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Book Review - Life is not always easy for residents of The Big Easy

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NINE LIVES: DEATH AND LIFE IN NEW ORLEANS. By Dan Baum. Spiegel and Grau. 335 pages. \$26.

When he was 14, Ronald Lewis witnessed the devastation wrought on his neighborhood in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward by the inrush of water from a broken levee.

Lewis and his family had to wade to safety in shoulder-deep water. Houses were left dredged in slime, knocked off their foundations, and ruined furniture littered the streets. The foul stench of mildew, gasoline and death hung in the air.

This was not the result of Hurricane Katrina. It was Betsy in 1965, and Ronald had "finally encountered a force of nature more powerful than his mom."

Ronald is one of the people whose stories are told in *Nine Lives*, an affecting, involving look at a city known as The Big Easy, where life is often anything but for its residents.

Author Dan Baum arrived in New Orleans two days after the levees broke in 2005 to cover the aftermath of Katrina for *The New Yorker*. During his initial three-week visit, and in subsequent visits over six months, he interviewed more than 100 people. From those interviews emerged the life stories of the book's nine subjects, a varied cross-section of New Orleans society.

There's Billy Grace, a wealthy lawyer and king of Mardi Gras; John Guidos, a football player turned transsexual bar owner; and Anthony Wells, who has spent most of his life going in and out of prison. Bookworm Belinda Carr dreams of college, a white picket fence and a life far from her family's raggedy rental house. Tim Bruneau is a gung-ho police officer, eager to take on the city's roughest neighborhoods. Joyce Montana lives most of her life in the shadow of her husband, Tootie, the flamboyant face of the Mardi Gras Indians, known for the colorful,

elaborately feathered and beaded costumes he would spend all year making and wear only once.

One of the most colorful characters is Frank Minyard, a gynecologist-to-the-rich who developed a do-gooder streak and was elected the coroner of Orleans parish in 1974, an office he has held ever since. One of his campaign posters pictured him wearing a white suit and playing the trumpet, helping to solidify his nickname as Dr. Jazz. After Katrina, instead of retiring, he helped identify the hundreds of bodies -- and was infuriated by the slowness with which those bodies reached him.

Music is a signature ingredient of New Orleans' cultural gumbo, and it's an intrinsic part of the life of Wilbert Rawlings Jr. He could have played football or basketball in high school, but instead he joined the band -- because in New Orleans, the bands' halftime competitions are what really draw the crowds to the games. After Wilbert becomes a band director for some of the city's poorest high schools -- including one where students beat the previous band director with a baseball bat -- he takes on the role of father figure for as many troubled, parentless kids as he can cram into a band room.

The specter of Katrina looms large as the tales approach the summer of 2005. But, ultimately, it is something of an anticlimax, less important in the fabric of the characters' lives than the years leading up to it. *Nine Lives* is really about the unique, anything-goes soul of New Orleans and the people who call it home, not the tragedy of Katrina.

Because the book skips chronologically among the subjects, dropping into their stories for a few pages at a time, at first it can be a bit confusing keeping track of who's who. But once the characters are set, you will find yourself eager to catch up on what's happened with their lives, to discover who's gotten married, who's gotten divorced and who's appeared on *60 Minutes*.

Baum does a masterful job illustrating that New Orleans is a world unto itself, a "city-sized act of civil disobedience" that outsiders can view as the worst city in America but that residents mostly love just the way it is. Through the captivating stories of these nine real-life people -- people whose lives, he says, "would be unimaginable anyplace else" -- emerges a portrait of a city of gaudy wealth and abject poverty, hope and corruption, rigid social hierarchy and limitless personal freedom.

In effect, New Orleans is the 10th character whose story is told.