Retelling 9/11: How Picture Books Re-Envision National Crises

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Retelling 9/11: How Picture Books Re-Envision National Crises

Paula T. Connolly

In 2006, Hollywood marked the fifth-year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks with the first theatrically-released films based on those events, Universal Studios’ *United 93* and Paramount’s *World Trade Center*. Critics initially questioned how the films would retell the events of September 11, 2001, particularly in a format of pseudo-fictionalization, and also how they would show events that had been so keenly imprinted on the American consciousness. Yet when the movies came out, they were met with general critical approval, perhaps because the central narrative thrust of each was on what one critic called “an inspiring vision of can-do American spirit amid adversity” (Lowry). What was not shown in either movie was the moment of violent physical impact in each event. *United 93* did not show the plane crash in Pennsylvania; in *World Trade Center* the planes hitting the towers were not shown directly, but rather visually anticipated when a plane’s shadow momentarily blocks the sun from a New York City street.

The issue of how to aesthetically reconceptualize the September 11 attacks becomes all the more complex when the audience is children and the format that of picture books. Not only the young age of readers but the visuality of the form presents particular problems, after all, the visual images of the planes hitting the Twin Towers and their later collapse have reached iconographic status in the American imagination. Indeed, perhaps because of the ubiquity of those images, children’s picture books published to date that deal with the September 11 attacks have all focused on the New York site. In revisioning visual images of 9/11 one risks opposing charges of inauthenticity (if the images vary from what many saw, either firsthand or through televised reports) or of frightening children (if the images are too realistic). The scale of destruction and loss of life make the event a difficult one to encapsulate in a picture book. Moreover, fully explicating the event...
becomes nearly impossible: the motivation for the attacks was politically complex and the event lacks closure that could neatly fit into a narrative structure for young children. Yet, only indirectly describing those attacks and assuming supplementary extra-textual knowledge is problematic if the books are to serve as more than transitory time-pieces. This is especially the case for children who have no personal memory of the event and for those born after 2001. Picture books that only obliquely refer to the attacks that nonetheless frame or underpin their story may have functioned as a palliative for cultural shock, but may require an adult reader/interpreter to complete their intratextually undefined interpolations. Such texts could thus serve to prompt potentially substantive conversations between children and adults about those events. Yet one danger of avoiding an intratextual description of the 9/11 attacks is of softening its depiction to the point of absence. Whether framing the events through stories of recovery, heroism, individual accomplishment, or community resolve, these books also reveal a range not only of responses but of ideological paradigms about 9/11. An exploration of picture books about the September 11 attacks may thus provide examples of how specific visual/verbal semiotics are used to translate violence to young children as well as opportunities to explore paradigms of childhood, national identity, internationalism, and notions of cultural and political hegemony.

The promise of cultural hegemony underlies Andrea Patel’s *On That Day: A Book of Hope for Children* (2001), one of the first picture books published about 9/11. Receiving mixed reviews—described as “effective . . .” by one critic (Lukehart) and “vacuous” by another (Kidd 140)—*On That Day* has nonetheless become a well-read book in what one could call “the 9/11 canon” of children’s literature, probably more so because it enjoyed strong popular promotion as the primary reviewed book on *Reading Rainbow’s* 9/11 episode. What is noted most by both the book’s supporters and detractors is the simplicity of its text and message. Here, Patel presents a peaceful world that is one day shattered by a terrible event but ultimately repaired through the kind actions of children. While symbol can obviously be used effectively to represent violence to young children, and a text’s oblique reference to specific events a way to enter particularly difficult discussions with children, *On That Day* is an intriguing and problematic text because of the extent to which it diffuses specific discussion about the 9/11 attacks.

Its simple text and tissue paper collage metanarratively reinforce the book’s ideology both in terms of politics and views of childhood. Patel sets the tone in the opening lines: “The world is blue. / The world is green. . . . / The world is very big, and really round, and pretty peaceful.” The syntax
alone replicates an idyllically protected world—repetitiously sing-song and declarative, as ostensibly simplistic as *Dick and Jane* books. Such a perspective not only avoids any specificity of context but its assumption of a “pretty peaceful world” posits a fictionalized hegemony that is inaccurate to the actuality of many children’s lives. This lack of specificity is reiterated in the accompanying collage, itself simplistic and childlike in many ways. Here, for example, one sees two circles—one, yellow/orange, the other smaller and green/white/purple—respectively representing the sun and earth as the only objects in the narrative universe. Unlike the sense of movement and depth that often marks Ezra Jack Keats’ collage technique or Leo Lionni’s use of visual texture and characterization, Patel’s collages often isolate a static, uncomplicated image on the page. While her collages could invite child readers’ understanding of an art form they might easily replicate, set against blank pages where white space is used not to suggest lacuna or develop context but to contain and isolate images, the technique visually reinforces the text’s sense of insularity.

That insularity is compounded in her depiction of the 9/11 attacks themselves, which are alluded to through a general statement of worldwide disaster: “one day a terrible thing happened. The world . . . got badly hurt. Many people were injured. Many other people died. And everyone was sad.” While the enormity of the world being visually shattered may be frightening—one sees this on a page where the world is shown scattered to torn bits of paper—the use of collage makes the image metaphoric and allows the reader some emotional distance and objectivity. The reader is, at the same time, directly addressed as the narrator asks, “Is there anything we can do to make the world right again?” and immediately reassures children of their agency: “You can help by sharing . . . by playing and laughing . . . by taking good care of the Earth . . . [and] by being kind to people.” Patel visually assures the reader’s efficacy in the final image where the shattered world has been illustratively reconstructed, an image of a young child’s smiling face nearly fully comprising the repaired planet.

Patel’s subtitle, “*A Book of Hope for Children,*” is shown as unintentionally ironic here, for while Patel offers hope for children in the assurance of their reparative agency, the narrative’s visual and verbal actual hope evokes a not uncommon historical trope of the “child redeemer” (Keller 87). Following 9/11, child psychologists had recommended that adults give children the opportunity to help others as a way to have children “maintain a sense of control and realize that one person can make a difference” (Sesame Workshop). Yet *On That Day* moves the personal to a vastly political scale (or conversely, the political to a vastly personal scale) at the same time that it ignores political context and positions the
young reader as a symbol of redemptive innocence and an outlandishly powerful Romantic Child who can repair the world and ultimately end terrorism. The central didacticism suggests an essentially uncomplicated redress and resolution to violent events, so that the “hope” of *On That Day* is ultimately an adult fantasy of children’s agency. It is particularly this unflinchingly simple assurance of reparative agency that underlines much of the praise and criticism that "On That Day" has garnered.

Another narrative technique used in picture books to present issues about 9/11 to children is to situate a parallel or countering story of the past as a comment on the present. Such stories can shift attention away from the more-present crisis by placing it within a longer chronological context, lessening the sense of present-day catastrophe for the reader, and developing a sense of nostalgia or even contrasting lightheartedness. Two picture books that move their stories to the past to offer strikingly different comments on the 9/11 attacks are Mary Pope Osborne’s *New York’s Bravest* (2002) and Mordicai Gerstein’s *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers* (2003). In *New York’s Bravest*, Mary Pope Osborne revises a tale she had included in her earlier collection, *American Tall Tales* (1991), and retells the legend of nineteenth-century firefighter Mose Humphreys as an homage to firefighters who responded to the 2001 attacks. Although one might argue that Osborne retreats to the past to soften the reality of the September 11 attacks, in her dedication and introductory note, she explicitly guides one in how to read her story: noting that Mose “represents the courage . . . of firefighters throughout history,” particularly the firefighters who died on 9/11. The introductory peritext thus serves as an initial frame that situates then releases the following narrative, and although the core story never directly mentions the 2001 attacks, it continues through metaphoric parallelism as a comment on (but not a more detailed explication of) 9/11.

Osborne’s choice of a “tall tale” hero allows her to mythologize contemporary firemen through a figure who is, in turn, mythologized intranarratively by others in the story. When Mose cannot be found after a particularly vicious fire, characters offer a flurry of legend-like explanations, unable to believe that he could have died. An old fireman’s response—“Mose is right here. . . . Whenever we save folks, he saves them, too. . . . he’ll never leave us. He’s the very spirit of New York City”—both acknowledges Mose’s death and offers solace, particularly through the promise of memory. The accompanying paintings by Steve Johnson and Lou Fancher reinforce Osborne’s sense of nostalgia and eulogy. Unlike the more postmodern fluidity and movement shown in the changing positionality and interaction of visual and verbal texts in the other picture
books discussed here, in *New York’s Bravest*, the uniform separation of visual and verbal text (with the verbal text consistently contained in a bottom frame, its background a textured light brown, reminiscent of paper browned with age) reinforces a sense of stability and Osborne’s narrative allusion to the past.

Within her story, by focusing on fires in which people are saved, Osborne turns subconscious attention away from the death of many civilians in the subtextually comparative event of the 9/11 attacks. But her focus on Mose, and particularly Johnson and Fancher’s haunting illustration following the fire after which Mose is missing, acknowledge specific loss. Washed in gray, that double-page shows five firemen suddenly inactive, their common focus, a building with only shards of its structure remaining. In such scenes, *New York’s Bravest* functions as a self-sufficient story that expands, through metaphoric parallelism, into issues of the 9/11 attacks. By placing the loss of firefighters in a wide time-context, the story ultimately becomes a comment on the fluidity of time and continuation of life. In acknowledging the death of Mose (and the firefighters of 9/11) Osborne acknowledges that everything cannot be repaired; there will indeed be loss that cannot be fully recovered. But in her assertion that the memory of those who have died remains with us and can strengthen us, she seeks to offer both commendation to rescue workers who died in the September 11 attacks and solace to young readers.

While using a story from the past to echo issues of the present allows a certain separation, even a deflation of anxiety in the objectification and distance of the present-day event, when the story of the past serves as a counterpoint to, rather than a comparative comment on, the present, it may also create contrasting narratives. Such is the case of Mordicai Gerstein’s Caldecott Award-winning *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers*. The loss of the World Trade Towers is alluded to in its opening lines—“Once there were two towers side by side”—and confirmed in the final pages—“Now the towers are gone”—but how the towers disappeared is never directly addressed. Since unlike Osborne’s *New York’s Bravest*, there is no dedication or peritextual explanation of the 9/11 attacks, this book calls for extratextual knowledge or an adult interpreter to fill this narrative space. Within the narrative frame, Gerstein tells of Philippe Petit’s 1974 high-wire crossing between the towers, focusing on his adventure as he evades authorities, sneaks into the buildings one night with friends, casts a cable between them, and in the morning, feeling “alone and happy and absolutely free,” walks between the towers, “a quarter of a mile up in the sky.”

Like the restoration of an idyll to recast a troublesome present, *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers* posits the 1974 tightrope walk as
counterpoint to the 2001 terrorist attacks, reclaims the emptiness of the lost buildings with the creative act of one man, counters the shock of the attacks with the surprise of this earlier event, opposes destruction with creativity. The book’s penultimate pages evoke the import of present-day loss. There, the simple declarative, “Now the towers are gone,” stands obituary-like against a white background, while the accompanying illustration shows clouds rising like plumes of smoke above a diminished cityscape. The final page attempts to resolve such loss, showing two translucent and massively scaled towers superimposed against the clouds; at their apex, a tiny figure walks on a tightrope between them. The text reads: “But in memory, as if imprinted on the sky, the towers are still there. And part of that memory is the joyful morning, August 7, 1974, when Philippe Petit walked between them in the air.” The specificity of dates is obviously significant; as Gerstein emphasizes the importance of “memory,” he implicitly replaces—or at least adds to—the now iconically defined “September 11, 2001” with “August 7, 1974,” as a way to deepen one’s sense of the World Trade Towers, so that the attacks of September 11 do not become the only signifying feature of the buildings.

Although The Man Who Walked Between the Towers can serve as an “homage” (Rev. Kirkus) to the buildings and the book has “drawn notice for its low-key treatment of the later fate of the towers” (Mehegan), some of its images seem to dissonantly reflect the 9/11 attacks. One sees this, for example, in two foldout pages that accentuate Petit’s walk by doubling the visuality of the crossing. The book, already a large one at 8 ½ by 11 ¼ inches, opens to a width of nearly 24 inches on these pages. The two foldouts show opposing perspectives: the first, an aerial view above Petit as he walks the high wire; the second, from the vantage point of surprised and concerned passersby at street level. As one critic noted, Gerstein’s “inventive foldout . . . offers dizzying views of the city below” (Rev. Publishers Weekly); Gerstein has himself stated that he “wanted this book to cause real vertigo, to put the reader . . . on the wire” (Gerstein, “Caldcott” 408). The visual effect is dramatic. The vertical lines, particularly in these extension pages, are mesmerizing, yet the obvious anxiety of an eyewitness character and the visuality of the foldout pages that exacerbate Petit’s vertical aeriality offer an uncomfortable evocation of 9/11. Using a story of someone tightrope-walking between the towers as a countering memory of the day when people fell or jumped from those buildings allows an extratextual visual interference that embeds the illustration with problematic subtextual narratives and thus severs any neat integration of the core story and 9/11 frame.

Authors and illustrators of children’s picture books that deal with the September 11 attacks in a contemporary and realistic setting must also
navigate a difficult landscape, most especially so because visual images of the planes hitting the Twin Towers, the subsequent explosions, and the ultimate collapse of the buildings received such repeated televised coverage. Yet two picture books—Maira Kalman’s *Fireboat: The Heroic Adventures of the John J. Harvey* (2002) and Jeanette Winter’s *September Roses* (2004)—directly depict those explosions. In each case, the narrative perspective is placed not in victims, but in those who could do something to help or offer some solace on 9/11. That their main characters are not directly injured by the attacks allows child readers a measure of separation from the depicted violence and since the stories are ultimately about the possibilities of positive input and restoration, the authors are able to balance that optimistic ending with direct visual and verbal descriptions of the attacks. In each case, their visual directness is evident as they show the devastation of the explosions running off a double-page spread, as if the text cannot fully contain or describe the impact. Each author then retains the import of loss while simultaneously redirecting the reader’s attention by focusing on how the protagonists and other characters respond. That these characters help in a range of ways not only reinforces a sense of varied community and experiences, but also alleviates any expectation that these protagonists (and by extension the child reader) can fully repair the world or prevent future terrorism.

In *Fireboat: The Heroic Adventures of the John J. Harvey*, Maira Kalman opens the focus of the 2001 attacks by opening the time and cultural frames of her story. Evoking the richness, diversity, and vibrance of New York City life, she begins *Fireboat* in 1931, describing how in that year, “The Empire State Building went up up up,” Babe Ruth made his 611th home run, the George Washington Bridge was completed, and—last in the series—the John J. Harvey fireboat was launched. New York’s visual cityscape in those early years and proceeding through the Harvey’s prime is shown without the World Trade Towers, which are first mentioned more than a third of the way through the text. This allows the narrative focus to remain on the Harvey, and the towers to be narratively rescaled as only one part of many stories of New York. Their introduction as part of a “changing” New York also foretells the Harvey’s initial obsolescence, and readers learn that by 1995, the fireboat is “considered old and useless... waiting to be sold for scrap.”

Later refitted by a group of New Yorkers, the Harvey becomes an image of community and rebirth. Yet in its recovery, it is still seen as obsolete, unable to compete with “real” fireboats: “Everyone said . . . she could NEVER be used to fight a fire. NEVER.” Such diminution and prescribed powerlessness, of course, plays upon reader sympathy and—in the case
of small children—empathy and identification. After situating the Harvey as an underdog for whom the reader is already rooting, there is a sudden shift in the narrative. The colorful illustrations of Fireboat, as well as the interplay of verbal and visual narratives, come to a sudden halt on an obituary-like grey-black page that announces: “But then on September 11, 2001 / something so huge and horrible / happened that the whole world / shook. / It was 8:45 in the morning, / another beautiful and sunny day.” Although momentarily reiterating the essentialism of Patel’s view in describing how “the whole world shook,” Kalman’s specificity of time—even noting 8:45 a.m.—is followed by a two-page spread that seems simple, but is visually and verbally packed to show the imminent crash.

Visually, this double page stands apart from the rest of the book (see fig. 1). The left page and one-third of its facing page are a vibrant deep blue, with two black planes facing the towers, which stand to the far right. The open space of the sky contrasts the often crowded images on other pages; the blue here is largely untextured in comparison to the use of blue elsewhere, and while the color is vibrant, its uniform and flat tonal quality provides little visual relief to the reader. The changes—in space, texture, color, and ratio of object to background—are visually shocking. That intensity is compounded by the image of the planes—black and sharklike—which are almost as long as the buildings are wide, reinforcing their sense of threat. While showing one plane on each of the facing pages could imply the time between the strikes—the gutter serving as an acknowledgment of the intervening quarter hour—Kalman’s choice to show both planes simultaneously and closely placed on the double page visually intensifies one’s anticipatory anxiety. Although tall, the thinness of the two towers as well as their isolation on the page emphasizes their vulnerability; one sees no other landscape, no other buildings, as if any other context has been lost and the towers are separate from all else in New York. Moreover, the directionality of left-to-right eye reading movement that is typical in Western culture implicitly moves the planes to their inescapable impact in the towers.

In the bottom left corner of the left-hand page, Kalman narrates, using a white typeface that replicates the color of the white towers against the sky:

Two airplanes
  crashed into the Twin Towers.
CRASHED, CRASHED, CRASHED into these two strong buildings.

The repetition of “crashed” as well as the use of capital letters suggests a verbal crescendo and reinforces the impact of the planes on the build-
ings. That “CRASHED” is fully capitalized three times while the “these two strong buildings,” which follows it is not, suggests the power of the impact and implicitly diminishes the strength of the buildings. The staggered placement of the lines, with each successive line ending further to the right, leaving empty space to the right of the lines directly above, visually suggests movement, here the dropping of the planes into the Twin Towers and the ultimate collapse of the buildings themselves. Kalman’s technique of verbally describing the impact in the past tense while visually showing the scene immediately preceding it, can exacerbate the reader’s anxiety as he or she follows the directive of the verbal text to complete the seemingly frozen action of the visual text. What Kalman does here is not only to depict the coming impact in concrete terms, but also to encourage an intriguing subconscious interaction on the part of the reader. This seemingly visually frozen and almost iconographic image thus becomes embedded with movement as the visual and verbal cues lead the reader to add inevitable movement to complete the page’s story.

Following a close-up of the impact on one of the towers where frenzied lines show the explosion visually consuming the page, Kalman redirects the narrative to its earlier focus on the Harvey, which is called into action to help put out fires alongside larger boats. In The Engine That Could tradition, the small and insignificant shows its power through resolve and dedication. The Harvey joins the rescue efforts until the fires are quelled and “The Harvey was a hero.” Although the Harvey can symbolically represent a young child because it is small and considered powerless,
in the context of the attacks, it serves as a much larger symbol. Kalman tells readers:

Now the Twin Towers are gone.
Something new will be built.
The heroes who died will be remembered forever.
The Harvey is back to being a very happy boat.
NOT scrapped.
NOT useless.
NOT forgotten.

The symbolic implication, of course, is that New York City stands in the same regard as the Harvey, incapable, despite assaults, of being scrapped or useless.

Here and elsewhere, Kalman also uses narrative bookending, as she places a positive description immediately following or on either side of a negative one. This technique allows her to tell young readers of serious events because she can encase them within other, more hopeful scenarios. The story of Harvey, for example, both bookends her depiction of the attack and is metaphorically aligned with that story as it provides a moral lesson about individuals aiding the larger community, offers reassurance on the importance of the ostensibly insignificant against seemingly insurmountable odds, and focuses on the rejuvenation of New York. But it is the story of New York that outermost bookends Fireboat. Kalman’s opening, describing the Empire State Building and George Washington Bridge, provides an unconscious stability to her depiction of New York. Although by the close of the book, readers know that the towers are destroyed, the other two structures remain standing, undamaged, and thus a visual promise of New York’s resilience.

Unlike On That Day, which describes how on September 11 “it felt like the world broke,” and Fireboat, which describes how “the whole world shook,” in September Roses Jeanette Winter keeps her depiction of the September 11 attacks more narrowly defined—avoiding statements that project the New York attacks onto the world at large—and more fluidly open—with her choice of protagonists, background characters, and by beginning her story outside New York. As acknowledged in a peritextual introduction and narrative frame, Winter here tells the story she had heard of two sisters from South Africa who grew roses and had arrived in New York City on September 11, 2001 for a flower show. The event cancelled and hotels fully booked, the sisters were given shelter, and in turn brought their roses to Union Square where they lay them down in the pattern of the two fallen buildings. As one reviewer described it, “Winter presents as a memorial the story of a memorial created at the time” (Bulletin 45).
The book is a small one at 5 ¾ x 7 inches, its size suggesting a book for small hands. Throughout, the font is cursive, and that coupled with the author’s self-revelation in the narrative frame where she relays her own experiences in New York City during the attacks, lend the impression that this story is one written by hand, like a diary or a letter to a friend. The paper, too, is roughly textured and flat and is the only one of the books discussed here not on glossy paper; as Perry Nodelman has argued, such roughly textured paper can increase a reader’s sense of “involvement and intimacy” with the book as if the texture “invite[s] our touch” (48). This is a small book, too, in its foregrounding of the modest story of these two sisters.

In *September Roses*, it is the background scene and embedded text that more directly provide details of the 9/11 attacks. One sees this, for example, in the double-page illustration of the impending attack. While Kalman narrows focus to emphasize tension in this scene, Winter opens her illustration to encompass both South Africa and New York City, and seems to visually minimize the impending threat. The sisters’ plane is large and centrally placed on the left-hand page. The pale green tones of its exterior and vibrant red interior seen through its several widows—where one can also see an array of passengers, including the two sisters—mark the plane as an image of life. In contrast, tightly held in the bottom right-hand corner of the facing illustration one sees a minimized and largely colorless New York City, with two planes heading toward the towers. The two planes are tiny (each no more than a quarter of an inch in length) and a visually unremarkable grey. A quick reading would even have one missing their subscript-like image. In *Fireboat*, the planes are moving to the right, following a left-to-right reading pattern; here, Winter has the two planes moving to the left, hence disrupting left-to-right eye movement and tightening our gaze since the movement is *into* and not outside the picture. The effect visually compresses an already compressed image. That compression is released in the following two-page spread, as the buildings illustratively explode, striations of gray covering the page, yet simultaneously maintained as the following ten pages turn to a ubiquitous black and white, signaling that the ensuing world has lost the vibrancy that had otherwise signaled hope and life.

As the sisters stand in the airport, one sees many figures in various stages of distress—crying, holding each other, watching television screens, standing motionless and stunned. Filling the small double-page with so many individuals, many with different reactions, lends to a sense of disorder. Adding to that, images of a bank of six airport screens—each filled with “cancelled” notices—and three television screens—each showing the explosion Winter had depicted on the previous page—do not allow
the reader’s eye to rest and compound the sense of visual chaos. Further, that these television screens each replicate the same scene of explosion reinforces a feeling of visual assault by tightening the already close-feeling black-and-white page.

In this airport scene, particularly in these information and television screens, Winter’s use of framing—a technique illustrators often use to create a sense of visual order and stability—does just the opposite. While the news is ubiquitous, shown here and in following pages by the number of television screens, its chaotic rapidity is visually dramatized in the way the screens are literally shown off-balance. Incomplete information on subscript scrollbars evokes a sense of fragmentation and requires the reader to more actively enter the text to complete the verbal lacunae. On this first page of the airport scene, for example, the scrollbars on the television screens announce: “SEPT. 11, 2001 - - T,” “ERRORIST ATTACK - - NEW YO,” “ACKED PLANES - - THOUSANDS DIE.” Reading the screens all together, and left to right, one can piece together the events, even more specifically than in the other picture books discussed here. When a minister arrives to offer the sisters shelter, he stands before a television screen that shows the towers splitting v-shaped and surrounded by flames, the scrollbar reporting “FIREFIGHTERS SEARCH.” Such an illustration offers a dual narrative to the child reader: a larger context of real tragedy and trauma as well as a narrowed, less threatening context of these two sisters who were, after all, only inconvenienced and not seriously hurt in the attacks of 9/11.

This mediation of contexts continues as the sisters visit Union Square where they leave their roses as a memorial. There, the placed pattern of flowers literally reframes the scene, for “When the sisters stepped back, there lay the fallen towers.” Here, not only the return of color, but also the re-establishment of frames, counters earlier depictions of instability. People who have gathered at the square surround the memorial on three sides, and here, too, Winter calls upon the reader’s interaction: the bottom frame—where the reader holding the book is extra-textually present—is left open, thus visually providing an incomplete frame that the reader’s physical presence completes. Yet here and elsewhere, Winter does not offer a facile sense of closure or recovery. The framing devices of the rose memorial and the surrounding three-sided border of people are nonetheless ephemeral. The roses will eventually die. The people will eventually walk away from the Square. And the park is, after all, also lined with pictures of missing people.

What these two books, *Fireboat* and *September Roses*, seem to do most effectively for children is to remove direct didactic lessoning (which one finds in *On That Day*) and to confront and contextualize the attacks of
9/11 (unlike *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers*). They present the attacks visually and realistically, but move that assault outside an insulated narrative position to include wider contexts of people, geography, and time. They also deal with the attacks by focusing on specific and real stories, showing the agency of adults as models for children, including them but not depending upon them to fix the ills of the world or to change the possibility of terrorism. These books show people confronted with, responding to, and ultimately processing through violence, despondency, and shock, into an acknowledgment of personal and communal contributions and the possibility of recovery.

Such a narrative trajectory may be particularly significant in picture books about 9/11 as the passage of time brings a readership consisting of a wider audience of children who may know little, if anything, about the events of September 11, 2001. Indeed, some extratextual knowledge, in varying degrees, may be necessary to clarify the specific context of all of the books discussed here. Even in the case of Kalman’s *Fireboat*, where the planes and explosions are directly shown, questions about who flew the planes and what their motivation for the attacks may have been are sure to arise with younger—as well as with older—readers. Centrally, these books show us ways in which images of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Towers have been reconstructed for children, but they also offer important opportunities to explore the intersections of visual/verbal semiotics and depictions of violence in children’s picture books. One sees this, for example, in the array of narrative forms—including the generalized symbolic representation in *On that Day*, the contrasting uses of history in the metaphoric parallelism of *New York’s Bravest* and the narrative counterpointing in *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers*, as well as the contemporary accounts that use other foregrounded stories, whether minimally anthropomorphic as in *Fireboat*, or realistic as in *September Roses*—that comment on 9/11. Such uses of story, as well as specific techniques like narrative bookending and visual framing, reveal ways in which reader anxiety can be both engaged and contained. Negotiating the oppositions of fear and hope, violence and recovery, victimhood and agency, these texts also reveal ways in which images of destruction and conflict can be confronted, displaced, or reshaped for young children.

*Paula T. Connolly is associate professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, where she teaches courses in children’s literature and film. She has published on issues of race in children’s literature, including visual representations of slavery in children’s picture books.*
Notes

1 In addition to non-fiction texts on 9/11, books by children themselves, including children’s art books (see, for example, Goodman and Fahnestock; Harwayne), also focus on visual images, as does Jacobson and Colón’s graphic novel for older readers. (An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Conference on Modern Critical Approaches to Children’s Literature in Nashville, TN, March 2007. I am also grateful to Elizabeth Gargano, Tony Jackson, Jennifer Munroe, as well as to the journal’s reader for their comments on this essay.)

2 Reading Rainbow’s 9/11 episode, which originally aired on September 2, 2002, featured The Tin Forest by Helen Ward, and showed host LeVar Burton visiting students at New York City’s P.S. 234 to discuss the events of 9/11. I am grateful to Erin Craig for alerting me to this Reading Rainbow episode.

3 Patel’s initial inclusion of all ages—“Whether you’re three years old, or thirteen . . . or thirty . . . or one-hundred-and-three years old, you can help”—is not particularly convincing; her reassurance of agency is largely dependent upon didactically reinforcing traditional values for children and the planet is illustratively recreated with a child’s face.

4 For other narrative strategies used to present difficult topics to children in picture book format, see Connolly.

Works Cited


