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# WHEN EVERYTHING IS ABOUT 9/11: ON READING CONTEMPORARY FICTION THROUGH 9/11 AND THE BOUNDARIES OF THE 9/11 NOVEL

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## Abstract

This article examines the boundaries of the term 9/11 novel by exploring what we truly mean when we say a novel is *about* 9/11 and what are the issues in reading general twenty-first-century literature through 9/11. By taking a thorough look at 9/11 literary scholarship, I argue that the issue of defining the 9/11 novel has been largely overlooked; consequently, the label 9/11 has often been stamped too easily on twenty-first-century fiction. In the aim to establish the boundaries of 9/11 fiction, I compare the thematic, temporal, and spatial features of some of the most iconic 9/11 novels to two works which have been commonly read as 9/11 novels even though they do not explicitly discuss the attacks, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*. By building on this discussion, I offer a concise definition of what a 9/11 novel is and where 9/11 ends.

## Key words

*9/11 novel; contemporary fiction; Cormac McCarthy's The Road; Philip Roth's The Plot Against America; genre; subgenre*

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The 9/11 attacks and their vast aftermath have inspired hundreds of novelists to write about the tragedy. These texts approach the terrorist attacks and their consequences from a myriad of different angles, thus forming a heterogeneous group of works which is these days commonly called the 9/11 novel or the post-9/11 novel. Nevertheless, the 9/11 scholarship has been plagued by the lack of proper scholarly discussion on the subgenre of the 9/11 novel. As I will go on to argue, this can be perceived as an issue, particularly in the way that critics have applied the label 9/11 too liberally to contemporary fiction.

The exploration of this subgenre should first be contextualized into more general discussions about genres and why they matter to begin with. Genres serve several important functions for writers and readers alike: they offer conventions for the authors, guide the reader's expectations, help to formulate interpretations, and contextualize works of fiction among similar texts, therefore providing a point of comparison. As John Frow states, genre "is a set of conventional and highly organized constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning".

He continues to explain that “[g]eneric structure both enables and restricts meaning, and is a basic condition for meaning to take place... That is why genre matters: it is central to human meaning-making and to the social struggle over meanings” (2015: 10).

This struggle over meanings is central to my argument about the 9/11 novel. The term 9/11 novel has been used widely in the media and scholarly discussion for the past two decades and most of this conversation has been done without any theoretical consideration of what it in fact means when we say that a novel is about 9/11. This has resulted in the scholarship reading some contemporary fiction such as Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) and Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (2004) as representatives of the 9/11 novel, even though their connection to the event, as I will go on to argue, is questionable at best. In this manner, labelling such works as 9/11 novels has indeed restricted their meaning and blurred the boundaries of this subgenre. Emphasizing these works as examples of 9/11 fiction can even create false expectations for the reader and restrict alternative interpretations of the novels. Furthermore, the prioritization of these works has also resulted in overlooking some important 9/11 novels written by less famous authors, such as Ken Kalfus’s *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006) or Jess Walter’s *The Zero* (2006). Therefore, a proper discussion about the boundaries of the 9/11 novel should be beneficial to scholars and readers alike.

The 9/11 literary scholarship has not arrived at an agreed-upon definition for 9/11 literature nor seen eye to eye on the number of works in this category. Alizeh Kohari, citing the Bowker’s Books in Print database, has stated that by the year 2011 there were already 164 works of fiction (in addition to 145 works of juvenile literature) about the 9/11 attacks (2011). In the same year, relying on sources such as the Global Books in Print database and Library of Congress Catalog, Birgit Däwes estimated that there were “at least 231” 9/11 novels (2011: 6). However, determining the number of 9/11 novels is rather difficult, since there is no universally agreed definition of what constitutes a 9/11 novel. As Rachel Sykes has noted, Kohari, like most critics and scholars who have written about the 9/11 novel, does not define what she means by saying that a book is “about 9/11” (2014: 253). Indeed, the whole topic of terminology and the extent of this category has been virtually ignored by the early 9/11 scholarship, as Däwes has criticized (2011: 7). Kristiaan Versluys, for example, states in *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*, the first monograph written on the topic, that “to date” nearly thirty novels which “deal directly or indirectly” with the events of September 11 have been published (2009: 12).<sup>1</sup> Yet, he does not offer any concise description of what it means to “deal with” the 9/11 attacks. Similarly, Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn do not take up the issue either in the introduction of *Literature after 9/11* (2008), the first collection of essays on the topic – of course, it seemingly avoids the issue of terminology by referring to literature *after* 9/11, not *about* 9/11.<sup>2</sup> Even later on, very few critics have considered what is meant by the term 9/11 novel or post-9/11 novel, even at the point when it began to comprise a group of works that had been the target of vast scholarly attention for over a decade. Sven Cvek (2011), Richard Gray (2011), Martin Randall (2011), and Arin Keeble (2014), for example, all either disregard the topic completely or mention

it only in passing in their monographs.<sup>3</sup> Bimbisar Irom, in his article titled “Alterities in a Time of Terror: Notes on the Subgenre of the American 9/11 Novel” (2012), quite paradoxically, does not explain either what he actually means by the subgenre of the 9/11 novel. In fact, thus far, Birgit Däwes’s ambitious, extensive *Ground Zero Fiction: History, Memory, and Representation in the American 9/11 Novel* (2011) is the only scholarly work to offer a detailed analysis and description of what a 9/11 novel is.

### What Do We Mean by Saying that a Novel Is About 9/11?

Däwes offers three main criteria for a work to be categorized as a 9/11 novel, or what she calls “Ground Zero Fiction”: “the (spatial and/or temporal) setting”, “the thematic and/or symbolic relevance of the terrorist attacks—whether they are implicitly or explicitly represented—for the plot”, and “the characters’ involvement with and/or perception of the event” (2011: 81). At first glance, the 9/11 attacks as the spatial and the temporal setting would seem like a self-evident feature of a 9/11 novel: if we take a look at some of the most iconic 9/11 novels, it is easily noticeable that works such as Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007), Jay McInerney’s *The Good Life* (2006), Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Claire Messud’s *The Emperor’s Children* (2006), and Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004) are all both spatially and temporally set in the close proximity to the terrorist attacks. Nevertheless, as Däwes points out, there is a great deal of variation among the 9/11 novels regarding their setting. For many novels, New York works only as a partial backdrop and some novels are completely located elsewhere. Temporally the novels are mainly set around the time of the terrorist attacks “often beginning in 2000 and ending in 2002 or 2003”, but there are several novels that make historical connections or are set in the near future (Däwes 2011: 81–82). Thus, it is clear that the spatial and temporal proximity of the terrorist attacks cannot be an unconditional requirement for 9/11 fiction, but it is certainly a common feature in this group of novels.

Compared to assessing the novels’ setting, determining the thematic or symbolic relevance of the attacks for the plot and the characters is a much more difficult task. As Däwes states, there is great variety among 9/11 novels also regarding this criterion. She explains, relying on Jeffrey Melnick’s *9/11 Culture: America under Construction* (2009), that some novels deal with the terrorist attacks only superficially and seem to use them “as a marketing device or mere background decorum” (Däwes 2011: 85). As Melnick states, “attaching ‘9/11’ to any cultural product is a quick way to add dimension to what might otherwise appear flat or lifeless” (2009: 221). Versluys has briefly addressed this issue by stating that “[m]any of the novels deal with the events of September 11 only tangentially: as a tragic moment that punctuates other, more mainstream (mostly love) interests” (2009: 12–13). According to him, these novels use the 9/11 attacks only “as a plot element”, “a part of a larger plot”, and not “as a central theme” (2009: 184, 200). Versluys, however, does not explain this distinction further; thus, it is, ultimately, as Paul Petrovic criticizes, “hazy at best” (2015: xi).<sup>4</sup> It would, indeed, be necessary

to first determine what it means that the 9/11 attacks are “a central theme” to make use of this distinction.

What exactly is it then that differentiates a novel which uses the attacks merely as a backdrop and a novel which engages with them meaningfully? Pankaj Mishra offers in his criticism of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The Good Life* one way to approach this issue. He accuses the novels of using the attacks only in a superficial manner: “They seem content to enlist the devastation in their city as a backdrop, and both use actual photographs of the event, either on the cover or within the text. But, for all that 9/11 stands for in their sentimental and nostalgic novels about New Yorkers coping with loss, it could be a natural disaster, like the tsunami” (Mishra 2007). Mishra appears to suggest that these novels do not engage with the attacks meaningfully and that the thematic impact of the 9/11 attacks is so limited that they should not even perhaps be perceived as “proper” 9/11 novels.

He is surely correct that the thematic impact of the terrorist attacks is more obvious in some other works than in Foer’s and McInerney’s novels: a good example of such a novel would be *Falling Man*. In DeLillo’s work, the entire family of 9/11 survivor Keith Neudecker is exhibiting strange behavior and symptoms of trauma that are unmistakably related to the terrorist attacks. The 9/11 attacks permeate the novel also through the performance artist who haunts the city by jumping from the rooftops of buildings and through the story of fictional 9/11 hijacker Hammad, which is told alongside the Neudecker family’s narrative.

However, the thematic impact is not such a clear-cut case for all 9/11 novels. In the works criticized by Mishra, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *The Good Life*, the role of the attacks is certainly subtler. In Foer’s novel, the terrorist attacks do work as a trigger for the plot: the events make 9-year-old Oskar Schell, who has lost his father in the attacks, begin a quest to solve a mystery, and they are the reason for his symptoms of trauma and erratic behavior. As in DeLillo’s novel, the terrorist attacks directly affect the characters’ motives and actions. Nevertheless, Oskar’s behavior and his trauma appear to be more about the loss of his father than about his father perishing specifically in the 9/11 attacks. Similarly, in McInerney’s novel, the attacks are the force that causes traumatic symptoms and makes the characters reevaluate their lives, but again, this could have been generated by any other major event.

Yet, these novels are universally considered to be 9/11 novels, as I believe they should be. Even though they do not engage with the terrorist attacks on a larger scale as a major political, global event, they do still seem to say something about 9/11. What Mishra considers superficial seems to rather refer to personal and domestic. He is not wrong in stating that these works are “sentimental and nostalgic novels about New Yorkers coping with loss”. But the question is, why should this approach make them any less valid 9/11 novels? Themes of personal trauma and loss have always been one of the main ways that literature has reflected historical tragedies, such as the Second World War, to which Foer’s novel actually draws a comparison through the narrative of Oskar’s grandparents, who are both survivors of the Dresden firebombing. The focus on personal trauma and overcoming it is in itself a decision that says something about the terrorist attacks and their

representation, but it does not make the works any less of 9/11 novels. The novels merely offer a different way of looking at the impact of the attacks from the more political 9/11 novels such as DeLillo's *Falling Man*, Walter's *The Zero*, Kalfus's *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*, and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) – all which participate in discussions about the nature of terrorism and the political atmosphere after the attacks.

What we should be looking at when considering whether novels belong to the subgenre of the 9/11 novel are the features that they have in common; not whether their tone is political or sentimental. As Frow points out, in determining genre, one of the main aspects is to consider the relations between the works in the genre. He asks, “[h]ow many features must they have in common before they count as ‘belonging’ to it? How do we know which features are relevant to a judgment about genre?” (2015: 11). Both are excellent questions to consider regarding the 9/11 novel, but instead of looking at the number of features (which would be rather impossible to determine), I would consider the quality of these features to be more significant. In this manner, the first question is connected to the latter, to which the answer would be that the features that matter are those associated with the thematic impact of 9/11, and it is the significance of these features that should be evaluated, not the number.

Däwes offers a helpful list of “recurrent historical plot elements” that can be found in 9/11 novels, such as “people jumping or falling from the towers”, “the endless repetitions on television”, “the flying paper in the air”, “the all-covering toxic dust”, “the missing posters, spontaneous shrines and New York Times obituaries”, and “the aftermath of xenophobia and paranoia”. She also lists some less common features which we can still find in many 9/11 novels, such as children reenacting the attacks, people using the terrorist attacks to disappear, characters missing the events or hearing about them later, or fantasies of altering the events. As typical reactions by characters, she lists “the moment of recognition (that the event is no accident) when the second plane hits the Trade Center, the impression that the attacks ‘looked like movie’ . . . the desire to donate blood or help in other ways, worrying about someone in or near the Trade Center, who then turns out to be alive” (Däwes 2011: 87). This list could be continued, for example, by features such as characters exhibiting traumatic symptoms which are caused by directly witnessing the attacks or having a loved one perish or become injured in them, characters discussing and debating the events of the 9/11 attacks, the nature of Islam, the “War on Terror”, and the general political aftermath of the attacks as well as characters fearing new attacks and talking about moving away from New York. When considering DeLillo's, McInerney's and Foer's novels, we can see that they use a plethora of recognizable tropes, themes, plot elements, and character types typical for the 9/11 novel: for example, they all deal with the traumatic impact of the attacks on their protagonists and the general atmosphere of fear and sorrow, DeLillo's and McInerney's novels feature 9/11 survivors while Foer's deals with a 9/11 victim and his family's sorrow, and people jumping from the towers is a central theme in Foer's and DeLillo's works.

Classifying works as 9/11 novels when they explicitly refer to the terrorist attacks is still a relatively easy task, but what about the novels which conjure up

9/11 implicitly? As Däwes has noted, some novels rely on, without ever mentioning 9/11, “the figurative spectrum of the terrorist attacks” by utilizing “the semantic fields of terrorism, hijackings, airplanes, destroyed urban infrastructure, towers, people falling from tall buildings, or combinations of any of these” to address the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath (2011: 86). She defines these novels as “metonymic” approaches to the attacks because they work based on omission and replacement: instead of dealing with the attacks explicitly, they substitute the 9/11 attacks with something closely related to them (2011: 98). According to Däwes, these substitutes can “range from general associations of out-of-the-blue terror (the unexpected loss of a beloved person, the sudden invasion or destruction of one’s home, or the threat of a hostile Other) to specific experiences of terrorism (suicide bombers in New York, a hijacked plane, or terrorist attacks on other major American cities)” (2011: 98–99).

There is, indeed, a group of works among 9/11 novels that do not explicitly refer to the terrorist attacks or merely mention them but still clearly invoke 9/11. John Updike’s *Terrorist* (2006), for example, mentions the terrorist attacks only in passing, and yet, the work has been universally read as a 9/11 novel. The novel revolves around a young American Muslim who becomes radicalized and is ultimately convinced to take part in a major terrorist plot. While the novel hardly addresses 9/11 explicitly, it certainly explores fields directly related to it, such as Islamist terrorism, a major attack on New York (as the plan is to explode the tunnel connecting New Jersey and New York), and the atmosphere of paranoia, suspicion, and fear prevalent in the aftermath of the attacks.

For some novels, the allusions to the 9/11 attacks are much subtler, and for some alleged 9/11 novels, the existence of these allusions is debatable – thus, it is difficult to draw the line where 9/11 fiction ends and something else begins. It is especially challenging since, as Däwes suggests, the metonymic texts leave the meaning-making process primarily to the reader. She explains, “The sheer fact that the mention of a box cutter and a Muslim within the same text, or of a beautiful September morning in connection with any sort of terror summons instant associations with the 9/11 attacks may be precisely the point: many novelists use the readerly level of expectations in order to either nourish or subvert it” (2011: 135). Some scholars have indeed suggested that at times, it is the reader’s response, their interpretation, that locates the novels in the subgenre of the 9/11 novel and not actual textual evidence of the thematic relevance of the attacks. This has been the case particularly with two novels that 9/11 scholars have interpreted in a way that would classify them in the category of Däwes’s “metonymic 9/11 novels”: McCarthy’s *The Road* and Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (2004). Nevertheless, as I will go on to argue, categorizing the novels in this manner would be misguided.

### **The Issues in Reading *The Road* and *The Plot Against America* as 9/11 Novels**

*The Road* is a post-apocalyptic story of a father and his son who try to survive in a ruined wasteland where most of humankind and all other living creatures have

been wiped off the face of the earth by an unnamed catastrophe. The boy and the man are traveling South to survive through winter. On the road, the few people they come across are thieves, cannibals, and gangs. The father and son are constantly cold, suffer from illnesses, and almost starve to death. At the end of the novel, the father dies of the sickness that has troubled him throughout the novel, and the son is left alone, until, in the strangely hopeful ending, a stranger comes along and invites him to stay with his family. As the 2006 winner of the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and the 2007 winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, the novel has been, unsurprisingly, the target of extensive academic attention.

Roth's *The Plot Against America* is a counterfactual historical novel set in the years 1940–1942. In the novel, the famous pilot Charles A. Lindberg wins the 1940 election against Franklin D. Roosevelt. Because of Lindberg's isolationist policies, the United States does not enter the Second World War until the end of the year 1942 and instead signs "an understanding" with Nazi Germany. President Lindberg's administration begins to put in order laws and regulations which target Jewish people, and anti-Semitism begins quickly to take hold of the population. The story is told from the point of view of the novel's young Jewish protagonist, who is, interestingly, named Philip Roth. As the novel progresses and the country begins its slide towards fascism, Philip and his family continue to grow more and more fearful.

It is clear that neither of the novels has anything explicitly to do with the 9/11 attacks. Nor do they fit Däwes's criterion regarding the spatial and temporal setting of the novel: *The Plot Against America* is set in the 1940s in Newark, New Jersey, and *The Road* is located somewhere in the southeastern United States in an unspecified time.<sup>5</sup> As mentioned earlier, there is, of course, plenty of variation regarding the temporal and spatial setting of the 9/11 novels: some novels are situated (partially) outside of New York and some engage with historical events or are set a few years after the 9/11 attacks. Nevertheless, for both the spatial and temporal setting to be completely outside the proximity of the terrorist attacks, as is the case with Roth's and McCarthy's novels, is quite unheard of among 9/11 novels.

Regarding Däwes's other criterion, the thematic or symbolic impact of the 9/11 attacks on the plot, the critics' opinions on exactly how these novels thematically address the terrorist attacks vary; yet 9/11 scholars appear to agree on the existence of this thematic impact and that the books could, thus, be classified as 9/11 novels. Marjorie Worthington, for example, states that it is "undeniable" that *The Road* is a 9/11 novel. Nevertheless, she does not explain this conclusion any further, besides mentioning that the novel "does not overtly thematize 9/11" but "evokes a decidedly dystopic future in which the world we recognize has been irrecoverably altered" (Worthington 2011: 112). While other critics have offered more detailed analyses of the works, they often have hardly complicated or questioned considering these works as 9/11 novels.

Gray analyzes *The Road* at length in *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (2011). According to Gray, the terrorist attacks made writers question "if literature could or should survive the end of *their* world", and he aims to show how the writers have asked and tried to respond to this question (2011: 16). In



his work's second chapter, he briefly analyzes novels which he considers having failed to answer this question, such as McNerney's *The Good Life*, Kalfus's *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*, DeLillo's *Falling Man*, Updike's *Terrorist*, Messud's *The Emperor's Children*, and Lynne Sharon Schwartz's *The Writing on the Wall* (2005) (2011: 16–17, 30–31). Gray argues that these novels “dissolve public crisis in the comforts of the personal”, while *The Road* is “the one novel considered in this chapter that manages to go beyond this, to begin imagining what it might feel like to survive the end of the world” (2011: 16–17). Devoting most of the chapter to his analysis of *The Road*, Gray claims that in comparison to the other novels, *The Road* aims “not to domesticate but to defamiliarize” the crisis of 9/11 (2011: 40). In line with the idea that trauma is something that avoids language and representation, he suggests that the reason why “the unnamable remains unnamed”, why the apocalyptic event is unknown in the novel, is because *The Road* is dealing with the “trauma that seems to resist telling”, more specifically, the trauma of the 9/11 attacks (2011: 39–40). He states that “[i]t is surely right to see *The Road* as a post-9/11 novel, not just in the obvious, literal sense, but to the extent that it takes the measure of that sense of crisis that has seemed to haunt the West, and the United States in particular, ever since the destruction of the World Trade Center” (2011: 39–40). Lydia R. Cooper as well suggest that “the apocalypticism of *The Road* seems to be a response to an immediate and visceral fear of cataclysmic doom” that followed 9/11 (2011: 221). She furthermore states that *The Road* “participates thematically in the projects of contemporary popular responses to 9/11, exploring as it does attributes of communal guilt, terror, and what, if anything, humanity can find that may provide a way out of the darkness”. Nevertheless, she proceeds to consider these themes by tracing the mythological foundations of the novel and offers an insightful reading of it as a modern grail narrative instead of a mere 9/11 narrative (2011: 222).

Keeble locates *The Road* in *The 9/11 Novel: Trauma, Politics and Identity* (2014) in the context of Hurricane Katrina and the “Bush Doctrine”. In an interesting reading of the novel, he suggests that “through a messianic allegory and portrayal of a retrograde, frontier masculinity, *The Road* endorses the Bush administration’s rhetoric of heroism, it’s [*sic*] focus on ‘American values,’ and its Manichean vision of ‘good vs. evil’” (2014: 100). Keeble, like Gray, groups McCarthy’s work with the earlier mentioned novels: he considers *The Road* as a “culmination of the trend of ‘indirectly’ representing 9/11” (2014: 92). Keeble suggests that McCarthy’s work “exhausts the possibility of examining disaster through indirect or symbolic means” and that in the years after its publication, the 9/11 novel has turned more political—a change which he sees as being caused primarily by the Hurricane Katrina and its consequences (2014: 93). Keeble also briefly compares McCarthy’s novel to Updike’s *Terrorist* and McEwan’s *Saturday*, and concludes that even though the latter novels offer “more explicit discussion of the ‘age of terror’”, these novels are “post-9/11 novels” while *The Road* is “very much a 9/11 novel—even if it is so allegorically” (2014: 95).<sup>6</sup> Similar to Keeble, David Holloway as well states in *9/11 and the War on Terror* (2008) that McCarthy’s book is the culmination of the trends of the early 9/11 novel (2008: 110). However, his view on what these trends are, differs slightly from Keeble’s: according to Holloway,

the early 9/11 novel has focused on “the flimsiness of Western modernity” and on distressed children and parents’ failure to protect them, which he sees as an allegory to “contemporary anxieties about state activity, and about the state’s jeopardising of the safety of its citizens” (2008: 108, 110–111).

As mentioned earlier, many critics have also read Roth’s *The Plot Against America* through 9/11. Charles Lewis interprets Roth’s novel in his article as “a prosthetic screen” for 9/11: “a substitute surface that both registers the traumatic consequence of that event and stands in as the projected realization of it” (2008: 248). Debra Shostak appears to agree with this view as she also associates Roth’s novel with the trauma of the 9/11 attacks and connects it to the trope of prosthesis (2016: 23–24). She claims that the novel discusses “by indirection . . . the consequences of national injury and shock on the nation’s most vulnerable citizens” (2016: 21). Lewis, furthermore, suggests that Roth’s novel “puts his reader on post-9/11 alert” and that “the reader of Roth’s novel can sift through the fiction to detect and decipher a pattern of signals linking the novel to 9/11 and the Bush administration’s response to it in the ensuing years” (2008: 246). Similarly, Holloway sees a connection between Roth’s characterization of the fictional President Lindbergh and the real-life President Bush, and he considers the novel to warn us about “the influence of sentimental nationalist iconography on ultra-patriotic post-9/11 versions of American nationhood” (2008: 108–109).

However, Roth himself has explicitly advised people not to confuse the book with contemporary politics:

Some readers are going to want to take this book as a roman a clef to the present moment in America. That would be a mistake. I set out to do exactly what I’ve done: reconstruct the years 1940-42 as they might have been if Lindbergh, instead of Roosevelt, had been elected president in the 1940 election. I am not pretending to be interested in those two years – I am interested in those two years. . . . My every imaginative effort was directed toward making the effect of that reality as strong as I could, and not so as to illuminate the present through the past but to illuminate the past through the past. (Roth 2004)

Roth also explains that the inspiration for the novel was not the terrorist attacks or their aftermath, but that the idea came to him in 2000 when he was reading Arthur Schlesinger’s autobiography and found a mention that some Republicans had considered running Lindbergh for president in the 1940 election (2004). Similarly, McCarthy has made it clear that the idea for his novel was not prompted by the 9/11 attacks, but instead, it emerged when he was visiting El Paso with his young son, John:

And one night, John was asleep, it was probably about two in the morning, and I went over and just stood and looked out the window at this town ... I just had this image of what this town might look like in 50 or 100 years... fires up on the hill and everything being laid to waste, and I thought a lot about my little boy. So I wrote two pages. And then about four years later

I realised that it wasn't two pages of a book, it was a book, and it was about that man, and that boy. (Adams 2009)

Of course, we should not interpret a novel guided only by authorial intention: the fact that a writer states they did not intend to write a 9/11 novel is not a sufficient reason to exclude it from the group of 9/11 novels. Indeed, the critics who have read *The Plot Against America* in relation to 9/11 have acknowledged Roth's words. Lewis claims that "even if Roth did not have George W. Bush in mind in his depiction of Lindbergh, it is nevertheless difficult for a reader encountering this fictionalized portrait not to recollect Bush's infamous May 2003 flight suit appearance aboard the aircraft carrier U. S. S. Abraham Lincoln and his declaration there, 'Mission Accomplished'" (2008: 251). However, the hypothetical reader in Lewis's argument who puts Lindbergh and Bush together and connects a novel which is set sixty years before 9/11 to 9/11 seems to be a specifically American reader at the beginning of the twenty-first century who is, as Lewis puts it, on "a post-9/11 alert". In other words, it would be fairly Americentric to assume that this is how the novel would be interpreted by different readers at different times.

In fact, it seems that all of the readings which consider McCarthy's and Roth's works as 9/11 novels rely on the presupposition that the readings are done in a certain context. The "thematic impact" of 9/11 appears to be found only if the novels are specifically read in relation to the 9/11 attacks, which seems like an exemplary circular argument: if we look for 9/11 in the novels, we will most probably find it there. For example, the fact that Gray considers *The Road* to explore "the sense of crisis that has seemed to haunt the West" and reflect the trauma of the 9/11 attacks, presupposes that the novel is specifically read in the context of the 9/11 attacks (2011: 39). After all, considering that *The Road* is set in an undefined time and place and tells a story of a nameless man and a boy who try to survive after an unspecified event has caused an apocalypse, there is no reason why, if we wanted to interpret the novel as reflecting some historical trauma, this trauma could not refer to any other historical tragedy. A distinction is needed to be made where 9/11 ends and trauma, terrorism, destruction, and death as themes otherwise begin. The 9/11 attacks have certainly not been the only major tragedy or terrorist attack in history, and at some point, it becomes very Americentric to read any allusion to loss, trauma, or terrorism as a reference to the 9/11 attacks. Furthermore, comparing McCarthy's novel's apocalypse which has destroyed all the living things and most of humankind possibly on the entire planet to a primarily American tragedy focused on a relatively small area, seems slightly unproportioned and supports the view that the 9/11 attacks were the end of the world as we know it, a unique rupture—a view which was prevalent in the mainstream political and media 9/11 discourse after the terrorist attacks.

Gray's, Holloway's, and Keeble's assertions that Roth's and McCarthy's works can be seen as 9/11 novels due to the themes they share with the previously mentioned 9/11 texts seem debatable as well. While these critics accurately recognize some common trends of the early 9/11 novel, such as the focus on children and the "domestic" tendencies, none of these features are the defining characteristic of the 9/11 novel—which is that the novels are about 9/11. Without this feature,

the similarities between McCarthy's and Roth's novels' themes and early 9/11 novels' themes hardly matter as such characteristics are prevalent in the American novel in general.

Keeble's reading of McCarthy's novel as supporting the conservative discourse and politics of the time has its issues as well. While I agree with the idea that the novel's values go hand in hand with the conservative ideology of the time, I disagree with the suggestion that this makes *The Road* a 9/11 novel. Whether a novel indirectly supports an ideology or a set of values which were prevalent in the aftermath of the attacks says nothing about the particular topic of the work: it does not mean that the novel is *about* the 9/11 attacks or their consequences. It might mean that the novel has been influenced by the terrorist attacks, but as I will establish in the following paragraphs, this does not qualify for the novel to be included in the subgenre of the 9/11 novel either.

As it has been demonstrated, there is a great deal of confusion about how to determine if a certain work is a 9/11 novel. Lewis, in fact, acknowledges this in his article about Roth's novel by saying that “[a]dmittedly, we would want to consider distinctions among, for example, the claim that a novel is ‘about’ 9/11, the proposition that a novel has been influenced by 9/11, and the observation that readers might be interested in a novel because of 9/11” (2008: 249). Building on Lewis's distinction, Shostak suggests that *The Plot Against America* lands somewhere between the second and the third possibility, and states that “Roth's novel need not be about 9/11 for its meanings to be inflected by that recent historical fact” (2016: 22–23). She claims that, therefore, it is “fair” and “useful” to read the novel “through the palimpsest of its representation of the years 1940–1942, a figuration of the trauma of 2001” (2016: 23). Similarly, Lewis states that “even a work that makes no reference to 9/11 and whose historical subject precedes that event by over half a century can be read productively in relation to 9/11” (2008: 250).

Nevertheless, we should keep in mind that just because a novel can be “read productively” in relation to something does not warrant for the novel to be classified into a subgenre based on that reading. *The Road* has been also read, for example, in relation to climate change<sup>7</sup>; yet this does not make it a “climate change novel”. Similarly, *The Plot Against America* has been recently read productively in relation to the Trump era, with which it resonates certainly more clearly than the Bush era.<sup>8</sup> The suggestion that a novel has been influenced by 9/11 should not either prompt anyone to categorize it as a 9/11 novel. Däwes, who correctly categorizes *The Road* and *The Plot Against America* as “American novels loosely associated with 9/11” instead of 9/11 novels, uses Roth's and McCarthy's works as examples of how plenty of novels which connection to the terrorist attacks is “abstract at best” have been read as 9/11 novels because, as Cohen argues, they “can tell us something about the ways their times, particularly the years after 9/11, thought about the course of history”<sup>9</sup> (Däwes 2011: 114–115). However, literature can always tell us something about its time: it is always written in a certain context and this context without question affects it in one way or another. But if we were to begin including every novel which has been influenced by 9/11 or which the readers are interested in because of 9/11, there would be no limits to

the term 9/11 novel as these criteria are not determinable in the same manner as the assertion that a novel is about 9/11. Thus, when discussing the 9/11 novel, the distinction that Lewis suggests should certainly be made, since only the works in the first category he mentions can be called 9/11 novels: the ones that are about 9/11.

### What a 9/11 Novel Truly Is

Building on the discussion in this article as well as Däwes's definition, I suggest to define the 9/11 novel as a group of works written after the terrorist attacks which address the 9/11 attacks or their consequences implicitly or explicitly in a thematically significant manner through tropes, themes, plot elements, symbols, and character types that are closely related to the discussions that surround 9/11 and which can be commonly found in the works throughout this subgenre and rarely in other novels. The definition emphasizes the connectedness of the works in relation to each other that Frow highlighted in his discussion of genre. It also suggests that these shared features should be evaluated regarding their thematic impact: their influence on the characters, significance for the plot, and relevance regarding the ultimate message the novels are trying to convey. It should be emphasized once more that it is, indeed, the textually proven thematic features of the works that first and foremost locate them as 9/11 novels. Therefore, the given definition allows these works to vary in features such as style, setting, minor themes, and narrative technique as long as they address the 9/11 attacks or their consequences in a thematically significant manner.

Of course, as Frow states, genres are always complex structures which should be defined based on formal, rhetorical, and thematic features; however, he also points out that different genres give different weight to each feature (2015: 84). At the most general level, the formal and rhetorical features of the 9/11 novel are already determined in the term "novel"; however, on a more specific level, it is difficult to find formal and rhetorical characteristics which would be universal for 9/11 novels. As mentioned earlier, the spatial and temporal setting can be indicative for classifying the works as 9/11 novels, but the proximity to the terrorist attacks is not an absolute requirement. The narrative technique of the novels also varies too greatly to make any definitive statements about it, and this is the case for the novels' stylistic features as well. The most we can say regarding the formal and rhetorical features is that 9/11 novels are often grounded in the traditions of historical literary realism, as Däwes suggests in her discussion of the literary historical context of the 9/11 novels (2011: 86–94). Yet, there are too many exceptions even to this claim for it to be considered a defining characteristic of the 9/11 novel; therefore, it is the thematic features that should be given prominence when evaluating whether a work can be considered a 9/11 novel.

It should be noted that, unlike Däwes's definition, mine explicitly incorporates also novels which deal with the consequences of the 9/11 attacks. By consequences, I am referring to different political, social, and discursive changes after the 9/11 attacks, which include but are not limited to emotional reactions to the at-

tacks, trauma, changes in values and attitudes, the “War on Terror” and the Patriot Act, the heightened suspicion and animosity towards Muslims and immigrants, and the rhetorical division of the world into “us” and “them”. While Däwes, too, seems to include such novels, this is not explicit in her definition.

Including the works which focus on the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks is essential when considering the definition of the 9/11 novel because, in fact, only a few works deal explicitly at length with the events of September 11. Yet, some researchers have distinguished between 9/11 novels and post-9/11 novels based on whether they deal with the 9/11 attacks or if they focus on their consequences. Georgiana Banita, for example, focuses in her work on what she calls post-9/11 novels, and while she does not offer a clear definition for this group, she states that the novels she analyzes would most likely not have been accepted as 9/11 novels by the earlier scholarship (2012: 14). Banita claims that the critics have focused on “the most ‘iconic’, mainstream responses to the September 11 attacks” and on “explicit, generally descriptive fictions about the attacks at the expense of more oblique works addressing the post-9/11 era” (2012: 14–15). However, the three most iconic examples of 9/11 literature, DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and Updike’s *Terrorist*, barely deal with the events of that Tuesday morning. *Terrorist* does not engage with the attacks explicitly; it hardly mentions the events of September 11. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* does not focus on the terrorist attacks themselves either but rather on the sorrow of a boy whose father has perished in the attacks. *Falling Man* begins and ends with a short depiction of the 9/11 attacks but otherwise revolves around their consequences in an estranged married couple’s lives. Indeed, there are hardly any works that would explicitly at length describe the events of September 11: as Randall states, “the ‘spectacle’ itself remains mostly absent from explicit description” (2011: 8).<sup>10</sup> Therefore, distinguishing 9/11 novels from post-9/11 novels, or 9/12 novels as Däwes calls them, based on whether they focus on the aftermath and the consequences of the attacks, does not appear justified.

Sometimes the scholarship seems to have distinguished between the 9/11 novels and post-9/11 novels based on the terms’ literal interpretation and considered 9/11 novel to refer to works about 9/11 and post-9/11 to novels after the terrorist attacks. This, however, raises a question: are all American novels written after the 9/11 attacks post-9/11 novels? If we answer no to this question and additionally require that the novels need to be in one way or another about 9/11, we could as well be talking about 9/11 literature. Then again, if we answer yes to the earlier question, we might as well be talking about twenty-first-century American literature instead of using the term post-9/11, which problematically defines a limitless period of time based on one singular event, as Sascha Pöhlmann criticizes (2010: 52), and supports the illusion of September 11 as the day when everything changed, as Sykes points out (2014: 249). Using the term post-9/11 would lead to even further problems. Since many international novels are also often referred to as post-9/11 novels, we would have to go even further and ask: are all the international novels written after the attacks also post-9/11 novels? At this point, we would be determining 9/11 to be the defining point of twenty-first-century literature for other cultures as well, which would obviously be even more questionable in many ways.

These problems are clearly similar to the ones we approach when reading novels such as *The Road* and *Plot Against America* as 9/11 novels: such readings suggest that the terrorist attacks are the only possible reference point for twenty-first-century novels, that 9/11 is the only cipher we need to understand any novel from the beginning of the century. This is not to say the novels should not be read in relation to the terrorist attacks but to point out that calling them simply 9/11 novels excludes any other interpretation. At the same time, McCarthy's novel has been read in literary studies in relation to, for example, religion, philosophy, ethics, and global warming: indeed, a plethora of critics have managed to offer convincing readings of the novel without even mentioning the 9/11 attacks. Considering there are hundreds of novels that actually are about 9/11, the majority of which have never been analyzed or have been included only in Däwes's work, it might be worthwhile for the scholarship to shift their attention to these novels instead of indirectly implying that everything is about 9/11.

This paper has illustrated the scholarship's lack of a proper definition for the 9/11 novel and the problems we come across without a discussion about the boundaries of the 9/11 novel and in reading contemporary fiction through 9/11. The article has also provided a working definition for the 9/11 novel, but there is still much room for further discussion. We should keep in mind that, as Frow states, "there are real and perhaps intractable conceptual difficulties involved in thinking about genre" (2015: 10). Genres, even when defined, are loose, changing structures, and what this paper has hoped to accomplish is to incite future discussion about the features and limits of this subgenre. The article has provided a good starting point for debates about defining the 9/11 novel that should be beneficial for future works about 9/11 fiction and the difficulties in defining new genres.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Versluys excludes both juvenile literature and detective literature from this group.
- <sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that Charles Lewis's article in the collection briefly addresses the topic, as will be discussed later.
- <sup>3</sup> On the surface, Randall avoids the issue by primarily using the term "literature of terror" instead of 9/11 literature. He does, however, mention, that Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday* (2005) cannot be considered to be a 9/11 novel in the same manner as Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* (2003); yet, he does clarify why this would be the case. Similarly, Gray's work is not specifically about 9/11 novels but about literature "after the fall". Nevertheless, he states that his aim is to interrogate how American writers have responded to the challenge that the 9/11 attacks posed for them (2011: 16).
- <sup>4</sup> It should be mentioned that based on this nebulous distinction, Versluys furthermore, rather bafflingly, concludes that in 2009 "no American female or minority author has yet treated 9/11 as a central theme" (2009: 200)—a statement that Petrovic vehemently criticizes as well (2015: xi).
- <sup>5</sup> The novel has often been considered to be set in the near future; however, Oliver James Brearey, who reads the novel as a criticism of humankind's reliance on

- technology, argues that based on the technologies in the novel, the plot occurs sometime between 1995 and 2001 and the cataclysm between 1985 and 1991 (2012: 335). This time frame would also suggest that the novel could be rather read in relation to the Cold War and the nuclear scares of the time than the 9/11 attacks.
- <sup>6</sup> Keeble does not, however, explicitly clarify what he considers to be the difference between a “post-9/11 novel” and a “9/11 novel”.
- <sup>7</sup> See, for example, Adeline Johns-Putra’s article ‘My job is to take care of you’: climate change, humanity, and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*.
- <sup>8</sup> See, for example, Maggie Ward’s 2018 article Predicting Trump and presenting Canada in Philip Roth’s *The Plot against America*. It is easy to connect the novel to the Trump era with the novel’s “America firsters” and a cult following of a celebrity president; nevertheless, this surely should compel no one to designate it as a “Trump era novel”. Of course, it should be noted that the novel could not be referring to the Trump era as it has been written before it, but this example only seeks to show how easy it is to connect the novel to a different context.
- <sup>9</sup> Cohen, Samuel: *After the End of History: American Fiction in the 1990s* (2009) qtd. in Däwes 114.
- <sup>10</sup> Beigbeder’s *Windows on the World* is one of the only early 9/11 novels that truly revolves around the events of September 11.

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No data is associated with this article.

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