Seeking the great American 9/11 novel

Writers keep trying to find the words to put the tragedy on paper

BY MARION WINIK
Special to Newsday

A fter the attacks on the World Trade Center, some novelists reported feeling stunned into silence. Even more than other occupations, spinning yarns about imaginary people and predicaments seemed beside the point. Eventually, some returned to their desks to invent stories about the attack itself. If, in 10 years, none of these books has been The Book — even the efforts of heavy hitters like Don DeLillo and John Updike were deemed wanting — they do tell a story about how we Americans have come to understand what happened to us that day.

Perhaps because it was written so soon after the event, the first literary fiction to take on 9/11 seems unaware of its global context. The traditional domestic dramas written by Claire Messud, Julia Glass and Jay McInerney all follow a similar pattern: They set up an ensemble of upscale Manhattan characters living their lives and pursuing their intrigues when out of the blue come the planes, changing everything.

In Messud’s “The Emperor’s Children” and Glass’ “The Whole World Over,” the attacks come very late in the game, followed by hasty denouements that trace the characters in the succeeding months. In “The Good Life,” McInerney unleashes his disaster early so he can focus on love in the ruins, or at least at the soup kitchen serving the ruins.

At the time, these books were groundbreaking: When “the unthinkable” becomes a plot device, it is, if nothing else, thinkable. But the focus on missing-persons posters and billboards of ashes, with no mention of al-Qaeda or Islam, now seems slightly naïve. The attack might as well have happened to “us” outside New York City and characters of several nationalities. They will be terrorists and victims, patriots and fanatics, leaders and minions. Rather than cut the event down to size, it will sound its reaches.

If there is a great 9/11 novel to come, it probably will begin before 2001 and end well after. It will have settings outside New York City and characters of several nationalities. They will be terrorists and victims, patriots and fanatics, leaders and minions. Rather than cut the event down to size, it will sound its reaches.

If there is an American author who can write this book, that, in itself, will be a good sign.

Books discussed

EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDI-
BLY CLOSE, by Jonathan Safran Foer (Mariner, 2005, $14.95)
SATURDAY, by Ian McEwan (An-
chor, 2005, $15.95)
THE EMPEROR’S CHILDREN, by
Claire Messud (Vintage, 2006, $15)
THE WHOLE WORLD OVER, by Julia
Glass (Anchor, 2006, $15)
THE GOOD LIFE, by Jay McInerney
(Vintage, 2006, $15)
A DISORDER PECULIAR TO THE
COUNTRY, Ken Kalfus (HarperPeren-
nial, 2006, $18.95)
THE ZERO, by Jess Walter (HarperPe-
renial, 2006, $14.95)
THE RELUCTANT FUNDAMENTALIST,
by Mohsin Hamid (Harvest, 2007, $13.95)
NETHERLAND, by Joseph O’Neill
(Vintage, 2008, $14.95)
THE SUBMISSION, by Amy Wald-
man (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011,
$26)

Stronger than fiction

The 10th anniversary brings a wealth of new nonfiction titles on
9/11. Some standouts:

UNMEASURED STRENGTH, by Lauren
Manning (Henry Holt, $25). A woman engulfed by a fireball in One
World Trade Center — and burned over 80 percent of her body —
recounts her remarkable recovery.

THUNDER DOG, by Nicahel Hingson
with Susy Flory (Thomas
Nelson, $22.99). A blind man recalls his escape from the north tower
with the help of his guide dog, Roselle.

WHERE YOU LEFT ME,
by Jennifer Gardner
Trulson (Gallery, $25). A 9/11 widow’s memoir of grief and unexpected
new love.

A DECADE OF HOPE, by
Anthony Summers and Robbyn Swan (Bal-
lantine, $30). A blow-by-blow account of the
events on 9/11, written with access to newly
released documents and a decade of research and
interviews.

ONE NATION, from the
editors of Life (Little,
Brown, $29.99). An updated edition of
Life magazine’s
photographic chronicle
of events in New York,
Washington and
Pennsylvania.

A PLACE OF REMEMBRANCE,
by Allison Blais and Lynn Rasico
(National Geographic, $19.95). The official
book of the National
Septembe r 11 Memorial.