

## **A Classroom Prepared for Global Crises: Using Children's Literature to Help K-8 Students Understand and Cope with Disaster and Trauma**

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the significance of children's literature as it relates to helping K-8 students deal with difficult times. The author's own personal experiences, including his own lack of preparation, in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 caused him to address this area of his duties as a teacher. He observed students reacting to the news in a variety of ways and recalls how he wanted to be better prepared in the future. He was forced to revisit those anxious moments in the days that followed the Indonesian tsunami of 2004 and the landfall of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita on the American Gulf Coast in 2005. What is to become of the school structures in these affected areas? To what degree will the children in these areas, not to mention those who are exposed to the devastation via television coverage, be affected emotionally, socially and educationally? What can and should teachers do to assist their students with regard to coping with such tragedy? These and other questions prompt this inquiry. Research shows that whether the tragedy or trauma is global, national, regional or personal, students can find answers in children's literature. Teachers can and should be made aware of the resources that exist in this area. The author briefly discusses his own teaching experiences regarding dealing with disaster and trauma, his interest in this area, and suggested coping and preparation strategies for various grade levels. This paper includes an extensive review of children's literature that meets or exceeds the author's suggested resource requirements. Each work is briefly summarized and categorized by the grade level of the students for whom it is best suited.

**Keywords:** children's, literature, trauma, disaster, coping

I was a public school teacher in the United States in September 2001. I was performing roll call duties on the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup> when the news broke that the World Trade Center and the Pentagon had been attacked. I starkly recall how American citizens initially reacted with a collective sense of shock to the terrible events that transpired in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania as well as the national lull of numbness, sorrow and rage that followed. I also remember how those anxious moments and collective national emotions were mirrored in our school and in my classroom. Within days of that initial reaction, my colleagues and I were confronted with the unsavory prospect of conducting our classes in an environment of great confusion and emotional anxiety. On a morning later that week, a news crew from a local television station even visited our school to interview teachers about student morale and teacher approaches to answering questions and meeting general needs. It was then that I began to see real world community expectations of teachers during such times of crisis. Frankly, I wish I had been better prepared.

As I watched real-life dramas unfold during the Indian Ocean/Indonesian tsunami and later, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, I was forced to revisit those days that followed September 11, 2001. I revisit those days as I watch the news of wars and/or violent civil unrest in Indonesia, Afghanistan, Iraq, India, Lebanon, Sudan, Nigeria, Congo, Thailand and several other places around the world. I remember how challenging it was for me then to do my job as a teacher and how some of these same challenges now face teachers across the United States and around the world. News reports and television images of the impacts of these

catastrophic events have left citizens of virtually every global community asking serious questions about our environment, our safety, the competence of those charged with our protection, and our attention to preparedness for future disasters. Compelling questions have also arisen within the field of education regarding the impact of natural disasters upon school children (Berson & Berson, 2001). What will be done to compensate for the great loss of school structure in the Indonesia, Sri Lanka or the American Gulf Coast and who will fund such an unprecedented endeavor? Who will meet the emotional needs of not only the population of children who have personally experienced such human and environmental devastation, but those children around the nation who have witnessed the catastrophic events? How do we, as teachers of children around the world, address the questions of our students? How do we better prepare them for future wars or disasters? Moreover, what are our duties as educators regarding students who suffer from personal trauma that can be even more devastating and/or discouraging? Can we promote healthy reflection and dialogue, and, if so, what resources are available to us in this endeavor? In the days that followed September 11<sup>th</sup>, I felt as though I was expected to have, and wanted to have, timely and useful answers for my students. Since those days, I have found that some of the answers may lie in the stacks of our school libraries and media centers.

The responsibilities of elementary and middle school teachers to address student concerns about traumatic information and to facilitate critical understanding and coping are great. In fact, according to many in the field of education, it is particularly becoming of teachers to be prepared to deal with crises, whether personal, regional or on the grand scale, in their classrooms and to be capable of employing any of several different stress management techniques (Johnson, 1989). Basically states, our classes often become impromptu counseling sessions after a traumatic event of global or national proportion, whether we are prepared or not (Long & Richard, 1986). The introduction of relevant works of children's literature to the classroom environment, both prior to and after such events, is a great way to educate, reduce hysteria and bridge emotional gaps for students. Dialog is the key. Language is a necessary ingredient in any recipe for critical thought (Vygotsky, 1962). According to Vygotsky, external and internal modes of language and speech develop in stages throughout the early years of education, therefore building a foundation for dialog, and thus, understanding. Children's literature is a means by which such dialog may be encouraged. Author Wei Tu calls children's literature a "tool for problem solving" that allows elementary school students to "perceive the complexities in the world in which they live" (Tu, 1999).

By being exposed to personal accounts of impacts and coping strategies of characters who have endured traumatic events, whether they are real or fictitious, children develop these described modes of internal and external speech (Miller, 1998). This development, along with a healthy relationship with mother and/or father, makes it possible for children to ask questions, form opinions, draw conclusions and approach degrees of closure in an environment that not only invites such growth, but nurtures emotional maturity (Monahan, 1993). Unfortunately, some children do not have this influence at home. In fact, studies show that some parents themselves never learn the ins and outs of emotional maturity (Hendriks, Black & Kaplan). Children, however, need that direction and stability, not only after life-altering events such as war or natural disaster, but before as well (Friedman & Mikus-Kos, 2005). Regardless of their home life, their nationality or their socioeconomic status, children are exposed to trauma and disaster around the world every day. Considering this, teachers should be proactive in preparation and by taking advantage of all resources that exist, and I believe we have at our disposal a wonderfully inexhaustible resource in the form of children's literature.

With this in mind, I have compiled a brief list of works that addresses various issues and suggest coping strategies for children who suffer from the emotional stress of crises. Many of the selected works discuss trauma or disaster within the United States. Many of them are focused upon trauma and disaster in other parts of the world. By no means is this list exhaustive, but I believe it is a good starting point. I also believe that some of the works cited would likely benefit children in several grade levels, but for the purpose of convenience, I have grouped them for use in primary grades (K-3), upper elementary grades (4-5), and middle school (6-8).

### **Good Resources for Students in the Primary Grades**

*One April Morning: Children Remember the Oklahoma City Bombing*, by Nancy Lamb and several schoolchildren (1996). In this 43-page picture book, Oklahoma City children share their feelings about the tragedy that befell their city on April 19, 1995. Masterfully illustrated by Floyd Cooper, and opening with a letter to parents about the purpose of the book, Lamb's work reminds us all of the types of questions and thoughts children have during times of trauma or disaster.

*Mama: A True Story in which a Baby Hippo Loses his Mama During the Tsunami, but Finds a New Home and a New Mama*, by Jeanette Winter (2006). Author Janette Winter addresses sadness and separation in this touching 30-page picture book. During the great Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, many humans and animals were displaced. Some would be forever separated from their loved ones. This is a story of hope written for the early primary grade child.

*Hiroshima No Pika*, by Toshi Maruki (1980). In this 47-page picture book, author Toshi Maruki chronicles the events in Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 from a ground level perspective. This heartbreaking story details the death and destruction left behind in the wake of the world's first atomic bomb. She finishes the book with a few pages on how this sad time in Japanese history is commemorated each year.

*The Big Flood*, by Wendy Pfeffer (2001). Illustrated by Vanessa Lubach, this picture book is based on the "Big Flood of 1993" that devastated the upper Mississippi River region of the U.S. It tells of a young girl who lives on a farm by the river. The author describes the girl's family's reaction to rising flood water and how well the community comes together to protect their farm. This book is styled to empower children by asserting that they too can contribute in a variety of ways during difficult times.

*September 12<sup>th</sup>: We Knew Everything Would Be All Right*, by first graders at H. Byron Masterson Elementary School in Kennett, Missouri (2002). This heart-warming 32-page picture book was written and illustrated by six-year olds. The students speak of their experiences and efforts to resume regular school routines during the days that followed September 11<sup>th</sup>. Each page is marked by the inspiring tone of reassurance.

*September Roses*, by Jeanette Winter (2004). This 30-page personal account of the hours and days that followed September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 is a portrayal of hope in the wake of an unexpected tragedy. The text is hand-written, evoking a warm and inviting tone. The book is well illustrated with images that gradually proceed from black and white to color as hope is realized. It is ideal for young children.

### **Good Resources for Students in the Upper Elementary Grades**

*Losing Uncle Tim*, by Mary Kate Jordan (1989). Coping with death in the family is a difficult, confusing and often overwhelming undertaking for young children. In this 28-page tale is well-illustrated by Judith Friedman and is about a relative who dies of AIDS, a child learns how to ask that ever-important question “Why?” in order to reach closure.

*Children of the Relocation Camps*, by Catherine A. Welch (2000). This 48-page non-fiction work details not only life in the Japanese internment camps that dotted the American west, but also addresses the events, governmental policies, social mores and public perceptions of the day that allowed American citizens to be treated so shamefully during World War II.

*Star of Fear, Star of Hope*, by Jo Hoestlandt (1995). This 28-page picture book is a warm and caring introduction for young readers to the dark days of the Holocaust. Illustrated by Johanna King, this is the story of a young French girl named Helen, whose birthday celebration is interrupted by news of the Nazi invasion. Helen chides her friend for leaving early, not understanding the circumstances. She never sees her again and spends the rest of her years regretting her parting words: “You’re not my friend anymore!” The very touching story reinforces the old adage that *words can hurt*.

*What is Goodbye?*, by Nikki Grimes (2004). In this 60-page work illustrated masterfully by Raul Colon, the issue of dealing with death is bridged. The author tells of two children who are coping with the recent death of their brother by including their alternating opinions or observations in the form of verse. What develops is a wonderful portrait of coping with new perceptions and moving on past adversity or loss. By way of this writing style, the author asserts that there is no one way to cope with death or related trauma. We must all cope with those parts of life in our own way.

*Earthquake!*, by Bill Haduch (1999). This short book has several pull-out cardboard pages that explain in detail how and why earthquakes occur. The neat thing about this book is that the cover is made up of a cardboard shadowbox that shakes and rattles like an earthquake when activated by a pull cord.

*Twister*, by Darleen Bailey Beard (1999). This 29-page picture book, illustrated brilliantly by Nancy Carpenter, begins with two children playing in the yard of their modest home. As the sky darkens, the children are rushed into a storm cellar for protection from an approaching tornado. As the tornado passes over them, they first encounter the expected fears and anxieties of children in such a predicament and they rely on one another for strength. As they emerge from the cellar to a home that has been destroyed, their safety and survivability of such a storm is asserted.

*Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families*, by Laurene Krasny Brown and Marc Brown (1986). This 32-page picture book tenderly discusses the issue of divorce in a series of short, thoughtful statements geared for the younger reader. I particularly like the page of terms associated with divorce. The authors carefully explain terms that are likely to be new to children in this situation and then use those terms throughout the remaining pages as they answer common questions. The illustrations are touching and colorful, and I think they support the underlying positive theme.

***Blizzard!***, by Jim Murphy (2000). This historical 136-page account of the *Great Blizzard of 1888* that fell upon New York City and much of the Northeast is brilliantly documented through first hand accounts of victims and survivors alike. Actual photos are mixed with poignant illustrations to assist Murphy's excellent conveyance of the magnitude of the disaster and how the storm "changed us all forever". I think it could also be a valuable addition to the list for middle schoolers.

***The Great Fire***, by Jim Murphy (1995). Noted history author Jim Murphy tells the story of the *Great Chicago Fire* of 1871 in this Newberry Honor book by intricately weaving first-person accounts with news reports, while taking time to separate myths about the tragedy from the facts. Murphy's 144-page work is brilliantly supported by period photos and illustrations, and the overall theme of the book is one of human triumph in the face of overwhelming adversity. This book, too, could be used by middle schoolers.

***Growing Up in Revolution and the New Nation, 1775 to 1800***, by Brandon Marie Miller (2003). This book tells the story of America's early days in children's terms. Detailed are the sacrifices and hardships of Colonial families, but the book also focuses on how people did things differently in those days. The book includes a detailed chronological list of events that occurred in the Colonies during the late 1700s.

***The Children of Topaz: The Story of a Japanese-American Internment Camp***, by Michael O. Tunnell and George W. Chilcoat (1996). This 74-page nonfiction work details the heartache and sacrifices of Japanese-Americans who were interned in the town of Topaz, Utah after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Included among the accounts of the internment are several photos and letters of the people who lived in the camp during this time. These accounts are based on the class diary of a group of third graders interned at the camp.

***Coming On Home Soon***, by Jacqueline Woodson (2004). This 30-page work is an inspirational tale about a young girl who is missing her mother who has gone off to work. The girl and her grandmother form a wonderful bond coping with their feelings of sadness. The theme of strength in the face of adversity and tough times rings throughout and the happy ending assures that such is a worth-while endeavor. This book is made even more touching by the pictures of award-winning illustrator E.B. Lewis.

***Always Remember Me: How One Family Survived World War II***, by Marisabina Russo (2005). This fine 41-page work details the experiences and sacrifices of a Jewish family displaced by the Holocaust during World War II. The story centers around two family photo albums; one devoted to the happy times, and one dedicated to the darker times before the family emigrated to the United States. The illustrations are wonderful in this book and the general theme is that love and family conquer all. The author also includes a short glossary of Yiddish words used throughout the book.

***Anne Frank***, by Josephine Poole (2004). This author of this 29-page book does a wonderful job at retelling Anne's story in a way young minds can understand. Illustrations by Angela Barrett bring Anne to life and build a relationship between her and the reader. Also included in the back of this book is a chronological list of happenings in the Frank family from World War II up to 1980.

***Earthquake***, by John Dudman (1992). This 30-page nonfiction work speaks in terms of factual information regarding earthquakes on a level children in upper elementary grades can

understand. By recalling accounts and situations from recent earthquakes around the world, Dudman informs children of the steps that have been made, and continue to be made, to protect us from future earthquakes. Hands-on projects are included in the back of the book to encourage children to build earthquake-safe model houses.

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*Luba, The Angel of Bergen-Belsen*, by Michelle R. McCann (2003). Probably one of the most touching stories among these selected works, this 46-page picture book details the heroic acts of Luba Tryszynska-Frederick in the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen during World War II. Luba orchestrated an operation to care for more than fifty children who had been left behind as their parents were taken away. This book asserts that during times of desperation and trauma, extraordinary things can be accomplished by ordinary people.

### **Good Resources for Middle School Students**

*My Brother Sam is Dead*, by James L. Collier and Christopher Collier (1974). This classic Newberry Honor Book, set during the American Revolutionary War, tells the familiar story of Tim Meeker, a young man torn between duty to family and country. In this 216-page chapter book, the Colliers seamlessly weave carefully-written fiction with an actual colonial setting and historical events. The story is told through the eyes of young Tim and is a picture of inter-family struggles as well as of war and sacrifice.

*Why Do They Hate Me? Young Lives Caught in War and Conflict*, by Laurel Holliday (1999). This 293-page work is a collection of diary entries children who endured the Holocaust in Germany and Poland, Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the Holy Land, or Catholic-Protestant violence in Northern Ireland throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These first-person accounts of life in violent times are moving to say the least, and each one offers a compelling, though very personal message of courage to students of similar ages. In my opinion, one of the greatest strengths of Holliday's compilation, as it relates to school children of today, is the attention paid to actual perceptions and emotions of the children involved and the subsequent promotion of the understanding that it is okay to cry, to be afraid, to ask questions, and to make emotional investments in one's own life and times.

*Disaster 1906: The San Francisco Earthquake and Fire*, by Edward Dolan (1967). This 185-page chapter book tells in great detail of the disaster that struck the California city of San Francisco one hundred years ago. The book dispels myths and informs the reader of how events unfolded after one of America's greatest natural disasters. By telling the accounts of individuals who actually lived through the earthquake and subsequent fire, the author instills a sense of survivability of such occurrences.

*Time's Memory*, by Julius Lester (2006). This 230-page chapter book tells the story of Ekundayo, the son of a young West African woman who has been abducted from her homeland and forced into slavery. The story tells of how Ekundayo reconciles his status as a slave and how he conquers adversity to bring peace to those around him.

*After the Holocaust*, by Howard Greenfeld (2001). This is another touching work about the aftermath of the Holocaust. The author intertwines personal experiences of survivors with very intimate photographs that capture their lives, loves, and glorified humanity. Though the stories are wonderfully told, I believe it is the photos that really make this book a poignant chronicle of such a difficult yet strengthening time on our collective history.

*Volcano & Earthquake*, by Susanna Van Rose (2000). This highly informative and well-illustrated volume is one of the Dorling Kindersley 'Eyewitness' books. The popular series is well known for brilliant photos and drawings that teach as much as the text around them. The general theme of this book is description and in-depth coverage of just what makes up the geothermal phenomena listed in the title.

*Hiroshima: The Story of the First Atomic Bomb*, by Clive A. Lawton (2004). This upper-level, 48-page picture book chronicles the physical, political and social fallout of the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945. Through vintage photographs and maps, Lawton investigates the lasting effects of the decision to drop the bomb in hopes that such a decision will never be made again.

*The Silent Storm*, by Sherry Garland (1993). Set in Texas shortly after the Galveston hurricane of 1900, this 240-page chapter book details the devastation of that great storm through the personal loss and inner turmoil of one little girl. After losing her parents, she stops speaking. As another storm approaches, she is confronted with a decision to be complacent and helpless or to become a proactive survivor.

*The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy*, by Patricia Netzley (1994). Author Patricia Netzley's 96-page compilation of the events of late November 1963 is well-written and is intermingled with photos and images of those dark days in American history, which leads me to suggest it for older children. She does address the attack in Dealey Plaza as well as looming questions about conspiracy, but the underlying theme of the book is the life and legacy of an American hero.

*The Day the Hurricane Happened*, by Lonzo Anderson (1974). In this 40-page work illustrated by Ann Grifalconi, a family on the Caribbean island of St. John takes precautions to survive a quickly-approaching storm. Told from a child's perspective, it touches on elements and fears that are obvious to youngsters. The happy ending reinforces a theme of strength and survivability.

*9/11: The Book of Help*, edited by Michael Cart (2002). Various authors respond to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> with compelling expressions of emotion. There are pieces that demonstrate goodness, anger, fear, calm, confusion and acceptance about tragic events and the healthy mix encourages the reader to express herself/himself in a variety of ways. In my opinion, the strength of this 178-page work is in Cart's efforts to relate this disaster to other such tragedies in the past, and his attention on coping, expression and hope.

*A Nation Challenged: A Visual History of 9/11 and its Aftermath*, by New York Times writers (2002). This young reader's edition is a serious and poignant approach to documenting the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Honest and straight-forward in tone, this 96-page book provides factual information about this troubling time in American history. The images and matter-of-fact retelling of these extremely difficult hours, days, weeks and months are done in a stirring yet tasteful manner, and would be an excellent means by which to discuss the fallout of such a tragedy. Though it is not an attempt to answer deep questions about why such events occurred, the focus of this book on the human spirit and triumph over adversity is greatly and positively reassuring.

*September 11, 2001: Attack on New York City*, by Wilborn Hampton (2003). This 145-page retelling of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> is actually a seamless compilation of accounts by

people who endured the attack. The reader is afforded a look into experiences of everyday people whose lives changed forever that day. By describing the lives of these individuals before, during and after the tragedy, Hampton expresses how cataclysm can be followed with hope, love and passion for life.

*All That Remains*, by Bruce Brooks (2001). This 168-page, three-story medley discusses personal traumas such as AIDS and death in the family as seen through the eyes of teenagers. Tough issues are addressed in a manner in which middle schoolers can relate.

*What's Going to Happen to Me?*, by Eda LeShan (1978). This 134-page book directly addresses the causes, impacts, events and emotions that are commonly associated with divorce. Though written as a non-fiction work, LeShan carefully include scenarios of children who are engaged in various stages of the divorce experience. These powerful and encompassing elements make the book relevant for children and encourage them to look for the light at the end of the tunnel. LeShan also instinctively includes an age-appropriate list of resources for further reading.

### **Conclusion**

Children's literature is a fantastic way to bridge the gap between confusion and understanding as it relates to times of global, national, regional or personal tragedy. Thankfully, studies show that in large part, teachers have learned from the past and have risen to the occasion of meeting the critical needs of their audience during times of crisis (Singer, 2002). Greater understanding of physical and emotional tolls of exposure to traumatic events on the human psyche has aided in the pursuit and practice of proactive methods of teachers to answer questions, conduct effective discussions on and model appropriate reaction to national disasters (Silverman, 1999).

As professional educators, it becomes our duty to our students to make ourselves aware of preparatory options at our disposal. Studies also show that pursuing proactive coping strategies allows teachers to maintain order during those crucial post-conflict, post-crisis hours and days (NATO Advanced Research Workshop on Developing Strategies to Deal with Post-Conflict Trauma in Children, 2005). Considering this, it also becomes our duty to realize that our students require not to have their questions avoided, but rather to have them actively pursued and addressed on the outset (Grosse, 2001). This is true regardless of their grade level, but is especially important for those in primary, upper elementary and middle grades. As I mentioned earlier and as Lev Vygotsky told us, open dialog is the key. Studies show that young children who are not afforded such immediate attention and encouraged to express themselves are much more likely to suffer socially and mentally for years to come (Manix, 2001). In fact, such traumatic experiences may affect children in a variety of ways, some of which we cannot predict (DiPaolo, 1999). It is my opinion, however, that by relying on these or many other fine examples of children's literature that address the fears and anxieties that often arise after such events, we utilize a wonderful resource that is often no farther away than our own libraries or media centers. I believe teachers who use children's literature in this fashion take proactive steps to demonstrate the physical and emotional security necessary to ensure a healthy classroom environment, regardless of the nationality or socioeconomic status of their students.

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All children need love, encouragement, and support, and for kids with learning disabilities, such positive reinforcement can help ensure that they emerge with a strong sense of self-worth, confidence, and the determination to keep going even when things are tough. In searching for ways to help children with learning disabilities, remember that you are looking for ways to help them help themselves. Your job as a parent is not to "secure" the learning disability, but to give your child the social and emotional tools they need to work through challenges. In the long run, facing and overcoming a challenge. Well written credited children's literature is a wonderful avenue of expression, as well as an outlet where children can activate prior knowledge and relate to the feelings of characters in a book. Various students in crisis might exhibit symptoms observable in the classroom such as; laziness, carelessness, lack of motivation and engagement, and resistance to authority (Sitler, 2008). Bibliotherapy, or therapeutic reading, (Galen and Johns, 1979) helps children relate to characters and cope with their own emotions. Dreyer (1984) identifies three characteristics concerning the use of literature to assist children through trying times (Kramer and Smith, 2004). Universalization reinforces that other children have experienced similar anguish. In reading literary texts, students have also to cope with language intended for native speakers and thus they gain additional familiarity with many different linguistic uses, forms and conventions of the written mode: with irony, exposition, argument, narration, and so on. And, although it may not be confined within a specific social network in the same way that a bus ticket or an advertisement might be, literature can none the less incorporate a great deal of cultural information.

### CULTURAL ENRICHMENT

For many language learners, the ideal way to deepen their understanding of life in the country. A child cannot learn without the right environment. Children in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa are often squeezed into overcrowded classrooms, classrooms that are falling apart, or are learning outside. They also lack textbooks, school supplies, and other tools they need to excel. In Malawi, for example, there are an average of 130 children per classroom in first grade. It's not just a lack of classrooms that's the problem, but also all the basic facilities you would expect a school to have like running water and toilets. Teachers also need materials to help prepare their lessons, share with their students, and guide their lessons. Read More: Half of All Child Refugees Aren't in School: Why This Is a Massive Problem. 5. The exclusion of children with disabilities.