



Josiah Myka, 10, glances at flags placed in the names of 9/11 first responders inscribed at the National September 11 Memorial & Museum.

Kathy Willens / Reuters

# What's the Best Way to Teach Kids About Tragedy?

One children's book series always places a young protagonist at the center of the devastation.

BARBARA SPINDEL | NOV 18, 2015 | EDUCATION

We were at Barnes & Noble browsing one Sunday afternoon, when my 8-year-old son ran up waving a chapter book that he wanted to buy. The title of the book: *I Survived the Attacks of September 11, 2001*. Upon seeing the cover, I flinched, as did the friend whom I was with. We took one look at the jacket's illustration—which shows a boy from behind, staring up at the Twin Towers as they burn—and blurted, “No!”

Growing up in Brooklyn, my son had long been aware that the two tall towers once stood across the river. But some months before stumbling upon the book, he'd arrived home from school wide-eyed and said, “I didn't realize that bad guys made the buildings come down.” “That's true,” I replied. But because he didn't ask any questions, I said nothing more, figuring he'd broach the subject again when he was ready.

It's not uncommon for parents to struggle with how to speak to their children about difficult, complicated, and inherently frightening topics. The question feels urgent in the immediate aftermath of the Paris attacks: Recent days have seen a profusion of articles counseling parents and teachers on how to talk about the events. The attacks of 9/11 happened before today's grade schoolers were alive but have in many ways shaped the world into which they were born.

Organizations like the 9/11 Memorial and the Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility recommend a gentle, honest, and straightforward approach. A number of 9/11-themed books have been written to help young readers begin to grasp the unimaginable; some get at the topic symbolically, while others bring to mind Mr. Rogers' famous suggestion to "look for the helpers" following a tragedy. Maira Kalman's picture book *Fireboat* tells of a restored 1930s fireboat that was called into action the day of the attacks; *The Survivor Tree* recounts the story of a pear tree that was pulled from the World Trade Center rubble and eventually replanted on the 9/11 Memorial's plaza; *14 Cows for America* describes a gift from the people of a remote Kenyan village to the United States after the attacks.

*I Survived the Attacks of September 11, 2001*, on the other hand, places a young protagonist at the center of the devastation. The book is the sixth entry in a New York Times best-selling series that launched in 2010 and now has more than 13.8 million copies total in print in the U.S. alone. The *I Survived* series, published by Scholastic and written by Lauren Tarshis and now being marketed as Common Core-

aligned, was originally conceived to focus on natural disasters that happened long ago. Other titles—which, like the 9/11 entry, feature a fictional young character thrown by circumstance into the heart of an unfolding catastrophe—are set around events

such as the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the destruction of Pompeii, the New Jersey shark attacks of 1916, and the sinking of the Titanic. As the books grew in popularity, though, Tarshis says young fans began to contact her to suggest topics, and in

response she has written about recent disasters that elementary school-aged children today may have caught glimpses of on the news or become aware of from overhearing adult conversation: the 2011 Joplin Tornado, for example, and the Japanese Tsunami that happened that same year. But Tarshis's biggest shift has involved expanding her focus to include far thornier acts of man on top of natural phenomena—and not just 9/11, but events such as the Holocaust as well.

The *I Survived* series is recommended for kids in grades two through five; at the lower end of that scale, readers who encounter the books might find themselves learning details of 9/11 and the Holocaust for the first time. Children, of course, eventually become conscious of the danger and cruelty in the world—but when and how should these lessons be imparted?

Tarshis, who at first found the idea of tackling the Holocaust in the series "ridiculous" and described herself as "terrified" while writing the 9/11 book, has given much thought to these questions. "I had never

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considered doing something like 9/11 in the series,” she said, noting that she completely rewrote the 9/11 book twice before feeling that she’d gotten it right. “I became almost deluged with emails from kids, I mean daily, daily—five, 10 emails a day—asking for that topic. I didn’t consider it. I thought, ‘No, this is not something I feel like I should take on.’ But then I started getting communications from teachers and librarians about it, the fact that many kids are very curious about it, and they did not have a safe way of exploring that topic with their kids.”

Ellen Zschunke, a librarian at Pine Road School in Huntingdon Valley, Pennsylvania, considers herself a fan. She says the students at her K-5 school “gobble up” the books and recommend them to each other. “We want to protect them, but they want to learn about this stuff,” she said. As for the quieter, gentler

9/11 books, like *Fireboat?* “They’re vague. Kids have more questions [after reading them] than when they started.”

My son eventually brought *I Survived the Attacks of September 11, 2001* home from school. According to some estimates, Scholastic, the world’s largest publisher of children’s books, has a presence in 90 percent of America’s schools, through book fairs, take-home book order forms, and the sale of materials directly to teachers and librarians. My son has read most of the *I Survived* series by borrowing books from his classroom and school libraries. The 9/11 edition, like the rest in the series, is intended to hook reluctant readers and thus opens at the

moment of greatest suspense before going back in time to explain how the protagonist arrived there and how he—it’s always a he—survived. In this case, the opening pages find 11-year-old Lucas in lower Manhattan as the first jet crashes into the North Tower: “With one last ferocious roar, the jet plunged into the side of one of the towers. There was a thundering explosion. People all around Lucas screamed. And then the bright blue sky filled with black smoke and fire.”

Subsequent chapters, set in the days before September 11, have Lucas, a budding football star growing up in a New York City suburb, being told by his mother and his FDNY father that he must quit the team after suffering a third concussion. Distraught, he skips school that Tuesday and takes a train into Manhattan to seek

help from his Uncle Benny, his dad’s best friend, who’s also a firefighter and the person who’d encouraged him to play football to begin with. After the first tower is struck, Lucas goes to the firehouse, where he’s told to stay put as the firefighters rush to the scene. When the second plane hits, however, Lucas sets out alone in search of his father, encountering mangled airplane parts and panicked crowds on the way. He finds his dad near the first responders’ staging area, and the two run for cover together as the first tower falls. By the end of the book, several of the firefighters Lucas knows have perished in the attacks; initially it’s suggested that Uncle Benny died as well, but the final pages reveal that he made it out, injured but alive. An afterword provides a few facts about Osama bin

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Laden, his death, and the war in Afghanistan without getting into the motives for the attacks.

If Tarshis was terrified writing the book, I confess to being a bit terrified reading it, perhaps because of the vivid depiction of a child close in age to my own experiencing the horror of 9/11 firsthand. Several of the books are similarly upsetting for their portrayals of children essentially fending for themselves during times of grave crisis. Susan

Fox, founder of the Park Slope Parents online community, said she “cried [her] eyes out” reading the Japanese tsunami book, a particularly grueling entry in the series that features an 11-year-old Japanese American boy whose father has recently died getting separated from his mother and brother and swept away by the tsunami while visiting Japan. (“Ben and his family thought they could race away from the wave in a car. But the water caught them. And suddenly, Ben was all by himself. The wave grabbed Ben and sucked him under.”) Fox, whose daughter began reading the series in the third grade after encountering the books at school, said, “I still think about the image of the boy seeing an arm sticking out of the mud.”

I brought several I Survived books to Leona Jaglom, a child psychologist in Brooklyn who’s been in clinical practice for nearly three decades. “The fear, the raw emotion, that’s in these books is so palpable,” she said after reading them. “I think these books can be very useful for educating some kids. But the point that I would make is to proceed with caution.” Jaglom’s concern is that the books might contain

information that some children are not yet prepared to process. “We have an anxiety epidemic going on in kids right now,” she said, comparing the I Survived series to genres such as fairy tales. “If you go back to Grimm’s fairy tales, they’re grim! Bad things happen.

In Bambi, the mother is killed. The psychological thinking is that they help children master very difficult subjects, help them process the emotions. But fairy tales are not real. They’re symbolic, so they’re a step removed from real life. The difference with

these books is that they depict real life. These things really happened.”

“Some kids have the ability to keep it at a distance,” she continued. “The operative term is differentiation. They’re able to differentiate, to say this isn’t me, this isn’t my world. But there are kids who have a much harder time with that, who personalize things, who identify very deeply with people’s circumstances, and who are more aware of the fact that this actually can happen in real life.”

I Survived’s tagline—“Do you have what it takes to survive?”—appears in bold font on the back covers of each book and seems to invite readers to personalize the catastrophic events. Such personalization has never been Tarshis’s intention. “To be honest, I don’t love that tagline,” she said. “Something like the Holocaust, it’s not like your inherent cunning is going to help you survive when you’re being chased by Nazi soldiers.”

Tarshis, who also works for Scholastic as the editor of

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its Storyworks magazine, agrees that the books aren't for everyone. "My daughter, who's 11, hasn't read any of my I Survived books. She keeps herself willfully very ignorant about these big topics. Parents and teachers need to determine if a child is ready."

Scholastic, however, encourages the incorporation of these books—along with the many other books and series it publishes—into elementary school curricula, offering on its website Common Core-aligned lesson

plans to accompany the books. That makes some sense when the topics are natural disasters like earthquakes and volcanoes, which are relevant to the science curriculum.

The complexities of introducing some of the series' more sensitive topics in a school setting, however, are dramatized

by the ill-conceived lesson plan that accompanies the 9/11 book. A word-comprehension exercise has students choose from a list of vocabulary words to complete sentences: "With one last [ferocious] roar, the jet [plunged] into the side of one of the towers." A math exercise asks students to calculate the elapsed time between the major events of the day. For many adults who lived through 9/11, the prospect of children honing math skills by figuring out how many minutes went by between the crashes of the four jets and the collapse of the towers is distasteful at best.

Zschunke, the librarian, however, argued that today's children see events like 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina (the topic of another series entry) very differently than do today's adults. "We don't feel attached to the people who lived near Mount Vesuvius, but for these

situations that are more recent, as adults they feel so much closer to us," she said. "But to the kids they're still very historic events, not current ones."

Now that she's tackled subjects that she once thought she'd never cover, I asked Tarshis whether she gets requests to cover topics she still wouldn't consider.

"Sometimes when we learn about a topic we can understand it better and it makes it somehow less terrifying, less overwhelming, but some of them we

just need to put out of our minds completely," she says, citing the response she gives when people ask her to write about school shootings like Sandy Hook.

"The other topic that I'm really getting deluged with that I don't imagine I would do anytime soon is the Boston Marathon

bombing," Tarshis continued. "Within a couple hours [of the marathon], I'd gotten maybe 100 emails from I Survived readers. I get emails from these 8- and 9-year-old kids asking for these topics ... It's baffling to me."

Zschunke thinks she understands. "They know by virtue of the title of the series that the character will survive," the librarian said. "As adults we know not everyone does."

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