with water, covering an area seven times the size of Manhattan island. Dan Baum, a former staff writer for the New Yorker, was among the army of reporters who covered the chaotic evacuation and long, aching aftermath. Even now, buses carry tourists through a tropical Pompeii of dead neighborhoods. Roughly a third of the population is gone. The recovery failed due to former President George W. Bush's indifference, then-Gov. Kathleen Blanco's failure to swiftly disburse relief funds and Mayor Ray Nagin's floor show of epic incompetence.

The national media withdrew. Baum dug in.

"Nine Lives," the product of his love affair with the sunken city, is a spiritual saga strikingly different from his magazine reporting. He says little about the political dynamics of Katrina and submerges his own voice as he weaves the experiences of nine New Orleans residents into a sinuous narrative. His technique brings to mind Robert Altman's film "Nashville," cutting between short scenes and longer vignettes from the lives of people who rarely intersect. With such a wide cast -- including the wife of a Mardi Gras Indian, a high school band leader and a bar owner who makes the surgical shift from a "he" to a "she" -- Baum has rich material to dramatize his case that New Orleans is utterly unlike mainstream America.

Baum's subjects float through a baroque society where music is a form of memory. Katrina does not hit until two-thirds of the way through the book. By then, the city's racial divisions and abysmal politics are clear, but we also understand why the place is precious to each of the nine. As

the flood recedes, the plot lines follow the characters' relentless quests to return.

Attorney Bill Grace, a former "Rex" -- king of the annual Mardi Gras celebration -- comes back to a privileged existence in a dry neighborhood. Dr. Frank Minyard, a trumpet-playing coroner and the book's moral protagonist, carries a gritty sense of duty to the dead.

Baum's lens on crime alternates between Anthony Wells, an ex-con; and Tim Bruneau, a police officer addicted to bulletproof candor: "You didn't need crooked judges and prosecutors to let criminals walk; all you needed was cops who should have repeated third grade." At the height of the disaster, Bruneau agonizes over what to do with a dead woman in his squad car, now that Doc Minyard's morgue is under water.

Wells is the only subject not cast in the third person; he enters talking. All of his sections are italicized monologues, and he rolls through the book on high-octane wit, recounting how he hunkered down for the storm with looted "motor oil, Courvoisier and Hennessy fifths. Cases of cigarettes. A gun we found in an auto-parts store. Little bit of cash but not much, because most of the places we hit, all the twenty-dollar bills were all moldy and wet." Forcibly evacuated by National Guardsmen, Wells was put on a bus -- "a nice one, from one of the casinos" -- with a TV screen showing "one of them slasher films, and the women on the bus were all upset." Then a helicopter landed, and Vice President Dick Cheney boarded the bus. "Had about eight guys with him, but it was him," Wells says. "I'd know that [expletive] anywhere."

"Nine Lives" represents a gamble that, despite the saturation media coverage of Katrina, readers will be riveted by the back stories of little-known survivors. "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," Baum explains in the introduction. "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."

As a native resident of New Orleans, I would argue that Katrina wrecked America's hyperefficient self-image. The country that put men on the moon couldn't build strong levees or rescue people in a flood. Still, I applaud Baum's shimmering portrait of the city. He adroitly moves his subjects through parades, prison, divorces, sex changes, fancy balls and gun brawls -- yes, the stuff of life here -- showing New Orleans as a magnetic, enduring force. Wells probably puts it best:

"What tripped me out, man," he recalls of his first visit to his daddy's hometown, "was. . . I was connected, you feel me? It was like being in the Bible with the begats: 'My auntee was married to your mother's auntee's second husband.' Then I got home to San Fernando, and I'm a stranger. Nobody knows my name. . . . New Orleans ain't like that."

Jason Berry is author of a novel, "Last of the Red Hot Poppas," and director of a documentary, "Vows of Silence," on the Vatican's role in the clergy abuse crisis.

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