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# 9/11 and the Novelists

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IN DON DELILLO's novel *Falling Man* (2007), a man dressed in a suit and tie plunges headfirst from a Manhattan skyscraper just weeks after the attacks of September 11, 2001. The jumper is David Janiak, a performance artist who is wearing a safety harness under his suit. No one knows what this performance, which he stages before horrified onlookers all around New York City, is supposed to mean, save that it is a ghastly reminder of the real men and women who leaped to their deaths from the World Trade Center. Eventually, the New School for Social Research ends up hosting a panel on Janiak: "Heartless Exhibitionist or Brave New Chronicler of the Age of Terror?"

DeLillo's satirical jab raises a deeper question with which any novelist hoping to take the measure of 9/11 must wrestle. Is it possible to create art out of horror without being exploitative and tasteless?

The question is not an academic one. Over the past few decades, literary novelists writing about American society have, for the most part, shied away from engagement with real-world events in favor of more interior portraits of their characters and the lives they lead. Lately, however, a surprising number of writers have taken up the subject of the terrorist attacks and their effect on the New Yorkers who lived through them. The 9/11 novels include DeLillo's *Falling Man*, Jay McInerney's *The*

*Good Life* (2006), Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006), Ken Kalfus's *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006), and, most recently, Joseph O'Neill's rapturously reviewed *Netherland*.\*

To what extent do these works succeed in providing a recognizable and illuminating portrait of our times? The answer to that question is a test of a kind, not only for the authors but for their readers. For there is a common thread running through these books: the suggestion, to quote one character in *Netherland*, that September 11 may not really have been a "big deal" at all.

"THIS CATASTROPHIC event changes the way we think and act, moment to moment, week to week, for unknown weeks and months to come, and steely years," DeLillo wrote in *Harper's* a few weeks after the attacks. But no such change in thought or action can be found in *Falling Man*. DeLillo is a novelist of global alienation, whose works over 30 years have chronicled the inability of individuals around the world to escape the crushing burden of American mass media and American imperialism. His latest novel—from its alienated and uncommunicative anti-hero to its elliptical, mannered dialogue—is no departure either in substance or in style.

Every character in *Falling Man* is isolated from every other, and each broods in sullen silence, des-

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\* Pantheon, 272 pp., \$23.95.

perately seeking meaning where none is to be found. When the silence is broken, conversations consist largely of portentous expostulations—“Nothing is next. There is no next. This was next.”—that have never actually emerged through the lips of real, living persons.

Keith Neudecker, the protagonist of *Falling Man*, is a middle-aged lawyer whose office was in the World Trade Center. Haunted by the fact that he survived the 9/11 attacks, he abandons his recently reunited family to play poker obsessively, determined to test the luck that spared him and took the life of his best friend. He views himself more as a “humanoid robot” than as an actual human being.

As Keith gambles, his wife Lianne pores over the Qur’an, whose first line haunts her: “This Book is not to be doubted.” Envy of the certitude possessed by the hijackers, she embarks on a spiritual quest of sorts. But nothing—neither churchgoing nor participation in anti-war protests—can alleviate her profound sense of solitude.

If only she knew that the hijackers were as alone as she! In DeLillo’s telling, these mass murderers, represented here by a character named Hammad, were embarked on their own existential quest for meaning. They and their societies had been “too long in isolation,” DeLillo writes, “crowded out by other cultures, other futures, the all-enfolding will of capital markets and foreign policies.”

In earlier novels, like *White Noise* (1985) and *Mao II* (1991), DeLillo had actually celebrated the liberating power of terrorist violence. As he declared in a 1991 interview, “In a society that’s filled with glut and repetition and endless consumption, the act of terror may be the only meaningful act.” *Falling Man* may thus be characterized as an effort to revisit that opinion, breezily offered by someone who at that point may never actually have contemplated the real-world consequences of a view in which wanton destruction and the purposeful murder of innocents were not only thinkable but considered laudable and even holy.

Yet it seems that DeLillo is still not ready to change his mind or to repudiate “the act of terror.” After all, those murderers had to do *something* to combat their profound alienation. And so he lets his novel dissolve rather than resolve. It ends the way it begins, with a plane striking one of the towers: Nietzsche’s nightmarish “eternal return” presented in its most chilling form.

DE LILLO’S EXHAUSTED nihilism assumes a subtler form in Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland*. The novel describes a “descent into disorder” that begins

with one family’s displacement from its lower-Manhattan loft only blocks from Ground Zero. With the area cordoned off following the attacks, Hans, a Dutch-born banker, and his English wife Rachel take up temporary residence at the terminally bleak Chelsea Hotel. The two, mired in what he calls a “malign weariness,” grow increasingly distant, and Rachel, frustrated by her “invertebrate” husband, finally leaves for London with their son.

One day, the deserted Hans sees a cricket bat in the trunk of a cab and is suddenly reminded of his boyhood in Holland. At this point, *Netherland* turns away from its portrait of domestic discord to an unlikely but more hopeful metaphor for America’s future: the game of cricket. The bat belongs to the taxi driver, and Hans soon finds himself spending every weekend with the driver and his friends as “the only white man” among a ragtag group of West Indian and South Asian immigrants who make up a cricket team in Staten Island.

On the ill-tended field, Hans meets Chuck Ramkissoon, a Trinidadian businessman of Indian extraction. Chuck is fascinated by what he sees as cricket’s moral underpinnings: “You ask people to agree to complicated rules and regulations,” he tells Hans; it is “like a crash course in democracy . . . a lesson in civility.” And Hans agrees: “I cannot be the first to wonder if what we see, when we see men in white take to a cricket field, is men imagining an environment of justice.”

The game is a symbol not only of fair play but of brotherhood. When Hans plays his first game with the Staten Island team, the motley crew of “three Hindus, three Christians, a Sikh, and four Muslims” forms a huddle to pray together. Chuck, too, sees the unifying possibilities of cricket. His secret ambition, he confides to Hans, is to build a world-class stadium in Brooklyn and popularize his beloved sport in America. Not only a tremendous business opportunity, the introduction of cricket would give Americans “something in common with Hindus and Muslims. . . . With the New York Cricket Club we could start a whole new chapter in U.S. history.”

In Chuck’s own unbounded vitality, Hans thinks he has discovered an answer to the “awful enfeebling fatalism” that has plagued him—and America—ever since 9/11. “Chuck was making a go of things,” he explains. “While the country floundered in Iraq, Chuck was running. That was political enough for me.” Unfortunately, though, Hans remains oblivious of Chuck’s dark side: he turns out to be a crook running an illegal numbers game, and perhaps to be involved in more sinister business as well.

O'Neill intends Hans's blindness to suggest something larger. When Rachel learns of his involvement with Chuck, she tells her husband: "You were just happy to play with him. Same thing with America. You're like a child. You don't look beneath the surface." The real America, she and O'Neill make clear, is scarred by what is beneath the surface: its ongoing history of violence, colonization, genocide.

As a privileged white man, Hans has had only momentary glimpses of this America. But his consciousness is raised when, after failing a driving test, he walks out into the streets of midtown Manhattan and is suddenly overcome with

a nauseating sense of America, my gleaming adopted country, under the secret actuation of unjust, indifferent powers. The rinsed taxis, hissing over fresh slush, shone like grapefruits; but if you looked down into the space between the road and the undercarriage, where icy matter stuck to pipes and water streamed down the mud flaps, you saw a foul mechanical dark.

**I**N LIGHT of this horrific vision, how are we to understand 9/11 and its meaning? Here O'Neill seems to be completely confused. When Matt, an old friend of Rachel's, claims that 9/11 was "no big deal when you think of everything that's happened since," meaning the American invasion of Iraq, Hans objects but is unable to offer reasons for his objection. In a rare display of marital solidarity, Rachel defends her husband to Matt as one who "was there" on 9/11. But Hans himself questions whether this gives him any authority to speak:

I've heard it said that the indiscriminate nature of the attack transformed all of us on that island into victims of attempted murder, but I'm not at all sure that geographic proximity to the catastrophe confers this status on me or anybody else.

Matt is not the only one who doubts that the threat facing America is a "big deal." The claim seems to strike O'Neill, too, as melodramatic. And so in the end he tries to have it both ways, evoking 9/11 to lend gravitas to Hans's personal malaise but withholding any attribution of real weight to the attacks themselves. Nor, except for a single remark midway through the book, are the hijackers or their motivations ever discussed. Instead, *Netherland* retreats to safer ground, focusing on the allegedly childlike inability or refusal of Americans to look beyond the "gleaming" surface of things into their own abundantly violent deeds. In *Nether-*

*land*, 9/11 changes nothing. America continues blundering through the world, unaware even that its day has passed.

**I**F *Falling Man* and *Netherland* are self-consciously "serious" efforts to grapple with 9/11, Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* and Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* are comedies of manners that dwell at least in part on the effect of the attacks on a very specific class of New Yorker: the sort best known to the world from the pages of the Sunday "Styles" section of the *New York Times*.<sup>\*</sup> The characters—mediocre would-be public intellectuals in Messud, over-moneyed party people in McInerney—are obsessed with celebrity, five-star restaurants, and getting invitations to the best parties. It is hard to decide which author is the more blameworthy: Messud, an otherwise thoughtful writer who fully realizes how trivial are her characters and their woes but asks you to care anyway, or McInerney, who, being only a quarter-inch deeper than his creations, genuinely loves them and is certain you will, too.

McInerney's *The Good Life* is basically another of his "late-coming-of-age" stories in which immature adults learn that there is more to adulthood than Dolce & Gabbana, but not before they engage in a little ostentatious bed-hopping. This is the formula that made him famous 25 years ago with *Bright Lights, Big City*, and McInerney evidently sees no reason to move beyond it. *The Good Life* is, in fact, a reprise of *Brightness Falls* (1992), a book largely concerned with the 1987 stock-market crash. As the opening chapters of the new novel make plain, everyone has fully recovered from that last shock and completely forgotten any lessons learned from it—which is convenient, since now they can learn them all over again.

*The Good Life* is so earnest in its mawkishness that it would be almost forgivable were it not for the scenes in which the hero and heroine, at Ground Zero, fall in love at first sight and flirt as shamelessly as if they were at a singles bar. Luke, who has supposedly watched "bodies raining down on the plaza . . . exploding like rotten fruit on the concrete," is not too traumatized by the murder scene to tell Corrine that she looks just like Katharine Hepburn. "What, spinsterish and flinty?" she banters back.

Messud's novel is no less lacking in banter, emerging in her case from the mouths of four ambitious young people: Marina, a poor-little-rich

<sup>\*</sup> Carol Iannone reviewed Messud's *The Emperor's Children* in the February 2007 COMMENTARY.

girl/wannabe writer; Julius, a gay freelance critic; Danielle, an ambitious television producer; and Frederick “Bootie” Tubb, a resentful college dropout. All want to make their way to the top of the New York media elite, but none has the discipline or focus necessary to get there on his own. Instead, they take turns courting Murray Thwaite, a famous liberal journalist coasting on his past achievements.

Like *The Good Life*, *The Emperor’s Children* is something of a soap opera. Danielle begins an affair with Murray, who is Marina’s father; Marina embarks on an affair with her father’s enemy. The 9/11 attacks put an end to their shenanigans when Bootie is killed at Ground Zero, but the party is only postponed, not canceled. After a brief interval of grieving, the remaining trio quickly sink back into their lives and work: a new book on children’s clothes for Marina, a documentary on liposuction malpractice for Danielle, a piece on nightclubs for Julius.

Danielle, psychologically the most affected by the attacks, looks up at the broken skyline of New York and wonders at the change that has occurred: “What had been the shape of it before? The shape of anything?” But, as in *Netherland*, the notion that America is actually at war seems too fantastic, too movie-like, to be real. And, it turns out, Bootie is not dead after all but has used the attacks as an excuse to escape Manhattan and begin a different life for himself in Florida.

Messud wants to show how, as Edith Wharton once wrote, a frivolous society “can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys.” But her sacrificial lambs, Danielle and Bootie, do not suffer very much, and in any case what happened on 9/11 was hardly an act of frivolity. Messud’s deployment of the attacks backfires. She has nothing of novelistic moment to say about them, but there they are on the page, raising a question to which she has no answer: what is the disillusionment of Danielle and Bootie next to the murder of thousands of innocent people?

**I**N KEN KALFUS’S black comedy, *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*, there are no innocent people, or at least no innocent Americans. Whereas the other novels discussed here brandish their politics largely by implication, Kalfus is explicit about

his. He sees himself as a bold truth-teller, and this novel, he told an interviewer, as his protest against “glorifying the victims of the attacks”:

Given what we know about the frequency of divorce and the extreme bitterness that often accompanies it, I supposed that if 3,000 people were killed in the towers that morning, then there must have been at least a few spouses relieved and gratified by the end of the day.

Inspired by such feelings, Kalfus created a portrait of America as a place of such unrelenting ugliness as almost to justify the hijackers’ point. His New York is “a world of heedless materialism, impiety, baseness.” And the real terrorists in his story are Americans: a married couple named Joyce and Marshall whose mutual hatred is so all-consuming that each of them is at first disappointed and then outraged to find the other did not die at the World Trade Center. Stuck together by mutual intransigence—neither will move out of their Brooklyn condo—they terrorize not only each other but also their two preschool-age children.

In the novel’s most outrageous and emblematic scene, Marshall decides to kill his entire family by means of a suicide bomb—an idea that comes to him after watching news coverage of a suicide bombing in Israel. This is Kalfus’s idea of sophisticated political commentary: the Israel-Palestinian conflict, maybe even America’s struggle with al Qaeda, as akin to a couple going through a bad divorce.

Vile as it is, Kalfus’s novel is also sadly of a piece with its fellows—more concerned with establishing a thesis about America than with tackling what that September day really meant or what its real impact continues to be. Nor, although each starts with the private and the small-scale—an unraveling marriage, a friendship, an affair—does any of the novels succeed in inhabiting that reality, either. The shadow of the attacks inevitably makes such woes seem trivial, and the word “trivial” hardly begins to capture the moral idiocy of any effort to analogize minuscule domestic difficulties with the fact or the scale of the slaughter and destruction. Confidently bent on disparaging Americans for a lack of either imagination or feeling, the authors might have more profitably looked in their own mirrors for telltale evidence of those same crippling deficiencies.