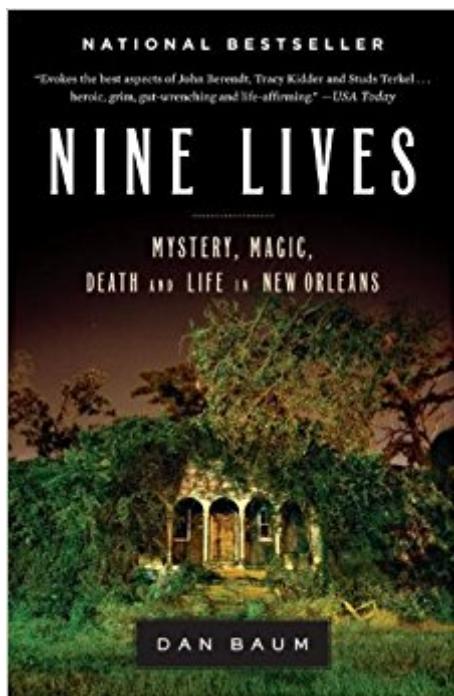


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# Nine Lives: Mystery, Magic, Death, And Life In New Orleans



## 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

Book Description The hidden history of a haunted and beloved city told through the intersecting lives of nine remarkable characters. After Hurricane Katrina, Dan Baum moved to New Orleans to write about the city's response to the disaster for *The New Yorker*. He quickly realized that Katrina was not the most interesting thing about New Orleans, not by a long shot. The most interesting question, which struck him as he watched residents struggling to return, was this: Why are New Orleanians—along with people from all over the world who continue to flock there—so devoted to a place that was, even before the storm, the most corrupt, impoverished, and violent corner of America? Here's the answer. *Nine Lives* is a multivoiced biography of this dazzling, surreal, and imperiled city through the lives of nine characters over forty years and bracketed by two epic storms: Hurricane Betsy, which transformed the city in the 1960s, and Katrina, which nearly destroyed it. These nine lives are windows into every strata of one of the most complex and fascinating cities in the world. From outsider artists and Mardi Gras Kings to jazz-playing coroners and transsexual barkeeps, these lives are possible

only in New Orleans, but the city that nurtures them is also, from the beginning, a city haunted by the possibility of disaster. All their stories converge in the storm, where some characters rise to acts of heroism and others sink to the bottom. But it is New Orleans herself—perpetually whistling past the grave yard—that is the story's real heroine. Nine Lives is narrated from the points of view of some of New Orleans' most charismatic characters, but underpinning the voices of the city is an extraordinary feat of reporting that allows Baum to bring this kaleidoscopic portrait to life with brilliant color and crystalline detail. Readers will find themselves wrapped up in each of these individual dramas and delightfully immersed in the life of one of this country's last unique places, even as its ultimate devastation looms ever closer. By resurrecting this beautiful and tragic place and portraying the extraordinary lives that could have taken root only there, Nine Lives shows us what was lost in the storm and what remains to be saved. Exclusive: Dan Baum on Nine Lives Hurricane Katrina was the kind of event a reporter waits his entire life to cover. It was especially satisfying doing so for *The New Yorker*. While newspaper and television reporters chased about feverishly in their attempt to feed the insatiable daily news monster, I enjoyed the time to go deep and peel back the tragedy in all its complexity. I wrote half a dozen short "Talk of the Town" pieces and two long articles over the following year. Even working for *The New Yorker*, though, covering Katrina and its aftermath became frustrating. The longer I stayed in New Orleans, the more I understood that huge as Katrina was, it is hardly the most interesting thing about New Orleans. New Orleans is the most unusual place I've ever been—complicated, sensual, self-contradictory, hilarious, infuriating—and it was the place itself, not the tragedy that befell it, that I wanted to write about. So when my wife and I thought about writing a book, it wasn't a "Katrina book" we had in mind. We finally settled on interweaving the life stories of nine New Orleanians—rich and poor and in between, black and white and in between, male and female and in between. Nine Lives begins in 1965, right after the last time a big part of the city flooded during a hurricane. By this we want to say: New Orleans was there a long time before Hurricane Katrina and it will be there a long time after. Katrina doesn't show up in Nine Lives until past page 200. We had two guiding principles: No bad guys, and all happy endings. All nine of these people are, in their own way, heroes. And while we could have ended any of their stories on a down note, we instead end all at a moment of ascendance. There are many ways of looking at New Orleans, but this is how we chose to do so in Nine Lives. We were careful not to make Nine Lives the kind of "issue" book one must read to understand current events. We want people to read it for the same reason they read *The Kite Runner* or *The Bridges of Madison County*—out of love

of the characters and a warm, delicious eagerness to see their lives unfold. New Orleans is above all, a fun place, and we tried to make Nine Lives as much fun to read. —Dan Baum --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

**Starred Review.** Reporter Baum (Citizen Coors) arrived in New Orleans two days after the levees broke after Hurricane Katrina. He admits his initial accounts of the disaster were flawed, but with this captivating collection of nine linked profiles, Baum has rectified what he claims was his narrow interpretation of events. While covering Katrina and its aftermath for the *New Yorker*, 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. Baum begins the narrative with the 1965 battering of the Ninth Ward by Hurricane Betsy and concludes in 2007. He captures the essence of the city through the lives of nine characters over 40 years, bracketed by two epic hurricanes, people such as Billy Grace, the king of Carnival and member of New Orleans elite; Tim Bruneau, the city cop haunted by images of Katrina's destruction; and transsexual JoAnn Guidos, who finds a home and, following Katrina, a sense of purpose. Baum, an empathetic storyteller, has nearly perfectly distilled the events, providing readers with a sensuous portrait of a place that can be better understood as the best organized city in the Caribbean rather than the worst organized city in the United States. Baums chronicle leaves readers with a bittersweet understanding of what Americans lost during Hurricane Katrina. (Feb.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I wanted to read the book before having a personal visit with one of the "interview-ees" in the book. It was FANTASTIC. I have done a lot of volunteer time in the Lower 9th, both before, and after Katrina. This was a beautiful, stellar, could not wait to digest every word sort of book. Engaging, sharp, and forward-moving. It perfectly places you into that miasma of beauty, culture, uniqueness, and love/pain/sorrow/joy that it is, to be there, from there. I have re-read it ten times. It is in my top three of "go-to" books because, as a volunteer there, it speaks, and resonates on such a deep level. Dan Baum did an absolutely stellar job capturing time and place. A great read, and it tells the deep abiding love of place, sorrow of place, and redemption and abiding love of place. I absolutely loved every word, and highly recommend!

Nine Lives is a beautiful story that follows the lives of nine New Orleanians. It starts in the 60's, when Hurricane Betsy was the "big storm" of the time. I've always heard of Betsy growing up, how

devastating it was and how my grandpa had to rescue his 5 kids out of their house by walking with each one on his shoulders through the murky water. The story then meanders through events in each person's life passing years and decades, it's a little hard to keep up with the characters at first but once they're introduced and you know their back story, it's hard to put the book down. Then there's Katrina. This part was really hard for me to read (through tears) but it was heartbreakingly moving. The characters are all real people that the writer had met while covering Katrina for *The New Yorker*. A stoic Mardi Gras Indian chief, a transsexual bar owner, a coroner, these are but a few of the people we read about. I understand that this book is currently being developed into a musical for Broadway. I hope that happens because these stories should be heard.

I was astonished to find myself utterly swept away by each person in this book and their background, history and journey up to Hurricane Katrina. Yes their travel through Katrina and beyond was what drew me to the book, but it was the braiding of each person's roots within the city itself that kept me turning page after page late into the night. Watching the descent of the Lower Ninth Ward through the decades - well all of New Orleans really, from a place where poor families struggled to make ends meet and keep family values at the center of their world as the neighborhoods decayed into drug dealer owned corners where even murderers feared to tread after dark. The reasons for that collapse are varied and numerous - as in any other city around the nation. However, this book should help to shine a light on the people who care about New Orleans and her old districts and the history each one carries. They just as varied and more important than the excuses for failure before and after Katrina. Personally I loved the Big Easy long before Katrina and my heart broke to slosh through the debris after Katrina. New Orleans is a city that accepts you foolishness and all, eccentricities and normality alike. *Nine Lives* is the only book I've read that offers a true look at the reality that makes New Orleans New Orleans.

This book reminded me a bit of Thornton Wilder's novella *Bridge of San Luis Rey*, which compassionately explores the backstories of the passengers on a bus which plunges into a crevasse. Except this isn't fiction, and instead of a crevasse we have Hurricane Katrina. Although you know the hurricane is coming, and a sense of suspense about how the characters will be affected grows stronger as the book moves along, this is about much more than the hurricane. It is about the people of New Orleans - nine of them to be exact, and how their lives have unfurled over the past several decades. Dan Baum selected his characters well to represent many sides of this extraordinarily unique city, and they in turn granted him access to intimate details of their stories. He

is a gifted memoirist, and tells the stories chronologically, with sections of the book devoted to different decades starting back in the 60s, and chapters about each of the nine people filling out each section. As a result, the reader gets a real sense of how New Orleans has evolved over the past half a century, and how its people have been affected by those changes. It's a difficult life for everyone for different reasons, but the book showcases the remarkable resilience they all show and their dedication to their community. I had the pleasure of meeting one of the characters, Ron Lewis, at his private museum, the House of Dance and Feathers in the Lower 9th Ward, during a recent trip to New Orleans. I highly recommend visiting Ron, and reading this book; I'll always have a special place in my heart for New Orleans as a result of both.

I chose this for my book group. Everyone enjoyed it, especially for non-fiction. We had some good conversation. The characters were difficult to keep track of in the beginning but you get them straight about halfway through. I found a web site that shows the real faces of each person, which was kind of cool.

I am not sure how factual these stories are, or if they were embellished, but I thought the book was well written and it held my interest throughout. I have visited New Orleans several times to help rebuild in the Lower 9th Ward while staying at a church in Broadmoor/Freret. It was interesting to read the back stories of the nine people from different perspectives. I found myself looking at a map to see the neighborhood where each person lived. I don't know if a person who had never visited New Orleans would get it, but I sure did!

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