

## Famous New Orleanians tell their stories in 'Nine Lives'

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Jennifer Zdon / The Times-Picayune

Tootie Montana's widow Joyce Montana, 76, sits next to an image of her husband as she rides a carriage to the Treme Center. She is featured in Dan Baum's "Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans."

Many are the journalists who passed through New Orleans in Hurricane Katrina's wake, pausing for a moment in the spotlight. Most moved on, but a few -- like Dan Baum -- lingered or returned, determined to get to know the city they had discovered in extremis.

Baum began writing articles and a blog for The New Yorker after the storm; in January 2007, he and his wife, Margaret Knox (his co-author in all but title credit), moved here for four months, determined to capture the city's soul in print. The result, **'Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans'** (*Spiegel and Grau*, \$26), is one of the most moving -- and riveting -- books ever written about the rich and complicated life we live here.

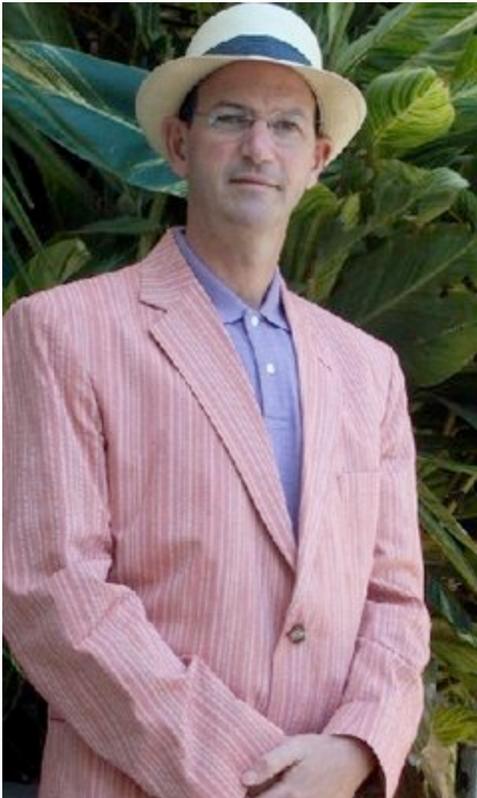
Baum and New Orleans seem a good match. There's his love for costume, his joy in being a Jewish guy from New Jersey shopping on Canal Street. Sometimes he wears a jaunty pink hat; other times, a blue beret. He lived at Dauphine and Clouet streets, "such a cool part of town," Baum said. He made the rounds, often via bicycle, of everything from Chazfest to second-line parades, listening in on stories told in grocery stores and restaurants, in hair salons and high schools, on stoops and street corners and sidewalks. And listen he did, as New Orleanians revealed themselves, their hopes and dreams and human frailties.

"New Orleans is not exactly a fact-rich environment," Baum said. "I think part of my being ejected from The New Yorker (his contract as a staff writer was not renewed in 2007) was that I was always agitating for more space in the magazine for New Orleans. Because as big as this disaster

was, it wasn't the most interesting thing about the city."

In "Nine Lives," Baum has assembled a composite portrait of the city, drawing on the life stories of nine New Orleanians -- Carnival king Billy Grace; band director Wilbert Rawlins Jr. and his wife, Belinda; transsexual bar owner JoAnn Guidos; 9th Ward museum founder Ronald Lewis; police officer Timothy Bruneau; small-time drug dealer Anthony Wells; coroner Frank Minyard; and Joyce Montana, widow of Mardi Gras Indian Chief Tootie Montana.

It's a tale, Baum says, in which there are no villains and only happy endings. "There are no bad guys here," he said, during a phone interview from his home in Boulder, Colo. "I could have stopped these people's stories anywhere, could have ended any of them on a really down note. But that's not how I feel about the city."



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He confesses to a bit of nervousness, waiting for his subjects' reactions. "Even though I did my best to writes these stories in a way they would

like, in the way they would tell them, it's shocking to see yourself written about," he said. "I'm hoping that people who know them will come up to them and say thank you for being here. Every one of them, in his or her own way, is a giant of a person and has overcome incredible difficulty and hardship."

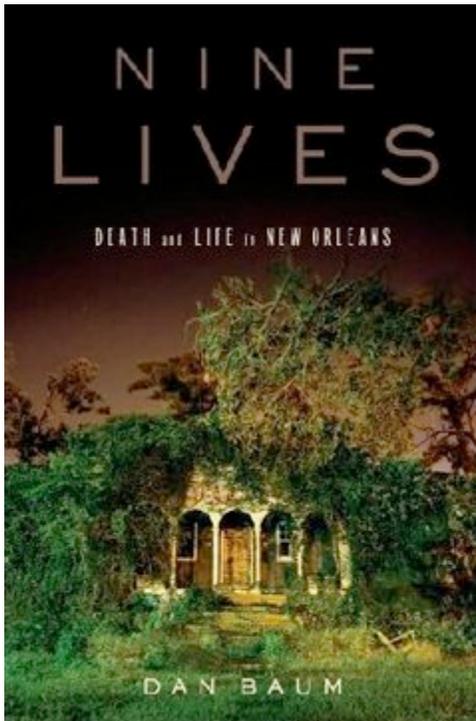
The years covered in this book, 1965-2007, bracketed by two storms, Betsy and Katrina, touch on many important events in New Orleans history -- the devastation of Hurricane Betsy, in which a young Lewis discovered "a force of nature more powerful than his mom"; the rise of containerized shipping, which did away with many of the dock jobs so important to the Lower 9th Ward; the epidemic of crack cocaine and the rise of AK-47s as the weapon of choice; Minyard's memories of the crash of PanAm Flight 829; Amoco's corporate headquarters' move to Dallas; the Adolph Archie case, in which Archie allegedly shot and killed a New Orleans police officer -- and later died in police custody; the death of Tootie Montana in City Council chambers in 2005; the post-Katrina struggle over the future of St. Augustine Church and its beloved leader, the Rev. Jerome LeDoux.

Baum's subjects live through it all. Guidos makes a new life for herself in Kajun's Pub after spending years miscast as John Guidos. Minyard is caught up in the Archie case. Rawlins wants to guide his public school band students to success. Grace gradually achieves the social status and financial success he has desired. Lewis wants only to improve the lives of 9th Ward residents, founding a social and pleasure club and a backyard museum, the House of Dance and Feathers.

Joyce Montana falls in love with Tootie as he transforms the violent Mardi Gras Indian culture into a competition of art and craftsmanship. And Wells, after growing up in California with the idea of New Orleans as his spiritual destination, finally makes it here, only to become part of the epidemic of drugs and violence.

Baum captures the ritual quality of life in this city -- the toast at the Rex mansion on St. Charles Avenue during the parade, the hours spent during a year stitching beads and feathers for an Indian suit, the rigors of a band practice after school, and the daily life of hustling enough money to get a fix.

Then we come to Katrina and the challenges it posed for these nine people.



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**Author! Author!**

**What:** Dan Baum reads from and signs 'Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans'

**When and where:** Tuesday, 6 p.m., Octavia Books, 513 Octavia St.; and Feb. 18, 7 p.m., Beth's Books, 2300 Chartres St.

In some of the most sharply written passages in the book, Baum describes Minyard's frustration at waiting at a mortuary for bodies, only to see the collection efforts of the National Guard, the State Police and the 82nd Airborne derailed. Then, when refrigerated trucks belonging to the biggest funeral home operator in the country arrive, he discovers the truth: "Dead people rot on the streets of New Orleans for a week and a half so the feds can sign a private contract?"

Bruneau drove around for a day with a dead body in the back seat of his Crown Vic, before being told to return the woman's body to the street. He would freak out in various ways, pulling a gun when his roommate on the cruise ship Ecstasy arrives unexpectedly and, at one point, firing into a threatening crowd on a street corner.

Grace was determined to rebuild his city. One of the most fascinating scenes in this book is his account of a post-Katrina meeting of business leaders in Dallas, in which the late-arriving Mayor C. Ray Nagin tells the assembled group, "I have no plan." And when Grace puts forth the idea of the city's elite staking personal wealth on the future of the city and offers \$1 million to kick off the fund, a silence falls in the room.

In another dramatic moment, he finds himself standing over the body of his father-in-law, George Montgomery, that civic activist and bon vivant, who lay in state in the Rex mansion over the Mardi Gras holiday. Baum was there when two young African-American girls knocked on the door and asked to see "the deceased king."

The only one of the nine whose story is told in the first person is Wells, who also provides Baum with the evocative snatches of urban poetry that serve as section titles for his book -- "Where Daddy Gets His Groove," "Walking on Glass," "A Thousand Whistles" and "The Heebie-Jeebies."

"I just fell in love with the guy the first time I met him," Baum said. That was in the post-Katrina Convention Center, where Wells was boarding a bus to Tennessee. "He represents the problem both outside New Orleans and within New Orleans. But there's a tremendous amount of music and poetry and love in him. In other societies, he'd be the trickster or the coyote.

"Other societies would have no room for Anthony and his relationship to his neighborhood, which by any metric is the most wretched neighborhood in New Orleans, which is thoroughly beaten up and doesn't have the cachet of the 9th Ward. And, yet, it's home. New Orleans was his home his whole childhood. He didn't even live there, but it suffused his upbringing in California."

This final section of the book is filled with yearning -- for home, for family, for friends, for all that has been scattered and smashed by the flood. It's a desire Baum can understand.

"Living in New Orleans, taught me a lot about the paucity of life outside New Orleans," he said. "It's different out here. We're richer out here. We have more stuff, and we drive newer cars. It sounds corny, but life means something in New Orleans. Day-to-day living in New Orleans matters in a way it doesn't out here, and you pay a price for that. It's scary and stressful to live in New Orleans, but I don't have to tell you that. Now we talk about coming back, and we're trying to figure out how we can spend part of each year there."

Baum said, "I always wanted to write. I used newspapering the way other people used the Marine Corps, and I didn't stay in it long. In 1987. I met my wife at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. We got married, and the very next day we moved to Zimbabwe, where we worked for three years as freelancers. Then we moved to Montana for eight years, and we've lived in Colorado, Mexico and California."

Baum has written two books -- "Smoke and Mirrors: The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure" and "Citizen Coors: An American Dynasty."

"I'd never really been to New Orleans before the flood," he said. But he's ready to accept the role of spokesman and defender of the city. "There's still a lot of good will about New Orleans. And, of course, I'm counting on it in a mercenary way. But everybody in the U.S. understands that New Orleans got screwed. This beautiful, benighted poor little city is really like the cute cousin of the family who isn't all that serious but everybody just loves. And everybody understands that she got beaten up and left for dead."

When people ask how they can help, he has a ready answer. "What New Orleans really needs is for you to go down there," he said. "Stay in a nice hotel. Tip the musicians heavily. Come be a friend. Spend a little money, spread it around, and go home and tell people what a great time you had. Be sure to leave the French Quarter. Don't rent a car. Hire a taxi driver to take you on the flood tour. Go see what's left of the devastation, and I'm happy to say there's less and less of it to see. Just do that. Go spend a four-day weekend, and every time you see a street musician put a \$20 bill in the cup."

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