

9/11. A Survivor's Story

Artie Van Why

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Van Why's 9/11 is a heartfelt memoir of September 11th, 2001 that lends voice to the event's survivors.

Artie Van Why's memoir *9/11* recounts his experiences as a witness to the September 11th, 2001 attacks and details the long, traumatic grieving process that followed, as well as the survivor's guilt that still haunts him.

The book collects short, linked vignettes, many reproduced from a *Huffington Post* column and an earlier memoir, *That Day in September*. It starts with Van Why's youth in the 1970s. An aimless teen, he converted to Christianity in high school after encountering a charismatic youth leader.

Van Why was eager to please God...and to suppress his burgeoning attraction to men. He eventually moved to New York City, where he discovered the city's LGBTQ community. Amid continual struggles to reconcile his sexuality with his Christianity and a battle with alcoholism, Van Why landed a job at a law firm that placed him close to the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001.

Best when describing the actual events of September 11th, the book's details, pacing, and scene setting work together to give sharp, clear impressions of what it was like to be at Ground Zero. In one particularly lucid section, concrete details depict the World Trade Center plaza before its destruction, filled "with people and activity, vendors selling hot dogs or ice cream or pretzels."

The text explores the attacks' enormous, lasting impact on survivors, from the distressing psychological effects of PTSD to the many lifelong physical ailments caused by breathing toxins at the crash site. Throughout, Van Why maintains an approachable, down-to-earth voice that highlights one of the book's most engaging features: its firsthand account of extraordinary events from an ordinary perspective.

Less successful is the widespread repetition of details and impressions, sometimes near verbatim. The pieces are not dated, and it is often unclear how much time has passed between them, or how their events fit together chronologically. Sections that cover the behind-the-scenes work of creating and publicizing Van Why's one-man play (also titled *That Day in September*) feel out of place and superfluous to the story. Several seemingly key events—including the first time Van Why meets another survivor in person, fifteen years after the tragedy—are summarized or presented indirectly rather than in full, engaging scenes.

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ANITRA BUDD (October 30, 2018)

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