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# Lives Defined by Hurricanes, but Devoted to New Orleans

By DWIGHT GARNER FEB. 17, 2009

Criticism, H. L. Mencken said, is “prejudice made plausible.” That’s why, reading the first 50 pages of Dan Baum’s new book about Katrina and New Orleans, I tried to puzzle out exactly what I disliked about it. I wanted my eventual pan of “Nine Lives” to make fine distinctions, to be 99.4 percent airtight.

My complaints fell into four plausibly neat categories: one, Mr. Baum’s story jumps from character to character in that facile, frustrating, crisscrossing style that’s become popular; two, he writes from the perspectives and often in the voices of his characters, reminiscent of Studs Terkel in “Working,” but Mr. Baum can ladle the emotions on too thickly, and it’s uncomfortable watching a white man channel a struggling black man’s voice (“A po-lice was tricking with some broad”); three, the core ingredients in “Nine Lives” are too similar to that of other humid, foliage-choked, cross-dresser-occupied sagas about the Deep South, especially John Berendt’s “Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil”; and, four, Mr. Baum is — this will sound oxymoronic, but it’s not — one of those underwriters who overwrite. You can feel the strain of composition behind his spunky and well-formed sentences, and they distract from the stories he’s trying to tell.

There. Beautiful. Review over. Time for me to go for a run.

Silly me. Because at about Page 65, something very real clicks in “Nine Lives.” The small, stray, unobtrusive details that Mr. Baum has been planting along the way begin coming together and paying off, like a slot machine that’s begun to glow and

vibrate. By the final third of “Nine Lives,” as the water begins pouring into the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, I was weeping like an idiot in the coffee shop where I was reading.

“Nine Lives,” which grew from Mr. Baum’s post-Katrina coverage for *The New Yorker*, tells the story of modern-day New Orleans from the perspectives of nine residents over more than 40 years. The narrative is neatly bookended by two devastating hurricanes: Betsy in 1965 and, of course, Katrina in 2005.

Mr. Baum’s opening pages, it turns out, were merely the squawks and squeaks of a big band prepping for a big night. Once the horn section kicks in, the sound is mighty and sad — a funeral parade sweeping through the streets. “Nine Lives” may be this young year’s most artful and emotionally resonating nonfiction book so far, and for that, to Mr. Baum, a belated New Year’s toast. Clearly I needed to make some new notes.

This book does not retell the larger political history of New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina; that ground has been covered, and well, in books like “The Great Deluge,” by Douglas Brinkley. Michael D. Brown, a.k.a. Brownie, the director of FEMA when Katrina hit, is not mentioned in this book. George W. Bush and Dick Cheney barely appear. Mayor C. Ray Nagin of New Orleans dithers around in the background of a chapter or two, and Harry Connick Jr., at age 9, is invited to play piano at a benefit. But that’s about it in terms of big names.

Mr. Baum’s story finds its center of gravity at street level, and he has selected a charming and fascinating cast of swells and strivers and convicts and crazies and persuaded them to tell us, through him, their stories. Among them are Frank Minyard, a trumpet-playing gynecologist turned Orleans Parish coroner; John Guidos, a former school football player and family man turned transsexual barkeep; Wilbert Rawlins Jr. — his dad played drums for Irma Thomas — who turns his life upside down to help poor kids play in school bands; Billy Grace, a well-connected young lawyer who is Rex, king of carnival; Tootie Montana, a Mardi Gras Indian chief who made his own elaborate costumes for more than 50 years; and Tim Bruneau, an intense New Orleans cop.

These people's stories wind around one another, illuminating life in almost every corner of the city, from the teeming streets of the Lower Ninth Ward to the august mansions of the French Quarter. There are marriages, divorces, scams, deaths, bands made and remade, drugs, affairs, babies born, jail sentences handed out. You begin to feel that Mr. Baum has his hands around the entire parish.

“Stop thinking of New Orleans as the worst-organized city in the United States,” he advises. “Start thinking of it as the best-organized city in the Caribbean.” He adds, “New Orleans is a city-sized act of civil disobedience.”

Katrina does not loom on the horizon until the last third of the book. As the storm approaches, some of Mr. Baum's people flee the city while others stay put.

The whole thing doesn't seem so bad at first. The night of the storm, Officer Bruneau steps outside: “He filled his lungs. The tang of a thousand busted-open oak trees made the air taste scrubbed. It crackled with ozone and buzzed through his veins like giddy joy. New Orleans had never smelled so good.”

Then the levees break, the water rises, and to everyone's despairing astonishment help does not come. The police officer is forced to place “a dead citizen on the curb like a bagful of crawfish heads” because there is nowhere to take her. People are stranded for 10 days or so. The Superdome turns into a Dantean circle of hell. The coroner can't figure out why no one is bringing in bodies. Soldiers aren't allowed to pick them up; neither are state police.

Eventually an outside contractor arrives, and the coroner says bitterly: “Let me see if I've got this straight. Dead people rot on the streets of New Orleans for a week and a half so the feds can sign a private contract.”

Racial tensions that have simmered in “Nine Lives” bubble over the top. One man watches state troopers herding evacuees and can't help thinking of World War II: “The troopers didn't prod them with sticks, but neither did they help them carry their sacks. One led a German shepherd on a leash. It ran its nose eagerly over the bags and bundles.”

In the months after the hurricane, when no one seemed to be returning to start over, the same man solemnly thinks: “A fundamental mistake had been made after Katrina. The government dangled a lot of resources, and it made everybody freeze up. Nobody wanted to start in until they saw what they were going to get. We knew after Betsy we weren’t going to get no help from anybody.” Maybe, he thinks, “that was better.”

There’s a funny moment toward the end of “Nine Lives” when a beloved preacher says: “A sermon should be like a woman’s dress. Long enough to cover the subject, but short enough to be interesting.”

Mr. Baum’s book clocks in at just a little over 300 pages, but it contains multitudes.

## NINE LIVES

### Death and Life in New Orleans

By Dan Baum

335 pages. Spiegel & Grau. \$26.

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