
Voices of Survivors: 9/11 as Personal Trauma in Memoirs and Documentaries

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ABSTRACT

The September 11, 2001, attacks left an indelible mark on both the global collective memory and the individual lives of those who directly experienced the tragedy. This paper explores the personal trauma and subsequent healing processes of 9/11 survivors through an analysis of memoirs and documentaries. Focusing on two pivotal documentaries—*9/11: The Twin Towers* (2003) and *The Man in the Red Bandana* (2016)—the research examines survivor narratives and oral histories that reflect the profound psychological impacts of the attacks. Utilising trauma theory, particularly the work of Cathy Caruth, and narrative therapy, this paper investigates how survivors of 9/11 have used storytelling as a means of processing trauma, reclaiming agency, and fostering healing. The findings suggest that survivor memoirs and documentaries serve not only as powerful historical records but also as critical tools for psychological recovery, providing a medium through which survivors can construct meaning, memorialise lost lives, and navigate the complexities of their post-traumatic experiences. By contributing to the ongoing discourse on trauma, memory, and resilience, this study highlights the vital role of survivor narratives in both individual and collective healing after catastrophic events.

Introduction

The events of September 11, 2001, shattered the collective psyche of not only the United States but also the global community. The catastrophic attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon altered the course of history, leaving in their wake a generation of survivors burdened with the weight of trauma. For many of these survivors, the process of coming to terms with their experiences has been documented through memoirs, oral histories, and documentaries—mediums that express personal grief, survival, and the arduous journey toward healing. These survivor narratives serve as critical testimonies, not only for historical preservation but also as a means of exploring the profound psychological impacts of witnessing and surviving such unparalleled violence. The selected documentaries offer a firsthand account of their experiences and how they withstand the attacks on their lives.

In this exploration, we will delve into how 9/11 survivors have documented their personal trauma and healing processes through media, mainly focusing on memoirs and documentaries. These works serve as powerful tools for both individual catharsis and collective memory. They offer insights into the emotional, physical, and psychological toll of the attacks and the remarkable resilience demonstrated by those who lived through them.

Two key documentaries, *9/11: The Twin Towers* (2003) and *The Man in the Red Bandana* (2016), present compelling accounts of survival amidst chaos. *9/11: The Twin Towers*, one of the earliest documentaries to capture the events of that day, provides a gripping perspective through the eyes of those who were directly involved, while *The Man in the Red Bandana* highlights the heroic actions of Welles Crowther, a survivor who risked his life to save others during the attacks. These films offer intimate glimpses into the personal trauma experienced by survivors, illustrating both the horrors of that day and the remarkable stories of courage, survival, and the process of healing.

How do survivor narratives of 9/11, as portrayed in memoirs and documentaries such as *9/11: The Twin Towers* (2003) and *The Man in the Red Bandana* (2016), serve as both a process of personal healing and a means of documenting collective trauma, while reflecting the theoretical concepts of trauma, memory, and recovery?



This question will guide the paper by exploring how individual survivor stories are not only vehicles for personal healing but also serve as essential cultural artefacts that document the larger societal impact of 9/11. It also connects directly to the theories of trauma and narrative recovery discussed in the literature review, particularly the work of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman. Throughout the paper, this question will be examined by analysing how survivors of 9/11 use memoirs and documentaries to process their trauma, rebuild their identities, and contribute to the broader cultural memory of the events.

The study of trauma and healing through personal narratives, particularly those stemming from the aftermath of catastrophic events such as the 9/11 attacks, has garnered significant attention in both literary studies and psychological fields. This literature review surveys key works that have addressed the psychological effects of trauma, the role of narrative in the healing process, and the ways in which survivor stories have been represented in memoirs and documentaries. Through an exploration of the intersection between trauma theory and narrative, this review positions survivor narratives as essential texts for understanding both individual and collective memory in the wake of 9/11.

A primary framework for understanding trauma in this context is Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), which has become a cornerstone in trauma studies. Caruth's work argues that trauma disrupts the survivor's capacity to integrate their experiences into a coherent narrative, leading to a continual re-experiencing of the event through fragmented, unconscious memories. In Caruth's view, trauma is not merely an event that has occurred but a wound that continues to resonate within the individual, disrupting their ability to make sense of the world around them. This is evident in the survivor narratives of 9/11, where individuals often grapple with the difficulty of articulating their trauma. Caruth's theory provides the critical lens through which the personal accounts in memoirs and documentaries are understood, highlighting the complex relationship between memory, trauma, and storytelling.

Additionally, the work of Judith Herman, particularly in *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992), complements Caruth's theory by emphasising the societal and communal dimensions of trauma. Herman identifies trauma as a social wound, not just an individual one, and highlights how healing is facilitated through the creation of narratives that allow survivors to reconnect with both their sense of self and their communities. This perspective resonates with the survivor narratives of 9/11, where individual trauma is tied to the broader



collective experience of the attacks. In many survivor stories, the process of healing is depicted not only through personal reflection but also through communal acts of remembrance and solidarity.

The role of storytelling in trauma recovery is further explored in the field of narrative therapy, which holds that telling one's story can be an empowering process, helping individuals make sense of chaotic or traumatic events. Michael White and David Epston's *Narrative Practice: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities* (1990) contributes to understanding how survivors of trauma reshape their identities through narrative. This therapeutic framework underscores the importance of survivor-led narratives in reshaping their relationship with their trauma, providing them with the agency to reclaim their stories and, in turn, their lives. Survivor memoirs and documentaries like *The Man in the Red Bandana* (2016) serve as exemplars of this narrative process, where survivors actively reframe their experiences, transforming trauma into a narrative of strength and resilience.

Documentaries, in particular, offer a unique vantage point for analysing trauma as they juxtapose personal experiences with visual and auditory elements that capture the intensity of lived trauma. *9/11: The Twin Towers* (2003) offers immediate, raw footage and survivor testimonies that reflect the collective confusion and devastation of the day. The documentary genre, as explored by Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), allows for the externalisation of trauma, presenting it to the public not only as a shared experience but also as an artefact to be interpreted and remembered. Sontag critiques the commodification of suffering in media but acknowledges the necessity of bearing witness to such events to foster empathy and remembrance. In this light, *9/11: The Twin Towers* and other survivor documentaries offer a platform for survivors to voice their trauma, while also providing the viewer an opportunity to engage with the collective grief of the nation.

In exploring the concept of memory and memorialisation, *The Man in the Red Bandana* (2016) encapsulates the heroism and personal sacrifices of Welles Crowther, a young man whose actions during the attacks became a symbol of selflessness and survival. This documentary contributes to the broader literature on the role of heroic narratives in trauma recovery, demonstrating how such stories offer survivors a sense of closure, dignity, and meaning in the face of overwhelming loss. Heroic narratives in survivor accounts are a vital component of how individuals negotiate their trauma, providing a framework for resilience and survival.

Finally, the work of Primo Levi, particularly *If This Is a Man* (1959), although written in the context of the Holocaust, offers valuable insights into the ways in which personal trauma is transformed



into narrative. Levi's exploration of survival guilt, memory, and the struggle for meaning in the wake of mass violence finds resonance in the survivor accounts of 9/11, where individuals often question their own survival amid the destruction of so many lives. Levi's reflections on how the trauma of the past continues to echo in the present highlight the long-lasting effects of traumatic events and the necessity of bearing witness through storytelling.

In sum, the literature on trauma, narrative, and healing provides a rich theoretical framework for understanding the personal and collective experiences of 9/11 survivors. Through the lens of trauma theory, narrative therapy, and documentary filmmaking, survivor stories illuminate the complexities of memory, loss, and recovery. The documentaries and memoirs examined in this paper contribute to a broader understanding of how personal trauma is navigated, reconstructed, and ultimately memorialised, offering a profound testament to the resilience of the human spirit.

In this research paper, I will examine how survivor narratives of the 9/11 attacks, as presented in memoirs and documentaries such as *9/11: The Twin Towers* (2003) and *The Man in the Red Bandana* (2016), serve as a powerful means of personal healing while also documenting the collective trauma experienced by individuals and society. By analysing these survivor stories, I aim to explore how these accounts reflect key theoretical concepts in trauma studies, particularly those proposed by Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman, who emphasise the complex relationship between trauma, memory, and recovery. This paper will investigate how these personal narratives provide insight into the survivors' psychological and emotional processes, offering a way to understand how they confront and integrate their traumatic experiences. Additionally, I will explore how these narratives, through the lens of narrative therapy, allow survivors to reconstruct their identities and find meaning in their suffering. Ultimately, this research will demonstrate how the storytelling process, whether in written memoirs or visual documentaries, is both an individual coping mechanism and a vital form of collective remembrance, shedding light on the long-lasting effects of 9/11 on those who lived through it.

The exploration of 9/11 survivor narratives through memoirs and documentaries reveals the complex interplay between personal trauma, healing, and the collective memory of the event. Survivor stories captured in works like *9/11: The Twin Towers* (2003) and *The Man in the Red Bandana* (2016) do more than simply recount traumatic experiences—they serve as vehicles for individual recovery while simultaneously contributing to the broader cultural understanding of the tragedy. Through an in-depth analysis of these narratives, I argue that survivor storytelling functions as a therapeutic process,



allowing individuals to confront and make sense of their trauma. The act of narrating one's experience, particularly in visual and written forms, not only facilitates healing for the survivor but also invites the public to bear witness to the emotional and psychological impacts of 9/11, thus serving as a key component in collective remembrance.

Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, as articulated in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), underscores the disorienting effects of trauma on memory and narrative. She writes, "The event of trauma is not available to consciousness at the time of its occurrence" (Caruth 4), highlighting how the survivor's relationship with their trauma is often fragmented and delayed. This is evident in many survivor narratives of 9/11, where the memories of the attacks are often experienced in bursts or flashbacks, creating a disjointed and fractured narrative. In *9/11: The Twin Towers* (2003), survivors recount their experiences of disorientation and confusion during the chaos of the attacks, exemplifying Caruth's theory that trauma resists immediate understanding and integration. One survivor describes: "I didn't know what was happening. Everything was a blur. The smoke, the screams, the uncertainty. It felt like I was in a dream, disconnected from reality" (*9/11: The Twin Towers*). This account echoes Caruth's assertion that trauma creates a rupture in the survivor's consciousness, a rupture that can only be later processed through storytelling.

Additionally, Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) expands on the idea that trauma recovery is not only an individual process but a communal one, where the act of sharing and witnessing trauma plays a crucial role in healing. Herman argues, "Trauma isolates the victim. Recovery is the process of regaining the ability to establish a sense of connection" (Herman 156). Survivor narratives, such as those in *The Man in the Red Bandana*, not only recount personal experiences but also serve as a way for survivors to connect with others who share similar emotional wounds. The documentary chronicles the heroic actions of Welles Crowther, whose selfless efforts during the attacks became a source of solace for his family and the survivors he saved. Crowther's story, as narrated by those who survived thanks to his bravery, becomes a shared narrative that offers a sense of solidarity and meaning in the aftermath of chaos. His mother, in an emotional reflection, states, "We didn't just lose a son; we gained a story—a story that keeps him alive and reminds us of what it means to be human" (*The Man in the Red Bandana*). This collective remembrance and communal bond exemplify Herman's assertion that recovery is intertwined with connection to others and the sharing of experiences.



Furthermore, narrative therapy, as discussed by Michael White and David Epston in *Narrative Practice: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities* (1990), provides a framework for understanding how survivor narratives serve as a means of reclaiming agency and meaning in the wake of trauma. White and Epston assert, “Through the process of telling our stories, we construct and reconstruct our identities” (White and Epston 13). Survivor memoirs and documentaries, by facilitating the retelling of the 9/11 experience, allow individuals to reshape their identities in ways that empower them. In *9/11: The Twin Towers*, survivors repeatedly describe how the act of sharing their story has allowed them to regain a sense of control over their lives. One survivor reflects, “By telling my story, I have come to understand who I am after that day, what it means to survive, and how to live again” (*9/11: The Twin Towers*). The survivor’s words illustrate how narrative creation can offer a sense of empowerment and transformation, which is central to the process of healing and recovery.

Through these survivor stories, we also see how trauma recovery involves the creation of meaning in a world that seems senseless after a violent event like 9/11. Primo Levi’s *If This Is a Man* (1959), although written in the context of the Holocaust, offers profound insights into the ways in which survivors confront meaninglessness and rebuild their identities. Levi states, “We did not know how to live; we only knew how to survive” (Levi 66). This existential struggle for meaning in the face of trauma mirrors the experiences of 9/11 survivors, who often grapple with feelings of guilt and confusion about why they survived when so many others did not. Survivor narratives such as those in *The Man in the Red Bandana* depict the tension between the horror of the event and the need to find meaning within it, as survivors often reflect on the significance of their survival, asking, “Why me?” This search for meaning through storytelling, as Levi’s work suggests, is crucial to the survivor’s ability to regain a sense of agency and purpose.

The survivor narratives of 9/11, as explored through memoirs and documentaries, serve as powerful tools for both personal healing and the documentation of collective trauma. Through the lens of trauma theory, narrative therapy, and existential reflection, these stories highlight the complex ways in which individuals and communities process and recover from trauma. The act of storytelling—whether in the form of a documentary, a memoir, or oral history—becomes a mechanism through which survivors can reconstruct their identities, connect with others, and ultimately find meaning in the aftermath of an unfathomable tragedy.



Survivor narratives from the 9/11 attacks function not only as personal accounts but as powerful forms of processing trauma and documenting collective grief. Through analysing memoirs and documentaries such as *9/11: The Twin Towers* (2003) and *The Man in the Red Bandana* (2016), this paper examines how these narratives engage with theories of trauma, memory, and recovery. Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, which emphasises the disjointedness of traumatic memory, plays a significant role in understanding how survivors of 9/11 articulate their experiences. Caruth argues that "the event of trauma is not available to consciousness at the time of its occurrence" (Caruth 4), meaning that survivors often struggle to integrate their experiences into coherent narratives. This theory is evident in the testimonies of survivors featured in *9/11: The Twin Towers*, where many survivors reflect on the difficulty of making sense of the attacks immediately following the trauma. One survivor recalls, "I didn't understand what was happening; everything was moving too fast, too out of control. It was only months later that I could begin to piece together what I had lived through" (*9/11: The Twin Towers*). The survivor's statement reveals how the traumatic experience created a rupture in their ability to narrate the event in real-time, echoing Caruth's assertion that trauma disrupts the survivor's experience of time and coherence.

The difficulty in assimilating traumatic memories into a coherent narrative is central to the theory of post-traumatic growth. According to Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery*, trauma recovery does not solely occur within the individual but through a communal process of sharing and bearing witness to the suffering of others. Herman writes, "Recovery is the process of regaining the ability to establish a sense of connection" (Herman 156), and this idea is echoed throughout the survivor accounts of 9/11. Survivors in *The Man in the Red Bandana* recount how their traumatic experiences were reframed and integrated through acts of shared remembrance and solidarity. For instance, after the loss of Welles Crowther, his mother describes, "We didn't just lose a son; we gained a story—a story that keeps him alive and reminds us of what it means to be human" (*The Man in the Red Bandana*). Here, the act of storytelling becomes a process of connection and healing. Crowther's heroism during the attacks became not only a source of personal meaning for his family but also a shared narrative that allowed survivors to connect with one another. By collectively witnessing and honouring Crowther's sacrifice, they could begin to heal from their own wounds. This communal dimension of recovery is vital, as Herman emphasises that trauma is not solely an individual experience but one that is intimately tied to a collective memory.



The importance of narrative as a tool for recovery is also highlighted in the field of narrative therapy. White and Epston's *Narrative Practice* suggests that "through the process of telling our stories, we construct and reconstruct our identities" (White and Epston 13). Survivor narratives function as a means of reclaiming agency and meaning after an event that threatens to erase one's sense of self. In *9/11: The Twin Towers*, many survivors discuss the psychological impact of the attacks and the ways in which they reconstructed their identities through the act of storytelling. One survivor states, "By talking about that day, I can begin to make sense of who I am now. It's like I had to rebuild myself, piece by piece" (*9/11: The Twin Towers*). The survivor's reflection exemplifies White and Epston's idea that the telling of traumatic stories provides survivors with the opportunity to regain control over their narrative and, by extension, their identity. Survivor accounts thus serve as an act of reclaiming one's life and personhood in the wake of disempowerment caused by the trauma of 9/11.

Moreover, the narrative construction of meaning is integral to trauma recovery, particularly in the face of overwhelming loss. Primo Levi, in his work *If This Is a Man*, discusses the psychological impact of surviving horrific experiences and the necessity of creating meaning in the wake of violence. Levi writes, "We did not know how to live; we only knew how to survive" (Levi 66), which encapsulates the profound struggle of survivors to find purpose after enduring incomprehensible tragedy. This struggle for meaning is echoed in the survivor accounts of 9/11, as many wrestle with feelings of guilt and confusion about why they survived when so many others did not. *The Man in the Red Bandana* explores this sense of survivor's guilt through the experiences of those who survived thanks to Crowther's heroism. One survivor recounts, "I didn't understand why I made it out alive. Why did I survive when so many others didn't?" (*The Man in the Red Bandana*). The survivor's existential questioning mirrors Levi's reflections on the difficulty of surviving unscathed when so many around you perished. Through the act of telling their stories, survivors of 9/11 attempt to make sense of their trauma and find a sense of purpose amidst the senselessness.

In conclusion, the survivor narratives explored in *9/11: The Twin Towers* and *The Man in the Red Bandana* demonstrate the therapeutic potential of storytelling in the process of trauma recovery. By applying the theories of Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and Michael White, we can understand how these survivor accounts function not only as personal forms of healing but also as ways of documenting collective trauma. Through their stories, survivors are able to reclaim their identities, find meaning in the aftermath of loss, and contribute to a broader cultural memory of the events of 9/11. These narratives



illustrate the profound psychological impact of trauma and the critical role of storytelling in both individual and collective recovery.

Conclusion:

The survivor narratives of the 9/11 attacks provide a unique and invaluable perspective on the traumatic aftermath of the event, offering profound insights into the processes of recovery, identity reconstruction, and collective memory. Through the lens of trauma theory and narrative therapy, as explored by Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and Michael White, we understand how these personal stories go beyond mere recollections; they are essential tools for healing and forging connections in the wake of profound loss. These survivor accounts, whether conveyed through memoirs, documentaries like *9/11: The Twin Towers* (2003), or *The Man in the Red Bandana* (2016), play a dual role: they help survivors to reclaim their identities and navigate the difficult path to recovery, while also contributing to a wider cultural memory of the tragedy. By offering their stories, survivors not only reassert control over their own experiences but also make an active contribution to shaping the collective narrative of 9/11.

The theories of Caruth and Herman illuminate how the act of storytelling serves as a mechanism for survivors to confront and understand the trauma that once felt incomprehensible. Caruth's insight into the fragmented nature of trauma memory, where survivors' accounts often begin after the traumatic event itself, finds resonance in the testimonies of survivors, who describe their experiences in fits and starts, trying to piece together what happened. The stories shared by survivors in *9/11: The Twin Towers* embody Caruth's argument that trauma resists immediate integration and coherence. Through the passage of time and the process of narration, survivors begin to piece together their fractured memories, allowing them to slowly come to terms with the experience.

Likewise, Judith Herman's theory of recovery emphasises the need for both individual and communal healing. Herman asserts, "Recovery is the process of regaining the ability to establish a sense of connection" (Herman 156), a statement that finds clear expression in the narratives surrounding Welles Crowther's heroism. In *The Man in the Red Bandana*, Crowther's family and the survivors he saved recount how the collective act of sharing and remembering his bravery provided a way for them to move forward, a communal bond that facilitated healing for all involved. This communal aspect of trauma recovery is crucial, as it allows survivors to feel connected to others and form a shared narrative that transcends individual grief.



Moreover, the concept of narrative identity, as discussed by White and Epston, emphasises the importance of retelling and re-authoring one's story to reclaim agency and meaning. Survivor narratives, such as those in *9/11: The Twin Towers*, demonstrate this by showing how survivors reshape their identities through the act of storytelling. By retelling their stories, they are not merely recounting a traumatic event but are actively reimagining who they are and how they fit into the world after the attack. These personal acts of narrative construction reflect White and Epston's idea that identity is fluid and that individuals have the power to redefine their lives through the stories they tell.

Finally, the search for meaning in the aftermath of such devastating loss echoes the reflections of Primo Levi, who poignantly writes, "We did not know how to live; we only knew how to survive" (Levi 66). For many survivors of 9/11, their lives were forever altered by the attacks, leaving them to grapple with the question of why they survived and what it meant to continue living in a world shattered by violence. The process of narrative construction, as seen in both *The Man in the Red Bandana* and *9/11: The Twin Towers*, provides survivors with a way to make sense of their survival, find purpose in the face of loss, and understand their place within a larger historical context. Through these stories, they are not only healing individually but contributing to a shared understanding of the trauma and resilience inherent in the experience of 9/11.

In conclusion, survivor narratives of 9/11 are vital not only for personal healing but for the collective remembrance of the tragedy. By applying the frameworks of trauma theory, narrative therapy, and existential reflection, this paper has demonstrated how these accounts offer more than just emotional catharsis. They represent a powerful means of processing and understanding trauma, reshaping identity, and preserving the collective memory of one of the most defining events of the 21st century. These survivor stories transcend individual grief, serving as a testament to the enduring strength of the human spirit in the face of unimaginable suffering. Through their narratives, survivors of 9/11 not only heal themselves but also ensure that the experiences of that day are never forgotten, creating a legacy of resilience, unity, and remembrance that will continue to resonate for generations.

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