



# New York September 11 By Magnum Photographers

By [Pam Robinson](#)

*(A review and an essay written Dec. 31, 2001 on the Epinions site)*

Magnum photographers are among the best in the world, and fortunately for us and for history, a lot of them were in New York City on Sept.11.

The photo agency had brought several of them into town for a meeting the day before. Many of these highly experienced photojournalists raced to the site or to other spots in the city when they heard or saw the planes hit the towers, and our knowledge of the disaster is so much deeper for their efforts.

Together, through their different personal lenses, they've compiled an important historical record of the attack and its effects on the city.

This book is a wonderful collection of pictures that you may think you've already seen on TV (endlessly), but one of the things that separates still photography from the TV film is the viewer's ability to linger, assess, move back and forth and really feel the content of the picture. TV is immediate impact. Still photography provides depth, thought.

I found several photos that I'd not seen before, though I've seen probably thousands in the last few months. And not all the pictures in this book are immediately striking, simply because we've seen so much on TV by now. But many are, and as a historical document, with their many different angles, the book is priceless.

Among the gems found here is the centerpiece, literally, a two-page smoky blue-gray shot by Thomas Hoepker in the center of the book that has just a touch of color—the red and white stripes of American flag. It's not hokey in the slightest.

Another shows a woman with her baby on a Brooklyn rooftop, looking out over the East River toward

the Manhattan skyline. My first (and second) thought was, what was the mother thinking? The choking smoke reeking of plastic and smashed concrete, which reached my neighborhood 30 miles away the following day, must have drifted over her and her child. On the other hand, perhaps it was not possible to avoid staring at the unfolding disaster. Maybe the woman was watching for other loved ones. Yet another story of the worst day in the lives of so many.

Several of the photographers have done extremely well at capturing the vastness of the damage. The word "massive" began to crop up in news reports of the attacks that day and the word quickly became quite trite. The rubble was massive, as was the damage to the psyche, economy, skyline, history, attitude, etc. But I know of few other words that would describe the frightening scenario of death and destruction, especially on view in several pictures of firefighters trudging through the mess, these muscular men dwarfed by burned columns, destroyed concrete and surrounded by the flotsam of businesses and lives. In particular, shots by Steve McCurry are riveting, giving us a sense of the expanse of damage, reminding us that we never want to see, let alone go near, such disaster.

The editors of this book wisely let the story be told almost entirely in pictures and not through a lot of unnecessary text. The pictures will stand for all time as a history of the terrible events, no further commentary needed.

The book is presented in a pretty organized way, especially given the speed with which it was produced. We get shots of the planes hitting and the towers collapsing, the fleeing crowds, the spread of smoke and debris, the remains, those dreadful skeletons of metal and mountains of rubble on the streets, the crowds mourning and ultimately, some pictures of the towers in their glory days. I never found the towers especially interesting until their deaths but this book shows their architectural beauty.

The book even made me laugh, something rare since Sept. 11. One photographer who happened to be in town for the story of his life was Larry Towell, who got the word of the attack while napping at a colleague's apartment.

Here's what he reports:

"Susan stuck her head in the bedroom I was staying in and said, 'Two airplanes, suicide bombers, just smacked into the World Trade Center.' I raised my head from the pillow and said, 'Where's the World Trade Center?' ...she said, 'Follow the smoke, country boy'."

That's what we all did that day, followed the smoke and wept.  
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(An essay)

Having recently purchased two books about the Sept. 11 attacks (only one of which I could review on this site), I got to thinking once again about how we'll all think about that day throughout our lives.

Proximity to events matters, of course.

But I'm not sure how or why people living on the West Coast could view these events as "attacks on the East Coast" as I hear some people doing occasionally when the attacks could have and may yet still, happen anywhere. Nor can I understand those who can't seem to realize how these attacks really are warnings of a major cultural clash, if the bad guys get their way. I emphasize the bad element, not a religion or culture in general. In the 1980s, I went back to school and ended up in a Middle East studies program, amazed to discover this whole other world filled with too many people who despised us and our culture. But I didn't think it would truly affect us, even after the WTC bombing in 1993, the USS Cole attack, and the bombings of U.S. embassies in Africa. It was mostly Over There somewhere. I know, too, that paying a little more for oil, pulling troops out of Saudi Arabia or forcing Israel to do what it doesn't want to do will never be enough for the Bin Laden crowd. Listen carefully to their words about their ultimate goals.

And I try my best to understand how people, again mostly those living elsewhere, can say they're tired of hearing about Sept. 11 when in my heart, if not my head, I hear endless tragic stories, fear endlessly for the future that has been altered so vastly by that day. I can see being tired of the images of TV and the daily deterioration of what passes for news coverage now on the cable news programs. But the events? No, they are here, they are with us, replaying in our minds' eye, always.

I've been carrying around a sort of summary, mental snapshots, if you will, of what Sept. 11, with its gorgeous weather and beautiful deep blue sky, was and is. The weekend just before the attacks, my child and I had attended a church retreat and had come home a little sick from the camp's mold. I even wrote about it on this site and mocked the idea that mold was worth complaining about when there were more important problems in the world. Little did I know. Little did I know.

Some of the mental snapshots aren't real pictures, of course, but they will be with me, I suspect, forever. For weeks after, it seemed that something lurked, just over my shoulder, the sensation strong enough that I would frequently turn and look, with a sense of foreboding, though nothing was there.

\*An American touring Rome was walking down the street when a shopkeeper grabbed him by the arm and dragged him into his store, trying to convey what he had just heard on TV. The Italian pulled out a picture of the World Trade Center, pointed to the buildings and said in his best English, "Your towers are no more." That's how one New York publisher got word.

\*Preschoolers in lower Manhattan being hustled from their school as the towers burned, and a young child, pointing out what he thought were birds aflame, not comprehending that they were people, choosing to plunge to their deaths rather than burn where they stood.

\*The fireman who left 10 children.

\*Another American tourist, also in Italy, shocked as cars suddenly came to a halt, their drivers, having

heard the news, leaping from their cars and kneeling on the pavement to pray.

\*The child who, told his father was in heaven, takes his soccer trophy out at night and holds it up to the sky so Dad can see it.

\*Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn, seeing the crowds pouring across the East River bridges, lined up in their black hats and clothes, to hand out cups of water. And the sight of Americans streaming across those bridges: refugees, it seems, in their own country. That isn't supposed to happen here.

\*The executives, secretaries, computer experts, traders, security guards, brokers, some on their third decade with their employers, others just beginning new jobs, who tried to live, tried to flee but could not. I read their obituaries, the all-too-short summaries of their lives, perhaps 10 a day, and cry. It's not time yet to celebrate them, though many of the families have tried to remind us just how good their children/spouses/parents were, how happy the lives they led.

\*The many who offered help so that others might live and paid with their lives.

\*The Queen of England ordering the playing of the American National Anthem at her palace as a sign of respect.

\*Rudy Giuliani, hardly the favorite of many for so long, seemingly headed to a quiet, rather embarrassing end to his term, suddenly showing why he was where he was at that moment in time. I believe now in destiny.

\*The firefighter's widow who went into labor at her husband's memorial, gave birth, and went to another service for him the next day. Many of the city's firefighters were also volunteers in the patchwork of volunteer fire companies here on Long Island, so their deaths were felt in many places, many ways.

\*The little girl receiving a medal meant for her police officer mother.

\*Tony Blair, everywhere. "Go, Tony," I want to say, and indeed do say, to the TV, every single time I see him on the screen.

\*The dozens of women who face the prospect of giving birth without their husbands. The miscarriages that have already occurred.

\*The suicide of a widow, struggling with cancer. Her husband died at the Trade Center, as did many of his colleagues, who also were her support system.

\*The dozens of medical workers standing outside the ambulance bays, waiting for an onslaught of injuries that never came.

\*The many families of dual losses, brothers and a brother-in-law, a woman and her aunt: Father and son firefighters, both killed, another son left to choose whether he should go to his father's memorial or to Ground Zero to dig through the rubble to find his brother; Brothers, one a police officer, one a firefighter, both lost.

\*A young couple, editors both, making their way down flights of dark, smoky steps with their baby, trying to get out of their apartments, not knowing what was happening but knowing it was bad.

\*The firefighter who years ago saved a young girl by donating his bone marrow to her, only to lose his life at the center. His funeral procession went past my house on a day I'd taken off to try to rid myself of the images of loss. I cried, and covered my heart with my hand. My Pakistani neighbors decided to remain behind doors as the long procession drove, oh so slowly past. Each day, I drive past the park named for him, one of three memorials on the way to work.

\*And those neighbors—good people, good neighbors, but with deeply different views on the world. We stopped our conversations for a little while when the patriarch, a man who would do anything for just about anyone, I think, told me what he believed—that the Jews had done it, to make the Muslims look bad. How else to explain why cameras caught the planes as they plowed into the buildings? Of course, anyone truly familiar with New York's fascination with itself would know that cameras are everywhere, all the time. Little really goes unnoticed. But they cannot be swayed from their opinions but they no longer attempt to change mine.

\*A friend who came home covered in dust but safe, his office destroyed; the bakesale for the lost mother of a preschooler at my daughter's school; a firefighter friend, always smiling, patient, low-key, funny, unflappable, who leaps now at the slightest bang or unusual noise, who knew personally 75 of the dead. I knew no one killed there, just people, including the firefighter, reporters and photographers who were on the scene and had to flee the crush of debris and smoke spewed out for blocks. For weeks, I spend moments before going to work, playing Pete Seger's version of We Shall Overcome, a song so often trivialized, so deep and meaningful now. We are not afraid, we cannot let ourselves be afraid.

\*The West Caribbean immigrant, who, after seeing the Trade Center for the first time, knew that was where he was meant to work. And, ultimately, die.

\*The people who had just enough time to call their families, some believing they would be rescued, others not. And those who had no time whatsoever after 8:48 a.m.

\*I am—or was—devoted to the concept that immigration benefits this country. I took a year off from journalism years ago to work in an immigration and refugee assistance program. I helped sponsor a Southeast Asian family that had helped the U.S. government in the 1970s and who had spent three years in a wretched refugee camp as a result. But I find myself out of patience now with people complaining that they've been arrested "only" for overstaying their visas by three or four years. Too bad, I hear my brain say. Do it right, do it legally, and you are welcome. And by the way, leave your hatreds, your

frustrations with your own government, at home. Don't bring it here. I say that even as I'm willing to ignore others living here, many new immigrants, many others citizens, who fund, fight and demand reforms in their homelands. I guess the difference is that Americans don't usually get murdered at their desks in those other battles.

\*Sept. 11—I packed my daughter off to school, the bus leaving at just about the moment the first plane was crashing into Tower One. I didn't have the TV news on; I was playing with a Web page, not a news site, when John McIntyre e-mailed: Turn On Your TV. The local TV stations were knocked off the air, but were broadcasting, miraculously on other channels. I watched the sickening picture of a plane turning into the second tower. Both the local and long-distance phone lines were temporarily out, so I ran to my car, raced to my newspaper, and watched two other cars nearly collide in the parking lot as the reporters, editors, photographers, artists charged into work. We worked, in shock, no jokes, no casual comments, no anything—just meetings, editing, writing, a sense of disbelief as the Pentagon was hit, then the plane crashed in Pennsylvania, the commercial air system was shut down, the local primaries were postponed, sporting events were canceled, tunnels, bridges, roads shut down, one event after another after another. Often we get an adrenaline rush that carries us through big news stories, and sometimes, it even feels good. Not this time. And never have I seen a story so huge that I couldn't get hold of all the details. In the meetings, word came that one staffer would't attend because his brother was missing. (he turned out okay). Then another: a technician with an affiliated TV station was missing. (He was killed, not to be found for months). Then yet another: the brother of a sports columnist had been at the Pentagon (He was dead, too.) What was next? Who could think? In a moment, we went from the silliness of writing about "Survivor" characters and Gary Condit to reporting history.

\*I called a friend in late afternoon and asked her to pick up my daughter because I wouldn't get home til late. She, as did many other local parents, had picked up her child in the morning, not knowing what was next, but fearing we were under attack, right here in the suburbs. My daughter went to her house for the evening, a little confused but surrounded by a large, loving family that kept her too busy to worry much. The next morning, I went to the school to talk with her, assure her, and found myself near tears, unable to say much. The school rents space from a church. We wound up sitting in a pew, trying to catch up on what was going on. I think I botched it. For about a week, she had nightmares, worried that I was flying, dreaming I was killed. (I knew she was better, though, when she announced she was no longer afraid, but she knew she would never work in a tall building. She'd found her solution to fear and her way to feel safe.) That day, the kids all had to stay in for recess—the strangest cloud of burnt plastic, concrete dust, an indescribable smell—had drifted out from Manhattan and crossed over our community 30 miles away. Those first few weeks, so many kids came in to her class each day with a family story of a near-miss: an aunt who'd missed the train, so was late, so got to live; the uncle who'd decided to turn down the job at the Trade Center only a week earlier; the grandmother who escaped with her colleagues, but whose boss had turned back to recover some papers, only to die. Roughly 350 Long Islanders died in those attacks; about two dozen from our town. That weekend, the school director, while acknowledging I might be a little busy, asked me to become the school's parent-teacher organization's president. I started to decline but asked my daughter what she thought. She replied, "Maybe I'd see you more if you did." You know, knife in the heart. So, of course, I did.

\*There are so many ways of seeing these events, and day to day, as more information came in and events

changed, so did our perceptions. One of the cable stations showed a tape made by a doctor who happened to be near the Trade Center, pulled out a videocamera and documented the blinding cloud of smoke as it swept over him. He then went closer to the rubble to try to assist victims. In the background is a cacophony of beeps. The doctor discovers the beeping devices belong to the firefighters—they wear the beepers so they can be located. Lots of beeps means lots of firefighters. This can only be good, you think. A few days later, another perspective: the beepers go off when the firefighters have been down, immobile too long, a sign of death.

\*The incomprehensible actions of a handful of poseurs—not the scam artists who fake insurance claims, for money-- who have represented themselves as survivors of the lost, often with no obvious gain to be made. What drives them? That's a question for the shrinks. And I suppose it says something about our culture but I don't know what.

I know some of these images will fade and I know that there's good news to be found in this disaster. Thousands escaped, people proved to be better than we realized in so many cases, we found heroes of every color, age, occupation, sex. We are, I hope, alerted now to the dangers in the world. But it will not be the same.

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