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Report From New York City

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Report from New York City by Marleen Barr

(Marleen Barr is a science fiction scholar who pioneered feminist SF criticism. She won the 1997 Science Fiction Research Association Pilgrim Award for lifetime achievement in science fiction criticism.)

It is certainly strange at this time to be a professional science fiction critic AND a native New Yorker. I saw the burning tower from the street. I live in a twenty-second floor Manhattan apartment with a straight shot view of what was formerly the World Trade Center. Out of all the millions of people who saw the events and are commenting about them, I think that as far as I know Samuel Delany and I are the only academic science fiction critics who live in Manhattan. This is a small minority perspective vis-à-vis the fact that every cognizant adult on the planet in the civilized world knows what has ensued. Professionals, of course, have been called upon to use their skills in the recovery effort. I, of course again, can't remove the twisted steel or repair wounded bodies. But what I can do is to comment in terms of science fiction in general and personal experience in particular. I would like to share my comments with the science fiction community via the *Locus* website. Since communicating traumatic events fosters healing, this exercise will be useful to me; and I hope that those who share my interest in science fiction will also find it useful.

I left the apartment on Tuesday morning at 8:45 to embark upon my usual walk across Manhattan from Third Avenue in the upper twenties to Port Authority Bus Terminal at 42nd St and Eighth Ave in order to catch the bus which would take me to the suburban New Jersey college where I teach. Although the attack started while I was in the elevator, street life was perfectly normal. About ten minutes into my walk I heard someone say "Smoke is coming from the top of the building and you can see it." I turned and looked up at the buildings directly behind me. I saw no smoke. Since the sight of smoke emanating from a building would not deter a New Yorker trying to catch a specific bus to go to work, I continued on. When I was directly across the street from Madison Square Garden and Penn Station I heard a solicitor for funds for the homeless who had a bull horn use the horn to say "The World Trade Center has been hit by a plane. We are all praying." I immediately thought that terrorists were responsible for this hit. Shocked, but unable to imagine that this situation could impact upon my bus, I thought that I should fulfill my teaching responsibility. I reacted by trying to carry out my objective to reach the bus terminal. Once inside I witnessed people's nervous reactions and thought better of entering the Lincoln Tunnel. I became scared and waited on a phone line to call my husband. I saw a fellow teacher from my college who always takes my bus. Although I have never before spoken to her, I threw myself into her arms and told her exactly how anxious I was. She told me that the tunnel was closed and that we should just go home. I voiced my appreciation to her, walked out of the terminal, and found myself alone on streets filled with stunned and panicking people. This was calm panic; no one was crying or screaming. Everyone resembled dazed automaton zombies. I was petrified. I thought more planes were coming to attack more buildings. I thought that planes carrying nuclear weapons were coming. I walked to 34th St and saw the Empire State Building directly in front of me. I told myself that I could not be there; I could not be in front of the Empire State Building when planes were coming to attack this prime target. I turned to change my direction and passed a building which had its occupants standing in front of it. "Why are you

standing out here?" I asked one of the people. His answer: "This is a tall building and we have been evacuated." Not understanding how standing in front of a building which might be attacked at any second could manifest safety, I walked on and encountered Madison Square Garden and Penn Station. I defined this building as another target. At that point I realized that it was absolutely impossible to find safety anywhere. People who ran from ground zero said that they became the war refugee that they have seen in pictures. I thought that I had become a character in a post-apocalyptic urban landscape science fiction novel. I had devoted my professional life to studying science fiction; now science fiction was real; now the science fiction critic had become a science fiction character. I walked and talked to myself. I really articulated these words: "I can't believe it. I can't believe it. This is a science fiction novel. I am in a science fiction novel." Because I knew that there was no such thing as finding a safe place, looking as stunned as everyone around me, I began to walk home no longer trying to find safety. I paused to listen to a radio report emanating from a parked construction truck radio. I do not remember what I heard. Then, from a location which I also can't remember but which I think must have been Seventh Ave, I looked south. I saw it. I saw black smoke billowing from the top of a tower. I say "a tower" because I saw only one tower. It was ten o'clock. One tower had just fallen before my gaze lighted upon the sole smoking tower. But my mind did not register that it was abnormal to see only one tower. My mind could not register that it was at all possible that only one tower could exist. And this occurred even though I ALWAYS saw two towers. I imparted normalcy to the situation by reasoning that one tower was somehow not visible from this particular angle. I REALLY and calmly believed this to be the case even though it NEVER was the case before. The burning tower struck me as just a more significant, horrible, and scary version of a normal building fire—i.e. the typical fire that did not deserve my attention at the start of my walk. Since the smoke was coming from a limited area at the top of the building, I thought that it would be contained and that the people inside would calmly leave via elevators. Death did not enter my mind. Even though groups of people were lined along the avenue staring transfixed at the tower, I reasoned that I had already seen the smoke and the burning tower and nothing would be gained by standing in the street and continuing to look at it. Construing a visual version of the cliché "I have been there and done that" I turned to continue walking home. Again, knowing that safety was impossible to find, I resumed my demeanor of juxtaposed trauma and calm. I have been married for the first time for a total of less than three months. Although having a husband is a very alien conception to me, it stood to reason that if one does have a husband than one should call him when flames are emanating from the top of a World Trade Center tower. I went to a phone booth and dialed.

"Do you know what happened?"

"Yes."

"I'm coming home."

"Okay. Good. Come home." I am a New York Jew; he is a French Canadian. Soon after my marriage I imagined placing a headline on the cover of the Science Fiction Research Association Newsletter: "Marleen S. Barr Marries Alien." In retrospect, I see that his restrained reaction makes this imagined headline even more true. He spoke calmly and succinctly even though he saw the burning towers directly from our apartment's window and he knew the magnitude of the explosions. Soon after we hung up, he had a direct view of the crumbling towers. In retrospect, I am glad that I did

not see the towers fall. Since New York Jews resort to humor when they are upset, let me tell you the difference between his subsequent telephone renditions of the event and my own. When his numerous sisters called from Montreal what he had to say was always the same: "*Bonjour. Oui. Oui. Non. Je suis bon. Au revoir.*" And that was it. When people phoned me I spent no less than an hour per call articulating various versions of the following: "Aaaaaaaargh!!! Oy!!! And the sirens and the smell coming into the apartment and what will happen next and all those poor poor people.....etc. etc." When I arrived home my husband and I watched television. I could not decide between watching the screen and the framed space of my windows to discern what was happening. I alternated between both views. I can't articulate how it felt to have the scene on television enacted outside of my window. Smell attached to a television screen is still science fiction; I smelled the smoke the television reporters were describing. At 5:20 the reporters said that another building had collapsed. I looked out of the window and corroborated the report in that I saw more smoke.

And then it was the science fiction cliché of the day after. It was a day of more television. On Wednesday night the smoke smell in the apartment became intense to the extreme that I was coughing and my eyes were tearing. I closed the windows and got back into bed to watch more television. The reporter said that there was a bomb scare in the Empire State Building and it was being evacuated. Since I never had a chance to say good-bye to the Trade Center view from my window which I loved so much, I got out of bed and went to the bathroom window to look at the Empire State Building and say good-bye to it. (It is seven blocks away.) I never bothered to awaken my husband; if the Empire State Building fell in ruins there would be nothing that he could do. If the bombed building threatened our lives, he might as well sleep through the trauma.

Another the day after. I spent it at the Bellevue Hospital missing person center trying to help a friend locate her missing cousin. The task was hopeless. He was not on any of the lists of the missing. Because of the amount of people, I could not hope to get in to file a missing person report. It is strange to stand on line with grieving people when you are not directly grieving. A chaplain asked me if I needed help. I said no and directed her toward a person who looked especially bereft. I returned home and watched more television.

Another the day after. Traumatized to the point that I could not function normally or work, I resolved to try to have a normal day. I made an appointment to meet my lifelong friend for lunch. She works on Park Avenue in a large office building. On my way to my "usual sitting spot to wait to have lunch with Carol," located across the street from the Waldorf, I forced myself to walk through Grand Central Station. I told two businessmen on the escalator behind me that it was an effort for me to walk into the building. They provided thumbs up encouragement. While I usually read while waiting for my friend in "my usual sitting spot," today I just wanted to "veg out" and stare into space at a normal urban landscape. Suddenly I saw people running from the office building. The stunned faces appeared again. The traumatized cell phone conversations took place again. I walked up to a woman standing in front of me. "I am really afraid to ask this, but why are you all out here." "Bomb scare. The building has been evacuated." I knew that the building could collapse at any moment. But I did not run. I stood on the street corner. I knew that Carol, the person who I had known since the time she was born eleven months after my birthday, the person who had been in every grade with me from kindergarten to senior year of college, was prompt. Carol was due to meet me in four minutes. Carol would come. Even if the building crumbled,

I had to wait for Carol. I saw her cross the street. She obviously did not know something was wrong. I grabbed her hand. "There is a bomb scare. We have to get out of here. We have to run. We can go to Central Park. In Central park the buildings can't fall on our heads." Holding hands we proceeded to head north. Then she stopped in her tracks. "Marleen, this is probably just a scare. I want to go back and ask the security guard the reality of the situation. Lets just go in the building and have lunch as usual in the cafeteria." "No. The authorities told the people in the Trade Center to remain where they were. I don't care what the guards say. I am not going in that building." We talked to the guards. We compromised. We had lunch in the deli located at street level of another building.

Another the day after. I had to go back to New Jersey to meet my class. I was afraid that something new would happen and the tunnel would close and I would be stranded in New Jersey. Although I never intended to desert my students, I voiced my apprehension to my husband. He ordered me to go to school. I stood in front of the students who looked at me nervously because they know I live in Manhattan. I told them what I had been through. I then described the events in terms of the subject of my class. It took me sometime before I could ask the class something normal such as "Does anyone need a syllabus?" Looking at those young scared people and reaching out to them as a fellow scared human being rather than as a professor constituted the most amazing teaching experience of my career. I thanked my students for their help—and they thanked me.

I am now sitting in front of the computer with my hands cold and damp, and some tears in my eyes. I am still scared. I do not really believe that things are back to normal. I still hear some sirens. If I look out of the window I will still see the smoke. I can turn off the television; I can't turn off the window view. I am trying to tell myself that the worst is over, that New York City will not really be destroyed in short order. But the truth is that a plane can come out of the sky before I put a period to the next sentence. Even though I have just edited a book about the next new millennium, I know that I can't know the future—even if I am a professional science fiction critic. I reach the end of another sentence and type the period and the plane did not come. I do not want to reread my narrative or to alter what I have said in any way. Again, I just want to be a science fiction critic who has communicated my experience with the science fiction community. No matter what happens, even if New York ceases to exist, my books will be there as long as human civilization exists. And someone will read this narrative. Is my sending of this message an act of science fiction? Well, without scrolling up and looking backward at what I have written, I know my next future action. I am going to write "love, Marleen" and push the send button. Love, Marleen
And: Oy!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

—Marleen Barr

