

Worlds of Terrorism:

Learning through Young Adult Literature

We are presented daily with news about terrorism—our “war” on it, acts of it around the world, talk about levels of alert with a color code to help us recognize how fearful we should be. Concurrent with the writing of this manuscript, Yahoo News alone reflected this presence in our lives: The 9/11 Panel decided we were unprepared for the attack. Osama bin Laden is still alive and sending messages via videotape asking us to recognize the errors of our President and join in a truce; our Vice President says we can only destroy terrorists. New York continues to live with threats about subway security. Kidnappers hold Christian peace activists and journalists hostage in Iraq. Australia receives a threat of terrorism. Oil workers are kidnapped in Nigeria. The December 12, 2005, issue of *Newsweek* reports that women are becoming increasingly active as terrorists and are able to hide explosives while appearing innocently pregnant. A cartoon depicting the prophet Mohammed with a bomb on his head set off new acts of violence around the world. As this article goes to press, Al Qaeda leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, has just been killed by US forces, and Al Qaeda threatens retaliation and renewed efforts in the insurgency.

While talk of terrorism, kidnapping, hijacking,

bombings and bioterrorism are not pleasant, 9/11 brought these words into a U.S. American consciousness, now as a reality and as a possibility for repetition. Yet even as the news media sustains the focus, people in general continue to live within a more immediate world of work, family, socializing or otherwise surviving. [Doris Lessing](#) writes that “[e]very one of us is part of the great comforting illusions, and part illusions, which every society uses to keep up its confidence in itself. These are hard to examine . . .”

(33). Along with other teachers and authors, I believe we have a responsibility to help students better understand the world in which they live by facilitating an examination of, or inquiry into, topics that confuse, create fear, raise questions and baffle world leaders.

Following the 9/11 event, then editor of *The ALAN Journal*, [Pamela Sissi Carroll](#), shared what many felt as helplessness in reassuring students through young adult literature that their lives remain safe and secure. She called on us to “Look for significance in the ways we live and the lives we touch. For many of us, that means continuing to reach out to adoles-

cents through the medium of young adult books” (3). Author [Jennifer Armstrong](#) noted two years later that while “in the world of children’s literature, we are

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pretty cozy. . . out there in the rest of the world, things are going to hell” (191). She asks what our books are doing to work against such chaos and fear. She writes that books can be the “enemy of violent zealotry” and “give us access to multiple points of view” (192). Kenneth Lindblom, a column editor of the *English Journal*, suggests that we recognize a responsibility to prepare students for a better future and to take the *9/11 Commission Report’s* critique of a lack of imagination in our intelligence agencies as an opportunity to promote imaginative conversation, thinking and action in our classrooms. Ruth Caillouet, assistant professor of English at Southeastern Louisiana University, finds the current war in Iraq a “teachable moment” (68), a way for good teachers to integrate the adolescent search for identity with the complexity of world problems as another kind of identity searching. She frames the time of adolescence as a war—of emotions and hormones, angst and uncertainty, and definitely fear.

I was involved in a research project in an 8th grade English classroom when 9/11 happened. Teachers were understandably unsure how to discuss this horrendous event that continued to unfold and replay on television sets in every classroom. Some decided that students were too young to talk about it. Others attempted to let students talk, write, question and process what they were feeling as we all tried to absorb the shock of this attack. I noted that whenever class was not officially in session, students wanted to talk and were asking questions that merited a response or school time to investigate their concerns. But within a few days, classroom television sets returned to playing Channel One for ten minutes each morning and any mention of the national tragedy rarely surfaced anywhere throughout the day.

Ramifications of Terrorism for Young Adults

As time passed following the 9/11 tragedy, I became increasingly interested in a pervasive silence I was finding in schools about the event and the topic of terrorism. In visits to middle and high school classrooms to supervise pre-service teachers, I sensed the unspoken desire to return to “normalcy,” putting any talk about terrorism, possibility of war, and eventually the U.S. offensive in Afghanistan on a “not

on class time” unofficial policy. Students seemed to comply, returning to comfortable school procedures and topics, appearing to forget that 9/11 ever happened unless something reminded them enough to make a reference in passing. With more time and the extended war in Iraq, the silence became more noticeable as the political climate of our nation turned into an emotionally challenging and polarized arena that usually valued a Blue or Red stance rather than any attempt to dialogue. I found social studies classrooms to be the only school location for occasional but surface discussion or questioning of war and terrorism as connections were made between history and present.

Doris Lessing tells us that people “crave certainty, they seek certainty, and great resounding truths” (21). Living, on the other hand, requires dealing with ambiguity, making decisions without clear resounding truths, and keeping minds open to new information and possibilities. Lessing urges us to work against the unconscious and pragmatic brainwashing all experience as members of any society by moving into

a “greater objectivity . . . to look at our culture with dispassionate eyes” (33). Some questions come to mind to ask of ourselves and our students: Are we as a nation self-silencing as a form of denial to psychologically and emotionally protect ourselves from the potential of war or another terrorist act occurring in the U.S.? Are we as educators participating in this kind of thinking, which tells our students to ignore something as dominating as worldwide terror? Do silence and ignorance about terrorism enable us to act against it? How can we act against it? Do we learn to live with it as many in European countries have done? By ignoring the opportunity to examine terrorism and our responses to it more objectively, are we miseducating for a lifetime of adult responsibility as citizens of a

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nation and a world threatened by it on a daily basis?

George Fletcher, professor of jurisprudence at Columbia University, writes that terrorism eludes easy definition, as does the concept of war at this time in our history. He claims that we have a romanticized view of freedom and war, much like the ideals of the romantic writers, who value honor, glory and emotional sensibility over objective rationalization, which further complicates efforts to define and deal with terrorism. [Benjamin Netanyahu](#), former Israeli Prime Minister, defines terrorism as “Violence directed against persons who have no connection with the alleged grievance the terrorist purports to remedy” (8). Which leaves us to define *terrorist*. Netanyahu explains that a “terrorist demands that his activity, which would ordinarily be viewed as gangsterism, be treated with the respect to legitimate warfare” (11) and that “far from being fighters for freedom, terrorists are the forerunners of tyranny” (12). [Milton Meltzer](#), an American historian and author, defines terrorism as

“The exploitation of a state of intense fear, caused by the systematic use of violent means by a party or group, to get into power or to maintain power. . . . through acts—bombings, kidnappings, hijackings, assassinations—that terrorize” (28). Meltzer’s more general and less politically-framed definition provides a more approachable way to connect the concept to both political and personal understandings.

Young people live with the national and international talk about terrorism and potential attacks. Those living in large cities who use mass transportation

systems cannot escape the concern about subway bombings or recurring alerts. Many travel with parents or have parents who travel to countries with incidents of kidnapping, particularly of U.S. Americans. Others may dream of traveling or of becoming a foreign

correspondent and think of the dangers as exciting, assuming they would be smarter than those who are kidnapped or killed. But the fear of being terrorized may exist more realistically at the local level with potential violence in schools from bomb threats, school shootings, fights that may involve weapons, and always the terror of being mercilessly teased, taunted, or bullied.

For many teens, terrorism or acts of terrorism may be too distant a phenomenon, yet it can be recognized as relevant if related to a local situation or behavior that has similar characteristics. Many young adult novels can cross this gap and initiate healthy conversation toward understanding one’s fears, finding alternative ways to handle fear and the situations that cause fear, becoming aware of why some need to terrorize others, and becoming more knowledgeable about terrorism on a larger scale.

Beginning with Caroline Cooney: Contemplating the Possible

The concept of terrorism in young adult literature does range from the involvement of international terrorists to individual fear from being “terrorized” by someone or something. Some novels revolve around incidents that can happen as accidents or as purposeful terrorist events, such as an airline crash, a kidnapping, a chemical spill or a biological error. The choice of a specific book would depend upon a teacher’s preference to study terrorism directly as a national and international concern, to approach it in terms of one’s personal emotional and psychological response, or to use a combined analysis regardless of the literature selection.

Three works of Caroline Cooney are especially useful for readers to vicariously experience what it might be like to be in an airplane crash or part of a rescue team responding to such a catastrophe, to have a family member killed by a terrorists’ bomb, or to be threatened with potential biological “warfare” and be kidnapped. (I was not alone in being surprised to find Caroline Cooney categorized as an author of “Chick Lit” at the 2005 ALAN Workshop in Pittsburgh. According to Pamela Sissi Carroll in *Caroline Cooney: Faith and Fiction*, this speaks to her broad range and talent as a writer.)

In *Flight #116 is Down!* [Caroline Cooney](#) uses

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multiple 3rd person narrators to allow readers to be an airline crash victim with life-threatening injuries as well as passengers who suffer and try to hold on but do not survive; to feel the thrill of being part of a rescue team; to feel helpless when wanting desperately to help but not knowing exactly how; and to worry as a family member of a passenger, waiting at an airport to hear a dead-or-alive report from an airline official. Patrick, 17, is an EMT and a junior member of an ambulance team. He “yearned for something unpredictable; something that would test him; something he could swagger about” (7). Heidi, a ninth-grader at a boarding school, is home at the family mansion. She dislikes school, gets Cs and is not sure how to follow her parents’ advice to get involved and be active in something. Daniel, 15, and Tucker, 13, are flying to their divorced father’s second wedding. Flying home after visiting her grandparents, kindergartner Teddy hugs her cuddly white bear and worries that her parents may not be at the airport to meet her. Darienne is an impatient woman who does not want to sit by a little girl named Teddy, is upset that the plane left late, becomes irritated by a whining baby a few rows away, brought a book on board that she has already read, and felt “baked in her own hostility” (22). Laura, also a junior EMT, feels she is in love with Patrick, who was in her EMT training class. She too is anxious for action.

Because each character is introduced through a chapter section headed by a specific time, such as 5:05 P.M. and 5:10 P.M., readers simultaneously know where each person is located on the ground, who is in the airplane and who is waiting at the airport as the printed times raise the tension toward an imminent crash that will occur at 5:41 P.M. (given away on the back cover). As the plane suddenly changes angles and begins its descent to crash, the time given begins to include seconds (5:41:01 P.M.) as people on the ground become alerted by the sound. Survivors on the plane express confusion and fear.

An eerie silence follows the roar of the crash of the 747, then screams are heard. The plane has crashed in the woods behind Heidi’s mansion in an area that is not easily accessible. Emergency crews coming to the sight are soon trapped in a traffic jam on a long, narrow country road with no outlet, leaving no exit access. From Saturday at 5:42 P.M. to Saturday at 10:48 P.M., readers experience the rescue operation.

Heidi’s home becomes emergency central. Her knowledge of her land and available equipment allows her to become the involved and capable person her parents wanted her to be. Patrick’s initial excitement about accidents meets the horror of reality at the scene. Gradually overcoming his paralysis, Patrick is able to invent a way to untangle the traffic and permit ambulance exits. Laura helps the ambulance crew put survivors onto gurneys, noticing personal details that bring emotions, thoughts of waiting relatives and empathy for another’s pain to the forefront. Sightseers and the media become a complication as the rescue extends into hours. Family members at the airport begin to get final verdicts about their loved one.

Readers can feel optimistic at the novel’s conclusion when many passengers have survived. Heidi and her parents are proud of her extensive involvement. The EMT trainer tells Heidi that even with training, one doesn’t feel prepared for such a massive rescue effort. One prepares, uses that knowledge to go forward, “hoping to be right” (199). The novel begs the question of *What would I do if this were me in any of these lives?*

Code Orange, another Caroline Cooney novel, begins when Mitty Blake, a high-schooler in Mr. Lynch’s advance biology class, struggles to find a topic for his term paper on a disease. Mitty wants to research bioterrorism in the Ottilie Lundgren 2001 anthrax case but cannot as Mr. Lynch requires four books as resources. Mitty’s mother, an interior decorator, specializes in creating libraries for people and thus buys and gathers old books. She has recently bought the library of a very old, now deceased doctor. At the Blake country home that weekend, Mitty investigates several of these recent acquisitions. In *Principles of Contagious Diseases* he finds an envelope marked “Scabs—VM epidemic, 1902, Boston” handwritten with a fountain pen. Opening the envelope, he handles the scabs and they crumble, causing him to sneeze. Because this happens on page 11, readers feel anxious during the remainder of the book as Mitty researches to find out what “VM” means, whether or not he will contact a contagious disease, and finally whether or not he could infect and kill everyone in New York City.

The first part of the novel is interwoven with textual excerpts from Mitty’s research to let us learn about the disease as he does. Meanwhile, anxiety

builds as readers note everyone he touches and speaks with, rides with on mass transportation, and sits with at ballgames. Cooney increases the tension by telling how many days before visible signs appear. When Mitty exhibits some early symptoms and thinks he could be contagious with smallpox, he decides to ask questions online at a variety of sites pretending that he is only concerned with accuracy for his term paper. His online inquiry gives him 27 messages the next day. Someone wants him to meet personally. But Mitty

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chooses to write a long letter to his parents explaining that he must die, and the virus with him. Two chapters later, we find Mitty in a basement immobilized with duct tape trying to remember how he got into this predicament. One of his abductors claims to be with the Center for Disease Control, but the enthusiasm for his potential illness tells Mitty he is a prisoner. His absence involves the NYPD, FBI and the CDC in an effort to interrupt anyone involved in the potential act of

bioterrorism. Mitty's knowledge and careful thinking allow him to escape as the terrorists attempt to move him to a new location. We finally learn that Mitty does not have smallpox.

The first chapter of *The Terrorist*, the third Cooney novel, acquaints readers with Billy Williams, newspaper boy, a Kraft macaroni and cheese aficionado, and a boy who imagines abandoning a suitcase at an airport to see what would happen. He imagines helping Scotland Yard seize a terrorist who might pick up the bag by mistake. However, on his way to school one day coming up from the Underground, someone catches his arm, smiles and says, "Your friend dropped this" (10). Quickly processing the stranger, the fact that no friend is with him today, the crowded setting, his knowledge about how such incidents happen, and the way "this" package is wrapped, Billy realizes it is a bomb. He wraps himself around the package as he

sees a baby in front of him and thinks of his mom.

The Terrorist differs from *Flight #116 is Down!* and *Code Orange* with an emphasis on the inner thoughts of the protagonist. Laura, a U.S. American who lives in London and attends the London International Academy, processes the death of her brother through denial, anger, proactive, but unwise, action and finally beginning to come to terms with the loss. Before Billy's death, Laura is only interested in finding a date for the Junior-Senior Thanksgiving dance. While her friends at school either discuss world events or worry about being kidnapped for political reasons, Laura is proud of her ignorance about world geography, of which friend comes from which country (if they can give this information), and of world politics. Unlike her European and Middle Eastern classmates, Laura made friends by listening to everyone's opinions and had none of her own.

After Billy's death, she gradually takes an active interest in her current events class. But she also becomes suspicious and judgmental in thinking how each of her classmates might have been involved in planting the bomb on Billy. She does develop a closer friendship with Jehran, one of her wealthiest classmates who is driven to school in a bullet-proof limo. At Jehran's first slumber party, she tells Laura that both of her parents are dead. She lives with her oldest brother. Jehran, who looks a somewhat like Billy, asks Laura for Billy's passport so that she can fly to the United States to escape an arranged marriage. The two girls work to devise the way to let Jehran escape, only to discover that Jehran is part of the terrorist group who had Billy killed just to gain a U.S. passport. Disillusionment with her friend causes Laura to question why God cannot stop a terrorist. Her father tells her, "Only other people can stop evil people" (154). Laura asks how and her father can only say he doesn't know, but that our responsibility is to stop evil wherever we see it. She learns the value of true friends "who cared enough to pay attention, to risk looking silly, to get involved" (198) in order to save her in spite of her naiveté and recent anger with them.

Opportunities for Reflection with Young Adult Literature

All three novels by Caroline Cooney offer rich material for student discussions about how innumerable fears can be transformed into acts of significance.

All three contribute to changing student illusions of a cozy and safe world into a recognition that life has pleasure and sorrow, safety and danger. Each story has a balance, which presents a more realistic world for young adults to reflect upon, one of uncertainty yet with hope in learning how to respond in ways that help others and themselves. Cooney allows readers to be reflective about the effects on individuals, families and communities through each of these three novels. Extended discussions and writings could then examine these same effects on a societal level.

Students could also follow the novel reading with research projects to discover more about terrorism as a world construct and compare research findings with text accuracies. Why were there no survivors on 9/11 on the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania? How is smallpox transmitted? Could Jehran actually gain entrance into the U.S. with Billy's passport? Throughout the novel *The Terrorist* (published in 1997), Laura's reactions and comments parallel many of the responses of the U.S. population after the 9/11 terrorist attack. By page 71, she thinks, "I was proud of being ignorant. I felt superior because I *didn't* know anything. When you're an American, and you're the best and the strongest, you don't have to worry what all those little guys are up to" (71-72). Why do we feel this way as Americans? And the question many find disturbing: Why do so many people in the world hate us?

Exploring Other Worlds of Terrorism: Other Selections

Stephanie S. Tolan's *Flight of the Raven* (a sequel to *Welcome to the Ark* but stands alone) combines the reality of acts of terrorism within the United States with two characters who have extrasensory ability to mentally connect with other human beings and animals. Amber Landis, about 14, believes that her father's leadership in the Free Mountain Militia in upstate New York will help create a better world through his organization's efforts to disrupt the system by bombing transmission towers and disturbing the infrastructure. While the Militia men are running from their last attack, they find a black, ten-year-old boy who is the one reported missing from a mental hospital. Debating pros and cons that include racist accusations, they decide to take Elijah as a hostage.

Elijah had been in a home for unusually gifted children where their schooling included enhancing their "connections" (54). For months, Elijah does not talk, remaining in his dreamlike world for safety. He first begins talking with Amber. Eventually, his gift lets him "hear" and feel the infiltration of an FBI agent in a White Nation organization who could endanger the entire Landis family with whom he now lives. But when Militia leader Landis decides to believe in Elijah's strangely-acquired information, he has two people members killed. Changing the method of violence from bombing places to killing people gives Amber and Elijah cause to question the goals of the Militia when Landis presents the final plan to practice "biowar" in conjunction with another country.

Flight of the Raven lets us face terrorism in our own country. A reminder for students that all terrorists are not of Middle Eastern descent opens the concept of terrorism for broader investigation and understanding. Meltzer includes a chapter in *The Day the Sky Fell* called "Terrorism, American-Style" which presents the Ku Klux Klan as a post-Civil War terrorist group and the late 1800's union activities as anarchism turned violent with terrorist methods.

One way to enter the young adult literature that speaks to topics like violence and terrorism would be through offering a list of possibilities and utilizing a literature circle format to initiate a broader dialogue. Cormier's *After the First Death* gives a chilling and realistic view of a school bus hijacking, giving 3rd person narratives from the perspective of two terrorists, the bus driver, a general's son, and a young child. Two additional novels involving kidnappings let readers feel kidnapped and follow the efforts to escape. Discussions that analyze realistic and novelistic could be productive since kidnappings happen locally as well as in the high visibility areas of Iraq. Ellen White's *Long Live the Queen* is situated in the White House. Madame President's daughter, Meg, is

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kidnapped by masked men amid machine gun fire and realizes that one of her Secret Service men was involved. The eponymous protagonist in *The Kidnaping of Christina Hattimore*, by Joan Lowery Nixon, is taken for ransom, but once she escapes, her family assumes she instigated her own kidnapping to get family money needed to pursue her own goals, goals which were not in alignment with family plans for her.

To consider terrorism in school settings, choices range from individual bullying of peers to school shootings. In *The Creek* by Jennifer Holm, one boy, Caleb Devlin, returns to this safe suburban community after being sent away to a juvenile home. When a dog skull with a bullet hole is found, rumors begin. During a game of hiding with flashlights, protagonist Penny

and friend Zachary find a little girl's body in a drainpipe. Parents assume Caleb is guilty, but Penny knows that someone else has killed Caleb and is framing him for the recent attacks. Penny finally learns it was Zachary.

Francine Prose's *After* pushes the real toward an almost-too-sinister plot by an "evil" adult who takes over a school after a school shooting occurs in a community 50 miles away. The principal relinquishes too much authority to an outside counselor who proceeds to send students away to survival school programs in other states for non-compliance with his increasingly bizarre rules. While the plot may be somewhat fantastical, the story illustrates the danger of remaining uninformed and accepting the illusion that the person in charge is making decisions based on self-created truths. It also

shows how reactionary institutions can be when violent situations disrupt certainty and no one is clear about what can or should be done to prevent further violence. *Give a Boy a Gun* by Todd Strasser presents a strong, multi-genre approach to combine a story about two students, Brendan Lawlor and Gary Searle, who decide that they can get even with those who have teased and tormented them for years by holding the student body hostage and killing their enemies as they see fit. The rich textual presentation offers the story through multiple voices as collected by a university journalism student from this community. Poignant facts and non-fiction excerpts from a variety of sources appear at the bottom of appropriate pages as the author's activist stance for gun control.

Another approach would be a whole class focus on a novel such as *Inventing Elliot* by Graham Gardner. Elliot was bullied at his last school and begins in a different school with the strong intention of laying low and not attracting attention. However, the leader of the Guardians, an organized high school group that terrorizes selected students, sees a potential Guardian member in Elliot. His experience of being "invented" by the Guardians becomes inseparable with his own quest for identity. A look at oneself raises questions about how a person may be against violence yet be caught up in it when lacking the self-awareness and skills to interrupt the power of a group.

Final Thoughts

Fear can be challenged when knowledge interrupts patterned thoughts or responses. By giving young adult readers the classroom permission to read about, vicariously experience, discuss, investigate, and then analyze terrorism as a topic, they can utilize that knowledge to rethink all of its ramifications, from acts of teasing and bullying to national and international realms of terrorism as the warfare of the twenty-first century. When I see students in classrooms discussing whatever a teacher or state has deemed worthy of study, I ask myself, 'How will this experience help them in their lives? How will it contribute to shaping each individual into a contributing member of the human family? Could we be doing more for them? for all of humanity? Which one of these students might be a Senator? a President? a foreign correspondent?

As [Angela Johnson](#) reminds us, "We are not

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bibliotherapists” (19), but we can help students—and ourselves—“make sense of the loss of innocence and the costs and benefits of free societies [and to] find scraps of hope in the midst of national—indeed, international—despair” (19). The ultimate hope for engaging young adults with literature that intersects with the world around us is the replacement of fear, ignorance and inaction with knowledge, a developing understanding and proactive steps toward making our world more habitable, whether on an individual or an international scale.

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