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DEC/JAN 2010

Afterwords

Eight years later, many novels have been written about September 11. What can they tell us about that day?

LAURA FROST

I didn't see the bodies falling. At least I think I didn't. In that moment of panic, when death seemed entirely possible, there in my living room, two blocks from the World Trade Center, too close to figure out what was happening beyond the swirling paper and the glass shards, debating whether to run or to stay inside, I might have seen more—or less—than I remember. Many weeks later, near where the National Guard barricade had been at the end of the street, I'm pretty sure I saw vendors selling photographs of body parts. How can you trust your memory—or your sight—when you half-expect every plane to smash into a building, when every blue sky is menacing, when you pass the same poster of an explosion every day and finally realize it's a painting of chrysanthemums?

My 9/11 was wasteful, unheroic, and self-destructive. I ended a nine-year relationship the evening of September 10 and, hours later, awoke to the towers burning, my private drama

John Rockwell on *Hold On to Your Dreams: Arthur Russell and the Downtown Music Scene, 1973-1992* by Tim Lawrence

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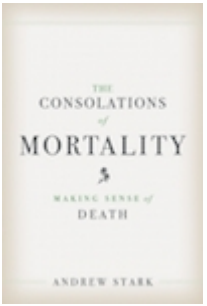
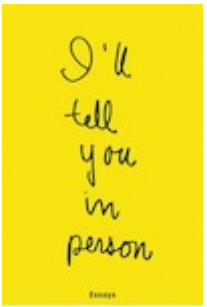
uncannily echoing a far bigger calamity in the physical and political world. After leaving the apartment that morning just before the buildings collapsed, I packed up and moved, and would again, seven more times in two years. While I was living out of plastic bags, my work—the study of fiction—seemed meaningless. Yet I was lucky that day. I have a friend whose daughter died in the World Trade Center. Her 9/11 and mine hardly communicate. My experience was caught up in what were, by comparison, banal details about housing, safety, and relationships, FEMA and anthrax dreams. Most of us did not suffer tangible losses. We get along, we function, we are grateful for our lives. Some of us are baffled that even though we did not experience "real" damage, the impact of that day persists in ways we cannot yet determine. This is not the first-tier drama we read about in the papers—the stories of people who lost family members and the stories of emergency workers—but it may well be typical of the smaller stories that haven't registered much in journalism or nonfiction. Such stories have their own archivists: fiction writers.

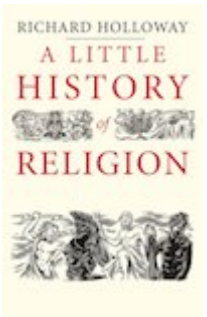
No event in American history has been transformed into so much fiction so rapidly, even as critics debated whether enough time had passed in order to produce significant literature about 9/11, and even as postmodern philosophers mused on whether the event was the revenge of the simulacrum. "[Reality] has absorbed fiction's energy, and has itself become fiction," Jean Baudrillard pontificated while Ground Zero was smoldering. Despite their ostensible precipitousness and irrelevance, fiction writers took up the subject.

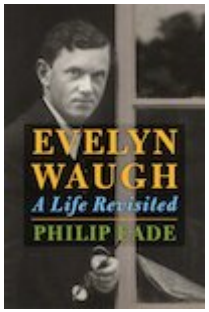
Poetry was the first responder, from former laureate Robert Pinsky's stately "9/11" to Diane di Prima's anticapitalist screed "Notes Toward a Poem of Revolution." Drama and short stories were next. Then the novels, falteringly. The initial wave of 9/11 fiction focused, for the most part, on heroism, loss, and rehabilitation and read like barely disguised memoir. Most of those novels—many of them genre fictions: detective and crime novels—treated the attacks as backdrop and murmuring menace, incorporating 9/11 into existing narrative formulas.

The novel is a flexible and capacious genre. Its ability to reflect, as well as its prerogative to refuse, the vicissitudes of histories is the source of remarkable power. The novels that win a place in the canon—what is sold, what is taught, what is claimed as "ours"contribute to how we remember, learn, or imagine the past. Thus hopes are high whenever an author with a record as a social chronicler takes on 9/11. Nearly every time, though, critics are







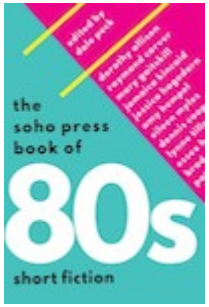


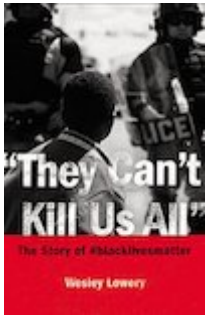
disappointed with the result—too pat, too gratuitous, too direct, too indirect, too sensational. Dispatching yet another effort, they resume the vigil. Like *Waiting for Godot*, it's not clear exactly what we all are waiting for (historical resonance? harrowing immediacy? collective or idiosyncratic insight?), or whether will we know it when we see it.

In her 2006 *New York Review of Books* piece on Jay McInerney's *The Good Life*, a tale of bourgeois, middle-aged Manhattanites after 9/11, Joyce Carol Oates observed that "very few writers of fiction have taken up the challenge and still fewer have dared to venture close to the actual event; September 11 has become a kind of Holocaust subject, hallowed ground to be approached with awe, trepidation, and utmost caution." Suggesting that these conditions made it difficult for writers to fabricate around the day's events, Oates pointed out that beneath the formulaic story of privileged, self-absorbed New Yorkers, McInerney includes images of "voids" and emptiness through which "a counter-novel begins to emerge, a prose poem of sheer unmitigated terror beyond the glib claims of solicitude; intensely felt, thrumming with a fierce, visceral life, mysterious and unpredictable in the way of genuine art." Because there are so many expectations, at least for American writers, to write about 9/11 in particular ways (respectfully and realistically), it's difficult to achieve a true loosening of the imagination.

Before 2005, the most significant pieces of writing were not fiction but rather nonfiction crafted in unusual forms. The *New York Times*'s "Portraits of Grief" obituaries rendered lives through idiosyncratic details ("He was so excited about *Snow White* coming out on DVD"). A government-sponsored document, the 9/11 Commission Report, reads, in parts, like fiction ("We have some planes," it begins, in medias res). Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* is a graphic witness memoir that breaks off into an archival study of its own form. "The Falling Man," Tom Junod's investigative essay for *Esquire*, probes the identity of a man who was photographed tumbling from the towers; in the last paragraphs, Junod abandons his quest and throws the search back onto the reader. All these projects attempted to describe or explain the surreal nature of 9/11 while displaying its known unknowns. With so much invention within nonfiction, what role was left for fiction?

In a much-discussed 2005 *New York Times* interview, V. S. Naipaul argued for the urgency of nonfiction while claiming that the writing of novels was "of no account." In an accompanying essay, Rachel Donadio stated that "it's safe to say no novels have yet engaged





with the post—Sept. 11 era in any meaningful way." Yet it was also in 2005 that the serious 9/11 novels began to appear: serious in that their authors had begun to think through the day's narrative implications and ground them in a texture, tone, or causal chain. Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World*, Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, Lynne Sharon Schwartz's *The Writing on the Wall*, Patrick McGrath's *Ghost Town*, and Michael Cunningham's *Specimen Days*, all published in the US that year, each approach the events differently. One basis of difference, proximity to Ground Zero, can be mapped as a series of concentric circles. Beigbeder's story unfolds, in part, inside the World Trade Center as he imagines the minutes from 8:30 to 10:29. With slightly more narrative distance, Foer and Schwartz explore the psychological impact of the attack as it bears on other personal and historical traumas. Cunningham and McGrath both present triptychs of, as McGrath's subtitle puts it, "Tales of Manhattan Then and Now," from a nineteenth-century cholera epidemic and an episode based on the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire to a science-fiction future. For McEwan, 9/11 is not so much a series of events as it is a narrative condition. The year 2005 marked the emergence of a canon, as a handful of novels have been begrudgingly blessed as the best of a bad bunch. The selection is skewed toward fictions with a liberal, humanistic bias—metafictional and elegant realist texts that treat 9/11 as one event in a broader social landscape.

Kristiaan Versluys's *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* is not the first such academic treatment, but it is the first book that purports to discuss exclusively novels. Versluys, a professor of American literature at Ghent University, in Belgium, focuses on four by now canonical works, all of which directly depict the destruction of the WTC and the psychological aftermath: *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, *Windows on the World*, Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, and Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*. The latter is a curious choice, based on the publishing misnomer "graphic novel," which indicates Versluys is not interested in a precise literary history. Rather, he approaches 9/11 as a disturbance of language; it was, he writes, "ultimately a semiotic event, involving the total breakdown of all meaning-making systems." His opening premise is that "9/11 is unpossessable," "a limit event that shatters the symbolic resources of the culture and defeats the normal processes of meaning making and semiosis." By this he means that the event was so far outside most people's repertoire of experience that it was impossible to assimilate, comprehend, accept, or

narrate coherently. Some readers may be resistant to conceptualizing the attack as an effect of language.

In his defense, Versluys conceives of this literature as intimately connected to concrete social issues—namely, to collective recovery. Novels are significant here insofar as they "affirm and counteract the impact of trauma" by exploring its psychological effects. When Versluys writes of the "unknowability" or "unsayability" of 9/11, he is drawing on the psychoanalytic premise that trauma is an experience that can only be told through hesitant, evasive, fragmented language. So-called trauma theory is a psychoanalytically inflected approach to describing the relationship between style and the psychology of a narrator or characters.

Versluys points out what he characterizes as traumatic language: gaps, avoidance, and failures of comprehension. He shows how the characters in *Extremely Loud*, for example, including a nine-year-old boy, Oskar Schell, whose father died on 9/11, "are faced with an ineffable trauma, an unspeakable truth, which they try to reveal through language." Foer's characters talk (and write, in the case of a character with aphasia) around their suffering. They fixate on apparently irrelevant details. They stutter. They pen letters they cannot send. The book is full of mysterious spaces, blank pages, cryptic pictures, and indecipherable palimpsests of text. "Language is strained to the breaking point," Versluys observes. Foer's prose might be the language of trauma, but it is also the inventive, contrived gamesmanship of postmodernism. Trauma is messy, not precious. This raises questions about Versluys's conflation of clinical and literary analysis. Is the novelist on the couch, or are the characters? Is scripted, fictional prose commensurate with the articulations of a traumatized subject? While this approach allows us to see how authors create shocked and suffering characters, the conclusions are dubious. Trauma theory approaches narrative as psychologically symptomatic, and it values healing and recovery as goals. Versluys reads Foer's controversial flip-book ending, in which Oskar takes a series of images of a falling man and rearranges it to make him float upward, as one of mastery, indicating that the boy "has learned to cope with trauma and his quest has come to some kind of closure." Of course, the ending could easily be read as the opposite, as a delusion that shows how Oskar has failed to come to terms with his father's death.

Likewise, Versluys characterizes DeLillo's prose in *Falling Man*, which depicts the landscape of stunned Manhattan in the wake of the attacks, as "barely functional." Indeed, readers

looking for the snappiness of *White Noise* or *Mao II* will be taken aback by *Falling Man*'s subdued tone. Language is numbed here, clichéd: "These are the days after. Everything now is measured by after," DeLillo writes. Versluys observes that DeLillo "gutted his style sentence by sentence" in an attempt to evoke "the sense of attrition and lassitude that characterizes clinical melancholia." Invoking Freud's theory that melancholia is a persistent clinging to one's loss, a stubborn refusal to move on to the next stage of mourning, Versluys pronounces *Falling Man* "the most gloomy of the 9/11 novels," an "utterly aporetic and deliberately antiredemptive narrative" that "allows for no accommodation or resolution." He concludes that "the danger lurking in DeLillo's portrait of transcendent grieving, which allows for no proper mourning or working through, is that it can serve as a prelude to, or be used as an excuse for, wholesale, reactionary and even totalitarian movements of redress and moral restoration." For Versluys, the stakes of narrative ambivalence, ambiguity, and psychological malingering are high. While admonishing writers who espouse "the simplifications of patriotic rodomontade and revanchist rhetoric," the psychological goal Versluys advocates is just as prescriptive. But the problem is not that *Falling Man* fails as therapy, but that it fails as writing.

Consolidating a canon of 9/11 novels that alleviate trauma with redemption or rehabilitation eliminates many provocative works. Versluys sidesteps fictions that tell different—darker, weirder, more complex—stories. Ken Kalfus's comic novel *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* focuses on a divorcing couple, each thrilled when they think the other has been killed in the towers or on one of the hijacked planes. They are so vitriolic and self-absorbed (Marshall, the husband, pores over newspaper and magazine photographs of downtown Manhattan, wondering why "he had not appeared in a single one") that they hardly remark on their children jumping off the porch holding hands, "playing 9/11." In Jess Walter's satiric novel *The Zero*, 9/11 brings out the glib opportunist in everyone. The son of the protagonist pretends his father has died in order to transcend the "trend" of "generalized grief" that everyone, including people in Wyoming, want in on. A cop is approached by an agent who urges him to sell his story in order to take advantage of "this cycle of opportunity: first inspirational stories, kids and animals, shit like that; then the backdrop stories, he called it the homefront . . . and then the big money—thrillers. . . . After thrillers come anniversaries: five years, ten, and the real money. . . . Nostalgia." Both novels present more

cynical but no less legitimate responses to the cultural assimilation of 9/11 than the stories of "recovery and repair" Versluys prefers.

One wishes for a bit more critical audacity. At another intensely propagandistic moment in another country, George Orwell's acute readings of "good bad books," such as jingoistic boys' weeklies, underscored the value of looking beyond the usual suspects of literary fiction. Versluys dismisses novels of "cheap sensationalism or fetishization" that exploit 9/11 or "suppress the trauma" through patriotism or sentimental closure. But sensationalism and fetishization tell us just as much about how an event is assimilated or disavowed as more aesthetically sophisticated and politically palatable fiction does. As cultural symptoms, Kalfus's and Walter's novels, along with curious subgenres such as Christian 9/11 fiction and "terror sex novels," which imagine conquering terrorism by domesticating or eroticizing it (including Helen Fielding's *Olivia Joules and the Overactive Imagination*, Claire Tristram's *After*, Chris Cleave's *Incendiary*, and Harlequin romances with 9/11 themes), are just as psychologically complex as tales of trauma and recovery.

When DeLillo, in an eloquently impressionistic essay published two months after 9/11 in *Harper's*, "In the Ruins of the Future," demanded "counter-narratives"—"the smaller objects and more marginal stories in the sifted ruins of the day"—"to set against the massive spectacle," he did not mean only therapeutic narratives. The story includes the formulaic 9/11, the unsophisticated 9/11, the insensitive 9/11, the gratuitous 9/11, and the pessimistic and negative 9/11. It also includes allegorical or oblique fictions—Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin*, Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children*, Deborah Eisenberg's *Twilight of the Superheroes*—and fictions that displace New York as the center of the world.

When fiction writers depart from official, politically motivated accounts of history or take representational liberties with it, they typically have the most impact. The devastating trench poetry of World War I and novels such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Death of a Hero* opened the twentieth century; Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, published fifteen years after the fall of Saigon, closed it. All are narratives of cultural and psychological breakdown, miring their readers in an unredeemingly appalling landscape. Thus far, no 9/11 novel has approached the profound historical and psychological insights of these works or the formal innovation (e.g., O'Brien's merging of memoir, history, and fiction) that may very well be what such a book must achieve, given the metafictional moment in which we live: a

moment in which action movies and thriller novels are invoked more often than historical analogies; in which psychologists contended with the phenomenon of trauma by proxy as people who had watched the events on television across the country and around the world complained of PTSD symptoms similar to those people who'd been near Ground Zero; in which a few callous voices described the attacks on the World Trade Center as artistic acts of terrible beauty.

Writers are treating 9/11 in increasingly imaginative ways; however, this is where time does matter. The historical moment is not yet "over," temporally or psychologically. The international consequences of that day continue to unfold, migrate, deepen, and shift. Just this year, *JAMA* published a study showing that the rate of PTSD among people living in lower Manhattan during the events of 9/11 was increasing, not decreasing. The ground is still settling, and with it, our narratives.

Perhaps the most provocative prediction about post-9/11 storytelling is DeLillo's in *Harper's*: "For the next fifty years, people who were not in the area when the attacks occurred will claim to have been there. In time, some of them will believe it. Others will claim to have lost friends or relatives, although they did not. This is also the counter-narrative, a shadow history of false memories and imagined loss." What a premise for a novel: a world in which people have memory envy and pretend they are victims. Or are we already there? We have not yet seen a fake 9/11 memoirist confessing on *Oprah*, but perhaps that day is coming. What this might mean for novelists, who trade in invented histories, and who have begun, ever so slightly, to invent that unreal day, remains to be seen.

By some twist of real estate fate, I now live in another apartment with a view of that gash where the World Trade Center stood, but this time I have a bulwark of twenty-something blocks. This year on September 11, I gazed out the window at the *Tribute in Light* with my son, the clouds drifting by to obscure the beams and then lifting to allow them to pour upward. These ghost towers filled the skyline with sadness but also a gigantic gesture of public art. I tried to explain it in terms a two-year-old could grasp. "Light." "Buildings." "Gone." Images still eclipse language. No novel has matched the formal or affective power of those beams. Through their evocation of absence and presence, this sculpture of ephemeral monumentality manages to wrenchingly represent the past, present, and future, what was lost (people, possibilities, the illusion of security) and what might be. Every year I am awed

and comforted to see them. Every year I wish they would shimmer downtown every month, every night. And every year I am relieved to see them go.

Laura Frost is an associate professor of literary studies at the New School. She is the author of Sex Drives: Fantasies of Fascism in Literary Modernism *(Cornell University Press, 2001) and is at work on a book about modernism's repudiation of pleasure.*

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