

Reading 'Nine Lives'

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Nine Lives: Mystery, Magic, Death and Life in New Orleans by Dan Baum is this year's Reading Project book for all entering first-year students at Tulane University. After Baum was assigned to cover the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina for *The New Yorker*, he decided to focus on the people of the city as opposed to the disaster. We caught up with Baum to ask him about the nine personal stories in the book.

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Dan Baum's *Nine Lives*, the 2010 book selected for the [Tulane Reading Project](#), focuses on people living in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Q: How did you choose your subjects?

Some of them I met while reporting on the disaster. JoAnn was the first. I wandered into her bar on day three of the disaster. Anthony Wells was next. On day 10, I turned myself in at the Convention Center to put myself in the forcible evacuation stream and see what was happening to those people.

That scene where Anthony is looking out the bus window at Dick Cheney? I was in the seat next to him. I stuck by him and his brother, Roger, and followed them to Knoxville, Tenn.

I'd been told not even to try to approach Billy Grace's class ? the "confederate gentry" of the uptown Mardi Gras krewes ? but when I dropped my business card through Billy's mail slot, he called me the same day and invited me over to drink and eat in his generator-lit house with some friends.

Tim Bruneau I met while hanging out at Sixth District police headquarters.

Ronald Lewis I went looking for because he was the go-to guy for the Lower Ninth

Ward. Frank Minyard [the coroner] was a natural.

Then I specifically wanted a high school band director, which led me to Wilbert, and he led me to Belinda.

I wanted to write about the Mardi Gras Indians, but I was also short of women characters, so that led me to Joyce [Montana].

Q: Which of the storylines, if any, was your favorite? Why?

I love them all, but I am particularly enamored of the way the storm destroyed everything in New Orleans, but repaired Wil and Belinda's marriage.

In the [second part](#) of this interview, Dan Baum talks about what he'd like his readers to learn from Nine Lives, and how students can use it as an introduction to the people of New Orleans.