

# One Sunny September Tuesday in New York

By Karen Green

Friday May 6, 2011 06:00:00 am

*Our columnists are independent writers who choose subjects and write without editorial input from comiXology. The opinions expressed are the columnist's, and do not represent the opinion of comiXology.*

This is a column I've thought about writing for close to two years, but have never been able to bring myself to complete. A recently-published book reminded me of my thoughts on the matter, however, and I guess now is as good a time as any to face the topic.

It's hardly news that comics and graphic novels can take on a subject of enormous seriousness and import and, through the medium's highly evocative blend of narrative and art, elicit a profound emotional, not to say visceral, response in the reader (see also, the "comics aren't just for kids anymore" syndrome). Art Spiegelman proved this with *Maus* over twenty-five years ago, and a lengthy list of titles on war and conflict, on illness and bereavement, have convinced naysayers that comics can tell complex and profound stories.

And so it is with the story of September 11th, 2001. Almost as soon as the shock had registered, cartoonists banded together to produce [9/11: Artists Respond](#), a compilation designed not to raise awareness, as [Strip AIDS USA](#) had done--no awareness really needed to be raised--but to raise money for the families of those killed in the towers' collapse and, perhaps, to give the artists a chance to work through their own responses to the calamity. The first volume was published in January 2002, with a second volume following later that year. The brief stories--some as simple as a single-page panel, few more than three pages--bore witness, told stories, waxed philosophical, advocated for sympathy and support for victims and first responders, evoked tragedies past, tried to imagine the future.

In a random sampling of the scores of artists included: P. Craig Russell re-imagined the World War I elegy, "[In Flanders Fields](#)," applying those mournful lines to a modern regiment of the fallen. (The passage "To you from failing hands we throw / The torch; be yours to hold it high" seems to hold a particular poignance this week.) Frank Miller's three starkly dramatic black-and-white panels--"I'm sick of flags" against a huge star, "I'm sick of God" against a huge cross, then "I've seen the power of faith" against the simple, twisted wreckage of the towers--gave voice to the heartbreak and angst in many people's immediate reactions, before the power of faith led so many of us to bond together and look to a more hopeful future. Jim Mahfood, a Lebanese-American cartoonist, examined the vulnerability of Arab-Americans in the wake of the attacks. Peter Kuper [literally] embodied the response of all New Yorkers with the iconic Empire State Building, incarnate, mourning the wreckage of the equally iconic World Trade Center--themes that would be expanded in the [post-9/11 issue](#) of *World War 3 Illustrated*. And Bob Harris and Gregory Ruth contemplated the complexities of greytone in a world so many wish were black and white:

Over the next few years, Art Spiegelman worked out his own 9/11 demons with a series of comics collected in the large-format board book for grownups, [In the Shadow of No Towers](#). Spiegelman had memorably captured the sorrow of a city with a black-on-black "afterimage" cover done for the first issue of *The New Yorker* published after the attacks. His thoughts on the creative process for that cover are quoted in an [article in Smashing Magazine](#) about design clichés: after discarding an image of shrouded towers in a bright, blue-skied city, "I finally said to Françoise that it should just be a black-on-black cover because every time I was walking to my studio from my house I kept finding myself turning around to make sure the towers were not there, as though they were a kind of phantom limb."

The comics in *In the Shadow of No Towers* were created for the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, and designed with its broadsheet-size pages in mind. The over-sized space allowed Spiegelman to experiment with capturing his own most searing memory of that day: "the image of the looming north tower's glowing bones just before it vaporized." Downtown residents, Spiegelman and his wife Françoise saw the collapse themselves, "unmediated" (a clever bit of word play). In his series of comics, he combines his own experience with representations of characters from early 20th-century newspaper comics: the [Katzenjammer Kids](#), Hans and Fritz, as the twin towers, or "Tower Twins;" the [Happy Hooligan](#) as those made newly homeless, or as the hapless artist himself; his Maus-self as [Little Nemo](#), falling out of bed after a bad dream. Why these characters? He imagined the collapse as disinterring the ghosts of those comics legends, all of whom had been launched into life on [nearby Park Row](#). Maggie and Jiggs from [Bringing Up Father](#), Little Nemo, and the Happy Hooligan--as Spiegelman explains in his concluding essay, all can be found in strips that deal with falling towers, collapsing Financial District architecture, Orientalism, or the subversion of patriotism (he's kind enough to include reproductions of the strips in question). These downtown denizens have been churned up by the towers' collapse and provide an entrée directly into Spiegelman's psyche, Beatrices leading us into the dark woods of the cartoonist's soul, reimagining 9/11 as a Dante-esque crisis point: "[Midway in the journey of our life / I came to myself in a dark wood, / for the straight way was lost.](#)"

Spiegelman lives in SoHo; in 2001 Danish expatriate cartoonist Henrik Rehr lived with his family a couple of neighborhoods closer to Ground Zero. In the brief preface to his graphic memoir "Tuesday," included in *Tribeca Sunset*, Rehr mentions that this proximity caused the attacks to seem that much more personal. "Ultimately, in the face of such an atrocity," he writes, "I had no choice but to create a love letter. A love letter to my family, a love letter to my friends and a love letter to the city we inhabit. There are a lot of beautiful places and fascinating metropolises around the world, but there is only one New York City. Even if it has an altered skyline."

Close enough to the towers to have heard the explosion of the first plane crash, and then be witness to the second, Rehr is evacuated from his Battery Park City apartment with his 18-month-old son and ferried to New Jersey where, helplessly, he watches his city burn. He knows his wife is safe, but neither have been able to get in touch with P.S. 89 where their older son is a student. The family is reunited safely the next day, and the narrative, drawn in densely-packed and heavily textured panels, goes on to focus on the seemingly small but actually massive details that took over the lives of downtown neighbors: where to sleep until homes were cleared for return, whether apartment buildings were still structurally sound, the possibility that insurance

companies wouldn't pay for damages, the frozen moment of pre-lapsarian time glimpsed in the amber of their long-unoccupied apartment. Rehr also contemplates this philosophical conundrum: "I find an even greater tragedy in all of this, when I consider the fact that the men behind the infamy most likely love their children just as much as I love mine"--not, apparently, the deterrent that [Sting believed it to be](#).

Another personal narrative appeared in 2008, with [American Widow](#). Illustrated by Sungyoon Choi in black and white, highlighted with a soothing aqua wash, Alissa Torres' memoir of her husband Eddie's death is both emotional and pragmatic. The opening spread of the book juxtaposes the soft blue sky of that September autumn day with the global media hysteria that met the news of the attacks; the chapter then flashes back to Alissa and Eddie's first meeting, then forward again to the fateful morning. Early on September 11th, a pregnant Torres sees her husband off to his second day at his new job at [Cantor Fitzgerald](#), still angry with him from a recent argument. Torres' ability to deal with the aftermath of her husband's death is complicated by her guilt, by the sometimes oppressive attentions of loved ones and grief therapists, the vagaries of case workers and official agencies, and by her dead husband's limbo-like status at his nearly obliterated firm, where he'd not yet had time to fill out the HR forms that could be used to file for death benefits. Her byzantine bureaucratic battles ground her story in the quotidian, in our own daily concerns for subsistence and protection. Choi ably captures her growing isolation and depression, as well as her determination to seize control of her destiny. Her story puts a face on the "9/11 widows"--granted, a decidedly non-monolithic group--and brings the reader deep into the reality of the support and remuneration often treated so facilely in the press.

As I said, I'd planned to write about these books, as well as the Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón adaptation of the 9/11 Commission Report and their journalistic account of the birth of the War on Terror. I'd felt overwhelmed by the subject but then was re-energized recently when the artist James Romberger, [whom you may remember from a year ago](#), dropped by my office with a copy of his latest book, [Aaron and Ahmed](#), written by novelist Jay Cantor and colored vibrantly by José Villarrubia. *Aaron and Ahmed* is fictional, but it addresses many of the questions that have gripped us as the 9/11-born War on Terror winds into its 10th year. It tells the story of Aaron Goodman, a Kansas Jew and VA hospital doctor, who is inspired by his fiancée's death on 9/11 to join the fight, and ends up in [Guantánamo Bay](#) as an interrogator. After witnessing the enhanced interrogation techniques that no rational person can view as anything other than torture, Aaron is given Prisoner 14, Ahmed, on whom to practice new techniques, using hormone therapies to foster a loving relationship between prisoner and interrogator. Aaron's colleague at Gitmo, a doctor named Negreonte (perhaps in homage to [John Negroponte?](#)), introduces him to "[meme theory](#)," a model for the viral transmission of ideas that could explain how a young man becomes a suicide bomber--or how a jihadist might become a US informant. "The brain is a computer. The meme is a program made of words that runs it....think of the memes as viruses made of words." (And here you thought memes were all about [dramatic chipmunks](#) and [Sad Keanu](#).)

Aaron sets out with Ahmed for Pakistan, and a jihadist training camp. The men's relationship morphs gradually from that of a Muslim adrift in the West to an American adrift in Muslim lands, as Aaron seeks to find the "terror memes" for the intelligence officers at Gitmo--before they transform him. Drawing on the [legend of the hashish-fueled Assassins](#), the cartoonists

depict days of starvation- and drug-fuelled prayer, as the bereaved and bereft cling to an externally-imposed source of strength. Aaron is chosen for a mission and returns to the US--to New York--with Ahmed and an entourage of true believers. Is Aaron infected with the terror-meme virus? Did the indoctrination merely convince him that he might be? Has Ahmed become a friend, or is he playing a long game? The narrative takes some implausible turns, but provokes interesting questions as well: what is the nature of the relationship between the torturer and the tortured? How different are our Gitmo techniques from those used against us? What combination of psychological makeup and insidious manipulation creates a suicide bomber?

It is early in the story that Aaron recalls watching the twin towers fall on a hospital television, knowing his fiancée Carol is inside. Romberger's art and Villarrubias' color here are so powerful, so evocative, that at first I had to close the book and put it aside for a while. The angry reds of the images of impact, the bleak black sun against the yellow sky, were such vivid reminders of the day that I couldn't read past them. This is what the arts are supposed to do: to challenge, to shock, to cause reflection or introspection. Later, in an attempt to bond with Ahmed, Aaron and his pet prisoner set off in a boat, and the panels pull the reader back until the men and their rowboat are just a speck against the vastness of the ocean--motes floating in the vastness of the plausibly-unwinnable War on Terror.

The books I've mentioned portray so many aspects of the events of and fallout after September 11, and often seem to provide a catharsis for their creators, commemoration in its most literal etymological sense of "remembering together." Here, in the Columbia University Libraries, our Oral History Research Office also rose to the challenge of such commemoration, with the [September 11, 2001 Oral History and Narrative Memory Project](#) and the September 11, 2001 Response and Recovery Oral History Project. From September 12 onward, Columbia's Oral History Research Office solicited people's 9/11 memories and, in 2002, received funding to gather oral histories from first responders, philanthropy workers, members of agencies set up for assistance, and those traumatized by the disaster. Go to our [Archives Portal](#) and type in "September 11 2001"--you'll find records for oral histories like that of Barbara Friedman, an artist and art professor at downtown's Pace University, with these contents: "9/11: home two blocks from World Trade Center, witnessing first plane crash, response at Pace University, evacuation over Brooklyn Bridge, difference of response between generations; post-9/11: return home, emotional response, effects on family life, changes in work environment, impact on artwork, daughters' responses." In addition, by early October 2001, our Rare Book and Manuscript Library had issued a campus-wide call to help in creating a [World Trade Center Archive](#) that would gather together digital, image, and text ephemera from the day of the attacks: photographs, local papers, flyers, emails, etc.--voices and content, bearing witness to the worst day in New York City history.

Columbia may be at the opposite end of Manhattan from Ground Zero, but we take our status as a New York institution seriously (did you know our official name is actually [Columbia University in the City of New York](#)?) September 11 was a wound to New York's collective municipal body, and Columbia's response has been manifold: as archivists, as instructors, as participants in the community. The curriculum takes the subject on directly, through courses at the law school like "9/11 and the Rights of Non-Citizens;" in the American Studies course, "Writing September 11: Narratives and Arguments," or in a graduate course on knowledge

management that used the 9/11 Commission report to examine the nature of information-sharing and the devastated firm of Cantor Fitzgerald as a case study of managing employee expertise. Columbia's School of Social Work reached out to [first responders and their families](#), [examined the effects on young children](#), and participated in [collaborative programs](#) with other non-profits to develop strategies for community assistance, among a host of other initiatives. And all this archival, instructional, and outreach activity serves a unified purpose: to remember, to respond, to understand. Just as do these graphic novel narratives. This is the goal and the purpose of higher education.

As I finished this column, I learned that the man who masterminded that terrible day is now dead. "Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind," wrote John Donne, in [Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, Meditation XVII](#), his testament to the interconnectedness of humanity, best known for the passage beginning "No man is an island," and closing with "Do not send for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." It is important to realize that even the death of a megalomaniacal jihadist diminishes the whole but, somehow, deep within this highly-educated humanist--*despite* being a highly-educated humanist--there is a sense of enormous satisfaction..

*Karen Green is Columbia University's Ancient/Medieval Studies Librarian and Graphic Novel selector.*

*Comic Adventures in Academia is © Karen Green, 2010*