

September 11, 2001

ATTACK ON NEW YORK CITY

An Award-Winning Reporter Tells the Story Through the Eyes of Those Who Were There

★ “New York Times editor *Wilborn Hampton* (Kennedy Assassinated! The World Mourns) presents a personal, emotional account of the attack on the World Trade Center, profiling two people who were in the towers when the planes hit, the family of a woman who perished, and some who helped with the rescue effort. . . . Strong and occasionally rawly emotional, reporting.”

—Publishers Weekly (starred review)

“Hampton writes with precision, grace, and a frightening intensity. . . . There are many, perhaps too many, books about 9/11 written for young people, but this is one of the best.”

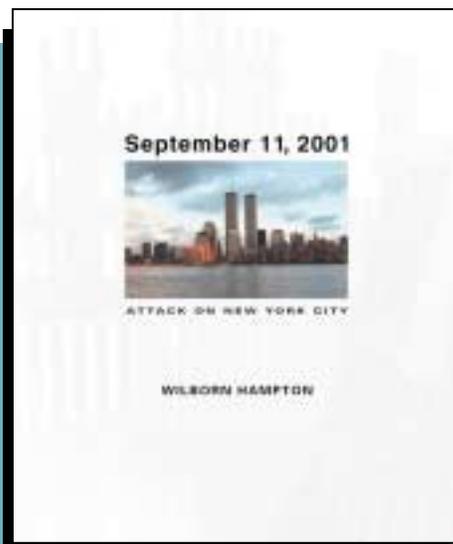
—Booklist

How do you make the events of September 11 comprehensible to a reader? How do you describe what happened that day in a way that future generations may understand? For the award-winning reporter who brought us gripping first-person accounts in *Kennedy Assassinated!* and *Meltdown: A Race Against Nuclear Disaster at Three Mile Island*, the answer is to tell the story through the eyes of a few individuals who were there.

Deciding to tell the story

Wilborn Hampton says he did not spontaneously set out to write a book about September 11. “I’d started work on another reporter’s notebook that I was doing for Candlewick Press,” he explains. “A couple of days after the attacks, my editor, Amy Ehrlich, called me to see how I was doing, as I live not far from the Twin Towers. Like most Americans, I was rather passionate when I talked about the events of that day. And in the course of the conversation, she said, ‘Why don’t you do a book about this? Why don’t you do a book about September 11?’ ”

Then an editor for *The New York Times Book Review*, Wilborn Hampton pointed out that he had nothing to do



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—Wilborn Hampton, author of
*September 11, 2001:
Attack on New York City*

with covering the story, whereas his previous books focused on events he’d covered as a reporter and foreign correspondent with U.P.I. “I had no inside knowledge,” he explains. “I was just one of many New Yorkers and Americans who were shocked and horrified at the attacks.” But Amy Ehrlich’s response was illuminating. “She pointed out, very gently, that I didn’t have to have covered everything I wrote a book about,” he recalls.

Finding a format

After giving the matter some thought, the author came up with an approach he thought would serve such a difficult subject. “In the course of writing *Meltdown*, I had reread John Hersey’s book *Hiroshima*,” Wilborn Hampton says. Originally published as a long article in *The New Yorker* at the end of World War II, John Hersey’s *Hiroshima*, still in print forty years later, “is a masterpiece of reporting,” Wilborn Hampton notes.

“Certainly I don’t mean to set myself up with any comparison to Hersey. But what he did in this book was find six survivors to interview who told their story of what they were doing that day when the bomb fell and immediately afterward. After reading their personal accounts, you have a very clear idea of what it must have been like to be in Hiroshima the day the atomic bomb was dropped.”

Wilborn Hampton decided to follow a similar format in approaching *September 11, 2001: Attack on New York City*, seeking individuals who had been in the middle of the tragedy and telling, in alternate sections, their story of that day. But finding the right subjects was a challenge. “Some people were reluctant to talk about it—their grief was very personal,” the author says. “One of the hardest jobs for me

as a reporter has always been to approach people who are bereaved and going through a great deal of sorrow, and trying to talk to them and get information.” Through networking and other means, Wilborn Hampton eventually found three main subjects who had extraordinary stories they were willing to tell: Omar Rivera, a blind man who inched down seventy-one floors of the burning North Tower with his seeing-eye dog; Bob Fox, whose close friend and mentor died in the collapse of the tower he’d escaped just a minute before; and Jim Kenworthy, a husband and father who watched in horror from the street as a jetliner crashed through the exact floor where his wife was at work.

Wilborn Hampton opted to include subjects who would bring in other elements of the day’s events as well, among them a New York civilian turned rescue worker and a group of firefighters who were trapped in the collapse of the North Tower. “I wanted to write about these particular firefighters not only because theirs was a brave and harrowing story, but also because it had the element of Josephine Harris, the one civilian there with them, who in a strange way turned out to be a guardian angel,” the author says. He also followed Mayor Giuliani’s story by piecing together public accounts of the mayor’s day. And finally, Wilborn Hampton tells his own story. “Mine is the voice of a sort of Everyman New Yorker who watched in slack-jawed horror as all of these things played out,” he says. “By including my own section, I had a way to report on events that the individuals in the center of the tragedy didn’t know until later—the grounding of all air flights, the closing of Manhattan’s tunnels and bridges, the attack on the Pentagon, the crash in Pennsylvania, and other crucial developments.”

A story more immediate and more emotional

In narrating the events of September 11, 2001 through multiple viewpoints and not filtering everything through his “I was there” reporter’s eyes, Wilborn Hampton diverges in approach from his previous two books. But there is another, perhaps more significant, difference that has to do with the element of time. “*Kennedy Assassinated!* was written thirty-five years after the fact, and *Meltdown* some twenty years after the fact,” the author notes. “With *September 11, 2001*, it was like picking up the ball a week or two after the fact and almost covering it as a reporter.” In some respects, he feels that this made his job easier. “The event was very fresh in everybody’s mind,” he says. “There was more immediacy to it.”

In other ways, however, revisiting the tragic events of September 11 so soon after they happened was much harder than the author anticipated. “Because it was such an emotional time, one of the most difficult things was trying to keep the emotion and subjectivity out of the writing and to

be as objective as possible,” he says. “In this I’m eternally grateful to my editors. There was a time when we kept sending pages back and forth, because my personal feelings kept creeping in, especially in my own section. But we wanted the book to be as objective as possible, and the subjective language had to come out.” Only in his dedication, addressed to his then one-year-old grandson, did the author finally let his true feelings come through. “It was probably the only personal, subjective observation that I made in the book, and I’m very proud of that,” he says.

What readers will take away

What does Wilborn Hampton hope readers will take away from *September 11, 2001: Attack on New York City*? “My hope is that those in the future who will want to know what New York was like on September 11 will be able to read these accounts and get a very good idea of what the city was like.” Indeed, even those who do remember what it was like in New York that day will find details of his accounts deeply resonant—the eerie silence that permeated the always-noisy city, for example, as people everywhere spoke in whispers “almost like talking in a library,” or the way so many New Yorkers stopped whatever they were doing to help in whatever way they could. “I’ve never seen anything quite like it, and I’ve covered three wars and a lot of other disasters,” the author says. “People lining up to donate blood, coming out of their shops, seeing stragglers on the street and handing out water or even shoes if they saw someone who was barefoot. If readers can take away some sense of that, of what the city was like in such extreme crisis, then that’s the purpose of the book.”

And if readers take away something more, such as a concern about how the world reached a point where the events of September 11 could take place, “that’s a bonus,” the author says. “At the bottom of this, a lesson anybody can learn is that we’re not going to survive in this world if hatred gets the upper hand. One thing I hope, if the book stays around that long, is that it will help to remind people that intolerance and hatred can lead to such a tragic thing, such a horrible thing. I guess that’s another reason for writing the book,” he says quietly. “Just to have it on record—that it can happen.”

September 11, 2001: Attack on New York City
ISBN: 0-7636-1949-3 • \$17.99 (\$25.99 CAN)
160 pages • Grade 7 and up * Age 12 and up
54 black-and-white photographs

