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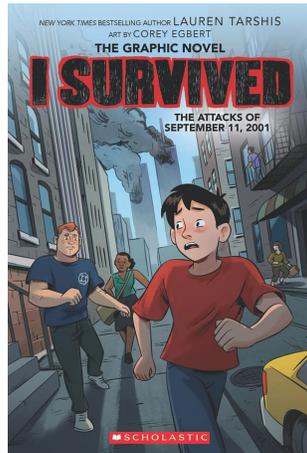
Comics Graphic Novels Interviews Kids' comics

Interview: LAUREN TARSHIS and COREY EGBERT on I SURVIVED: THE ATTACKS OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

The graphic novel adaptation will arrive August 3rd, 2021.

By Avery Kaplan - 07/08/2021 2:00 pm 0

In the *I Survived* prose series by **Lauren Tarshis**, young readers are given the chance to better understand nonfiction tragedies thanks to well-researched historical fiction narratives that give a kid's eye view of surviving world-shaking events. The latest (and fourth) in the series to be adapted into a graphic novel from Scholastic Graphix is *I Survived: The Attacks of September 11, 2001*, illustrated by **Corey Egbert** and with a script by **Georgia Ball**.



The Beat had the opportunity to ask Tarshis and Egbert all about *I Survived: The Attacks of September 11, 2001* over email. Read on to discover more about

what goes into centering a more recent historical tragedy, how graphic novel adaptations can connect struggling readers with nonfiction, and what role historical fiction can play in keeping readers informed!

AVERY KAPLAN: In the *I Survived* series, stories about real historical events are told through the perspective of fictional protagonists. What is it about historical fiction that makes it such a uniquely effective way of conveying information about the past?

LAUREN TARSHIS: I think it boils down to the power of stories, how we absorb information so much better when it's conveyed as a story. I think this is especially true for kids learning about history. So many of the topics in my *I Survived* series are far



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removed from my readers' lives. I know many of the topics are completely unknown to them, like Mt. St. Helens or The Molasses Flood, or they're topics many kids never imagined they be interested in, like Gettysburg or the Revolutionary War. My job is to make these topics relevant to them, to engage them, to help them see the connection between what happened in the past and their life today. The fictional characters in my stories enable me to do this.

COREY EGBERT: I think it puts the reader in a different psychological state. They are experiencing the events through the eyes of the fictional character in a more immersive way than if they're just reading dry facts. It's so much more relatable.

KAPLAN: While many of the books in the *I Survived* series center more distant historical events, *I Survived: The Attacks of September 11, 2001* centers events from the past two decades. Does this proximity to the present day have an effect on how you approach the story, narratively or aesthetically?

TARSHIS: Writing about recent events is far more challenging and delicate for me because in some cases I'm writing stories at the request of people who have been through disasters—like Hurricane Katrina, the Joplin tornado, and the California Wildfires. There's an emotional layer that I don't feel as acutely as when I'm writing about an event from the distant past. When writing about modern events,



I know the books will be read by kids and families who might have experienced the event, and I want to make sure I've honored their experiences as best I can.

This is especially true of 9/11.

EGBERT: To me it seems like the recent past is harder to depict. We've all got an idea of what the 1920s, 50s and 80s look like because there's a lot of media set in those decades and we've developed a sort of symbolism for them. We can look at them from the outside. But the early 2000s are in an awkward in-between place that's not quite present day, but not one of those bygone nostalgic eras either. It's less clear in people's minds what the fashion and industrial-design aesthetic was, because

it's still so recent. Does that make sense? So it was an interesting challenge.

KAPLAN: Was there any part of this story that was especially difficult to develop?

TARSHIS: I did several full drafts of this book and put them aside until I realized I wanted to make it the story of a first responder and their family. I created a very "big" fictional front story — Lucas and his concussion, his love of football, his father and his previous injury — which put the actual historical event more in the background than in many of my books. I wanted to make sure I created a "safe" 9/11 story for kids who were exploring this event for the first time. Many of my readers are very young, and I



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wanted to make sure that I did not introduce aspects of this story that were simply too complicated or overwhelming for young readers to process. I see my books as door openers to new topics, not comprehensive explorations. I want to satisfy their curiosity, begin their journeys.

EGBERT: The Manhattan cityscapes with large diverse crowds were daunting! The very first page of the book is a wide shot of a busy street corner. It made me panic a little bit! For fire trucks and airplanes, I used 3D models for reference which helped a lot. And I got a lot of help from **Heather Daugherty** to depict the trains and subways correctly. I've been to New York City several times, but I'm not an expert at public transportation. I find

Uber less intimidating than the subway, haha.

KAPLAN: The *I Survived* series has had many entries published in prose, and *I Survived: The Attacks of September 11, 2001* is the fourth entry to be adapted to a comic. When it comes to historical fiction, does the comics medium provide any special benefits (or detractions) when compared with prose?

TARSHIS: I feel so fortunate to have Georgia Ball writing the scripts, and my editor **Katie Woehr** taking such care with the stories. And the artists are incredible — I especially loved how Corey brought Lucas and his family to life. He perfectly captured the tone of the book.

Overall, the graphic format is just so engaging and accessible. Since one of my primary goals is to help struggling and reluctant readers access complex topics, I have so appreciated the opportunity to translate the books into this new format.

At the same time, I've seen how some of the topics can become more intense in the graphic format; we can't layer in as much background and nuance. This was true in the *Nazi Invasion* graphic. We did quite a few drafts before we got it right. The book is absolutely spectacular. But I don't recommend it to very young readers the way I would recommend the *Titanic* or *Shark Attack* graphic novels.

EGBERT: It's just a different medium and they've both got their inherent pros and cons. The artwork in the comic version is great to give the reader a visual sense of what's happening, but in both comic and prose you're experiencing an artist's interpretation in regard to the actual historical events. But I've heard people say they're so excited to see Lucas and Uncle Benny come alive visually on the page. I think a lot of human emotion and expression can be conveyed in a single comic panel, and those little moments are probably what I'm most proud of. I think my favorite page in the book is one where Lucas is trying to call his mom and she doesn't answer. A lot is conveyed without words on that page.

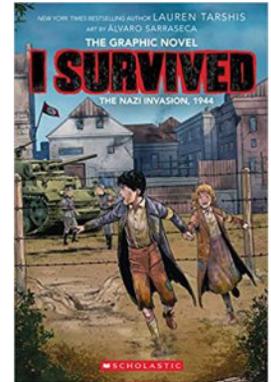
KAPLAN: Lauren, as revealed by a mini-comic in the back of the book, you were actually on a plane over the Atlantic when the 9/11/01 attacks took place. How did the personal connection to the events affect your creative process (if it did)? How does it compare with other *I Survived* entries with which you may have some degree of connection with the events?

TARSHIS: It was my editor's idea to have my story created as a mini comic, and every time I read it my

heart cracks apart a bit. I remember every second of that experience and the days after, when my husband and I were "trapped" in London, separated from our children. At the same time I knew how lucky we were.

That said, I don't think this personal connection impacted the creative process in a discernable way. The research was especially searing, though, to explore this topic so deeply. At times I felt swallowed up by my grief of that time.

I felt similarly while researching the holocaust. My beloved mother-in-law **Steffi** was a "Hitler survivor" as she put it. Many of my husband's relatives were murdered by the Nazis and their sympathizers. Delving into that part of history as an author was brutal.



I Survived: The Nazi Invasion, 1944 graphic novel

KAPLAN: Many readers may be learning details about the 9/11 attacks for the first time through *I Survived: The Attacks of September 11, 2001*, however, this is an event that you remember firsthand. I'm curious if you can share any examples from your own childhood in which you learned about certain past events from historical fiction, while those events may have been remembered firsthand the adults in your life?

TARSHIS: One oddity of my childhood is that I was not a reader. I had a reading struggle that made it hard for me to comprehend what I was reading. I could decode the words, but nothing made sense. I "successfully" hid the problem until I was 14, in high school, when I finally figured out strategies that enabled me to make my way through books. And so it wasn't until much later that I discovered historical

fiction.

Looking back, I do think that these struggles inspire my work in certain ways. I remember feeling left out of conversations, shut out from stories my friends were talking about. That's why I work so hard to make these stories accessible to all kinds of readers. And I do think historical fiction can be a powerful way to introduce new topics to young readers.

KAPLAN: Corey, what was it like illustrating the real-world events that took place on 9/11/01? What kind of research went into representing the events as they occurred?

EGBERT: It was another daunting aspect of the book. But the Editor, Katie Woehr, provided a lot of reference material, both stills and videos, and it's helpful that there's lots of documentation out there. I was also told that it was reviewed by a historical expert who had a few suggestions and I made those changes accordingly.

KAPLAN: If you are comfortable sharing, do you have any memory (including secondhand memories) of the events of 9/11/01? If so, did this have an effect on your artistic process while working on the project?

EGBERT: I was twelve years old on 9/11—just a year older than Lucas. I remember going to school and seeing my cousin, who was in my same class, crying at her desk. I hadn't heard what happened yet. That's my most vivid memory—along with seeing news coverage of the smoking towers and hearing the shock in the voices of the news anchors, which was alarming because news people were usually so

cool and detached. I can relate to Lucas's confusion wondering why something like this would happen.

KAPLAN: Have there been any comics (or stories in any other medium) that have been especially inspirational for you lately?

TARSHIS: Lately I've become fascinated by historical political cartoons, which were such an important medium until fairly recently. I'm struck that like comics, they convey so MUCH with such economy.

EGBERT: I was reading *War and Peace* (also historical fiction) during the time I was illustrating *I Survived: The Attacks of September 11, 2001*. I think **Leo Tolstoy** is amazing at portraying humans realistically and showing that on both sides of any historical conflict people are still people. We tend to think in terms of "us" and "them," good guys and bad guys, but that's not reality, and humanity is so much more complex and nuanced than that. Everybody is capable of doing selfish or selfless things. What's important is that we treat each other with understanding and respect.

KAPLAN: Is there anything else that you would like me to include?

TARSHIS: These are such thoughtful questions. Thank you so much for giving me the opportunity to share my thoughts and experiences!

EGBERT: Just that I learned and grew a lot as an illustrator while working on this! It was my first graphic novel, and a tough but rewarding challenge. I'm super grateful for the people at Scholastic/Graphix for giving me the opportunity!