

SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

Storyville

By THOMAS MALLON FEB. 19, 2009

In 1927, the Louisiana man of letters Lyle Saxon complained to Sherwood Anderson that none of the writers rushing down to chronicle the effects of the great Mississippi River flood seemed able to make things “*wet* enough or muddy enough.” Almost eight decades later, after Hurricane Katrina, the problem was often the opposite. Many journalists, operating more on romantic affection for New Orleans than any deep knowledge of the city, seemed unable to dry the place off, to reconstruct what had made it so distinctive to begin with.

Dan Baum, the author of books on Joseph Coors and the American “war on drugs” (a federal effort about as successful as the government’s response to Katrina), showed up in New Orleans to report for *The New Yorker* on Aug. 31, 2005, “two days after the levees broke.” He stayed for three weeks, went home, came back repeatedly and, early in 2007, just moved there. (He now lives in Colorado.) Aware of journalism’s failure to reimagine New Orleans as it had been before the hurricane, Baum has written a splendid book that is two-thirds prologue. The winds and waters of Katrina don’t begin battering the nine lives he puts on display until the reader is past Page 200, by which time his characters and their city have been realized in all their generosity and folly.

“Nine Lives” begins in 1965 with a previous hurricane, Betsy, and moves forward in plausibly reconstructed scenes derived mostly but not solely from long conversations Baum had with his main characters. “I conduct interviews with my laptop in my hands,” he explains, “and can type as fast as most people can talk.” Baum might have settled for a jazz choir of his principals, but he’s after lives, not

mere voices, and toward that end has conducted a wealth of collateral interviews with “friends, colleagues and even ex-wives” of the nine. He has wisely chosen to render almost all the material in what novelists and writers of creative nonfiction like to call “close third person,” approximating the diction and consciousness of his characters but retaining the freedom to wander into the bigger picture.

That picture was grim enough even before Katrina struck. New Orleans was a “sick and wounded” city, crime-ridden and police-brutalized, its economy as fragile as a parade float. Baum understands that “in the context of the techno-driven, profit-crazy, hyper-efficient self-image of the United States, New Orleans is a city-sized act of civil disobedience,” but he also knows that it can be a sentimental basket case of corruption and self-delusion. “Nine Lives” is his “attempt to convey what is unique and worth saving” in the city — first and foremost its citizenry, who seemed chillingly expendable in 2005. Baum’s vivid, selective census of survivors includes “a millionaire king of carnival from the Garden District and a retired streetcar track repairman from the Lower Ninth Ward, a transsexual bar owner from St. Claude Avenue and the jazz-playing parish coroner, a white cop from Lakeview and a black jailbird from the Goose.”

What often connects them is an involvement in Mardi Gras, though they can’t really be said to share the bacchanal, since the “parallel traditions” of white uptown and the city’s poorer parts didn’t truly converge even after the festivities were formally desegregated in 1991. Black men always costumed themselves as fantastical Indians, and each year, for more than half a century, Tootie Montana constructed and wore the most astonishing “suit” of them all. The Indians used to brawl among themselves until Tootie got them to put all their competitive energies into finery rather than fisticuffs. But long after they’d stopped battling one another, the city’s police kept whaling on them. Tootie’s widow, Joyce Montana, is one of Baum’s nine lives.

The author’s “king of carnival” is Billy Grace, who made his own money and married into an old family with a “gigantic and historic” mansion. In 2004, as captain of the Rex krewe — one of the more progressive Mardi Gras organizations — Billy made a hesitant approach, too little and too late, trying to get to know Tootie Montana. But

Tootie died two months before the hurricane, and after the storm, deaths from stress and suicide diminished even Billy's privileged circle.

Ronald Lewis, Baum's streetcar track repairman, lived through Hurricane Betsy during his adolescence, and in the succeeding decades watched as his neighborhood in the Lower Ninth Ward was scorched by crime and then threatened with extinction from a plan to expand the locks in the city's Industrial Canal. As a young radical, Lewis distributed Black Panther literature, but his self-respect really "went back to Mama: you got to do their work, but you don't have to give them a song and dance." By the early 1990s, Lewis was helping to start a second-line club of musicians and marchers in the more-than-ever beleaguered Lower Ninth, even though "second-lining was a city thing, and the people here cross the canal had always remained, at heart, country people." Lewis eventually started a museum for the group's costumes — and began rebuilding it after the deluge. Baum's title has a clear double meaning, with "Nine" also standing for the ward and "Lives" acting as a verb.

During the 1960s, Frank Minyard was a big-spending, hard-partying, womanizing gynecologist, until a depressive crisis pushed him into good works and a run for coroner, an office from which he could legally introduce a methadone program for the city's prisoners. In the late summer of 2005, after decades autopsying the violence performed by and on the city's police, Minyard found himself swimming up Canal Street, through trash and feces, to his office, where he valiantly objected to the use of the word "drowning" on death certificates for people who had in fact "died from heat exhaustion, dehydration, stress, and from being without their medication — from neglect, basically."

Every so often, sentimentality gets the better of Baum. A reader may lose patience with the italicized jive of Anthony Wells (the only character presented in the first person), a "jailbird" before and after his displacement from the city, and with Tim Bruneau, a battered, racially prejudiced cop who sees the city as "one big misdemeanor lockup." When, during Katrina, Bruneau shelters in his unmarked car the corpse of a young black woman rejected as "the city's trash" by a doctor running the morgue at University Hospital, the policeman has probably the finest moment in his life. But his ensuing, ruminative dialogues with the body can make a reader cringe.

Then again, these excesses are no worse than a last drink that might have been resisted at the end of an evening crowded with memorable characters. Baum continually serves up wonderful detail and phrasing: during Katrina “the tang of a thousand busted-open oak trees made the air taste scrubbed,” and after it downtown was full of “law enforcement golf shirts with their guns in the open like the genitals on short-haired street dogs.” People in “Nine Lives” sometimes use the phrase “You feel me?” the way other people say “You understand?” If Baum had employed these words as the last line of his book, as a question about everything he’s told us, the answer would be a firm, appreciative yes.

NINE LIVES

Death and Life in New Orleans

By Dan Baum

335 pp. Spiegel & Grau. \$26

Thomas Mallon’s most recent books are the novels “Bandbox” and “Fellow Travelers.”

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