

Seeking the great American 9/11 novel

Writers keep trying to find the words to put the tragedy on paper

BY MARION WINIK
Special to Newsday

After the attacks on the World Trade Center, some novelists reported feeling stunned into silence. Even more than other occupations, spinning yarns about imaginary people and predicaments seemed beside the point. Eventually, some returned to their desks to invent stories about the attack itself. If, in 10 years, none of these books has been *The Book* — even the efforts of heavy hitters like Don DeLillo and John Updike were deemed wanting — they do tell a story about how we Americans have come to understand what happened to us that day.

Perhaps because it was written so soon after the event, the first literary fiction to take on 9/11 seems unaware of its global context. The traditional domestic dramas written by Claire Messud, Julia Glass and Jay McInerney all follow a similar pattern: They set up an ensemble of upscale Manhattan characters living their lives and pursuing their intrigues when out of the blue come the planes, changing everything.

In Messud's "The Emperor's Children" and Glass' "The Whole World Over," the attacks come very late in the game, followed by hasty denouements that trace the characters in the succeeding months. In "The Good Life," McInerney unleashes his disaster early so he can focus on love in the ruins, or at least at the soup kitchen serving the ruins.

At the time, these books were groundbreaking: When "the unthinkable" becomes a plot device, it is, if nothing else, thinkable. But the focus on missing-persons posters and blizzards of ashes, with no mention of al-Qaida or Islam, now seems slightly naive. The attack might as well have been a tsunami or a wildfire.

"Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close" focuses even more intently on individual loss. Jonathan Safran Foer's avant-garde novel is narrated by a precocious 9-year-old boy who has lost his father in the towers. It contains photos and other graphics, most notably a flip book that reverses the descent of a man who jumped from the tower.

Two genre novels, a satire by Ken Kalfus and a noir thriller by Jess

Walter, move beyond shock, grief and discombobulation. Kalfus' "A Disorder Peculiar to the Country," essentially about hatred, starts from an evilly hilarious premise. Though their marriage has crumbled, Joyce and Marshall have remained in the same apartment. He works in one of the towers; she is scheduled to travel on United flight 93 on Sept. 11. For at least part of that day, each is jumping for joy, thinking the other dead.

Jess Walter's "The Zero," a National Book Award finalist, focuses on a cop who was one of the first responders and now suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder so severe that he keeps blacking out, then waking up in bizarre situations. A gun is in his hand and he is bleeding — has he attempted suicide? He's speeding away on a boat with a torture victim — to help him or to set him up?

In suggesting that his protagonist's inability to make sense of what is happening is "some kind of cultural illness," Walter gets at the problem facing 9/11 fiction as a whole. What happened to us is neither a natural disaster nor a psychic disorder but part of an ongoing international political crisis.

Three novels from international writers offer a somewhat wider perspective on the situation. Ian McEwan's "Saturday" and Joseph O'Neill's "Netherland," both published to acclaim, take on 9/11 as it is reflected in the warped experiences of their protagonists — a British neurosurgeon and a Dutch-born equities trader.

Mohsin Hamid's Booker-nominated but lesser-known contribution, "The Reluctant Fundamentalist," is a slim allegory with a large ambition — it wants to make you understand something about the experience of Muslims in the Middle East and in the United States. Like Hamid, its narrator is a Pakistani who has lived in the U.S. but is now back in Lahore. He relates his experiences as a scholarship student at Princeton and as a financial analyst in

New York. He is as shocked as everyone else by 9/11 — but shocked also by his reaction to it. The story draws him down a disturbing path from there, and to our surprise, we readers go along with him.

In an article published before "The Good Life" came out, McInerney commented that "when I told [Norman] Mailer that my new novel took place in the autumn of 2001, he shook his head skeptically. 'Wait 10 years,' he said. 'It will take that long for you to make sense of it.'" Now it has been that long. This year we see Amy Waldman's "The Submission," a novel about the building of a Ground Zero memorial that faces up to prejudice, ignorance and jingoism. This is a start, though longtime journalist Waldman does not manage to breathe life into her characters and plot as a great novelist can.

If there is great 9/11 novel to come, it probably will begin before 2001 and end well after. It will have settings outside New York City and characters of several nationalities. They will be terrorists and victims, patriots and fanatics, leaders and minions. Rather than cut the event down to size, it will sound its reaches.

If there is an American author who can write this book, that, in itself, will be a good sign.

Books discussed

EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE, by Jonathan Safran Foer (Mariner, 2005, \$14.95)

SATURDAY, by Ian McEwan (Anchor, 2005, \$15.95)

THE EMPEROR'S CHILDREN, by Claire Messud (Vintage, 2006, \$15)

THE WHOLE WORLD OVER, by Julia Glass (Anchor, 2006, \$15)

THE GOOD LIFE, by Jay McInerney (Vintage, 2006, \$15)

A DISORDER PECULIAR TO THE COUNTRY, Ken Kalfus (HarperPerennial, 2006, \$13.95)

THE ZERO, by Jess Walter (HarperPerennial, 2006, \$14.95)

THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST, by Mohsin Hamid (Harvest, 2007, \$14)

NETHERLAND, by Joseph O'Neill (Vintage, 2008, \$14.95)

THE SUBMISSION, by Amy Waldman (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011, \$26)

Stronger than fiction

The 10th anniversary brings a wealth of new nonfiction titles on 9/11. Some standouts:

UNMEASURED STRENGTH, by Lauren Manning (Henry Holt, \$25). A woman engulfed by a fireball in One World Trade Center — and burned over 80 percent of her body — recounts her remarkable recovery.



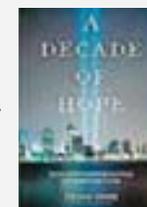
THUNDER DOG, by Nicahel Hingson with Susy Flory (Thomas Nelson, \$22.99). A blind man recalls his escape from the north tower with the help of his guide dog, Roselle.



WHERE YOU LEFT ME, by Jennifer Gardner Trulson (Gallery, \$25). A 9/11 widow's memoir of grief and unexpected new love.



A DECADE OF HOPE, by Dennis Smith with Deirdre Smith (Viking, \$26.95). A former firefighter, and author of "Report From Ground Zero," interviews first responders and their families.



THE ELEVENTH DAY, by Anthony Summers and Robbyn Swan (Ballantine, \$30). A blow-by-blow account of the events on 9/11, written with access to newly released documents and a decade of research and interviews.



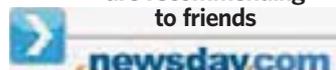
ONE NATION, from the editors of Life (Little, Brown, \$29.99). An updated edition of Life magazine's photographic chronicle of events in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania.



A PLACE OF REMEMBRANCE, by Allison Blais and Lynn Rasic (National Geographic, \$19.95). The official book of the National September 11 Memorial.



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