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'Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans' by Dan Baum

February 22, 2009 | Wendy Smith | Smith is the author of "Real Life Drama: The Group Theatre and America, 1931-1940."

BOOK REVIEW

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Nine Lives

Death and Life in New Orleans

Dan Baum

Spiegel & Grau: 336 pp., \$26

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Although it grew out of his reporting on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina for the New Yorker, Dan Baum's extraordinary book reads more like fiction than journalism. Indeed, despite its brevity, "Nine Lives" resembles a vast Victorian novel in its many-sided evocation of an entire world -- worlds, actually, because the New Orleans that Baum lovingly conjures belongs to people rooted in neighborhoods with strong traditions, each one a universe in itself.

Joyce Montana is a Seventh Ward Creole, her life organized around the annual creation of the lavish beaded and feathered suit her husband, Tootie, wears as a Mardi Gras Indian. Across the canal in the Lower Ninth Ward, "no need for all that parading in the street like the city people," asserts Ronald Lewis. The Lower Nine may be "as far down the social ladder as you could go in New Orleans," but it offers "the best of both worlds . . . a quiet country life right there by the good waterfront jobs." Lawyer Billy Grace's hard-charging business ways and relatively enlightened racial attitudes make him something of an anomaly in his elite white neighborhood, but he has "never known anything other than uptown life" and can't bring himself to leave. Frank Minyard lives in nouveau-riche Lakeview because he dislikes "uptown swells"; this wealthy doctor remains a staunch son of the French Quarter, and of a mother who told him, "our kind stays below Canal Street."

The contrast between proudly parochial New Orleans and deracinated suburban America struck 8-year-old Anthony Lewis when he went there from California to visit his grandmother in 1959. The six or seven blocks around her house, in an area called the Goose, "felt like the whole world," he remembers. "Everybody knew me. I was Ant'ny Wells, Edward and Deloris's boy. People I never seen before would come up and say I looked just like my grandma. . . . Then I get home to San Fernando, and I'm a stranger. Nobody knows my name. Life is all cut up." By the time he moved to New Orleans in 1982, the waterfront jobs that sustained the Lower Nine were vanishing, and the city's black neighborhoods were besieged by crime and drugs. But it was still the kind of place, Anthony says, where, if everything else went wrong, "there would be someone in the Goose to pick me up, give me something to eat."

Anthony's first-person monologue is woven throughout the intricate, superbly structured text with the odysseys of Joyce, Ronald, Billy, Frank and four additional protagonists. Each is captured with equal intimacy in third-person narratives based on lengthy interviews and the author's research.

Belinda Carr's dreams of escaping the Lower Nine via a college education are temporarily derailed by pregnancies and an abusive husband. High school band director Wilbert Rawlins Jr. throws a lifeline in the form of music to kids from the city's roughest wards who have no parents and no future. Cross-dressing John Guidos moves from the "all-Catholic world" of Metairie into the Quarter, a tolerant refuge for sexual and social misfits like rechristened, chemically readjusted JoAnn Guidos. Hard-bitten cop Tim Bruneau, who views black New Orleans as "one big misdemeanor lockup," discovers compassion while trying properly to dispose of the corpse of a 24-year-old crackhead killed during Katrina by a falling streetlight.

Baum's impressive technical skills unobtrusively serve this rich material as he follows his subjects' lives and New Orleans' complicated history from Hurricane Betsy in 1965 through Katrina to December 2007. The final hundred pages include a scathingly understated chronicle of the ordeal of a flooded, looted city abandoned by incompetent, indifferent federal, state and local authorities. But this is not a book about calamity: It is a portrait of community, of people's passionate attachment to home and kin and friends.

New Orleanians' commitments are wholehearted and unflinching. Ronald is an upright working man, shop steward for the union of streetcar roadway laborers, but his childhood pal Pete is for many years a pimp: "He never questioned Ronald's choice, and Ronald never questioned his." When Pete goes straight and opens a hair salon, his best customers are the local gangbangers. Ronald hates what they do, but "at least they'd stayed in the Nine," he thinks ruefully. "The children who went off to college hardly ever came back. . . . They forgot the community that raised them."

Loyalty trumps morality: Frank becomes close to police officer Joe Maumus after being elected coroner and twice uses his political connections to save Joe's job, first when he's found with a gram of cocaine in his wallet, second when he's implicated in the death of a cop-killer in police custody. "Any other city, both Joe and I would have been canned," he admits. "I love New Orleans."

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