



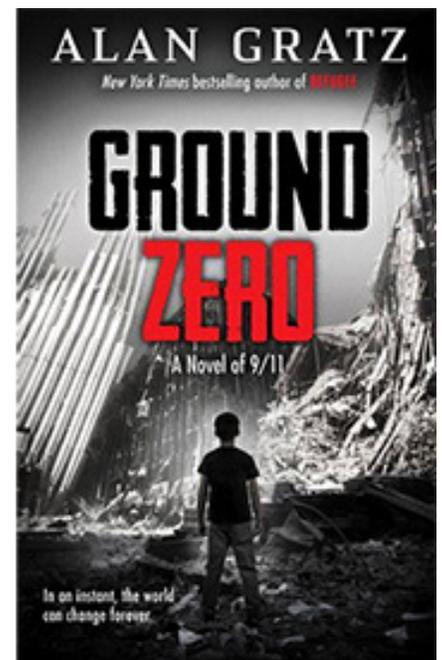
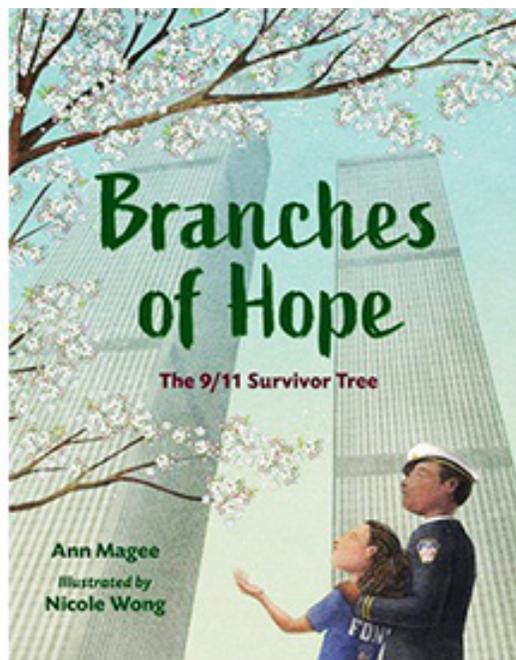
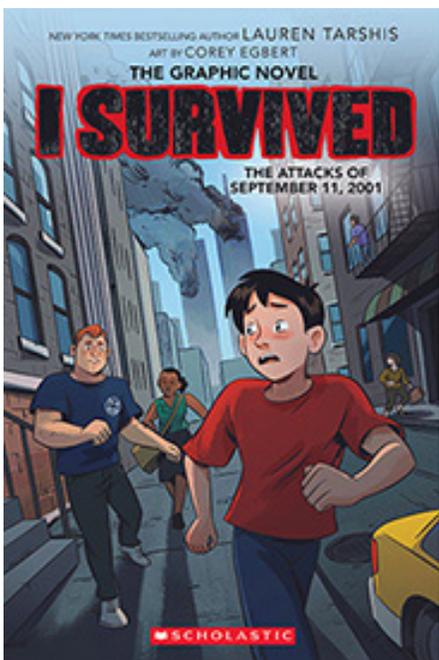
BEST BOOKS

AUTHORS

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

Portraying 9/11 for Young Readers, Two Decades Later

By Claire Kirch | Apr 23, 2021



During this 20th anniversary year of the 9/11 attacks, children's publishers are releasing at least a dozen fiction and nonfiction books that deal with the events, in contrast with previous milestone years that saw only a handful of titles. "On the 10th anniversary, the events were still so fresh," says Scholastic senior editor Katie Woehr. "We have some perspective now."

Woehr edited *I Survived: The Attacks of September 11, 2001* (Aug.) by Lauren Tarshis, illustrated by Corey Egbert, about a boy visiting his New York City firefighter uncle just as planes hit the World Trade Center. It's a graphic novel adaptation of Tarshis's 2012 middle grade chapter book in the publisher's

popular *I Survived* series.

"It's a book about resilience," Woehr says. "It moves from tragedy to hope pretty quickly." Still, she and other editors acknowledge that publishing a book for children about a subject that elicits strong emotions in adults even two decades later presents certain challenges.

"How do you make a traumatic event accessible to children without softening it or further traumatizing anyone?" asks Deirdre Jones, senior editor at Little, Brown. One answer: by focusing on the Gallery pear tree discovered at Ground Zero, which became a symbol of resilience and rebirth. Little, Brown's August release *Survivor Tree* by Marcie Colleen,

illustrated by Aaron Becker, follows two May titles on the same subject: *Branches of Hope* (Charlesbridge) by Ann Magee, illustrated by Nicole Wong, and *This Very Tree* by Sean Rubin (Holt).

Though *Survivor Tree* never mentions 9/11 by name, Jones says, Becker's illustrations show the towers and then the rubble. "This evokes in an accessible way for kids any moment that causes grief or fear, like this past year," she explains. "Difficult moments are part of our lives, but the greenery will always come back."

Other publishers are targeting the school and library market with big-picture accounts. Capstone hired content consultants and a sensitivity reader to help staffers vet *The 9/11 Attacks* by Amy Maranville (Aug.), explains editor Stephanie Miller, in order to make the events real for middle grade readers without sensationalizing it. The goal, she adds, was to convey in an age-appropriate and respectful way "how a day started one way, and by the end of that day, the world had changed."

Bearport Publishing is debuting a middle grade graphic narrative series about 9/11 in August. Each of the six volumes tells the story of a hero or group of heroes, such as first responders. Bearport consulted with a licensed child therapist on the content and is working with that therapist to develop a series readers' guide for parents and educators.

Another work of graphic nonfiction, Don Brown's *In the Shadow of the Fallen Towers*, is intended for YA readers and due out from HMH's Etch imprint in August. Brown is the author and illustrator of numerous works of graphic nonfiction for children and teens, including 2011's *America Is Under Attack* (ages six to 10).

"Words plus pictures create the most immersive narratives," says Kate O'Sullivan, senior executive editor at HMH Books for Young Readers. "Don knows when a well-placed quote or description works and when the art can do more of the legwork.

The graphic novel format really allows the source material to come to life. Characters look out directly at the reader and the dialogue is captured in speech bubbles, which creates a sense of immediacy and connection to these real events and people."

Several authors are educating children about 9/11 through fiction, including in books inspired by real-life encounters with xenophobia and Islamophobia after the attacks. Priya Huq's *Piece by Piece: The Story of Nisrin's Hijab* (Amulet, Sept.), a middle grade graphic novel, depicts a Bangladeshi American teenager in Oregon who becomes the victim of a hate crime. Forthcoming YA novels from HarperCollins include *An Emotion of Great Delight* by Tahereh Mafi (June), in which a Muslim teen in post-9/11 America copes with a family tragedy, and *Yusuf Azeem Is Not a Hero* by Saadia Faruqi (Quill Tree, Sept.), about a Muslim boy in contemporary small-town Texas, where the locals cite 9/11 in their opposition to the building of a mosque.

"Saadia Faruqi deals with the subject in a way that children will be able to understand and relate to," says Quill Tree editorial director Rosemary Brosnan. "She never deviates from seeing the event through a child's eyes. I hope that readers will relate to Yusuf, sympathize with him, and see themselves in him and his family."

Other works of fiction center on New York City. Alan Gratz's *Ground Zero* is a middle grade page-turner about a boy visiting his father on the 107th floor of the World Trade Center on the morning of September 11; a second story line follows a girl in 2019 Afghanistan. Scholastic Press published the book in February in order to give educators time to familiarize themselves with the title before adding it to their fall curricula.

"Gratz is so good at writing about the darker stuff—it's never gratuitous," says Scholastic editorial director Aimee Friedman. Because *Ground Zero* also delves into the U.S. war in Afghanistan, she says, "it

shows the ripple effect of that day. Where we are now is heavily influenced by 9/11.”

Another middle grade title, *Big Apple Diaries* (Roaring Brook, Aug.), is based on the journals kept by author Alyssa Bermudez and her friends in 2001, when they were New York City middle schoolers. The book follows a girl splitting her time between her father in Manhattan and her mother in Queens when 9/11 upends her life. “*Big Apple Diaries* is about a teenager living a normal life amid national trauma,” says Roaring Brook editorial director Connie Hsu. “Kids are allowed to care about mundane things—to take the moment and be happy even if everyone else is in mourning.”

The middle grade novel *Elvis and the World as It Stands* (Amulet, Sept.) by Lisa Frenkel Riddiough,

illustrated by Olivia Chin Mueller, maintains distance from the horrors of 9/11 by setting the story in the present and placing a kitten at the center of the narrative. A rescue animal named Elvis watches her family’s 10-year-old girl deal with her parents’ separation by building Lego skyscrapers, including representations of the Twin Towers.

“The challenge in discussing 9/11 was to not shy away from the trauma but to allow space for that loss and to honor it,” says Abrams senior editor Erica Finkel. “We wanted to show that some things that are lost will never come back, and that will always be sad; it’s okay to be sad about them. While loss is not within our control, what we do next is, and we can choose to move forward and rebuild.”