

'Nine Lives,' by Dan Baum

Lolis Eric Elie, Special to The Chronicle Published 4:00 am, Wednesday, March 11, 2009

Nine Lives

Death and Life in New Orleans

By Dan Baum

(Spiegel & Grau; 335 pages; \$26)

Dan Baum begins his book out on a limb. Before he has even introduced us to the New Orleanians from whose nine lives he has taken his title, he makes a sweeping statement, one that seeks to define the otherness of these people and the strangeness of their place.

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"As for money, New Orleanians like it well enough, but not so they'd bend their lives out of shape to get some. ... New Orleanians tend to identify more with the welfare of their families, neighborhoods, wards, bands, krewes, second-line clubs, and **Mardi Gras** Indian tribes than with their own personal achievement, and so are largely free from the insatiable desire for individual aggrandizement that afflicts the rest of us."

To make his case, Baum takes nine New Orleanians, threads, if you will, and weaves their stories into a tapestry of the city. A wounded cop, a king of Carnival, a preoperative transsexual bar owner, the matriarch of a Mardi Gras Indian gang, a public school band director, a trumpet-playing coroner, a streetcar track repairman with a curator's vision, a single mother with get-out-of-the-ghetto aspirations and a ne'er-do-well day laborer - these are Baum's people. He begins their tales in 1965, when Hurricane Betsy had flooded much of New Orleans and when the **United States Army Corps of Engineers** promised that its levees would protect against a disaster in the future.

Baum's story moves forward through the failure of the levees during Hurricane Katrina and the rebuilding that followed the flooding. There is not a single narrative here; this is a cumulative telling. The stories of these people alternate, so that the overall history of the city is advanced by each of the characters and their tales.

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Much of the personal drama in this book has nothing to do with the events of Aug. 29, 2005. **Belinda Rawlins** struggled to overcome teenage pregnancy and abusive relationships in pursuit of not one, but two **college** degrees. Yet she finds that the husband of her dreams comes with challenges she never imagined. **Billy Grace** is proud that he has risen above his working-class background and the insular prejudices of white New Orleans' society to become not only the king of New Orleans Carnival but also an ally of some key black politicians. Yet his political connections also bear some bitter fruits that raise troubling questions about him and his new friends. New Orleans coroner **Frank Minyard** sees running for public office as a means of improving the lives of drug addicts and convicts. But when one of his police officer friends is implicated in the beating death of a suspect, Minyard is put in the uncomfortable position of defending a tarnished friend.

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In almost all of these stories, we see hope and aspiration that predates Katrina and in turn is strengthened by it. **Ronald Lewis**, a Ninth Ward resident who loses everything in the flood, is determined to create the **House of Dance and Feathers**, a museum dedicated the New Orleans black parading traditions. **Wilbert Rawlins Jr.** struggles to use his high school marching band as a way of keeping kids out of the principal's office and the juvenile courts. **John Guidos** searches for his own sexual identity and ultimately sees himself and his bar as resources to help children with self-doubts similar to his own.

Perhaps these are not the sorts of grand, robber baron ambitions that would mark these New Orleanians as members of the stereotypical American mainstream. But the drive of these characters gives the reader ample ammunition to question Baum's opening thesis.

It is testimony to the integrity of the writer that Baum has given the reader a book so rich that it contradicts itself in the way that reality contradicts the neatest of theories. Baum has told the story of modern New Orleans with sympathy, insight and an appreciation for the cultural complexities that make the city, even in its current wounded state, a place well worth reading about.

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