Master of Communication by coursework

Major Project

Plane language: how readers make sense of 9/11 through contemporary western literary fiction

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Abstract

Prior to September 11, 2001 terrorism had not figured as a major theme in western literary fiction. In the years following the attacks on New York and Washington, however, a number of well-known writers of contemporary western literary fiction have published novels or short stories explicitly about terrorism and, in particular, 9/11. In short: a genre of 9/11 novels has emerged.

The events of September 11, 2001 are already much represented in myriad forms of media, as well as being part of the personal memory of a large number of people. This research seeks to gain an insight into how novelists can contribute to the crowded mediasphere of 9/11, and what meanings readers might glean from literary fiction about 9/11.

I undertake a 'genre textual analysis' of western literary fiction about 9/11 to identify the main themes therein. Looking at published book reviews of the various texts, I also discuss how some readers responded to the books. This informs an exploration of how readers may derive meaning from 9/11 by reading contemporary western literary fiction.

The study reveals that the scope of the attacks is not fully represented in existing literary fiction and that a series of thematic biases across the genre are likely to reinforce a narrow victim perspective among western readers. There are indications, however, that readers will respond to a balanced representation of 9/11, and the project concludes by predicting that writers will, over time, produce more nuanced texts to enrich the genre and help readers make more sense of 9/11.

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Introduction

"What terrorists gain, novelists lose. The degree to which they influence mass consciousness is the extent of our decline as shapers of sensibility and thought" says the character Bill Gray, a novelist, in Don DeLillo's *Mao II* (1991, p.157). Here, he is elaborating on a point he makes earlier in the book, where he remarks: "There's a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists…Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory" (p. 41).

In light of this, it is interesting to note the increase in the number of novels and short stories written about terrorism in general and the 9/11 attacks in particular since September 11 2001. It is as if novelists are trying to reclaim some of the ground previously surrendered, or using the terrorism theme to shape the cultural space within which their texts are used.

Reflecting on the response of writers to the September 11 attacks, Martin Amis wrote that: "an unusual number of novelists chose to write journalism about September 11…I can tell you what those novelists were doing; they were playing for time" (Amis 2008, p. 12). This suggests writers can only explain the attacks by writing, yet it was too soon and perhaps too trivial to write a story about the event (Carey 2002). The publication dates of the books that make up this study bear this out; the majority of them were not published until five or six years after the event. "A novel is…an act of imagination, and the imagination, that day, was fully commandeered" (Amis 2008, p. 11). Thus writers, including Amis, initially wrote journalism instead. Here perhaps they discerned that readers were also still too confounded by September 11 to be ready for literary representations of it. This is why this study seeks answers to the following question: In what ways can readers make sense of 9/11 via literary fiction?

Terrorism might be a relatively new topic for western literary fiction, but there are precursors, such as Dostoyevski, *The Devils* (1872); Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911); Graham Greene, *The Quiet American* (1955); Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (1988); Don DeLillo, *The Names* (1983) and *Mao II* (1991); Paul Auster, *Leviathan* (1992) and Bret Easton Ellis, *Glamorama* (1998). These are widely read books by well known authors, highlighting that terrorism is not entirely new territory for literary fiction. It is still striking, however, to compare the number of books published in the past five years dealing with terrorism to the number of books on terrorism published in the one hundred years preceding it. Equally striking are the number of books explicitly, or implicitly, about that single event, 9/11.

Previously, novels relating to politics and conflict between nation states or groups have been concerned with espionage rather than acts of terrorism. The Cold War gave rise to its own genre of fiction – spy thrillers, (Finder 2001) and while some well-known European writers such as Graham Greene tackled the subject seriously, it was not a topic that much interested American writers (Mishra 2007). Although popular, Cold War novels were not generally tackled by the major writers of literary fiction of the era, but were the domain of genre writers such as John Le Carre and Frederick Forsyth. The difference now is that writers with established literary reputations are publishing books dealing explicitly with terrorism or terrorist events; so much so that not only has terrorism become a literary genre of its own, but so has 9/11.

So what can a novelist contribute to an event that is already heavily mediated, and which a vast audience saw unfold in real time? Or more precisely: what can a reader hope to glean from a novel about 9/11 that they can't absorb through journalism, personal testimony from witnesses and even victims, or by simply watching it?

The expanded form of the novel can offer a unique perspective on an event such as 9/11. In her collection of essays, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag notes the effectiveness of narrative in engaging with an issue: “partly it is a question of the length of time one is obliged to look, to feel” (2003, p. 110). Literary fiction therefore, might provide readers with the best way to discern meaning in the violence of this attack. A universal meaning may not be possible however. As Sontag writes: “no ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain” (Sontag 2003, p. 6).

Nevertheless, readers can find meaning in the texts within the contexts of their cultures. McKee (p. 140) underlines this by suggesting that a text’s ‘likely’ meaning (for a reader) emerges via the reader’s semio-cultural context for the text being interpreted: “There is no such thing as a single, ‘correct’ interpretation of any text. There are large numbers of possible interpretations, some of which will be more likely than others in particular circumstances” (McKee 2001, p. 140). Fiske refers to this as the ‘semiotic democracy’, where the audience negotiates the meaning within a consensus of signification (Fiske 2002, p. 41). This has particular resonance in literary fiction, where meaning is derived through invented characters and events, and where there is an existing tradition of interpretive freedom. And yet as the number of novels and stories about 9/11 continues to grow, certain thematic tropes are becoming distinguishable across the genre. These motifs may not be so calculated as to constitute a framing device, where an author privileges certain aspects of the story over others to imbue them with extra significance (Entman 2002), but even so, their cumulative affect may influence how readers respond to stories within the genre. This study seeks to identify these thematic tropes, highlight recurring motifs in the various novels and stories, and understand what messages and meaning readers might make of them.

Chapter 1 - Literature review

"Did you go crazy or did you report
On that day they wounded New York?"

On That Day – Leonard Cohen 2004

When it comes to September 11 2001 and literary fiction, the most relevant literature can be categorised into six themes: **1** Writers and readers – initial response to 9/11, **2** Art and reality, **3** Trauma and terror, **4** Terrorism in literary fiction, **5** 9/11 and literary fiction, **6** Writers and readers of 9/11 literary fiction.

1.1 Writers and readers – initial response to 9/11

One of the earliest vehicles for writers of literary fiction to address the September 11 attacks was an anthology commissioned by Ulrich Baer called '110 Stories: New York Writes After September 11', in which a number of writers contributed pieces. The title is a reference to the number of floors in each tower and the collection was even presented in a tall, thin oblong shape as a likeness to one of the towers (Houen 2004). Whether this is in questionable taste is one thing, but the most noticeable characteristic of Baer's commission and another anthology, 'September 11: American Writers Respond' is that the vast majority of contributions are essays or autobiographical accounts of how the individual writer experienced the day or reacted to the attacks, rather than actual fiction (Houen 2004, Dreifus 2004, Kelly 2008). This illustrates an initial reluctance on the part of writers to re-imagine or fictionalise the events. The time-lag associated with producing a novel is one impediment. It takes time to write a novel, but part of the problem also, as Amis (2008) points out, is that 'novelists don't normally write about what's going on; they write about what's not going on' (p. 13).

Even when writers were ready to write about September 11, were readers ready to read about it? Reviewing one of the earliest examples of fiction about 9/11, *Varieties of Religious Experience* by John Updike, which was originally published in November 2002, Martin Amis refers to it as ‘fatally premature’ (Amis 2009). Erika Dreifus (2004) writes that she faced opposition from colleagues and readers who expressed anxiety about references to the attacks in fiction, one of whom she reports as saying "I am not ready to read short stories referring to it yet. I feel like there should be some sort of grace period…it just doesn’t feel right. Like you’re trying to capitalise on that emotion" (Dreifus 2004 p. 35). Stephens (2007) ponders the uncertain reception and mixed reviews for fiction dealing with 9/11, even by such celebrated writers as Don DeLillo and Jonathan Safran-Foer, and wonders if was because it was still seen by reviewers as ‘too soon’ (Stephens 2007, p12.) for a novelistic treatment. He cites two examples of public art in New York in 2002 that were viewed as being ‘too soon’: sculptor Eric Fischl’s *Tumbling Woman* statue in honour of those who fell to their deaths was removed from display within a week, and an enlarged image projected onto a building of people hanging out of the window high in the North Tower of the World Trade Centre after the attack, about which Melbourne writer Wendy Bowler said, “It seems too soon to be viewing this as public art”. Stephens questions how soon is ‘too soon’ noting that other horrific events, such as ‘the world wars, the Holocaust, Hiroshima, the firebombing of Dresden…’ (p12) have eventually spawned art that not only has cultural significance, but is widely accepted. Mishra (2007) agrees, seeing proximity to the event and a dominant American interpretation as limiting the range of responses from writers, and looks to the example of European writers who contributed to a ‘flourishing’ of literary fiction some ten to twenty years after the First World War.

Perhaps with these precursors in mind, Shriver (2008a) wonders if there is a risk that some writers might use terrorism and the attacks of September 11 as a figurative symbol to give their work the appearance of weight and depth, or even be exploiting the event (Kaplan 2005).

Quoting Edward Hirsch, Dreifus argues that one role of the writer is 'to make sense out of experience' or what she herself calls, 'to write of the moment, in the moment' (Dreifus, 2004 p. 39). The lag between the event itself and the sudden rush of literary fiction coming four to five years afterwards appears to support Amis' notion of novelists 'playing for time'. Perhaps the time writers require in order ‘to make sense out of experience.’ Stephens makes a similar point, writing that, ‘empathy, rather than sympathy takes time to resonate and is a key to artistic production’ (Stephens 2007, p.13). He quotes Bennett (2005) who argues that significant art follows a ‘deep, lengthy engagement with a given subject matter’ (Bennett in Stephens, p.13) and is perhaps a way of ‘making meaning’ out of catastrophes (Kaplan 2005, p.19).

This study seeks to reach an understanding of how readers respond to literary fiction about the September 11 attacks. To do so I’ll be incorporating the responses of individual readers through published book reviews. This will provide an opportunity to determine if this sentiment of it being ‘too soon’ exists among those who have read the novels and stories, and whether it influences the reader’s response to the texts.

1.2. Art and Reality

If it is the subject matter itself that presents a dilemma for artists, then Stephens asks if the September 11 attacks are too big for writers to grapple with. Houen (2002) agrees, labeling the attacks ‘a monumental collision of symbols’ (Houen 2002, p. 4), so terrifying that trying to convey its meaning, or how it was experienced can lead authors into ‘hyperbole’ (Houen 2002). Amis also sees the attacks as a masterpiece of the figurative, in which those who planned the attack on the World Trade Centre knew it would become an ‘unforgettable metaphor’ (Amis 2008, p. 5). This is despite the fact that the perpetrators could not have

anticipated the complete destruction of the Twin Towers, possibly the most dramatic and symbolic image of the event (Baudrillard 2002).

Yet as big as the events may be, the majority of novelists set their stories in domestic situations and deal on a very personal level with how individuals react to the event (Mishra 2007). This may be a reaction to an event of such symbolic scale that authors find it difficult to offer a suitably grand narrative to match it, or as Baudrillard asks in his consideration of the 9/11 attacks, 'does reality actually outstrip fiction?' (Baudrillard 2002 p28, Shriver 2008a).

In other words: How can a writer begin to approach an event that might be beyond the realms of the art form itself? Baudrillard resists the urge to impose meaning retrospectively, because 'there is none' (2002, p. 30). The spectacle is so 'original' and 'radical' that it can't be reduced to an art form (Baudrillard 2002). 'Artworks, unlike terrorists, change nothing' writes Salman Rushdie (2002, p. 441), and while this may be true in a political or physical sense (and even then it is contestable), perhaps there is scope for writers of literary fiction to change the understanding of readers. Compared to other art forms, literature might be in a unique position, as narrative can be effective in engaging with an issue, 'partly it is a question of the length of time one is obliged to look, to feel.' (Sontag 2003, p. 110). Kaplan (2005) highlights the various reasons a victim of trauma might turn their experience into a narrative, such as an aid to self-understanding or to create a witness (Kaplan 2005).

Don DeLillo seems to agree with Baudrillard when he says of the September 11 attack that "in its desertion of every basis for comparison, the event asserts its singularity" (2001, p.6), but also sees a space in which the writer might operate, 'There is something empty in the sky. The writer tries to give memory, tenderness and meaning to all that howling space' (DeLillo 2001, p. 6). Wilcox believes that DeLillo 'sees language and artistic representation as crucial in

making sense of the event' (Wilcox 2006, p. 100), and indeed, his subsequent novel, *Falling Man* suggests as much.

Rather than inhibiting writers, the very 'singularity' and symbolism of the event has attracted them, inspiring a genre of literary fiction in its own right as a number of writers seek to interpret it and, in DeLillo's words, 'give memory, tenderness and meaning to all that howling space' (DeLillo 2001, p. 6). But what meaning do the writers give and what meaning might readers take from the respective texts? By studying a number of texts about the same topic, and identifying the common and divergent themes among them, I'll endeavour to identify possible meanings that readers might infer from this genre.

1.3. Trauma and terror

Scanlan in wondering 'how or whether literature helps us face a catastrophic history' (Scanlan 2001b, p. 2) concludes by asserting that literature can provide meaning for contemporary issues, that it 'looks terror in the eye, measures its human consequences, rejects the simplicities of public rhetoric' (Scanlan 2001b, p. 6). But she is referring to pre 9/11 literature, having to that point, not read any of the literary fiction that the attacks engendered. Scanlan explores the idea of writer as revolutionary and the connection between writers and terrorists, a stance she re-evaluates post 9/11 (Scanlan 2001b). But DeLillo also acknowledges the connection, albeit in an opposing paradigm, by noting that cyber-capitalism and terrorism are the competing narratives of the age, and that 'it is left to us to create the counter-narrative' (DeLillo 2001, p. 2). Thurschwell (2002) agrees and singles out writers as the key group to create that 'counter-narrative.' As Gray highlights, 'the first step toward recovery is testimony to a listener, an intellectual witness' who can offer 'the intimacy of experience' (Gray 2009, p 2, Kaplan 2005). So if literary fiction is to constitute a counter-narrative, it

can only be through a pas de deux between writers and readers, thereby giving readers a role in understanding and even combating terrorism.

One of the difficulties of this is that the trauma of witnessing the 9/11 attacks can affect the writer, who may experience difficulties representing or interpreting the trauma into a narrative (Kaplan 2005, Kelly 2008). Or even induce a feeling of 'vicarious trauma' in readers (Kaplan 2005, p.89). Gray (2009) recognises the signs of trauma in literary fiction that deals with 9/11, and views fiction about the attacks as a way for people to recover from trauma, but feels the examples published so far fail to get beyond a simple 'registering that something traumatic' has happened (Gray 2009, p.3). He joins Houen (2004) in calling for a new form of fiction with new structures to describe the new terror, but while Houen yearns for an experimental approach, such as might be adopted by William Burroughs or Kathy Acker, Gray seeks a literature that reflects and dramatises America' s different constituent cultures and conflicts. Following Gray, Rothberg (2009) also believes that using 'familiar' forms to describe the unfamiliar does not aid recovery from trauma. He believes that 9/11 novels need to reflect not only America's internal 'multiculture', but to also show how this culture is experienced in the rest of the world.

While Gray and Rothberg highlight shortcomings in how existing 9/11 literary fiction might relieve trauma, both focus on the responsibilities of the writer to reflect culture clash rather than on how readers actually react to these books. Calling for new forms of narrative fails to acknowledge the experimental structure of books such as *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, *Windows on the World*, *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night and Twilight of the Superheroes,* all of which adopt a non-traditional narrative model, including fragmented narratives, shifting narrators, blurring time and even pictures and cartoons. The focus on trauma studies also assumes that recovering from trauma is the only experience a reader might seek from 9/11 literary fiction, whereas readers may seek understanding, solace, drama, suspense or simply a story about a familiar event

to feel some involvement in the narrative – to 'make meaning' in other words (Kaplan 2005, p.137). And it may just be that a traditional narrative provides that need, or that the next generation of novelists is able to treat the subject in a less insular and more universal way (Mishra 2007) that readers may respond to.

Kaplan (2005) highlights the various reasons victims of trauma, or witnesses of a traumatic event, might write about their experiences. She also describes how people might experience a form of vicarious trauma through hearing first or second hand accounts from victims, citing responses from therapists who have treated victims and listened to their stories. While there is value in studying therapist's reports on listening to victims, and even similarities to the experience a reader may feel on reading an account of terror, as with Gray (2009) and Rothberg (2009), Kaplan's approach is primarily from a trauma studies perspective. She draws on personal reminiscence, cites Freud, World War II memoirs by Marguerite Duras and Sarah Kofman and uses case studies from cinema, such as Alfred Hitchcock's 'Spellbound' and television and newspaper reporting to illustrate how trauma manifests in culture. From these examples Kaplan earmarks possible learnings for victims or witnesses of the 9/11 attacks. The reliance on World War II texts and examples from world cinema to find possible learnings for witnesses and victims of 9/11 reveals a gap in literature that examines texts relating to terrorism in general and 9/11 specifically. A study of texts explicitly dealing with 9/11 might also offer learnings for victims and witnesses of that attack.

This study will examine how trauma manifests in contemporary literary fiction about 9/11, but instead of placing responsibility on writers to be healers of trauma, I regard them as interpreters. I'll look at how writers across the genre represent trauma and how it might be transmitted to readers. If fiction has any healing power, it is only through the active cooperation and participation of readers. New forms of fiction may indeed facilitate this, as some commentators argue, but there is sufficient stylistic variation in the existing body of literary fiction

on 9/11 to begin an investigation. Current fiction includes novels, short stories, first person confessional narratives, third person narrators, adult and child narrators, chronological and fragmented narratives – enough to test Scanlan's pre 9/11 assertion that literature can provide meaning for contemporary issues.

1.4. Terrorism in literary fiction

Scanlan (2001a) and Houen (2002) examine literature and offer a detailed analysis of how terrorism has featured as a topic in literary fiction. Both theorists highlight similarities, even crossover, between terrorist and writer, using key texts from the nineteenth through to the late twentieth century to illustrate the relationship. While both theorists offer insights into this issue and the role terrorism has played in literary fiction, they deal with texts that predate the September 11 attacks, about events that were in most cases, fictional, or are removed by time and experience from a current readership. The attacks of September 11 2001 and the literature it has engendered offer an opportunity to examine this question in light of a real terrorist event.

In her study of how artists, and in particular writers, respond to contemporary events, Dreifus (2004) offers first hand experience about some readers' lack of preparedness to read literary fiction about the 9/11 attacks in the immediate wake of the event. This is instructive and supports her general tenet that writers have a responsibility to address contemporary events. The literature, however, features only a limited examination of literary fiction about 9/11 by well known authors and there is an absence of material examining how readers respond to that literary fiction. Novelists who write about the event more than six or seven years after it occurred might be able to bring a different perspective to those who wrote in its immediate wake. Likewise, readers who found the topic too painful in the first year or two after its occurrence might re-evaluate their stance after more time has elapsed. As more writers address the topic over time, including some who are familiar and trusted voices, it may lose its shock value and might change

the way readers view, not only literary fiction about the attacks, but the attacks themselves.

One writer of literary fiction with a familiar and trusted voice to write about the 9/11 attacks is Don DeLillo, both in essay form, *In the Ruins of the Future* (2001), and in his novel *Falling Man* published in 2007. Having previously written about terrorism, most notably in *Mao II* (1991) and *The Names* (1983), DeLillo has been the focus of a number of theorists who have written about literary fiction relating to terrorism and 9/11. Wilcox (2006) examines *Mao II* and compares DeLillo's view on the implications for art of the 9/11 attacks with that of Jean Baudrillard (2002). Wilcox highlights similarities in their understanding of how terrorism works as a spectacle, but argues that where Baudrillard considers that this makes the attack like a subversive work of art in itself, DeLillo takes an opposing view, believing that the spectacle is a kind of anti-art and that we need art to explain it.

Thurschwell (2007) also examines DeLillo's fiction on terrorism for clues on how art might, if not explain terrorism, at least offer a 'counter narrative' as DeLillo himself referred to the role of writers. Where Thurschwell, Wilcox (2006), Scanlan (2001a), Houen (2004) and other theorists to study DeLillo's literary fiction on terrorism focus on *Mao II*, there is only limited discussion of DeLillo's 9/11 novel, *Falling Man* (2007), most notably by Leppard (2007). The emergence of a number of literary novels about 9/11, including this one from DeLillo, offers a unique opportunity to compare how readers react to different novels about the same event. DeLillo's is a key voice in literature about terrorism, and *Mao II* is often studied alongside other examples of contemporary fiction about terrorism, most notably Paul Auster's *Leviathan* (1992). While both of these works deal with fictional terrorist events, *Falling Man* is about a real event – one that has ushered in a variety of voices to the literary landscape – and can be studied alongside other works from a range of writers about the same event.

DeLillo is an important voice when it comes to literary fiction on terrorism, but rather than study his September 11 novel, *Falling Man*, in isolation or in the context of his oeuvre, I'm locating it within the genre that has emerged around it, and to which I believe it belongs – that of September 11 literary fiction. In this context I can consider a wide range of voices and begin to explore the relationship between literary fiction and terrorism in a way that is more inclusive, not only of writers, but also of readers.

The conceit that writers and terrorists share similar traits and aims is unjustified and perhaps unconscionable against the brutal reality of a major terrorist event like 9/11. This study will therefore shift the focus from the writer to the reader. The majority of literature compares how various writers have represented terrorism, but there is limited commentary on how readers make sense of it. This study will aim to bridge the gap between how a terrorist event is depicted in literary fiction and how that depiction is received.

1.5. 9/11 and literary fiction

In conjunction with literature about terrorism published prior to 9/11, including Paul Auster's *Leviathan* and early DeLillo novels such as *The Names* and *Mao II*, Leppard (2007) compares DeLillo's *Falling Man* with three other novels about 9/11: *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night: Eleven Stories* by John Barth, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran-Foer and *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* by Ken Kalfus. Leppard looks at twenty common elements – thematic or plot – that are found in each novel and analyses character relationships and other intertextual aspects within the respective novels. Her comparative study is valuable as it recognises the emerging genre of 9/11 novels and provides a link to the literature that preceded 9/11, 'creating a dialogue between an older generation of authors and a newer generation' (Leppard 2007, p vii). The twenty common elements she identifies offer a revealing picture of how the event is portrayed, which Leppard hopes can be

used to ‘discuss, view and attempt to make sense of the event’ (2007, p 106). Leppard succeeds in identifying the common elements in these four novels, but there is also scope to examine divergent elements in these narratives, such as narrator perspective, the terrorist versus victim paradigm and the portrayal of the perpetrators, to give a fuller picture of the how the novels might help the reader ‘attempt to make sense of the event.’ The inclusion of additional texts by a variety of different writers might broaden the perspective further still.

Mishra (2007) is one theorist who focuses on the portrayal of Muslims in 9/11 literary fiction. He highlights what he perceives as shortcomings in the writers’ understanding of the Islamic world and eastern culture, and is critical of the simplistic representation of Muslim characters and their motivations in the novels and stories he examines. In his criticism that most 9/11 fiction is ‘composed in the narcissistic heart of the west’ and that it fails to acknowledge the reality and power of divergent political and ideological beliefs, he highlights one of the areas in which readers’ ability to make meaning from these texts might be biased or limited.

The portrayal of the terrorists is crucial to how a reader might understand or interpret this event and Mishra offers a careful and nuanced reading that will inform this study. What is missing in the literature, however, is a comparative study of the portrayal of perpetrators alongside an examination of the portrayal of victims and witnesses.

1.6. Writers and readers of 9/11 literary fiction

Theoretical literature on novels and terrorism focuses on the producers of the texts, the novelists, and what they are trying to convey. Mishra, for example, studies the 9/11 fiction of Martin Amis, Don DeLillo and Ian McEwan through the prism of the non-fiction essays and articles these writers produced after 9/11. Shriver (2008a) too, offers a round-up of 9/11 fiction and appraises the various

books in light of their literary worth, as she sees it, compared to other non-fiction treatments of 9/11. This is a valid and interesting approach that highlights some telling comparisons, but a complete picture of how literary fiction deals with contemporary events can only be gained by including readers and trying to understand the meanings that they make from novels about 9/11. Bringing readers into the circle of interpretation highlights Lewis' 'collective noun' theory of communication, where audiences are 'as critical to the media as producers, distributors and regulators' (Lewis 2005, p 5-6).

Focusing on how readers respond to these texts rather than what the authors may have intended also follows the theoretical lead of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault and the notion of the 'death of the author' (Barthes 1977). Barthes writes that 'to give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text' (1977, p. 147) and that any meaning to be derived from a given text can only come from the reader, who brings all of his or her history, knowledge and understanding to the text. 'A text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination', that is, the reader (1977, p. 148), yet the literature about 9/11 literary fiction remains focused on the author and his or her construction on 9/11. Foucault argues that the author is absent from the text and quoting Samuel Beckett, asks 'what matter who's speaking?' (Foucault 1977, p. 138) Radford continues this point, writing that 'authors do not really matter, only texts' (Radford 2002, p. 1), but adds that the meaning of any text depends on the reader bringing their own encyclopedia of knowledge and understanding of the text. He quotes Umberto Eco who writes that 'it is possible to speak of the text's intention only as a result of a conjunction on the part of the reader' (Radford 1992, p. 4). It may be this approach that allows us to discover how readers make meaning of 9/11 through literary fiction.

1.7 Research gap and research question

With reference to September 11, Carey notes that ‘events in the real world inevitably change the way we read’ (2002, p. 1) and uses this to re-evaluate selected texts from pre 2001. It may be equally instructive to examine a real event in light of the literary fiction that it generates and try to measure if reading about it changes the way we might view it or understand it. There is an established body of research examining literary fiction about terrorism prior to September 11, but this research largely focuses on novels about fictional terrorist events. The growing body of literary fiction about the September 11 attacks presents an opportunity to extend that field of study, and although there was documented concern that some readers may not be ready to read fiction about September 11, or that not enough time has passed for writers to engage deeply with the topic, the number of works inspired by the attacks continues to grow, suggesting at least that there is sufficient interest and engagement to conduct further research. While there is some literature about September 11 fiction, it focuses on a minority of writers, in particular Don DeLillo, and their intentions. There is limited comment on how readers respond to these texts. Thus, looking at contemporary western literary fiction about 9/11, across a range of literary styles and fiction formats (including novels and short stories and first and third person narration) provides an opportunity to fill the research gap we have identified by seeking answers to this research question:

‘In what ways can readers make sense of 9/11 via literary fiction?’

Chapter 2 - Methodology

"Brownstones, water towers, trees, skyscrapers
Writers, prize fighters and Wall Street traders
We come together on the subway cars
Diversity unified, whoever you are"

An open letter to NYC – Beastie Boys 2004

In this chapter I will describe how I plan to answer my research question regarding a reader-centred understanding of literary fiction relating to the 9/11 attacks. The chapter will also include a rationale for why I have selected the texts included in the study.

2.1. Approach to research

I propose to follow a qualitative approach for this study. Qualitative research is a subjective methodology and does not seek to provide a single objective measure. I will conduct a 'genre textual analysis' covering selected novels and short stories about the September 11 attacks as well as reviews of these novels and short stories.

2.2. Textual analysis of literary fiction – reading the writers

Literary fiction relating to 9/11 can be considered as a genre by following the definition of Thwaites, Davis and Mules, who write that a genre is: "a grouping of texts which are similar in structure or subject matter'" (1994, p. 91). Not only do the novels and stories that make up this study all feature the same event – the planes crashing into the World Trade Centre – they were all written within a six year period (2002– 2008), and within seven years of the event occurring. Thwaites, Davis and Mules see genre analysis as beneficial because: "by

comparing texts and responses from the same time period one can begin to gauge dominant and alternative ways of understanding a particular topic" (1994, p. 91). Identifying a genre allows a comparison of common and divergent elements within the respective texts and this, according to Thwaites, Davis and Mules:"enables us to measure against each other the changing representations of, and responses to, cultural values and beliefs" (1994, p. 93).

There is, however, a risk that classifying a selection of novels and short stories about 9/11 as a genre in its own right narrows the prism through which the text might be read and cuts across other potential literary genre categories, whether stylistic or thematic (Moon 1992). Todorov (2000) believes this may be the case with a truly great book, which in any case, creates its own genre, but that the best popular literature is that which fits its genre. While highlighting a genre may limit alternative readings of 9/11 literary fiction and the meaning readers might produce from these texts (Moon 1992), this study is specifically seeking to understand the sense that readers will make of 9/11 from literary fiction. In this sense identifying a 9/11 genre can be legitimate and worthwhile.

Leppard (2007) has provided a methodological model for this genre-based approach in her research, *Finding the pen in a pile of grenades: Postmodern American literature, a spectacular definition of terrorism, and the response to 9/11*' (Leppard 2007). Selecting four 9/11 novels: *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) by Jonathan Safran Foer, *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night* (2004) by John Barth, *Falling Man* (2007) by Don DeLillo and *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006) by Ken Kalfus, Leppard identifies twenty elements they each share and compares them to novels about terrorism from pre 2001. This leaves scope for further research across the broader genre of 9/11 literary fiction. I will therefore include twelve texts in the study to expand and more clearly define the genre of 9/11 literary fiction.

Where Leppard's study is restricted to four novels – all by male American writers, I'll broaden the scope to include short stories and works from other perspectives, such as French writer Frederic Beigbedder, British writer Martin Amis, an American writer of Pakistani heritage, Moshin Hamid, and female authors Claire Messud and Deborah Eisenberg (some of which were published since Leppard's study). By studying a wider range of literary fiction, I hope to identify the key elements common to all texts, thereby sharpening the picture successfully framed by Leppard and help present a clearer view of how this event has been mediated through literary fiction. Including a broader range of texts may reveal a variety of voices and the potential for divergent reader response, providing an audience-centred perspective of contemporary novels about terrorism and the 9/11 attacks. A more representative sample of the genre will also allow me to identify changes across the genre through time and perspective, which may be indicative of "a change in attitudes and values" (Thwaites, Davis & Mules 1999, p. 92), and help reveal how readers make sense of the 9/11 attacks by reading literary fiction about that event.

In an analysis of narrative structure in Ian Fleming's James Bond novels, Umberto Eco identified a set of binary oppositions of characters and values that are apparent across the genre, and used these to trace narrative patterns and establish familiar formulas in which readers take comfort and make sense of the novels (Eco 2000). I will adopt a related form for my study, selecting several key relations within the texts. These conceptual pairs can help us discuss how readers may make sense of the September 11 attacks. In the study these pairs are expressed as questions – to subvert a binary hierarchy of terms that may otherwise be assumed:

1) Who is telling the story – the victims or the perpetrators?
2) How is the story being told – First person or Third person?
3) Where is the story happening – New York or Washington?
4) Temporal tropes - when is the story happening – past or otherwise?

5) What happens in the story – global events and the domestic world?
6) Which groups are represented in the story – the powerful or the powerless?

Although these thematic questions are discernable in the novels, under analysis here, the conceptual pairs thus suggested need not be understood as binary oppositions. Moon notes that "through such oppositions, texts, and our ways of reading them, can embody and reproduce certain patterns of thinking" and acknowledges that identifying the links between binary oppositions can help trace "cultural assumptions which have been coded into the text" (Moon 1992, p. 3-4).

The study of binary oppositions does, however, have its limitations. Although logically co-dependent, "one element in a binary opposition is often privileged over the other" (Moon 1992, p. 3), which means that the element listed first sets up a hierarchy (e.g. good/evil) and is seen as the more legitimate of the two. Baudrillard notes this tendency in the west in the framing of 9/11 but observes that 'Good and Evil' can also be understood as a duality: one does not rule over the other, "Good does not conquer Evil, nor indeed does the reverse happen: they are at once both irreducible to each other and inextricably interrelated" (2003, p.13). Thus, he contends that we can only reach an understanding of this event if we "look beyond Good and Evil" as a binary opposition (2003, p. 13). Even so, as Moon also notes, these "patterns of opposing concepts or ideas…work to reproduce a set of beliefs or values, and they serve particular interests" (1992, p. 6) and it is precisely this privileging of one element over the other to "serve particular interests" that might reveal encoded meaning in the novels. As Eco writes, "such structures inevitably entail ideological positions" (2000, p. 120). By tracing these links and picking out the dominant cultural assumptions and intertextual relations across a broad range of texts, I hope to illustrate how readers make sense of 9/11 through reading literary fiction. Nevertheless, I'll use conceptual pairs for my analysis, without assuming they must always be understood as binary oppositions.

2.3. Analysis of book reviews – reading the readers

To gain a sample reader response, I have collected several reviews of each novel or story. Book reviews are written by specialist readers who publish their impressions of the text, creating a record of reading. Reviewers are generally selected because they are adept at identifying narrative signs and patterns and considering a text in the wider context of both literary fiction and the events depicted in the story (Thwaites, Davis & Mules 1994). Also, as Belcher suggests, because book reviews "reduce and summarise, they contribute to the distortions" that are suggested within the text (Belcher 2009, p. 145).

I have selected reviews from a mix of daily newspapers and literary supplements originating in Australia, the United Kingdom and the USA. The publications have been selected with a view to those that might be available to general readers, rather than specialized literary journals.

A network of book reviewers arguably constitutes a virtual book club. Book groups represent existing readership cohorts, or interpretive communities (Fish, 2001). While reviewers don't generally meet to talk together about books, they do publish their personal interpretations of shared experience (Guba & Lincoln 2005), and can play an active and influential role in influencing other people to read, or even not to read, a particular book. By publishing a positive or negative review and setting out arguments for their position, as well as revealing how the story may have influenced their own views, reviewers have a key voice in shaping what sense readers might make of the 9/11 attacks through literary fiction.

2.4. Rationale for sample selection – novels and reviews

In this section I'll outline the emergence of literary fiction about terrorism since the attacks of September 11 2001. In doing so I'll provide a rationale for the

selection of novels and stories to be included in the research and for those that, although related to terrorism and the 9/11 attacks, will be excluded.

Prior to 2001, terrorism and Islam had not figured prominently as topics in western literature (Shriver 2008b). Since the attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, and subsequent attacks in Bali and London, however, terrorism has become increasingly prevalent as a central plot device or theme in western literature (Mishra 2007, Stephens 2007), to the point where they might be considered to constitute a genre (Thwaites, Davis & Mules 1994). During this time a number of well-known writers have published novels and stories about terrorist events and their aftermath or set against a background of terrorism (Shriver 2008a). Novels about September 11 in particular seem to proliferate (Shriver 2008a). What marks this thematic surge as noteworthy is that the novelists in question are not writers of pulp fiction or cheap thrillers, but established writers with strong literary reputations.

2.4.1. Novels and stories about 9/11

A number of the writers who have to contributed to the literary genre of terrorism since September 11 2001 have addressed the events of 9/11 explicitly, situating their characters either in the city of New York, in the World Trade Centre towers or even in the planes at the time of the attack, and incorporating into their narrative the actual moment when the planes hit, either through direct commentary or a character relaying it. Other examples see characters describing the attacks in hindsight, by way of exploring how the attacks led them to their current situation and the subsequent impact of the attacks.

John Updike was one of the first writers to offer a fictional treatment of the September 11 attacks with a short story called *Varieties of Religious Experience* (2002), about events on the day. He followed up with *Terrorist* (2006), a novel about a fictional terrorist plot and one youth's radicalisation stemming from 9/11.

Martin Amis also wrote a short story about one of the hijackers from September 11 called *The Last Days of Muhammad Attar* (2008). Don DeLillo, perhaps the author most associated with literary fiction dealing with terrorism wrote *Falling Man* (2007), about the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, a theme also explored by Jay McInnerney in *The Good Life* (2006) and John Barth in *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night: Eleven Stories* (2004).

Emerging writers of literary fiction with growing reputations have also published work on 9/11, including Frederic Beigbedder, *Windows on the World* (2004), about a father and his two sons trapped in the restaurant at the top of the World Trade Centre; Jonathan Safran Foer's, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) from the perspective of a young boy whose father was killed in the attack; Claire Messud's, *The Emperor's Children* (2006) that locates 9/11 as a pivotal event in the unraveling of privileged lives; Deborah Eisenberg's, *Twilight of the Superheroes* (2006) about a group of young adults who witness the planes crashing into the World Trade Centre; Ken Kalfus', *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006), about a bitter divorce set on September 11; Moshin Hamid's, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) about the radicalisation of a Pakistani-American and Joseph O'Neill's, *Netherland* (2008), that deals with marital discord and cricket in New York post 9/11.

2.4.2. Novels about terrorism influenced by 9/11

While the novels and stories listed above deal specifically with the attacks of 9/11, there are also a number of writers who, since September 11 2001, have published novels and stories addressing the broader topic of terrorism or have set stories in a post 9/11 world, where the events depicted have a beginning in the attacks. There are also examples set in a pre 9/11 world where the reader is relied on to bring their foreknowledge of the attacks. Paul Auster wrote *The Brooklyn Follies* (2006) set in an idealised period immediately before the attacks – the book ends on the morning of September 11 2001, just forty-six minutes

before the first plane hits, and *Man in the Dark* (2008) set partly in a parallel post-September 11 world where the attacks never happened and the towers still stand. Michel Houellebecq wrote *Platform* (2002) about a fictional attack targeting 'decadent' westerners in south-east Asia, thereby anticipating the Bali bombings, while Richard Flanagan wrote *The Unknown Terrorist* (2006) about the paranoia and fear engendered by terrorism, even where no terrorism event occurs. Ian McEwan published *Saturday* (2006) set against the lead up to the invasion of Iraq and on the day of a massive anti-war protest in London, it tells of a contented man enduring his own personal terrorist invasion. Peter Carey wrote *His Illegal Self* (2007) set in the Australian 70s counter-culture with a direct line to America's home-grown radical group the Weathermen, while James Meek published *We Are Now Beginning Our Descent* (2008) set in Afghanistan in the war against the Taliban following the September 11 attacks.

While these books are not explicitly about the 9/11 attacks, it is arguable that they were conceived and written in response to the attacks, and that the themes explored and the events depicted in the respective narratives are influenced by, or have their origins in the attacks.

This study examines the way readers might make meaning from reading literary fiction dealing with terrorism. I will focus on the novels and stories that deal explicitly with the attacks on New York on 11 September 2001 because it inspired the greater volume and variety of literary fiction. The large number of books written about this event makes it useful for a comparative study concerning whether reading a novel or story about this terrorist attack can shape a reader's understanding or perspective of that event. As this was an actual event in recent history, most readers of western literary fiction are familiar with it and possibly witnessed it, as mediated by television, in real time (Stephens 2007, Leppard 2007). As such they bring their own knowledge and interpretations to bear on their reading.

Limiting the study to novels and stories dealing with the September 11 attacks in New York will allow me to compare how the same event is depicted in a range of different texts by different authors. This will provide a basis for an investigation of how readers might make meaning of the event through these texts.

Although the 9/11 attacks also targeted the Pentagon in Washington as well as another unknown site – (the fourth hijacked aircraft crashing over Pennsylvania), works of literary fiction about September 11 have tended to focus exclusively on the New York setting, ignoring other aspects of the attacks (Leppard 2007). There may be several reasons for this, such as the sheer spectacle of the World Trade Centre towers collapsing (Baudrillard 2002), or simply that many of the writers involved in the study live in New York (Leppard 2007). For the purpose of this study, I will focus on literary fiction dealing with the 9/11 attacks on New York and include novels and stories that are at least partly set in New York.

The study will therefore incorporate John Updike's *Varieties of Religious Experience*; Martin Amis' *The Last Days of Muhammad Attar*; Don DeLillo's, *Falling Man*; Jay McInnerney's *The Good Life*; John Barth's *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night: Eleven Stories;* Frederic Beigbedder's *Windows on the World*; Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*; Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children*; Deborah Eisenberg's, *Twilight of the Superheroes*; Ken Kalfus' *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*; Moshin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*.

These books have all been widely read and reviewed and constitute a representative cross-section of literary styles and fiction formats, such as novels and short stories. All of these books incorporate the actual moment when the planes hit, either through direct commentary or a character relaying it, or revolve around the characters reacting to or directly affected by the attack.

I will exclude from the study Paul Auster's *The Brooklyn Follies*. It is set in New York in the months before September 11 2001 and concludes, ominously, on the morning of the attacks, "just forty-six minutes before the first plane crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Centre" (p. 306). As such, it can be read with reference to the attacks as a sort of idyll, or of life in a pre-terrorist New York. However, it does not depict the attack or any of the characters reacting to it. For similar reasons I will exclude Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, John Updike's *Terrorist* and James Meek's *We Are Now Beginning Our Descent,* for while the events depicted have a clear origin in the September 11 attacks, they do not represent the day itself or New York.

I will also exclude from the study novels relating to fictional terrorist attacks, such as *Platform*, or the threat of fictional attacks, as in *The Unknown Terrorist*. Also excluded are novels that may have been inspired by the September 11 attacks, but which are set in different periods, such as *His Illegal Self*, set in the past and *Man in the Dark*, set in an alternative parallel time. Nor will novels about terrorism published prior to September 2001 be included in my sample for genre analysis.

I will centre the study on the novels and stories most directly about 9/11. Understanding the meanings that readers make from novels about 9/11 can show how literary fiction as a form deals with contemporary events and subject matter.

Chapter 3 – In what ways can readers make sense of 9/11 via literary fiction?

"Tall buildings shake
Voices escape singing sad sad songs"

Jesus, Etc - Wilco 2002.

In this chapter I will seek answers to the Research Question by a) outlining the major themes in contemporary western literary fiction about the September 11 attacks and b), exploring how readers, by way of published book reviews, have responded to the texts in light of these themes.

I have identified six major themes, articulated as questions, through which a reader might derive meaning from contemporary western literary fiction about the September 11 attacks: **1)** Who is telling the story – the victims or the perpetrators? **2)** How is the story being told – First person or Third person? **3)** Where is the story happening – New York or Washington? **4)** Temporal tropes - When is the story happening – the past or otherwise? **5)** What happens in the story – global events or the domestic world? **6)** Which groups are represented in the story – the powerful or the powerless?

As discussed earlier, these thematic questions are presented in the form of conceptual pairs that need not be understood as binary oppositions, but may also be read as thematic dualities or relations.

3.1. Who is telling the story – the victims or the perpetrators?

If it is a truism that history is written by the winners, then the verdict on who is the victor in the 'war on terror', or at least the September 11 attacks, is debatable, for

in the case of literary fiction at least, it seems to have been written by the victims - that is, New Yorkers. Among the victims I include those who died or were injured and survived the attack, as well as those who witnessed it, whether in person or via mediation.

In literary fiction about the September 11 attacks, the deaths largely occur offstage. Only four writers are prepared to kill off characters in front of the reader and two of these are focusing on the hijackers. Frederic Beigbedder in *Windows on the World* shows his three main characters expiring in the North tower of the World Trade Centre; John Updike shows Jim Finch falling from the same tower and Caroline plunging to earth on United flight 93 in *Varieties of Religious Experience*; Don DeLillo has the reader riding alongside the hijacker Hammad as he crashes into the World Trade Centre in *Falling Man*; and Martin Amis has the reader watching the hijacker Muhammad Atta in his last second in *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta*.

The majority of these stories emerge from survivors and witnesses, as without them, there is no one to tell the story. As Elizabeth Kiem notes in her review of *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* in the San Francisco Chronicle, few writers: “have ventured to interpret the attacks through anything other than a survivor’s tale. The understandings of being a survivor may range from platitudinous to alarmist, but the internalization of catastrophe remains the literary paradigm.”

Readers of contemporary western literary fiction about the September 11 attacks are thus given a limited perspective on the event. Of the twelve novels and stories included in this study, the predominant voice is that of the victims or survivors of the attack. Ten of the twelve stories are told from the victim or survivor perspective, with only one story, *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta*, told entirely from the point of view of one of the terrorists. Two other stories, *Varieties of Religious Experience* and *Falling Man* offer short sections from the perspective of a perpetrator, but these are couched within a dominant survivor framework. In

Falling Man there are three short sections from the perspective of the terrorist plotters, totaling just 15 pages out of 246, while *Varieties of Religious Experience* (which consists of four vignettes from different characters on September 11), offers only one from the perspective of the terrorists.

One other novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, also presents a Muslim perspective, but of someone who became radicalised by the September 11 attacks. Although the narrator's sympathies lie with the terrorists, he is not an active terrorist at the time of September 11. Even though he describes his reaction to watching the Twin Towers collapse saying, "And then I smiled. Yes, despicable as it may sound, my initial reaction was to be remarkably pleased "(p. 72), he might also be classified as a victim of the attack, as at the time of September 11 he held a good position with a prestigious US company. It was partly the suspicion in which he was held as a Pakistan national in America after 9/11 that radicalised him.

The victims and witnesses of the September 11 attacks who populate these novels and stories are portrayed in a variety of ways, from the precocious and idiosyncratic Oskar and his quietly grieving mother and grandparents in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*; the protective father with his little boys plus the hipster writer from *Windows on the World*; the imaginative Graybard and his provocative muse in *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night*; the measured self-aware Hans in *Netherland*; loner Keith and introspective Lianne in *Falling Man*; the spiteful, self-obsessed Marshall and Joyce in *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*; the introspective Lucien and Nathaniel from *Twilight of the Superheroes*; the loving husband and father Jim Finch stuck in the tower; the frightened old lady on board United flight 93 and the spiritually questioning Dan Kellogg with his daughter and granddaughter from *Varieties of Religious Experience*; and the thoughtful sophistication and infidelities of the cast from *The Good Life* and *The Emperor's Children*.

These characters are expansively drawn and occupy various roles throughout the stories (in many cases more than one simultaneously), including husband, wife, father, mother, son, daughter, friend. Readers are given insight into their loves, jealousies and secret aspirations and in most instances also see them engaging in their specialist professional employment. Oskar's mother in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* works as a lawyer; Carthew Yorston *from Windows on the World* is a Texas real estate agent; Graybard from *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night* is a writer; Hans from *Netherland* is an equities analyst; Keith from *Falling Man* is a lawyer while his wife, Lianne, is an editor who also runs a writing therapy group for people with Alzheimer's. In *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*, Marshall has an office in the World Trade Centre while Joyce has a position that sees her going to talks at Berkeley University. Lucien from *Twilight of the Superheroes* is a director of an art gallery and Nathanniel is an emerging architect, while the cast of *Varieties of Religious Experience* includes a lawyer, Dan Kellogg, and his daughter Gretchen who "works in finance" (p. 2). Of the couples in *The Good Life*, Russell is an editor and his wife Corrine was a lawyer before she gave up work to be a full-time mother, while Luke is a retired investment banker and his wife Sasha a socialite. In *The Emperor's Children*, Murray Thwaite is a renowned journalist and his wife Annabel a lawyer at a not-for-profit social service agency, and Danielle is a documentary film maker.

Thus, with not a menial job among them, readers can get a sense that these characters are living rich, full lives and contributing to society through their various professional capacities. It therefore heightens the pathos that they become victims of this inexplicable attack.

The plotters, on the other hand, are granted only perfunctory characterisation, and even this focuses on their base desires and bodily functions. The Muhammad Atta of *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* suffers from a range of debilitating bodily ailments, including constipation, nausea, bad breath and headaches as well as cutting himself while shaving. He is cast as non-political

and non-religious, which suggests that there isn't even an underlying ideology to his participation in the plot, other than pure malevolence. The only vulnerable trait he exhibits is existential fear, when the reader discovers that the reason for his trip to Portland is to collect a vial of holy water which he believes will protect him from re-living his suicide over and over throughout eternity.

The Mohamed Atta of *Varieties of Religious Experience* is not scared, but exhibits superiority and disgust for American society. In the story he is drunk and in a strip club watching a young woman pole-dance. There are descriptions of unappetising food and his partner Nawaf is seen going to the toilet after drinking too much, from which he emerges "pale" (p. 5).

Falling Man introduces Hammad who is first glimpsed in Hamburg at a mosque, a "shabby building with graffiti smeared on the outer walls and a setting of local strolling whores" (p. 78). Despite his brief page time, Hammad is portrayed with some light and shade – while he's part of the plot to kill, he is also intimidated by the religious certainty and worldliness of the other plotters. He is described, however, by bodily limitations and unsavoury habits: "a bulky man, clumsy" (p. 79). He goes "to the toilet to jerk off" (p. 80), sleeps with a German-Syrian girl and goes on an errand to attack another man without knowing who he is or why he is to assault him. In America he goes for a week without washing or changing his clothes while others in the house pay for sex.

The terrorists appear in only three of the texts and their depiction is limited to going to the toilet – in Mohammad Atta's case unsuccessfully – eating, drinking, vomiting and perfunctory sex via masturbation and visiting whores. Despite the nature of their role in September 11, none are seen studying religious or theological texts or outlining the reasons for the attack they are planning, and only one anonymous man is seen praying, and Hammad, in *Falling Man*, steps over him on his way to the toilet to masturbate.

This narrow characterisation of the terrorists contrasts with the well-rounded, intricately drawn characters of their American counterparts who have hopes, dreams and a network of strong social and family relationships. This may be because unlike the fictional witnesses and victims that populate these stories, the plotters are drawn from actual people about whom little is known, and the writers seem reluctant to invent too much by way of biography. The effect is that readers learn little about them as people, or about their motivation for the attacks, and therefore have less opportunity to empathise or even consider any validity in what they are doing. By comparison, through the sheer amount of detail provided about the victims and survivors, readers are given a far greater opportunity to empathise with their plight.

Even so, some readers do find depth in the portrayal of the terrorists: Tom Bissell in The New York Observer on 1 April 2008 notes that Atta is 'no cartoon' or 'joyless nihilist...The mind of this Muhammad Atta is at once empty and full, dull and terrifying, familiar and extraterrestrial. It is, in other words, convincingly human.' Likewise, the reviewer on the A Few Words website on 8 September 2006, writes that portraying 'Atta as a banal, limited, troubled, individual humanises him: these are not monsters. If they were, the action required would at least be clear.' Anthony Macris, writing in the Sydney Morning Herald on 15 June 2007 sees merit in Don DeLillo's brief portrait of Hammad in *Falling Man*, writing that it 'is all the more potent for its succinctness'.

The reaction of most readers to the portrayal of the terrorists is less positive; Warren Bass writes in The Washington Post on 27 April 2008 of Amis' *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* that there is 'not a lot of insight in this story'. There is also criticism of the depiction of the terrorists in DeLillo's *Falling Man*: Adam Mars-Jones in The Observer on 13 May 2007 labels it 'oddly perfunctory'; Tim Martin in The Independent on 18 May 2007 calls it 'threadbare and cursory'; Michiko Kakutani in The New York Times on 9 May 2007 calls it 'sketchy' while

Frank Rich in the same publication on 27 May 2007 dismisses sections devoted to the terrorists as ‘potted’.

The lack of attention devoted to the perpetrators by writers is reflected in the views of the majority of readers cited who find their portrayal limited and unconvincing. It becomes difficult for readers to understand the motivation of caricatures or empathise with the circumstances that led them to their position. The victims and survivors, on the other hand, are not only the overwhelming focus of literary fiction about the September 11 attacks, but are presented as well-rounded characters with intricate family and friendship networks and professional responsibilities, not unlike the probable readership. Telling stories from the perspective of victims and survivors makes it much more likely that readers will identify and then empathise with their plight. Thus, it would appear that ‘victim’ is privileged over ‘perpetrator’ in a binary opposition within this thematic component of the genre sample.

3.2. How is the story being told – First person or Third person?

Five of the texts in this study: *The Reluctant Fundamentalist, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, Windows on the World, Netherland* and parts of *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night* are told in the First person. The remaining texts, including all three texts that include the perspective of the perpetrators, are told in Third person.

The question of narrative distance is worth considering in relation to literary fiction about September 11. Much of the journalism and writing at the time of the attack was personal testimony detailing the writer’s experience of the attack and it was written in First person. Many of the most powerful and moving of these testimonies were those that contained descriptions or transcriptions of telephone calls made from passengers on the various flights or by people trapped in the

World Trade Centre. This aspect is picked up by three of the texts in the study, including two of those told in the First person. *Windows on the World* offers a direct First person account from a father and his two sons trapped at the top of the North Tower. At one stage the father calls the mother of the children while the reader eavesdrops on the conversation as he explains their predicament.

In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, nine-year old Oskar transcribes his father's phone messages from the tower, including one as it comes in. That he didn't answer the call or tell his mother about the messages remains a source of distress and guilt for him throughout the novel, one the reader can share more readily having heard the calls. The third vignette in *Varieties of Religious Experience* is essentially a transcribed telephone conversation between Jim Finch, a bond trader in the World Trade Centre, and his wife who is at their home in New Jersey after the plane has struck.

As a reader, I found these three accounts to be the most moving as they depict people in the midst of terror at their most vulnerable as they realise their situation. Interestingly, all of the protagonists who are in a position of danger initially lie or downplay the extent of that danger when speaking to their interlocutor. In Windows *on the World*, Carthew tells his ex-wife that "the boys are fine, we're going to do our best to get out of here" (p. 69). Oskar's father leaves a message saying "just wanted to let you know that I'm OK, and not to worry' (p. 15) followed by "I'm okay. Everything. Is. Fine." (p. 69) and he even tells his wife that he got out and is walking home. In *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Jim Finch initially tells his wife "I'm sure it'll work out. I mean, how bad can it be?" (p. 6) These conversations are quoted in the first person and so sound like the characters are trying to protect the reader from the truth, but as readers know the outcome, arguably the conversations use irony to elicit more sympathy from the reader.

Readers offered mixed reviews of these stories. A telling aspect that distinguishes First person narratives from Third person is the emotional involvement of the readers who did enjoy the books, and in some cases, of those who didn't. Writing in The Observer on 13 May 2007, Adam Mars-Jones says that 'the most successful attempts to address in narrative the events of 11 September 2001 have been the most direct' and he cites *Windows on the World* and *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta*, which although it is in Third person, tells of the inner world of Muhammad Atta. This is particularly evident when considering the reader's response from the perspective of whether their personal view of 9/11 was altered by reading literary fiction about it. The books written in the First person have had a greater impact on readers' perceptions of the event.

For example, writing about *Windows on the World*, Laura Miller in Salon.com on 20 March 2005 says that the book 'rings true' while Stephen Metcalf in The New York Times on 17 April 2005 says (despite reservations about the book) that: 'Beigbeder has happened onto something true' and adds that the book is 'strangely moving'. Both contend that the novel helps them understand the tragedy better.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close also attracted mixed responses from readers, but of those that were positive, Priya Jain writing in Salon.com on 20 March 2005 said the book is 'moving', 'mature' and 'clever', and that she found it 'strangely healing'. Ron Charles writing in The Washington Post on 27 March 2005 thought the novel 'hilarious' and 'poignant', and says that 'the tragedy of September 11 has made Oskar older than his years, but in Foer's tender portrayal the grief that weighs him down makes children of us all.'

Discussing *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night*, Blair Mahoney in The Modern Word website considers the book 'imaginative' and 'playful'. He suggests that the experience of reading it has changed his view of September 11, giving him a positive outlook by helping him to recognise that 'storytelling is a life-giving urge'

and that ‘the function of telling stories in times of crisis is to reassert the human capability to shape the world (in the imagination at least).’

Although *Netherland* is told in the First person, it is less explicitly about the September 11 attacks than it is about the effect on the narrator’s family. Dwight Garner in The New York Times on 18 May 2008 comments on the book’s accurate portrayal of how it felt in the aftermath of the attack and of the 'uniquely, dislocated, bewildered quality that typified New York after 9/11’, a point echoed by Lionel Shriver in The Australian Literary Review of 3 September 2008. By reflecting how people felt at the time of the event, literary fiction is arguably helping readers make sense of 9/11, and it seems that this is especially prevalent in First person narratives.

The other First person narrative is *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, which of all the books in this study, I believe to be the most convincing and powerful. Other readers also reacted positively to this book, as it attracted universal praise in the reviews gathered for this study. Generally, the difference between First and Third person narratives is that First person offers just one perspective on the events being described, whereas Third person allows the author to provide a sweeping overview of events and present more than one perspective. In this instance, however, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is able to offer two opposing perspectives: that of someone who is part of America’s capitalism enterprise and who is personally affected by the September 11 attacks – his fiancée is institutionalised, he experiences prejudice and ultimately loses his job and position – but also, someone who grows disenchanted with his position. By describing his gradual radicalisation, the novel manages to present another dimension, thus using a First person framework, and capitalising on the direct storytelling approach this provides, to present a Third person sense that approaches omniscience.

A measure of the positive response to this book is its ability to influence views on the September 11 attacks amongst those who've read it. Jim Ottewill in The Observer on 11 March 2007 says that it accurately reflects subsequent mistrust and suspicion between east and west; Soumya Bhattacharya in The Sydney Morning Herald on 14 April 2007, agrees, saying it 'offers up a mirror to the complex business of east-west encounters in these troubled times.' Alastair Sooke in The Telegraph on 18 April 2007 thinks it a 'sharp, relevant book' that 'is a microcosm of the cantankerous suspicion between East and West'.

The comments of readers, as presented in book reviews, suggest that a convincing First person narrative can resonate deeply. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* offers two opposing views on the attacks, whereas *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *Windows on the World* give readers the chance to empathise, as well as sympathise, with victims. In both instances, the narrative device of First person lends the story an authenticity that helps readers make sense of 9/11.

3.3. Where is the story happening - New York or Washington?

Leppard (2007) noted in her study of four novels that the focus of 9/11 literary fiction was firmly on New York and the strike on the World Trade Centre, to the exclusion of the attack on the Pentagon in Washington and the other unknown target, also thought to be in Washington. This study asks if the same bias is evident over an expanded genre of twelve books.

Of the novels and stories in this study, which include the four in Leppard's original study, only one, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, explicitly focuses on one of the planes heading for Washington. While the majority of the story is set in New York, the fourth vignette features a character called Caroline on board United flight 93 that crashes in a field in Pennsylvania. In *A Disorder Peculiar to*

the Country, Joyce is meant to be on the same United Airlines flight but the 'talks' she was scheduled to attend in Berkeley were cancelled so she did not board the flight. *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night* mentions the attack on the Pentagon and United Airlines flight 93 in passing, while *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta* makes reference to the Pentagon and Capitol arms of the operation, but the story centres on one of the pilots earmarked to crash into the World Trade Centre.

Aside from these minor references, not one of the stories is centred on the attack on the Pentagon or the United Airlines flight 93 that didn't reach its target, presumed to be the Capitol or the White House in Washington. There may be a number of reasons behind the emphasis on New York as the focus of the September 11 attack in literary fiction – the symbolic and dramatic collapse of the towers, the existence of footage of the planes flying into the World Trade Centre (whereas there is no footage of plane hitting the Pentagon or United 93 crashing in the field) or the fact, as Leppard (2007) highlights, that there are survivors and witnesses of the World Trade Centre attack, whereas no one survived the struggle on board United 93. Or it may simply be that a number of the authors who wrote these books actually live in New York and felt personally attacked. Reviewing Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* In The Age on 25 February 2006, Jennifer Levasseur notes that a number of New York's resident novelists, including Jonathan Safran Foer, Paul Auster and now, Jay McInerney, have written about September 11. Don DeLillo, Joseph O'Neill and Deborah Eisenberg, whose books are included in this study, also live there. Paul Gray of The New York Times quotes from an interview given by McInerney in which he says 'As a novelist who considers New York his proper subject, I didn't see how I could avoid confronting the most important and traumatic event in the history of the city'.

Irrespective of the reason for this focus on New York over Washington, it sets up a contrast, not necessarily between the two cities, but between a civilian target, the World Trade Centre, and a political target, the Pentagon and either The

White House or the Capitol. An attack on a civilian target rather than a political target might resonate more with readers who will feel more connected, or more personally at risk. In this instance, readers may feel under attack personally, rather than through the agency of the government or military, and may therefore empathise more readily with those who are victims. This empathy may even be heightened by what Baudrillard referred to as “the profound pleasure of not being there” (1998, p. 34). A book, like other media, is an attempt to place people in ‘the heart of reality’ (1998, p. 34). A book, however, can only ever be a representation of reality; yet the more convincing the portrayal of reality, the more vicarious vulnerability a reader might feel at an attack on a civilian target or the more comforted they might feel that they weren’t present. In this sense, readers might read literary fiction about civilians being victims of 9/11 and experience the ‘profound pleasure of not being there.’

3.4. Temporal tropes - When is the story happening - the past or otherwise?

The attacks on New York and Washington are referred to in shorthand by the date on which they occurred – nine-eleven. Although there is a new nine-eleven each year, and despite the American ordering of month and day being reversed in other countries, such as Australia, it is universally understood that ‘nine-eleven’ refers to just one day in history, September 11, 2001. And as highlighted in the section above, one could almost say that it refers to just one place, New York City.

Despite this fixing of date to one particular day, literary fiction about 9/11 contains a dual aspect of time being staked to a particular moment and place and yet also recurring.

Three of the books use a stipulated time frame as chapter headings: the successive chapters of *Windows on the World* count down in one minute

intervals from 8.30, sixteen minutes before the first plane hit the North Tower, to 10.29, when North Tower collapses. *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* divides its chapters according to months, starting with September, and then moving through into 2002, while *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night* commences on the evening of September 11 with First Night, followed by Second Night, Third Night and so on.

There are also examples within texts of time being measured: the muse's room in *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night* contains a digital bedside clock that repeatedly flashes 9:11 9:11 9:11, while in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Oskar notes the time of his father's phone messages from the World Trade Centre, '8:52 A.M., 9:12 A.M., 9.31 A.M., 9.46 A.M. and 10.04 A.M.'

This fixing of time acts as a reference for readers, an historical marker against which all other events are located, as in before 9/11 and after 9/11, and serves as an ever-present reminder of the event.

Alongside this notion of fixed or measured time are examples of recurring time, where the story folds back on itself or shifts between present, future and past. The most striking example of this is at the end of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* when Oskar flips through the series of Richard Drew's iconic photographs of an unidentified man falling head first from the World Trade Centre. Thinking it might be his father, Oskar reverses the sequence so that the man appears to be ascending, not falling. In his narration, Oskar continues his father's backward journey back into the building, down the elevator, back to the subway, back to his station, eventually bringing him all the way home where he will be safe. The reader is invited to participate in this experiment in moving time backwards, as the sequence of images of the falling man are included in reverse order, so that as you flip through them at the end of the book, the man ascends from the ground up. It is a moving scene that actively enlists readers to become accomplices in reversing time and adding to the emotional impact of the novel's

conclusion. John Updike, writing in The New Yorker on 14 March 2005 considers it ‘one of the most curious happy endings ever contrived, and unexpectedly moving’ while Tom Barbash in the San Francisco Chronicle on 3 April 2005 finds the same device to be ‘horrific’ and that it ‘cheapens a gorgeous and beautifully sad moment’.

If time moves backwards in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, it shifts in every direction in *Twilight of the Superheroes*. The story opens in an imagined future with Nathaniel telling hypothetical grandchildren about the Y2K scare, and from there time expands and contracts, speeds up, slows down and slips in and out of the past, present and future. The story, however, continues to light on the moment when Nathaniel and his friends witness the planes hitting the World Trade Centre from the balcony of their apartment. “This moment is joined to all the other moments they’ve spent together here, and all of those moments are Right Now” (Eisenberg 2006, p. 27-28). There will be no escape from that moment, “Hour after hour, month after month, waiting for that day to not have happened. But it had happened. And now it was always going to have happened” (Eisenberg 2006, p. 28). Writing about this story in The Harvard Book Review, Emer Vaughan notes the fragmented time structure and believes it represents not only the different moods of New York (‘beloved home’, ‘fearsome metropolis’) but also the ‘discontinuity between pre and post 9/11 New York’, a point highlighted by Lucien’s dilemma, “It was Lucien’s city, Lucien’s times, yet what he appeared to be living in wasn’t the actual present – it was an inaccurate representation of the past” (Eisenberg 2006, p 36-37).

In *The Last Days of Mohammad Atta* and *Falling Man*, time folds back on itself with both stories ending where they begin, yet transformed. *The Last Days of Mohammad Atta* traces the pilot of the second plane as he wakes in Portland on the morning of September 11. He had made a trip to Portland to obtain holy water that is said to prevent a suicide from repeating his or her death throughout eternity. After the attack, the story ends with him waking again on his last day,

doomed to repeat it again and again. Thus, Amis would appear to be 'buying into' the metaphysics of radical Islam; while at the same time relegating it to a subordinate position in a binary of 'victim/perpetrator', somehow outside of time.

Falling Man commences with Keith emerging from the World Trade Centre and ends with the plane knocking him "out of his chair and into a wall" (p. 239), from where he escapes the tower and links up with where he was at the beginning of the novel.

Other readers did not comment on the notion of time being simultaneously fixed and recurring, but I found that it had the effect of staking readers to a particular moment – '9:11 9:11 9:11' as the digital clock flashes in *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night* (Barth 2004, p. 35), no matter where storylines led, back to the past or into the future. The recurring time motif in fragmented narratives such as *Falling Man* or *Twilight of the Superheroes*, continually brought me back to the jets into skyscrapers moment. Readers might get a sense that they can never escape that moment. As the narrator of *Windows on the World* observes, "some seconds are longer than others" and "time will become elastic" (Beigbedder 2004, p. 2). Returning to the moment of the attack may cause readers to believe that, in a sense, the attack is continuing to happen; will always be happening. The ramifications, therefore, will continue to reverberate and this may instill in readers an ongoing sense of empathy for the victims, or even fear of the perpetrators. When textual time returns readers back to the moment of the attack, it could reinforce the way they interpret the attacks, although this temporal trope would appear to allow for both binary and more dualistic readings of the conceptual pairs at play in it.

3.5. What happens in the story – global events or the domestic world?

Leppard (2007) identified that marital conflict and dysfunction were common traits in the four books in her study. It is noteworthy that this theme of changing

domestic relationships or fractured families remains the predominant theme across the expanded genre of literary fiction relating to the September 11 attacks. In eleven of the twelve books included in this study, the global resonance of the September 11 attacks is reflected by a change in the domestic relationships of the characters in the respective novels and stories. The only book not to include this plot development is Martin Amis', *The Last Days of Muhammad Atta*, which focuses on the inner life of one of the terrorists. In all of the stories set among victims of the attack, the traditional nuclear family either doesn't exist or there is a rupture to its arrangement during the course of the narrative.

Varieties of Religious Experience consists of four short vignettes featuring people – victims, witnesses and perpetrators – captured in a particular moment during, or in the case of the story about Mohamed Atta, before the attack. In one vignette Jim Finch is speaking to his wife from the hundredth floor of the World Trade Centre where he is trapped. During their conversation he broaches his possible death and gives his blessing for his wife to "do whatever you want…don't let anything cramp your style" (Updike 2002, p 7). After hanging up he rushes "across the hot floor to his co-workers clustered at the windows. They were his family now" (Updike 2002, p 8). Gretchen, from one of the other vignettes, is also identified as the "tough-minded survivor of divorce" (Updike 2002, p. 10).

The book that most clearly explores the trope of marital conflict is *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*. This story opens on September 11 with Joyce and Marshall already in the throes of separation. The premise of the novel is that both of them should have been killed on the day; Marshall in his office on the 80th floor of the World Trade Centre and Joyce on board United Airlines flight 93. Both are secretly delighted to think that the other is dead, but Marshall escapes from the tower and Joyce's conference is cancelled at the last so she doesn't take the flight. The enmity between them escalates after September 11 and the couple finally divorce with Marshall moving out of the family home. A fantasy ending to

the novel sees Osama bin Laden captured and a celebratory crowd gathering at Ground Zero where Marshall and Joyce are reunited as they are pressed together in the crowd. The simultaneous resolution of both conflicts provides readers with a clear link between global events and Marshall and Joyce's relationship, and the improbable outcomes suggest that a happy ending in either case is a fantasy.

Readers have noted the parallel between global and domestic events in this novel, with Mark Lawson in the Guardian on 14 October 2006 noting that 'the personal and political consistently intertwine' and suggesting that the book 'perhaps too obviously' equates 'domestic and international suspicion and revenge'. Nevertheless, as Jonathan Yardley writes in The Washington Post on 1 August 2006, 'It was precisely such hatred, on a global scale, that motivated the hijackers of September 2001'. Daniel Asa Rose also acknowledges that 'our private lives have proved all too pervious to global pressures' and recognises how this novel illustrates the way 'those pressures menace the family unit.' Laura Miller in Salon.com on 25 July 2006 believes that the dovetailing of global events into domestic scenarios provides a comparison point that shows us how remote conflicts work.

Keith Neudecker walks out of the World Trade Centre at the beginning of *Falling Man*, but instead of going home, he goes to the home of his estranged wife Lianne and their son Justin. This in itself represents a disruption to domestic relationships, but Keith compounds this by beginning an affair with another survivor whose briefcase he has inadvertently carried with him from the World Trade Centre. By novel's end the affair has ended and Keith is spending most of his time on the poker circuit, while Lianne has found comfort in religion, "She was ready to be alone, in reliable calm, she and the kid, the way they were before the planes appeared that day, silver crossing blue" (DeLillo 2007, p. 236). Anthony Marcis in the Sydney Morning Herald on 15 June 2007 reads *Falling Man* as a 'sombre and nuanced reflection on how a decisive turning point in American (and

global) history affects a single family.' It is also an example of September 11 causing a temporary change in the domestic set up, which over time reverts to the domestic set up that had existed on September 10.

In *The Emperor's Children*, renowned journalist and thinker Murray Thwaite is having an affair with his daughter's best friend, Danielle. On the morning of the attack he wakes up in Danielle's apartment after staying the night. After watching the towers fall from Danielle's apartment he returns to be with his wife, effectively ending the affair. This leaves Danielle shattered, and as Kate Levin points out in The Nation on 14 September 2006, in relation to Danielle, but also the other characters in the ensemble, 'the public tragedy doesn't eclipse but rather seeps into and amplifies their private sorrows'. The nature of life's tragedies, she contends, is that 'they don't compete; they compound.'

The Good Life traces the domestic lives of Russell and Corrine Calloway and Luke and Sasha McGavock. After the attack, Corrine and Luke meet when they volunteer at a soup kitchen set up to assist rescue workers at Ground Zero. They begin an affair and become disenchanted with their respective spouses, whose infidelities are also documented. Adam Mars-Jones notes in The Observer on13 May 2007 that in *The Good Life*, 'apocalypse and atrocity yielded to adultery and conversation.' Jennifer Levasseur in The Age on 25 February 2006, however, believes that the book 'transcends' September 11 to become a love story, 'not a political treatise.' In the end, although the stability of the respective families is briefly threatened, the two families remain together in their original units – attending a Christmas performance of the Nutcracker with their children. This highlights what Louis Menand notes in The New Yorker on 6 February 2006 as the temporary nature of change brought about by disaster, and that afterwards, they wanted 'to hang on to the past, and to cherish whatever in the way of normalcy they had had on September 10th. They didn't fight off their lives; they made peace with them.'

The September 11 attacks also bring about a temporary change in the domestic set up of Hans and Rachel in *Netherland*. Married and living in a TriBeca apartment, close to the World Trade Centre, they are forced to move to the Chelsea Hotel after the attack. The marriage breaks up with Rachel and their child moving back to England leaving Hans in New York. Hans says, “it was me, not terror she was fleeing” (O’Neill 2008, p. 27), but her reasons all stem from the attack, and as Lionel Shriver notes in The Australian Review of Books on 3 September 2008, ‘We have the unfocused sense that the sudden separation between the narrator and his wife has something to do with an emotional reboot that the fall of the towers occasioned.’ By novel’s end, however, the family is back living together in England, reinforcing the notion that changes wrought by 9/11 were temporary.

Even so, the change in the domestic world is all too permanent for some characters. Carthew Yorston from *Windows on the World* is separated from his wife, and she will be separated from her children forever after they perish in the towers. Oskar’s mother in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is widowed after 9/11, and the domestic change is compounded when she begins a relationship with Ron, who she meets at a victim support group. In a separate story, Oskar’s grandparents, who have been apart for 40 years, both obsessively write letters that Priya Jain in Salon.com on 20 March 2005 considers an attempt to ‘explain…the work of creating a normal life after tragedy.’

It is perhaps imaginary, but even *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night* depicts a temporarily altered domestic set up after 9/11. The Original Author, who is dismissed as the “Mere Narrative Hardware” (Barth 2004, p. 5) is married, but Graybard, the Present Teller of the stories who embodies the Author’s Narrative Imagination, indulges in nightly trysts with his muse, Wysiwyg (What You See Is What You Get). She inspires him to tell a series of “irrelevant stories” (Barth 2004, p. 7) as a sort of therapy for the horror of September 11, between which they engage in sexual encounters.

Nathaniel and three of his friends, all in their early twenties, offer a different domestic set up in *Twilight of the Superheroes*. Through Nathaniel's uncle Lucien, they are sub-letting an apartment owned by Japanese businessman Mr Matsumoto while he is away on business. From Mr Matsumoto's apartment they enjoy "probably the best view on the planet. Then, one morning, out of a clear blue sky, it became, for a while, probably the worst" (Eisenberg 2006, p. 16) as the group witness the towers burning. After the attack when New York is judged to be back to normal, Mr Matsumoto prepares to return and the friends must leave the apartment. "Yeah, he and his three friends might all be going their separate ways, come to think of it, once they move out" (Eisenberg 2006, p. 28), breaking up their domestic group, illustrating what Kasia Boddy, writing in The Observer on 16 July 2006, believes to be the author 'considering political contexts and resonances of personal lives.'

In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, there is a much clearer connection between 9/11 and the change to Changez's domestic situation. It is not so much that his girlfriend, Erica, is admitted to a mental institution and eventually disappears, but that Changez himself relocates from New York to Lahore, and swaps his America identity for his original Pakistan identity. The domestic change is not one of personnel, but of residency, which ultimately leads to a change in ideology.

This book is less typical of the genre in that it is overtly political, whereas the majority of books in the study consider 9/11 from a more personal basis. Given the overwhelming political framework of 9/11 however, readers might infer from the parade of adultery, separation and divorce violating the domestic harmony of these characters, that there is palpable change brought about by 9/11. Six of the selected texts, *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country, Falling Man, The Emperor's Children, The Good Life*, *Netherland* and to a certain extent, *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night*, share a similar plot trajectory in that the domestic relationship

is temporarily ruptured by September 11, only to reassert itself as couples drift back together, or apart, as they were at the beginning of the book.

It seems from the testimonies offered in reviews that readers note where the personal is 'standing-in' for the political or global in these novels. Also, they seem to accept that they might glean something from this transposition. As Zadie Smith notes in her review of *Netherland* in the New York Review of Books on 20 November 2008, "only the personal offers this possibility of transcendence." Arguably, readers see not only the impact of 9/11 on the individual lives of the characters in these stories, but can extrapolate that to the global situation.

3.6. Which groups are represented in the story – the powerful or the powerless?

A noteworthy element of the genre of September 11 literary fiction is the presence of children. This shouldn't seem unusual in a genre where domestic and familial relationships act as a key trope, but it is not usually a common trait of other genres of adult literary fiction. What is also noteworthy is that for an event so rich in political ramifications, not one of the texts features a real or imagined political personage. From President to Mayor, even to firefighters, so highly regarded in the personal testimony and journalism of the period, few authoritarian figures are represented. Given this absence of the powerful, the presence of children, the most powerless, arguably works as an implicit critique of the adult world by inverting the 'adult/child' binary.

Leppard (2007) noted that some portion of three of the four novels in her study were either narrated by or seen through the eyes of children. In the expanded genre of this study, young children feature in seven of the twelve texts. Even by subverting the notion of power to argue that it is the terrorists who hold it, you notice that children outnumber terrorists in these texts, and that the number of books featuring children far outweighs the number of books featuring terrorists.

This is perhaps an obvious trope for literary fiction related to such a notorious terror attack, but it may help us understand the sort of meaning readers will take from this fiction.

In most cases the children are simply observers or witnesses. In *Netherland*, Hans and Rachel's son Jake is an infant at the time of the attack and his presence in the narrative simply serves as a reason for Rachel to return to London in the wake of the attack. In *Falling Man*, Keith's son Justin and his friends, Robert and Katie, search the sky with binoculars looking for more planes and for Bill Lawton – their misheard name for bin Laden. They play more of a figurative than active role.

Likewise in *The Good Life* where there are two sets of offspring – Russell and Corrine's twins, Storey and Jeremy and Luke and Sasha McGavock's teenage daughter, Ashley. The twins don't play a major role in the story and Ashley's main role seems to be to illustrate a gulf between generations and to highlight the disengagement of her parents.

Marshall and Joyce's children in *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*, Viola and Victor, are also observers, but they are observing 9/11 through the prism of their parents' divorce and in this sense they become personally involved. According to Mark Lawson in The Guardian on 14 October 2006, the children are 'innocent victims' of Marshall and Joyce's own war of terror against each other. Indeed, they even have a game where they jump off a porch to mimic victims of the World Trade Centre attack, "We were playing 9/11" Viola says (Kalfus 2006, p. 115). The chapter called *May* is even narrated from Viola's perspective. In this chapter she tries to set out known 'facts' and derive an overarching meaning that will help explain her parents behavior. Listing her facts, she mixes personal observation of her parents' behavior with facts about the September 11 attacks "they flew into the World Trade Center on purpose" (Kalfus 2006, p. 127). In one scene, at the conclusion of a particular nasty argument, Viola notices the

“impeccably cloudless daylit sky. She contemplated the blue for some time as if it held some all-explaining vital secret” (Kalfus 2006, p. 141). This recalls the cloudless blue sky on the morning of September 11. The next moment Victor launches a small plane from a slingshot that crashes into a vase which then smatters and crumbles. The symbolism obviously calls to mind the attack on the World Trade Centre but also reflects how in the minds of the children, the attack melds with their parents’ bitter arguments.

In *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Victoria is prevented from watching television or looking out the window as the disaster unfolds. But she grows interested in the recovery and clean-up and talks of ‘bad men’ who did this and a time when the towers are put back. Her sister Hermione, however, says “children shouldn’t see what you’re all looking at. It’s scary” (Updike 2002, p. 11). Jim Finch, stuck in the tower regrets that he will miss his child Annie’s soccer match. In this story, only the baby that Caroline overhears crying on board United flight 93 is directly involved in the attack.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close and *Windows on the World* both depict children directly involved, not only in the attack, but also playing a prominent role in the story. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is narrated by nine year-old Oskar whose father is killed in the attack, while *Windows on the World* centres on the death in the towers of Jerry and David, along with their father Carthew.

Using a child narrator in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* gives the reader direct access to the pain Oskar feels at the death of his father. According to Walter Kirn in The New York Times on 3 April 2005, it also evokes for the reader the ‘innocent New York that was vaporized…when the towers were toppled.’ Despite the potential for a child’s perspective to add poignancy – one of the chief reasons Priya Jain in salon.com finds the novel ‘touching’ and John Updike in The New Yorker finds it ‘unexpectedly moving’ – it can only be so if the child is

credible, and Tom Barbash in the San Francisco Chronicle finds him unbelievable as a nine year-old.

In *Windows of the World* the reader counts down the final minutes of Jerry and David, knowing how the story will end from the very outset of the novel. Aside from Jim Finch and Caroline, who are briefly sketched in the moments before their deaths in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, these two children, together with their father are the only main characters in the genre that actually die in the attack, imbuing them with extra significance.

Overall, although a number of children populate these stories, they play a relatively minor role. Readers noting this will possibly invest them with a metaphorical or symbolic value. Children might be said to represent two things: innocence and the next generation. A popular, if not necessarily accurate, journalistic interpretation of 9/11 at the time was that America lost its innocence. This might be a straight-forward interpretation of the killing of the two children in *Windows on the World*, but the actions of other children, such as Ashley's drug overdose in *The Good Life* or the 'playing' of 9/11 by Victor and Viola in *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* might also be read in this light. Or the simple fact of children witnessing the attack could be read as a sign that the events of September 11 will reverberate through generations. Children make for sympathetic characters and one reason they might feature more than politicians or other representations of state authority is that they have the potential to illicit both sympathy and empathy from readers. This helps readers derive meaning, which might explain why the books cited by readers as being 'strangely moving', 'touching' and 'unexpectedly moving' are those in which children figure prominently.

3.7 Summary

By answering the research question via the six thematic questions, key elements across the genre have emerged to reveal how readers might make sense of 9/11 through literary fiction.

The majority of the stories are told from a victim's perspective. The victims are well-developed characters with families and professions who are unwittingly caught up in the attacks or who witness them first hand. Although there are very few deaths among the main characters across the genre, the lives of the survivors and witnesses are disrupted and their relationships damaged as a result of the attacks, with their family or domestic situation quite changed by the event. In the few brief instances where the story is presented from the perspective of the perpetrators, readers are not given any sense of an overriding ideological viewpoint motivating them, or any hint of religious devotion among them. Instead of the marriages, children and professional employment that characterise the victims, the perpetrators are presented to readers as deviants or degenerates with base desires. Referring to the portrayal of terrorists in 9/11 literary fiction, Mishra believes that the novelistic treatment "reduces individuals as well as movements to stereotypical motivations" (Mishra 2007) and criticises DeLillo for failing to "analyse in the light of the biggest ever terrorist atrocity, the origin and appeal of political violence" (Mishra 2007).

The genre of 9/11 literary fiction focuses on the attack on New York City and almost completely ignores the attacks, both successful and unsuccessful, on Washington. This serves to highlight that civilians rather than government or military personnel were the target and the victims of the attack. Notwithstanding the symbolism of the attack on the World Trade Centre, overlooking the strike on Washington arguably denies readers a sense of ideological motivation behind the attacks. The World Trade Centre attacks are seen through the eyes of characters who are presented in the context of their family and social responsibilities, rather

than any role they might play in the world's economic markets. Readers are invited to be sympathetic towards them, reinforcing the idea that the victims are noble innocents of an unprovoked assault; a point which might earn the empathy of readers.

Innocence itself is summoned in the form of children who run through these novels. The lives of children are influenced, and in some cases, ended by the attacks. Readers thus may find that the most moving moments in this genre are those involving children: the deaths of Jerry and David in the tower and Oskar bringing his father back through time by running the Falling man photos in reverse. In two books, children 'play' at 9/11 by jumping from a height or searching the sky for planes. This causes me to imagine the potential psychological impact of the attack on young people over time and generations.

The effects of the attack emerge through temporal tropes of recurring and fixed time. Where some stories fix the day, hour and minute of the attack, reinforcing in readers the memory of the event, others use the notion of fragmented narrative to return to the time of the attack more than once. As a reader I find that returning to the attack evokes the impression that the attack is always likely to recur, or is in fact always recurring. Returning to the attack in the narrative makes it resonate, reinforcing the reader's vulnerability and empathy or identification with victims.

The reader's identification with victims is most pronounced in the stories told from the First person perspective. Although this applies to only four of the texts in this study, these are the four texts that book review readers found to be the most moving or convincing. All First person characters undergo a profound change as a direct result of the attacks; in particular the father and his two sons trapped in the tower in *Windows of the World* and the boy whose father is killed in the tower in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. These novels, presented as

autobiographical accounts from victims, and involving children, evoke the most empathy from readers.

Together, the six themes highlighted across the gene of 9/11 western literary fiction present a view of the attack that, while not necessarily uniform, constitutes a broad discourse through which readers might reach consensual understanding of what the 9/11 attacks mean. This view, however, is arguably limited, as the majority of stories present a similar perspective of an inexplicable and violent attack on innocent New York citizens whose lives are terminated, traumatised or thrown off course as a result. While this was certainly the case for a great many people, it doesn't represent the full scope of the event. The perpetrators of the attack for instance, are barely considered, and where they are, it is only in a dismissive and derogatory way. As a result there is little investigation as to why the attacks may have occurred, or how the USA may have invited or contributed to the attack. Based on the answers to thematic questions posed at the outset, readers are not encouraged to consider this aspect.

Only one novel, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, explores this angle in any depth and it is notable for being the one book to garner unanimous and overwhelming positive reviews from readers. The positive response to this book suggests that readers are open to a variety of voices and views about the event and can make sense of it, perhaps better sense of it, when presented with a novel that one reader, Soumya Bhattacharya, says: "shows us the post-September 11 world from another angle. In doing so he offers up a mirror to the complex business of East-West encounters in these troubled times" (Bhattachaya Sydney Morning Herald 2007). Or as Alistair Sooke simply says, it: "entertains at the same time as it makes you think" (Sooke 2007).

Conclusion

Like comedy, tragedy can be a matter of timing. Just as in comedy, the time to write about a tragedy is not always in tune with the time to read about it. The slow form of the novel mercifully buys writers time, but even so, their words can be published 'too soon' for some sensibilities. Priya Jain opens her review of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by saying: "I haven't been too keen to read any of the …9/11 novels…That date still feels too close, too fresh in the memory to necessitate a literary reminder" (Jain 2005). Yet the singularity and symbolism of 9/11 has inspired a genre of literary fiction. For some, this genre has emerged 'too soon'. For others it has become a step towards national healing.

To answer my research question I have drawn on book reviewers as sample readers and while some reviewers have cited instances of books being moving or even 'strangely healing' (Jain 2005), others have raised the issue of whether literary fiction has any business dealing with 9/11. In his review of *The Book of Ten Nights and a Night* in the San Francisco Chronicle on 18 April 2004, Daniel Handler mimics Barth's own style to comment: "Admit that Sept.11 as literary device is sure to make some cringe".

Jonathan Yardley expresses disquiet over this issue. Reviewing *Falling Man* in the Washington Post on 13 May 2007, he accuses DeLillo of: "piggybacking on 9/11" and "letting the shock of Sept.11 do his work for him…counting on those vivid images cemented in our memories to give this novel the force he's unable to instill in it himself". This echoes Beigbeder's accusation against himself in *Windows on the World*: "in leaning on the first great hyperterrorist attack, my prose takes on a power it would otherwise not have" (Beigbeder 2004, p. 295). As Michel Faber notes in his review of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* on 4 June 2005: "For many readers, these events are so potent that any fiction dealing with them automatically swells with poignancy". All too aware of this, Beigbeder concedes his novel: "uses tragedy as a literary crutch", but asks:

“what else is there to write? The only interesting subjects are those which are taboo” (Beigbeder 2004, p. 295).

This study highlights that existing research on literary fiction relating to terrorism in general, and 9/11 in particular, focuses mainly on how writers, or the producers, have represented terrorist attacks, with little commentary on how readers interpret the texts, or how they might use literary fiction to make sense of terrorism and 9/11. Having identified a genre of 9/11 literary fiction, this study has sought to close that research gap by examining thematic questions raised by the texts from the perspective of how readers might interpret them. The findings show that western literary fiction doesn’t currently reflect the full scope of 9/11.

If readers are offered a blinkered view of 9/11, they may be able to make only partial sense of it. Polysemy or varied readings are certainly possible, as Fiske (2002) highlights, but readers may find it challenging to engage in this critical exercise over the course of several books. This highlights the point made by McKee, that while a text may produce any number of “possible interpretations, some…will be more likely than others” (2001, p. 140).

It is therefore understandable that American authors feel compelled to write about the American experience of the attack, at least initially. It might be a way of absorbing the shock, paying tribute, or documenting their time and place. In doing so, however, they risk transmitting the trauma of 9/11 to readers through their focus on civilian victims, marital discord and the impact on children. Nevertheless, perhaps novelists in future will respond to readers’ dissatisfaction with the limited perspectives of this event by exploring further and finding stories that present opposing or more nuanced views. Jay Parini expresses this hope. In his review of *The Good Life* in The Guardian on 11 March 2006, he wonders if: “in future work McInerney will begin to question this lopsided world.” Should he and other writers make this leap, they might join readers in a process that sees literary fiction finding a role in healing the trauma caused by 9/11.

As discussed earlier, working in an extended literary form takes time and perhaps more time will need to elapse before writers have developed a sufficiently mature understanding of the event to tell stories that represent its full scope. Mark Tewfik, reviewing *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* writes that: "Our expectations of novelists are high – we look to them for a deeper understanding of the events that shape our lives. Yet for all the talk of perspective and understanding requiring distance, there's no escaping the fact that novels simply take a long time to write" (Tewfik 2005). Another reviewer, Michiko Kakutani writes that: "not enough time has passed for any novelist to put the events of that day and its shuddering consequences into historical perspective" (Kakatuni 2007). Mishra adds that: "recent novels may turn out to be only the first draft of a rich literature" (Mishra 2007). As readers, perhaps we need to be patient with our writers, knowing that they have the capacity for great depth and perspicacity. "There is great fiction yet to be written about 9/11" (Cosgrove 2006). We must wait for this 'great fiction', or what Don DeLillo referred to as the 'counter-narrative,' to fully emerge.

Should this counter-narrative emerge over the next five to ten years, a topic for future research might be to investigate if a more nuanced view has become evident in western literary fiction. For example, one could ask if dualities more than binaries become a structuring element in these books of the future. It would also be instructive to research literary fiction from the Muslim world to determine if a 9/11 genre has emerged in that tradition, and if so, to identify the themes and representation that are evident, as well as how readers of those books might make sense of 9/11 via this literary fiction.

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