

Deal with It, Sort of: The Picture-Book Treatment of September 11

Katie Sciorba

AS THE IMAGES OF THE TWIN TOWERS—STRICKEN BY TWO HIJACKED planes, billowing with smoke, and falling from the New York City skyline—dissipated from media coverage, adults in the United States were left to grapple with their own heightened emotions and, simultaneously, help children “cope with the tragedy.” While many young people were, indeed, directly and deeply affected by the events of September 11, 2001, the majority of American children—like the majority of American adults—had borne second-hand witness to the incidents via television. Yet, the pervasive assumption among adults was that, in order to deal with September 11, *all* children required special consideration. A plethora of Web sites and articles sprang up, offering suggestions to parents and teachers for helping children handle the “trauma” they had recently experienced.¹ News channels provided toll-free numbers for organizations offering free counseling services.² And within three years, a sampling of picture books intended to “explain” or memorialize September 11 were published.

Although September 11 was likened to Pearl Harbor, in that both attacks occurred on U.S. soil and spurred the immediate call for retaliation against an outside “enemy,” the events of September 11 called for a more emotionally sensitive treatment of children—perhaps due in part to the repetitious airing of scenes from the World Trade Center on a medium that was unavailable in 1941. Maira Kalman’s *Fireboat: The Heroic Adventures of the John J. Harvey* (2002)³ and Jeanette Winter’s *September Roses* (2004)⁴ are two picture books for young readers published in response to the events of September 11. Each of these titles has sold steadily since its release, maintaining an Amazon sales rank well above other children’s book titles.⁵ In February of 2008—six and a half years after September 11—*Fireboat* was ranked number 51 on a list of children’s non-fiction titles pertaining to “violence.” The customer comments that

appear on Amazon are predominantly positive, reflecting the extent to which many consumers have embraced the books' treatment of September 11. In addition, both *Fireboat* and *September Roses* frequently appear on face-out book displays at popular bookstores,⁶ and the majority of the reviews for these titles are celebratory, focusing on the books' abilities to do such things as help "even small children" begin "to grasp what happened."⁷ Reviews like these suggest that "small children" did *not* understand what occurred on September 11 and that these picture books would somehow, sensitively, offer them valuable insight. They also imply that children *needed* to "grasp" a particular interpretation of September 11. Additionally, the critics seem to have forgotten that the media—both on television and in print—did not distinguish between adult and child audiences, as far as revealing graphic footage and detailed accounts around the incidents of September 11. Children in New York City, for example, were privy to the image of a man jumping headfirst from one of the Towers—displayed prominently at most corner kiosks.⁸ By the time *Fireboat* and *September Roses* were released, children had already seen as much as—if not more than—most adults had. The question that remained to be answered was *how* these picture books might help children deal with September 11; what message, *exactly*, were these texts encouraging them to "grasp"? Further, why did the attack on the World Trade Center demand a response to the psychic needs of children who were *not* directly affected by its occurrence? The answers to such questions suggest the propagation of an ideological agenda rather than concern for the young in our society.

In his essay "Written in Red, White, and Blue: A Comparison of Comic Book Propaganda from World War II and September 11," Cord Scott argues that comics published after Pearl Harbor and September 11 provided American audiences with "upbeat and patriotic" themes designed to boost morale, following threats to their "way of life."⁹ Heroes—whether "super" or everyday—maintain a strong sense of national loyalty in these comics, throughout their quests to save the United States from the "enemy." In this manner, propagandized comic books—aimed at children—also served to gain support for imminent war efforts. Red, white, and blue colors saturate the pages of these post-Pearl Harbor and post-September 11 comics, further contributing to their patriotic spin. The post-September 11 picture books, *Fireboat* and *September Roses*, exhibit similar signs of propaganda. Whether by claiming that the entire "world" had changed after September 11, projecting patriotic images through the illustrations, or creating heroic deflection from

the events, these texts echo the post-September 11 rhetoric of George W. Bush and other elite decision makers. By transfixing heroism-amidst-tragedy or happily-ever-after motifs onto these texts, the authors and illustrators encourage children to adopt a nationalistic ideology in relation to September 11 rather than help them “[confront] the true dimensions of what occurred” (Žižek 5).¹⁰ This, most likely, is attributable to the emotions that *adults* developed after seeing and hearing media accounts of such a wide scale American loss, instead of in direct response to the emotional needs of children.

THE *WHOLE WORLD* SHOOK: DEPICTIONS OF SEPTEMBER 11

At 8:30 p.m. on the evening of September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush stood before a television camera and stated, “Today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts. . . . America was targeted for attack because we’re the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining.”¹¹ During this five-minute “Address to the Nation,” Bush offered an interpretation of September 11 that exonerated the United States from all blame in relation to what transpired. The country had simply been attacked for its “freedom”—a freedom that Americans, as well as the rest of the world, allegedly regarded as superior. This interpretation was reflective of media coverage that, earlier in the day, had run headlines such as “America Under Attack” that encouraged viewers to regard the United States as an innocent victim.¹² In actuality, the cause of the attacks was much more complex than these presentations suggested. But as David A. Altheide points out in his article “Consuming Terrorism,” anyone who suggested that “the United States had angered many political groups by previous actions (e.g., support for Israel) was denounced.”¹³ Thus, the with-us-or-against-us movement toward post-September 11 “Americanism” and its unitary definition of patriotism had begun.¹⁴

Under the pretense of national victimhood, the term “terrorism” was converted from a “strategy or event” to characterizing a “condition of the world” after September 11.¹⁵ September 11, 2001, began to be regarded as “the day the world changed” and thought of as a historical turning point.¹⁶ However, as Slavoj Žižek writes in “Welcome to the Desert of the Real!” the “[relative] prosperity and peace of the ‘civilized’ West was bought by the export of ruthless

violence and destruction into the ‘barbarian’ Outside.’¹⁷ He adds that the loss suffered on September 11, 2001, is far less severe than what takes place in other parts of the world—often on a daily basis. In other words, the “world” did not change on September 11; what changed was simply Americans’ notion of *their position* in that world. Yet, the post-September 11 children’s picture books support the idea that September 11 was a day of universal, worldwide, mourning.

The first twenty-three pages of Maira Kalman’s *Fireboat* recount moments from New York City history, such as the 1931 construction of the Empire State Building, and tell the story of the *John J. Harvey*—a fireboat that had grown “old and useless” over the years but is put back “on the water” by a “group of friends” who believe that “everyone needs a fireboat.” GraceAnne Decandido’s *Booklist* review for this title praises its gouache paintings by saying, “Wonderful, sweeping images of New York icons bring the city to life.”¹⁸ Indeed, the bright blue, green, red, and yellow hues in the illustrations of Babe Ruth, the Snickers bar, a jazz club, and the *Harvey* create a cheery textual atmosphere—up until the twenty-fourth page of the book.¹⁹ This page, void of illustrations and marked by a black backdrop, begins, “But then on September 11, 2001 something so huge and horrible happened that the whole world *shook*” (emphasis in original). The darkness of this page—contrasted with the brightness of the rest of the book—momentarily disrupts the flow of the story. Metaphorically, this can be interpreted as the way in which life as most Americans knew it came to a halt on September 11 and ceased to return to normalcy thereafter. This sentiment can be likened to what Žižek describes as the “phrase which reverberate[d] everywhere, ‘Nothing will be the same after September 11.’” He problematizes this “empty gesture” of a statement by questioning whether the “only thing that effectively changed was that America was forced to realize the kind of world it was part of.”²⁰ (Kalman’s description of the September 11 events as world-shaking reflects a national egocentrism orchestrated from the top, suggesting the superior worth of American lives over those lost in other regions of the world. Because this country functions as a “beacon of freedom and opportunity,” the whole world is *expected* to mourn when the United States mourns—even when the United States does not always mourn for them.

The black backdrop on this page of *Fireboat* marks the transition to a more somber tone in the book. Upon turning to the next double-page illustration, readers encounter two black airplane silhou-

ettes flying toward the white Twin Towers. This black-white contrast presents the reader with the same type of opposition related by the media—"evildoers" against the innocent good guy. The text in the lower left corner of this spread reads, "Two airplanes crashed into the Twin Towers. **CRASHED, CRASHED, CRASHED** into these two strong buildings." The proceeding two-page spread comprises a painting of the smoke-and-fire ridden Twin Towers. The description of the incident reads as follows:

The sky filled with fire and smoke.
The buildings exploded and
fell down to the ground.
Many people were hurt.

Many lives were lost.

This is the last mention of the September 11 attacks. Yet, the DeCandido review of *Fireboat* claims that Kalman "[frames] the enormity of September 11 so that young readers, even small children, can begin to grasp what happened."²¹ The actual telling of what took place on September 11 is limited to five simply written pages within this thirty-two-page picture book. The text glosses over the "enormity of September 11," omitting all details about *why* the planes "**CRASHED, CRASHED, CRASHED**" into the Towers, *who* was flying them, and *what* might have motivated them to do so. By excluding any mention of the group responsible for the events of September 11, *Fireboat* effectively dehumanizes the "enemy," which makes the United States all the more sympathetic a character. Kalman's visual depiction—which inaccurately shows *both* planes flying into the Towers simultaneously—is a replica of the postimpact Twin Tower image that had aired repeatedly on television and been printed repeatedly in newspapers and magazines. This artistic rendering does little more than regurgitate the images already impressed upon readers' memories. So what value does this depiction have—especially considering that children are its intended audience? If adults are encouraged to use this book as a means of explaining "what happened" on September 11, they are essentially being encouraged to skim over the topic or reiterate the same media-driven account, each of which denies thinking seriously about the complexity of world events—and the hypocrisy of the U.S. presence in them—that inevitably contributed to the catastrophic events that transpired that day.

Like Kalman's *Fireboat*, Jeanette Winter's *September Roses* is a fic-

tionalized account of an actual episode that occurred on September 11. However, Winter's account is more realistic in that its protagonists are actual people—not an anthropomorphized fireboat. In *September Roses*, two sisters who have brought thousands of flowers from Africa end up donating them to a World Trade Center memorial set up at Union Square.²² The flap copy for this book reads, "September 11, 2001. It was a day that touched hearts and lives all across America and around the world." This theme is manifest in the two women *from Africa* who are so moved by the loss of the Twin Towers that they contribute their roses to an American memorial. Similarly, the layout following the depiction of the attacks reads, "There were tears enough to fill an ocean," and it shows seven people with various shades of skin, hairstyles, and head coverings with their hands over their eyes. The story of the African sisters, as well as illustrations like these, emphasize a global reaction to September 11 which, as is the case in *Fireboat*, insinuate that the "whole world *shook*" with compassion for the United States. Again, this is directly tied to Altheide's analysis of media coverage; it "emphasized commonality of the victims rather than the cause or rationale for the attacks."²³ By implying that the people who died on September 11 could have been anybody—or the loved ones of anybody, the media made it difficult to imagine that someone might *not* sympathize with the United States, let alone see the symbolic value of the Twin Towers in relation to the economic power of this country, and while it was certainly honorable to mourn the lives of those who were lost, the media did so at the cost of circumventing larger global issues.

Like *Fireboat*, *September Roses* was positively reviewed for being "instructive for older students, yet easy to grasp for much younger children."²⁴ Its depiction of the attack on the World Trade Center, though nearly hidden in the right corner of a busily illustrated page, starts with the same inaccurate shot of two planes simultaneously flying into the Towers. The text on this page reads, "High in the air the two sisters sat dreaming of their roses." Their plane is the predominant image on the spread, perhaps because the story begins with them coming to New York City in order to display their roses at a flower show. The reader turns the page to find a huge cloud of smoke billowing over several buildings with the caption, "Then the sky turned black." The color drains from the images on the next page and does not return until the end of the story, with lights from candles at the Union Square memorial.

The black-and-white illustrations, like the black backdrop in *Fireboat*, establish a solemn mood through which the events of Sep-

tember 11 are presented. The first illustration following the black cloud is set in the airport. Several people, including the African sisters, are viewing the World Trade Center attack via television monitors—just as the majority of the people in the United States had. The snippets of text displayed across several screens say, “SEPT. 11, 2001—T / ERRORIST ATTACK—NEW YO / ACKED PLANES—THOUSANDS DIE.” These televisions appear again throughout the next few pages, reading, “TOWERS FALL . . . FIRE / FIRES BURN . . . MAYOR / FIREFIGHTERS SEARCH.” Although they are fragmented, these statements, as well as their accompanying visuals, are successful in their attempt to capture media representation of the events. Readers who caught television reports during this time period would understand that “ACKED PLANES” stands for “hijacked planes,” and “MAYOR” stands for Mayor Rudy Giuliani, who was one of the major political voices of September 11 news. By separating these words from the main text, omitting large chunks of the information presented, and splitting the word “terrorist” into two television sections, Winter requires the reader to fill in his or her own blanks—which most likely stem from his or her recollections of similar real-life broadcasts.

Winter’s depiction of people—*adults*—reacting to the television images portrays the immediate impact of September 11 media on its viewers. Only three children are shown in this scene—one sleeping in a veiled woman’s arms, a second staring at the flight information monitors, and another alone and looking lost. The absence of children responding to September 11 news in this spread suggests that the immediate emotional impact of it was more intense for adults. While arguable, this very well may have been the case. Children who were not directly affected by tragedy might have dismissed the events of September 11 had it not been for adult and media reactions to what transpired, especially given their familiarity with such disaster films as *Independence Day*,²⁵ in which buildings are routinely decimated. Even children who *were* in close proximity to the events mention the impact that adults’ reactions had on them. As one young student from New York City explains in *What Will You Do For Peace? Impact of 9/11 on New York City Youth*, “I will never forget my mom’s face. It will live like thorns in my heart.”²⁶ It is possible that many adults simply transferred *their* need to deal with the events of September 11 onto children in the creation of these picture books. These books also uphold the assumption that children needed some sort of protection from the truth that adults were already aware of. As Peter Hunt writes: “Specialists in children’s literature often view childhood as this

sort of 'other.' Our common clichés about the ways in which children are close to nature or to God, about how their ignorance is really a saving innocence, disguise a profound distrust for the realities of life as we must view it as adults—and perhaps most significantly, a nostalgia for that which never was."²⁷ Altheide and Žižek both allude to the fact that the media played upon *adult* fears following the threat to their once-taken-for-granted national security.²⁸ After revealing this fear to children and causing a deeper emotional reaction than might have occurred naturally, adults seemed to want to return them to their "innocence." Children's picture books entered the scene to provide some semblance of comfort and hope—just what the media was offering to adults.

"THESE COLORS DON'T RUN": POST-SEPTEMBER 11 PATRIOTISM

Once Charles Schumer, the "Brooklynite and senator" declared that everyone in the United States should wave a flag to demonstrate their support for the country following the September 11 attacks, stars and stripes sprouted up in front of houses, on lapels, as well as in vendors' stands throughout downtown Manhattan—starting just blocks from Ground Zero.²⁹ *Village Voice* columnist Chisun Lee wrote that "terrorism has asked us to be Americans" and states that this might have been dismissed as "hee-haw" by New Yorkers prior to September 11.³⁰ Everyone, regardless of race, gender, class, or political affiliation, was suddenly encouraged to brandish Old Glory in order to prove national solidarity in this time of "crisis." As George W. Bush had stated in his September 11 Address to The Nation, "This is a day when all Americans from every walk of life unite in our resolve for justice and peace."³¹

Slogans like "United We Stand" and "These Colors Don't Run" were written boldly in reds, whites, and blues and placed on bumper stickers, T-shirts, baseball caps, shopping bags, and drycleaner hangers. Altheide suggests that "elites and advertisers promoted cash donations and expenditures as symbolic and commensurate with personal caring and national identity in the context of popular culture."³² Regardless of the intention behind the flags and other patriotic productions, certain companies and individuals profited from these sales, just as certain publishers and writers profited from the publication of September 11-related children's literature—thus, providing support for the arguments in "Consuming Terrorism."

While September 11 picture-book authors, like September 11 comic-book artists, might very well have felt compelled to “reach out and help”³³ after the incidents, their works—perhaps inadvertently—support the politicians’ call for patriotism, which was circulated widely after September 11. This concept is explained by Altheide who argues that “popular culture and mass media depictions of fear, patriotism, consumption, and victimization contributed to the emergence of a national identity and collective action that was fostered by elite decision makers’ propaganda.”³⁴ Post-September 11 propaganda could be as explicit as new company slogans, such as General Motors’ “Keep America Rolling”³⁵ or as implicit as red roses and blue clouds on a white background on the cover of *September Roses*.

In addition to the patriotic palette of its jacket, as well as in the illustration of the two planes flying toward the Towers, Winter’s book contains images of the Statue of Liberty and American flags. Although these symbols might be considered reflective of New York City scenery, their prominence in the book can be interpreted as propaganda. The Statue of Liberty, for example, is exaggerated so that it is nearly half the height of the Twin Towers. It is also the very first site the sisters encounter upon their arrival from Africa. In fact, the only thing separating the “mountains” representing their home and the Statue of Liberty is the ocean. Realistically, the sisters’ airplane would have flown over several other buildings, and they might have had difficulty seeing the American monument from the sky. Thus, the illustration in the book is not exactly representative of the New York City skyline.

Kalman also includes the Statue of Liberty throughout her book, beginning on the cover. Interestingly enough, the only other concrete images on the front of this jacket are the fireboat and the American flag waving from its stern. None of New York City’s buildings are visible, and the white streams of water spouting from The Harvey resemble Fourth of July fireworks. Again, this image does not capture any true view of the city. The Statue of Liberty on the book appears much larger than it is in reality and looks as if it stands alone—far away from Ellis Island and downtown Manhattan. Lady Liberty’s assertive presence, in conjunction with the flag and celebratory feel of the cover art and title, give the impression that *Fireboat: The Heroic Adventures of the John J. Harvey* is a tale of patriotic heroism—irrespective of the incidents of September 11, 2001. As Amazon customer reviewer E. L. Bird “Ramseelbird” posted:

On the cover is a picture of a perky little fireboat spurting water hither and yon. It's a charming little image and without flipping through it (or perhaps just the first few pages) you pick it up and check it out. Later, you're reading it to your toddler when, to your surprise, there's a mention of September 11th. Turning the next page you see two planes flying side by side into the Twin Towers. Turn another page and the towers have exploded. Gouache fire, smoke, falling debris, and what could possibly be blood cascade from the sky.³⁶

While the interior flap copy of *Fireboat* alludes to the September 11 attacks, the cover of this book does not hint toward the gravity of September 11. Instead, it conveys a "charming" and "perky" message of patriotic fortitude.

Like most Americans, post-September 11 picture-book authors were susceptible to the message that this was a time to show national pride. Indeed, had Kalman and Winter not affiliated themselves with this ideology, their books might not have been legitimated. The period following September 11, 2001, was no time to criticize the United States; disagreeing with political leaders was synonymous with disrespecting the memories of the dead. Mayor Rudy Giuliani, who was highly criticized prior to September 11, appears in both *September Roses* and *Fireboat*. He came to be viewed by many as a New York City hero following his appearances in front of September 11 news cameras. While Winter simply puts the word "MAYOR" on one of her small television screens and requires the reader to fill in the blanks, Kalman's text offers him explicit praise: "The mayor was strong. He said, 'We will all work together. We will not be broken.'" Accompanying this statement is an unmistakable illustration of Giuliani. The former mayor of New York City was recognized for his post-September 11 leadership. Yet, many New York Fire Department firefighters have spoken out to "set the record straight on Rudy Giuliani,"³⁷ revealing that the mayor failed to respond to requests for equipment that would have made their job much easier on September 11. The firefighters have campaigned to expose Giuliani's tactics of "exploit[ing] their heroism during and after the September 11 attacks for his own political advantage," with one representative stating that he was "no friend of the firemen."³⁸ Because the media had painted Giuliani in such a positive light, however, this actuality did not find its way into Kalman's book. At the time of *Fireboat's* publication, it was more important to perpetuate the pro-leadership rhetoric that celebrated all that politicians were doing for us—even when that was not much of anything.

When political and national support make their way into books for children, the literary results are propagandized. Peter Hunt explains this best: "Like other writers, children's books are inescapably influenced by their views and assumptions when selecting what goes into the work (and what does not)."³⁹ Lady Liberty appears three more times within *Fireboat*; additionally, the American flag appears in five places. Readers of this book cannot miss its pro-United States-ness. In *September Roses* American flags appear in an illustration of the Union Square memorial that the sisters visit. All together, four flags are shown on this black-and-white page. Winter's decision to include them may, in fact, be based on her firsthand knowledge of the scene, which she references in her author's note; however, the way the flags are featured causes them to stand out more than the missing person flyers that neighbor them. This is symbolic of the way in which the individual lives lost on September 11, 2001, were absorbed by a universal American claim.

The World Trade Center, previously thought of as the "center of VIRTUAL capitalism," was converted to a "symbol of freedom and democracy,"⁴⁰ American loyalty, and patriotism after September 11. Regardless of their politics—or that of their families—the victims of September 11 were spoken of as "heroes" and given soldier-like treatment and status, as if they had *volunteered* to die for their country.⁴¹ During his one-year anniversary visit to Ground Zero, for instance, George W. Bush stated, "Every life taken here, every act of valor performed here the nation holds in honored memory."⁴² In order to use the September 11 attacks as justification for "retaliation" and for instigating an unrelated war in Iraq, it became necessary to garner support for "the country", i.e., President Bush. The victims of September 11 were used as leverage in this political finagle, and Bush's ratings soared to 90 percent.⁴³ The majestic Towers became emblematic of the reason for which we had to get even with the enemies who had done this "to us" as a country. After all, "These Colors [symbolic of the United States] Don't Run [From Anyone]"; they fight back.

In *September Roses*, the sisters pay respect to the victims of September 11 by laying their flowers out in the shape of the Twin Towers at the Union Square Memorial. Similarly, *Fireboat* ends by focusing on the lost Towers: "Now the Twin Towers are gone. Something new will be built. The heroes who died will be remembered forever." Even though hundreds of lives were also lost at the Pentagon and in United airplane crashes, the World Trade Center became *the* symbol of September 11. This fixation could have been

the result of a number of factors such as the larger number of World Trade Center casualties, the magnitude of physical destruction, and the detailed accounts of people who escaped or died in the buildings. Other incidents, such as the crash into the Pentagon, had not been caught on camera and, quite possibly, were not sensationalized enough to become as engraved in the minds of Americans. Regardless, the focus on the Twin Towers encouraged people to mourn the loss of two *buildings* that held inherent promises of renewal.

While the lives of human victims could not be brought back, the American values of “freedom,” “democracy,” and “capitalism” certainly could.

IN SPITE OF TRAGEDY: HEROIC DEFLECTION

The media stories of September 11, 2001, zeroed in on random acts of kindness, such as Žižek’s reference to “young African Americans helping an old Jewish gentleman to cross the street,” which were “scenes unimaginable” in the days prior to the attacks.⁴⁴ Everyday people began to be referred to as “heroes” for showing “solidarity” by doing such things as volunteering their time to post-September 11 relief efforts, and rescue workers, especially the New York City Fire Department, received multiple accolades for their September 11 services. In “Misreporting September 11: How the Media Muzzles the Story,” Danny Schechter speaks to this coverage: “For months on end, many media outlets celebrated the September 11 victims and ‘heroes’ while giving the White House a pass on what really happened and why. Few critical questions were raised in a climate of self-censorship posing as patriotic correctness.”⁴⁵ The heroic tales revealed by the media did not contribute to a critical examination of the events. If anything, the heroic efforts of individuals were exploited so as to evade discussion of the underlying causes of September 11. Viewers were to accept stories of American heroism as the only truths that mattered and not question President Bush or any other White House decision maker.

In his analysis of comic-book propaganda, Cord Scott points out examples of “simpler, less overt samples of patriotism,” which “elevate” rescue workers like police and firefighters to “superhero status.” These types of comic books catapult realistic stories into “the realm of the mythic” and send out a clear “message,” whether that message is to support the United States, promote hatred of its

enemies, or “find humor in serious situations.”⁴⁶ Similarly, *Fireboat* and *September Roses* celebrate the heroism of ordinary characters that transmit messages of unity and propagate the importance of being useful.⁴⁷

The *John J. Harvey*, for example, is an old fireboat—once relegated to a scrap heap—who is called back into service on September 11, 2001. “WE NEED YOU!” the fire department announces. With that, the *Harvey* rushes to the scene to help fight blazes at the World Trade Center. After four days and nights of pumping water, the text reads, “The *Harvey* was a hero. And everyone knew it,” and the story ends:

The Harvey is back to being a very happy boat.
NOT scrapped.
NOT useless.
NOT forgotten.

Although this book is based on real events, the personification of the *John J. Harvey* sends this ordinary fireboat into the “realm of the mythic.”⁴⁸ Readers are introduced to the *Harvey* in its underdog state and witness his transformation into “the little ship that could,” as Amazon reviewer “Ramseelbird” dubs him.⁴⁹ In spite of the tragedy of September 11, the fireboat gained something—happiness. By shifting from the destruction of the Twin Towers and the victims’ deaths to the happy heroic ending—within just a few lines of text, Kalman places an exorbitant amount of importance on the fireboat’s satisfaction. It is almost as if September 11 occurred in order to give new hope to the *Harvey*—an inanimate vessel. The happy wrap-up might make readers feel *better* about the events of September 11, but that is only because their attention is shifted away from what occurred. In spite of everything, “[s]omething new will be built” and larger-than-life “heroes” like the *Harvey* are around to save the day.

September Roses exhibits a more subtle form of heroism, in the shape of kind acts performed for strangers. First, the two African sisters are offered shelter by a man in a suit and hat. In the afterward, Winter reveals that the real women were given lodging by the First United Methodist Church of Flushing, New York. This type of benevolence is reflective of the media stories that celebrated people who “did their part” to assist those in need after September 11. The sisters in the story, shown sleeping in the same bed, then ask, “How can we repay this kindness?” They tell the man to please take their roses because they have no use for them. Subse-

quently, he takes them to the Union Square memorial, where he states, "Your roses are needed here." This reciprocal kindness turns the sisters into heroines. Their roses, which had become as useless as the scrapped fireboat, were donated to a good cause—the commemoration of the Twin Towers. While this book does not end as happily as *Fireboat* does, with the narrator's tears falling on the roses, it definitely offers hope to its readers. The events of September 11 managed to bring out the best in people; their selflessness helped others deal with difficult circumstances. *September Roses* received a starred review in *Publishers Weekly*, in which its effective use of color was described as "underscor[ing] the sense that simple acts of kindness can bring a ray of light to even the darkest day."⁵⁰ Without denigrating these "simple acts of kindness," it is crucial to understand the result of such an exclusive focus on them; it dramatically deflected attention away from any real struggle to explain some of the root causes of September 11. As Rachel G. Payne comments in her *School Library Journal* review, in spite of its ability to capture the "intensity" of the day's emotions, *September Roses* "will not explain what happened on September 11 to children too young to remember it."⁵¹ Nor does the book offer insight to children who *do* remember it.

Whether or not the authors of *Fireboat* and *September Roses* intended to support the rhetoric of "patriotic correctness," their books paint a positive picture of U.S. heroism and encourage adults to evade children's critical questions. These two picture books *incorporate* the topic of September 11 but spend more time providing escape from what occurred than helping children truly deal with it.

A CRITICAL CONFRONTATION

In *What Will You Do For Peace? Impact of 9/11 on New York City Youth*, a group of young people aged eleven to eighteen write about and illustrate their September 11 experiences. Like the student who mentions being "glued to the TV" and the image of his mother's face that will "live like thorns in [his] heart," another student recounts:

When I got home, when I turned on the TV,
All I see was news on every channel.
See airplanes crashing into the World Trade Center,
See people flying out the windows.
I was praying for the people who died,
I thought about them.⁵²

Statements such as these reveal the way in which the media contributed to children's emotional responses to September 11. After viewing the graphic footage on TV, as well as witnessing adults' reactions to that footage, many young people felt remorse for what had happened—and went through their own mourning processes. This combination of media coverage and adult reaction most likely augmented the traumatic impact that September 11 had on children.⁵³

Although *Fireboat* and *September Roses* are picture books that ostensibly help children “grasp” what happened on September 11, they do little more than re-present media images of the tragedy—perhaps even causing children who had viewed the events with their own eyes to reexperience the same emotions they initially felt. In addition to containing illustrations of the airplanes crashing into the Twin Towers and depicting the aftermath of this occurrence, these two books include propaganda that perpetuates the post-September 11 rhetoric of George W. Bush and other political leaders of the time. *Fireboat* and *September Roses* both depict September 11, 2001, as an episode that had a global impact; however, as Žižek points out, this American loss was not as severe as the tragic losses that occur elsewhere in the world—often on a daily basis.⁵⁴ By incorporating images such as the American flag and the Statue of Liberty, as well as red, white, and blue coloring, *Fireboat* and *September Roses* encourage children to adopt the patriotic “correctness” that debilitated Americans' ability to criticize the White House's role in September 11. Rather than encourage children to consider multiple perspectives on September 11, as recommended by Mei-Yu Lu in “Children's Literature in a Time of National Tragedy,” these books deflect children's attention onto heroes or kindly acts that demonstrate ways in which Americans united despite the tragedy that occurred.⁵⁵

The push toward a single national identity allowed political leaders like George W. Bush and Rudy Giuliani to make huge strides—toward an irrelevant war in Iraq and, later, toward presidential candidacy. Regardless of prior criticisms—or the meritocracy of their post-September 11 actions—these leaders jetted toward high national approval ratings immediately following September 11. Criticizing these men—or any of their decisions—in a time of national “crisis” was as taboo as defaming deceased September 11 victims. In order to show one's support for this country and respect for the lives that were lost, one had to demonstrate unbridled approval of everything “American.”

Because they are reflective of the popular response to September

11, 2001, *Fireboat* and *September Roses* encourage young readers to view the events with a lens that is simultaneously nationalistic and avoidant. While adopting a pro-American stance that includes heroic deflection, these books prevent children from gaining any new understanding about what actually *happened* on September 11. Unless these picture books are simply seen as launching grounds to deeper discussion, they contribute to unquestioning acceptance of the media and the government. Through literature that is considered *explanatory*, children are indoctrinated with a single patriotic version of what took place that day. This type of blind following is especially dangerous in times of national crisis—when other lives may be at stake. It is also, ironically, quite un-American.

Under the guise of helping children *deal with* the tragedy of September 11, picture books like *Fireboat* and *September Roses* support the national media-driven response to the events. Rather than “[confront] the true dimensions” of what happened, these texts encourage children to think uncritically about September 11 and accept the single version that the United States government wanted its citizens to accept so as not to implicate itself.

NOTES

1. For an example see Mei-yu Lu’s “Children’s Literature in a Time of National Tragedy,” ERIC Digest Dec. 2001, 2–7. This article offers suggestions to parents and educators for using literature to help cope during the time following September 11. <http://www.ericdigests.org/2002-2/time.htm>.

2. One specific example is 1–800–964–2000, which specialized in handling the trauma experienced by viewing graphic images of war.

3. Maira Kalman, *Fireboat: The Heroic Adventures of the John J. Harvey* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 2002).

4. Jeanette Winter, *September Roses* (New York: Frances Foster Books, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004).

5. At the time this chapter was written both *Fireboat* and *September Roses* held a ranking in the 609,000–611,000 range.

6. *Fireboat* and *September Roses* were displayed prominently at bookstores in New York City, such as Barnes & Noble, immediately following their publication. They often reappear around the anniversary of September 11.

7. Grace Anne DeCandido, Rev. of *Fireboat: The Heroic Adventures of the John J. Harvey*, by Maira Kalman, *Booklist*, September 1, 2002, 113.

8. This photograph of a man, eerily calm as he fell through the sky toward his death, was released by the Associated Press and subsequently published in newspapers like the *New York Post*.

9. Cord Scott, “Written in Red, White, and Blue: A Comparison of Comic Book Propaganda from World War II and September 11,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 40.2 (April 2007): 329.

10. For the purposes of this paper, “nationalistic” refers to the pro–United

States attitudes and activities that arose following the events of September 11, 2001. Nationalism is taken up as an issue in the context of my argument because of the way in which it allowed the government to make decisions without being criticized by the general public. Slavoj Žižek, "Welcome To The Desert Of The Real!" (2001), <http://www.theglobalsite.ac.uk/times/109zizek.htm>.

11. "Statement By The President in His Address to The Nation," *Whitehouse.gov*, September 11, 2001, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html>.

12. "America Under Attack," ABCnews.com, 2001. September 11, 2001, <http://wasearch.loc.gov/sep11/20010911211307/http://abcnews.com/>.

13. David A. Altheide, "Consuming Terrorism," *Symbolic Interaction* 27.3 (2004): 291.

14. "Americanism" is the term David A. Altheide uses to describe the post-September 11 pro-United States identity, which came about in relation to the tragic events that occurred that day.

15. Altheide, "Consuming Terrorism," 289.

16. See, as an example, the subtitle "September 11, 2001—The Day The World Changed" on the homepage of *September11news.com*, 2007, <http://www.september11news.com>.

17. Žižek, "Welcome To The Desert Of The Real!" <http://www.theglobalsite.ac.uk/times/109zizek.htm>.

18. DeCandido, Review of *Fireboat*, 113.

19. Most picture books, like *Fireboat*, are comprised of thirty-two pages. Therefore, more than 70 percent of this book is devoted to framing a background of innocence into which the tragic event of the story is inserted.

20. Žižek, "Welcome To The Desert Of The Real!" <http://www.theglobalsite.ac.uk/times/109zizek.htm>.

21. Ibid.

22. In the hours following the attacks on the World Trade Center in Manhattan, people gathered at Union Square and wrote messages of peace in chalk on the ground. Soon after, this site became one memorial ground for the lives that were lost that day.

23. Altheide, "Consuming Terrorism," 291.

24. Karen Leggett, Rev. of *September Roses* by Jeanette Winter, *Children's Literature*, 2001, http://www.childrenslit.com/childrenslit/th_sept11.html.

25. *Independence Day*, dir. Roland Emmerich, perf. Will Smith, Jeff Goldblum, 20th Century Fox, 1996.

26. Faith Ringgold, *What Will You Do For Peace? Impact of 9/11 on New York City Youth* (Hamden: InterRelations Collaborative, 2004). 15 (unpaginated—counted from first page according to publishers' criteria).

27. Peter Hunt, ed., *Literature For Children: Contemporary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1992), 13.

28. Altheide, "Consuming Terrorism," and Žižek, "Welcome To The Desert Of The Real!"

29. This information derives from the author's documented experience visiting the World Trade Center site two weeks after the September 11 attacks.

30. Chisun Lee, "American Enough," *Village Voice*, September 25, 2001, 35.

31. "Statement By The President in His Address to The Nation," *Whitehouse.gov*, September 11, 2001.

32. Altheide, "Consuming Terrorism," 292.

33. Cord Scott, "Written in Red, White, and Blue: A Comparison of Comic Book

Propaganda from World War II and September 11," *Journal of Popular Culture* 40.2 (April 2007): 336.

34. Altheide, "Consuming Terrorism," 290.
35. Ibid.
36. E. L. Bird "Ramseelbird," Rev. of *Fireboat: The Heroic Adventures of the John J. Harvey*, by Maira Kalman, Amazon.com, http://www.amazon.com/Fireboat-Heroic-Adventures-Harvey-Picture/dp/0142403628/ref=pd_bbs_sr_1?e=UTF8&s=books&qid=1208053175&sr=8-1.
37. Ari Paul, "New York City firefighters are out to set the record straight on Rudy Giuliani's 9/11 legacy," *The American Prospect*, July 10, 2007, http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=real_911_heroes_speake_out_against_rudy.
38. Ibid.
39. Peter Hunt, ed., *Literature for Children*, 18.
40. Žižek, "Welcome To The Desert Of The Real!"
41. Organizations like "Not In Our Name" were formed in order to protest using the September 11 victims as a reason for going to war. They had a very visible presence in Manhattan during the months following the attack on the World Trade Center.
42. "Bush visits 'Ground Zero', vows victory over terror: President remembers victims of attacks," *CNN.com*, September 11, 2002, <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/09/10/ar911.bush.day/index.html>.
43. Altheide, "Consuming Terrorism," 296.
44. Žižek, "Welcome To The Desert Of The Real!"
45. Danny Schechter, "Misreporting 9/11: How the Media Muzzles the Story," *Common Dreams News Center*, 2004, <http://www.commondreams.org/views04/0413-11.htm>.
46. Scott, "Written in Red, White, and Blue: A Comparison of Comic Book Propaganda from World War II and September 11," 340.
47. This theme of usefulness is not unique to children's literature related to September 11. See also *Thomas the Tank Engine*.
48. Altheide, "Consuming Terrorism," 340.
49. E. L. Bird "Ramseelbird," Rev. of *Fireboat: The Heroic Adventures of the John J. Harvey*, by Maira Kalman.
50. "September Roses (Book)," Rev. of *September Roses* by Jeanette Winter, *Publishers Weekly*, August 16, 2004, 63.
51. Rachel G. Payne, Rev. of *September Roses* by Jeanette Winter, *School Library Journal* 50:9 (September 2004): 184.
52. Ringgold, *What Will You Do For Peace? Impact of 9/11 on New York City Youth*, 12. (Again, this book is unpaginated. See earlier note.)
53. In "Children's Literature in a Time of National Tragedy," Mei-Yu Lu explains that news footage of September 11 might have frightened children; adults should, therefore, monitor their children's media exposure. She also recommends that adults discuss the events with children and allow them to express their feelings about what occurred.
54. Žižek, "Welcome To The Desert Of The Real!"
55. Mei-Yu Lu, "Children's Literature in a Time of National Tragedy," ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading English and Communication (2001), <http://www.ericdigests.org/2002-2/time.htm>.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Altheide, David L. "Consuming Terrorism." *Symbolic Interaction* 27.3 (2004): 289–308.

- "America Under Attack." ABCnews.com, September 11, 2001. <http://wasearch.loc.gov/sep11/20010911211307/http://abcnews.com>.
- "APA Offers Materials That Can Help Children Deal With Disturbing Images From Iraq." APA.org, June 2, 2004. http://www.apa.org/releases/iraq_images.html.
- "Bush visits 'Ground Zero', vows victory over terror: President remembers victims of attacks." CNN.com, September 11, 2002. <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/09/10/ar911.bush.day/index.html>.
- DeCandido, Grace Anne. Rev. of *Fireboat: The Heroic Adventures of the John J. Harvey*, by Maira Kalman. *Booklist*, September 1, 2002, 113.
- Hunt, Peter, ed. *Literature For Children: Contemporary Criticism*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Kalman, Maira. *Fireboat: The Heroic Adventures of the John J. Harvey*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, a division of Penguin Putnam Books for Young Readers, 2002.
- Leggett, Karen. Rev. of *September Roses* by Jeanette Winter. *Children's Literature*, 2001. http://www.childrenslit.com/childrenslit/th_sept11.html.
- Lu, Mei-Yu. "Children's Literature in a Time of National Tragedy." ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading English and Communication (2001). www.ericdigests.org/2002-2/time.htm.
- Paul, Ari. "New York City firefighters are out to set the record straight on Rudy Giuliani's 9/11 legacy." *The American Prospect*, July 10, 2007. http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=real_911_heroes_speak_eout_against_rudy.
- Payne, Rachel G. Rev. of *September Roses* by Jeanette Winter. *School Library Journal* 50.9 (September 2004): 184.
- Ringgold, Faith. *What Will You Do For Peace? Impact of 9/11 on New York City Youth*. Hamden: InterRelations Collaborative, 2004.
- Schechter, Danny. "Misreporting 9/11: How the Media Muzzles the Story." *Common Dreams News Center*, 2004. <http://www.commondreams.org/views04/0413-11.htm>.
- Scott, Cord. "Written in Red, White, and Blue: A Comparison of Comic Book Propaganda from World War II and September 11." *Journal of Popular Culture* 40.2 (2007): 325-43.
- "September Roses (Book)." Rev. of *September Roses* by Jeanette Winter. *Publishers Weekly* 251.33 (August 16, 2004): 63.
- Homepage. *September11news.com*, 2007. <http://www.september11news.com>.
- "Statement By The President in His Address to The Nation." *Whitehouse.gov*, September 11, 2001. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html>.
- Winter, Jeanette. *September Roses*. New York: Frances Foster Books, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004.
- Žižek, Slavoj. "Welcome To The Desert of The Real!" (2001). <http://www.theglobalsite.ac.uk/times/109zizek.htm>.

III

Embracing the Complexity: Deconstructing the War on Terror

He did nothing of the sort. Almost everything they said was a lie that obscured a very simple and potentially relevant question that he asked, which is: should healthy young people receive the vaccine? We're not precisely sure what the risks are. In September of 2020, at the height of the presidential campaign, a CNN reporter asked Kamala Harris whether she'd be willing to take the coronavirus vaccine once it became available. "Well, I think that's going to be an issue for all of us," Harris responded. "I will say that I would not trust Donald Trump." It is the crudest kind of propaganda, designed by the cynical for the benefit of a population they consider stupid and weak and malleable. It's not just Kamala Harris. Everyone is in on it, even the corporate comedians. The 9/11 attacks resulted in thousands of deaths and unspeakable devastation. But among the people affected were several who demonstrated real-life heroism. Here are a few groups and individuals whose bravery and commitment to helping others was evident on September 11, 2001, and in the days that followed. The two men proceeded to descend from the destroyed upper floors and made it out of the tower. Clark felt Prainnath had helped him survive as well - the group he'd been with when he went to Prainnath's aid had climbed higher to await help, a decision with fatal consequences as the South Tower collapsed at 9:59 am. [READ MORE: How Mister Rogers Helped Heal the Nation After September 11.](#) 11. September: Die dritte Wahrheit. September 11 - The Third Truth. (English version with additional videos and photos). Originally published in German by NEXUS magazine, October-November 2010. This English translation of the article is published with the kind permission of the NEXUS editors and that of the author - Dimitri A. Khalezov. Copyright notice. Most of us just accepted "Ground Zero" as some sort of proper noun - as if it were the name of a city or the name of a ship. However, not many people today realize that the rather peculiar name "ground zero" was assigned to the location of the former WTC much too prematurely for it to have been an actual "Proper Noun" when referring to the WTC.