

Boulder author Dan Baum chronicles residents of post-Katrina New Orleans

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Following Hurricane Katrina, journalists from all over the world descended on the Crescent City to document the aftermath. Dan Baum, a Boulder-based freelance writer and author, was working for the New Yorker magazine at the time. He went to New Orleans to cover a hurricane, and ended up writing about the soul of a city.

In his new book, "Nine Lives: Death and Life in New Orleans," Baum chronicles nine seemingly diverse residents of the Big Easy -- a criminal, a cop, a coroner, a marching band teacher and a streetcar track repairman, to name a few -- and finds that the real story wasn't the hurricane, but rather the people that make the city such a unique place to live.

This is narrative journalism at its finest, an award-worthy book that doesn't seek to explain or dissect its subjects, but presents them as they are. In so doing, Baum has produced what might be considered a biography of the city of New Orleans.

In writing "Nine Lives," Baum and his wife and writing partner, Margaret Knox, resided in New Orleans for more than four months. They have lived in Boulder for more than five years, and first called Colorado home in 1997 while researching Baum's second book, "Citizen Coors: An American Dynasty." Baum has also authored the book "Smoke and Mirrors: The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure" and has written for the Wall Street Journal, Rolling Stone and the New York Times Magazine.

On Wednesday, Baum will read from and discuss "Nine Lives" at the Boulder Book Store. He discussed his new book, and the city of New Orleans, with the Camera.

Camera: Let's start off with some background. What is the book about?

Dan Baum: I covered Katrina for the New Yorker. I was in and out of New Orleans for most of the year after that and getting increasingly frustrated because as fascinating as Katrina was, and the recovery was, the longer I spent in the city the more I realized that Hurricane Katrina is not the most interesting thing about New Orleans. I continually agitated for more space in the magazine for New Orleans. I couldn't get it. The appetite for New Orleans was exhausted by then. That's why I wanted to write the book.

I did not want to write a Katrina book. I wanted to write about this weird culture. I'm not an academic. I wasn't going to write an academic tract about it. I'm a storyteller. I think it was Margaret who said, "Why don't you just pick a bunch of people and write their stories?" My first thought was to find a group of people whose stories really do come together. But we couldn't find one that would throw a rope around all of New Orleans.

I had two principles going into this. One was no bad guys. The city has been beaten up enough. No villains, and everybody's story ends happily. I could have stopped any of these stories at a down moment, but I stopped them all at an up moment.

The reason we started back in 1965 was that was the last time the city flooded, and the city survived. It's not as though people have been talking about nothing but Hurricane Betsy since 1965. It was terrible. The

city was flooded. People died, houses were ruined. It was traumatic. It took years to recover, but they recovered. I wanted to begin with this idea that the city has nine lives.

Camera: Did you find that most people were open to talking to you?

DB: Oh, the problem was getting them to shut up. Literally. I would do interviews until 3:30 in the morning with Joyce Montana. Margaret and I, at 3:30 in the morning, would have to say, "Joyce, we're falling asleep. We've got to go home." She was going strong.

I met her son Darryl for breakfast once, and by the time we were done talking the waitress was coming around asking if we wanted lunch. People talk and talk and talk. That was not the issue.

Camera: You say this isn't a book about Katrina. How would you describe this book?

DB: An academic friend of mine said this is an oral history of the last 40 years of New Orleans. It is definitely not a Katrina book. Katrina doesn't show up until the last 75 pages. It's really a book about what makes that city unique and worth saving more than it is about Katrina.

Camera: How did you go about structuring the orders of the stories?

DB: I realized pretty early on I wanted to start with Ronald. It bookends with Ronald. He's a giant of a man. Not physically. He's a broad-shouldered guy, but he's just an amazing man. And he kind of represents the spirit of the city. He doesn't have any money, and he's just so important in that town, in a way that a guy living on an \$1,100-a-month streetcar track repairman's pension living anywhere else would not be.

There is artistic license. Everything happened. There are no composite characters. I'm not compressing stuff, but I am manipulating the importance of events and the lessons that the characters are carrying away from the events. In some ways, I think I know these characters better than they know themselves because none of us thinks about our lives as a narrative, a story with a beginning, middle and end -- an arc -- and drama and a climax. We just don't think of ourselves that way. It's my job to think of them that way. It's my hope that these people are going to read this and learn something about themselves.

Camera: Does the act of storytelling itself express some of the values of the town, its personal mythology? In your intro, concerning one of the characters, you talk about not changing the date of when he heard a song. What is the role of this storytelling and personal mythology in describing the city?

DB: I wrote about New Orleans for 2½ years for the New Yorker, which has the most brutal fact-checking department in the business. And New Orleans is not a fact-rich environment. I largely took these people's stories at face value. Because I think you're right: The way they tell their stories says as much about them as what really happens. The telling of the story is as important as the facts of the story. New Orleans is just full of myth. I was always telling the fact-checkers. They'd ask me, "Well, how do you know this or that?" and I'd answer, "Well, everybody knows this."

I think fact matters. I ran a lot of facts down. There's a moment in here where Anthony Wells handwrites a petition to the Louisiana Supreme Court to get him out of a 30-year prison sentence. He writes it from prison. He told me that story, and I thought, no way. I had to wait a while to get it, because the Supreme Court records were flooded, and they had to be freeze-dried. But they sent me a copy of the handwritten petition. God damn if he didn't really do that.

I did check facts, and if people told me something happened at a certain place I went to that place and I took a lot of pictures so I could describe it in the book. I did a lot of research in the newspaper archives. I

would often go back to people and say, "I don't think that could have been in 1974." Facts are important, but they're not everything. But I'll go on the stand and raise my right hand and say these are true stories. All of this happened.

Camera: How do you and your wife work as a team?

DB: The analogy I always use is I move the block of marble into the studio. That's hard work, and it takes some skill. Mostly it takes stamina, but it takes a certain amount of finesse. You don't want to tear the molding off the door. You don't want to drop it on your foot. But it's not art. The real work begins when Margaret has the first draft. I go out and do the reporting, but she acts as my bureau chief. I write the first draft, then she goes to work on it. Then it goes back and forth, back and forth. She's always saying, just slap it down. We can't start working until we've got something to work with.

Camera: She's a writer too?

DB: Yes, she's working on a novel. We freelanced together, did all our work together until our daughter was born 16 years ago. Then we decided we didn't want two careers going on in the house with the little baby. So I became the legs and eyeballs of the operation, and this is how we work. We don't do double bylines. We could have on this, but modern nonfiction requires a lick of first-person from time to time. Double bylines can be confusing to a reader. They can't develop the same kind of relationship with the writer as they can with a single byline. Margaret doesn't care about the byline.

Camera: What were some of the parallels between the nine different stories? What commonalities did you find between these characters?

DB: That's kind of the point of the book, that there is a New Orleans way of living in the world. Whether you are fabulously wealthy confederate gentry, a Garden District resident or a retired streetcar track repairman in the lower Ninth Ward, there is a value set on living in the moment and serving your community, not out of obligation but just living in the community that is unique to New Orleans.

Here in Boulder, we all have more money than time. Even those of us that don't have very much money, we have more money than time. In New Orleans, everybody has more time than money. All that's really important to these people is being with their friends, getting ready for their parade, getting their Mardi Gras Indian suit ready, being with people you have known since birth. People in New Orleans don't travel very much. I know a number of New Orleanians who have never been to the French Quarter, literally, because you stay in your neighborhood. I think that is evident in all nine of these characters.

That's why a lot of people who go there never leave because they realize, "I'd rather live this way. I'd rather live right here, right now. Enjoy this moment, and then enjoy the next, and then enjoy the next." And it's not a question of laziness or fecklessness. It's a question of having a deep sense of what matters. Out here we are ruled by the dollar and the clock, and they are not. And it is very pleasant.

Camera: What were some of the distinctions between these characters? How do these characters complement each other?

DB: They're all from such radically different segments of that society. But I really think any of them could sit down at a table with any other and really enjoy the evening, and you can't say that everywhere. In New York City, nobody like Billy Grace is going to enjoy an evening talking to Anthony Wells, and vice versa. But I think they would really enjoy each other. I've got the rich, the poor, the in-between; the black, the white and the in-between; and the male, the female and the in-between.

Camera: What do you hope people get out of the book?

DB: Nonfiction is not the thing people often reach for to relax. When they want to relax, people like to curl up on the couch with a novel, love stories, action, violence, intrigue, drama, crescendo. That's what we tried to do with ("Nine Lives"). One blogger, he read the whole thing. He thought it was a novel until he got to the end and saw all the research. We wanted this to be as much like a novel as we could make it and still be true. Frankly, I think it's more fun to read because you know it's true. It's one thing to just make stories up. That's hard. I haven't done that. But to take true stories and write them in such a way that people can't wait to get back to bed so they can pull it off the end table and keep reading? That's what we were after.

I want to get the people who don't really care about New Orleans to read it for the same reason they read "The Bridges of Madison County." Simply because they fall in love with these people. They care about them, and they can't wait to find out what happens to them. And they are changed by having known them.

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