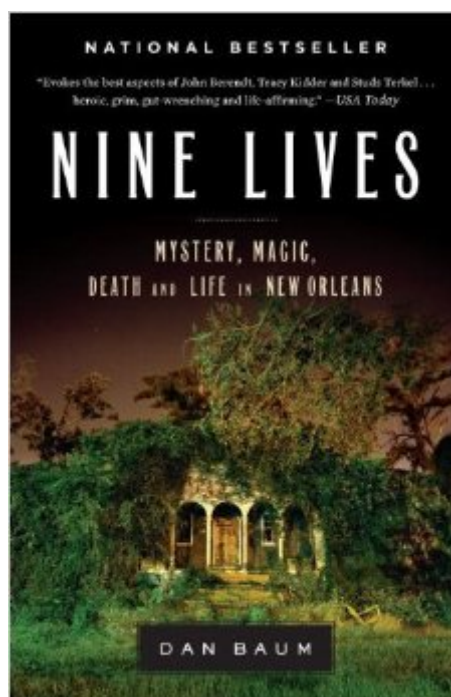


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Nine Lives: Mystery, Magic, Death, And Life In New Orleans



Synopsis

Nines Lives is a multivoiced biography of a dazzling, surreal, and imperiled city, told through the lives of nine unforgettable characters and bracketed by two epic storms: Hurricane Betsy, which transformed New Orleans in the 1960s, and Hurricane Katrina, which nearly destroyed it. Dan Baum brings this kaleidoscopic portrait to life, showing us what was lost in the storm and what remains to be saved.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

New Orleans is a city full of contradictions, a place out of context with the rest of America. It defies understanding, explanation, and most especially, classification. It's a quality the residents hold onto, this testament of uniqueness, even as the city has teetered time and again on the brink of destruction. I've lived near New Orleans for most of my life. I'm a frequent visitor there, and, like everyone else who comes, I've fallen in love with its decadent grandness, its welcoming, leisurely way of life. All manner of humanity calls New Orleans home, and the city embraces them all. It's a unique place, out of step with the rest of America, and that is exactly why it is so important to save. This has never been truer than now, as the great lady teeters on her knees, still struggling, three years later, to rise from the devastation of Katrina. Dan Baum, on assignment from The New Yorker after the storm, quickly learned all of these things. Along with his wife Margaret, he eventually moved to New Orleans in order to write a book, one which, using the timeframe between Betsy in 1965 and Katrina in 2005, captures perfectly what it means to love this city. Baum chose nine people he got to know after the storm, conducting hundreds of hours of interviews, writing the story of the

city through their eyes. They are from vastly different ends of the socio-political spectrum, ranging from the widow of a revered Mardi Gras Indian chief to the long-time coroner of Orleans parish, from a transsexual bar owner to a former king of Rex and pillar of the Uptown community. Their stories are unique, yet a common thread runs through them all - the deep, abiding love of this place, of the home New Orleans offers to each.

A doctor turned coroner, a band and music teacher, a transit system worker, an ambitious woman struggling to achieve a college education, a transsexual bar owner and former college football player, a wealthy accountant... These are among the characters whose very disparate lives are woven together in this book that is about all of them and none of them; rather, it is about the city that they share, New Orleans. "New Orleanians really want nothing more than for everything to stay the same," Dan Baum writes in his introduction to this compelling oral history of the city's misadventures over the last forty-plus years. As well all know, far from staying the same, everything in New Orleans underwent a seismic change in 2005, when Hurricane Katrina blew in from the Gulf of Mexico and along with the floods that followed, transformed the city's geography in every conceivable way. Its citizens were scattered all over the country, the lower Ninth Ward -- home to some of those whom Baum profiles in his book -- was destroyed. While Katrina's devastation is the *raison d'être* for Baum's book, the events of those horrible days in August and September, 2005 are simply the climax of the lives of the New Orleanians he tells the story through. Or perhaps I should say that his nine characters choose him to tell their tales of the lives they lived in the city that they loved and sometimes hated but couldn't imagine living without. It's the story of a city and of the many ways of life that coexisted within it, of the unique 'live for the day' ethos that prevailed there and its strong sense of community.

This is a good book, and I found it an easy and quick read. But it is also very lean, even meager. One of the reviewers noted that you don't hear Baum's voice again after the introduction; this is true. In place of an author's voice you get a very stripped narrative of 8 lives, about thirty pages per person spread out over forty years. Given those restraints, Baum does an admirable job, but there's not all that much magic. You get the sense that the real spirit of New Orleans had to be shunted aside to get the tale told. There's one glorious exception, which is the "life" of Anthony Wells, told by himself (he is the only one who was allowed to speak for himself this way). He is all zest and glory, and it makes you realize how much the experience of New Orleans can only be rendered in the first person. The Wells portions, all in italics, are worth reading straight through all on their own. He is

like a New Orleanian Neal Cassady. One way of putting this is that Baum put together in schematic form a kind of Canterbury Tales for New Orleans, but you really can't manage that kind of thing without more first-person narrative. It's the flavor of perspective that really drives the whole. One more thing. Since Baum was writing nonfiction about living people he would presumably like to remain friends with, there is little that is incisive here. At times you wish you could tell him you're shutting the tape recorder off to get his real opinion on his subjects. I suppose this is why authors turn to fiction - they can put down their real thoughts about people, as long as they change the names. Baum does not appear to be operating with the same freedom. The overall result is good narrative with surprisingly little color.

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