The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 have been featured in a great number of poems, stories, novels, and plays. It is especially the impact these events have had on individual lives that has been focused on in literary writing. Owing to the great number of victims and the material, psychological, and political damage done, this is no wonder. And as the catastrophe was deliberately brought about, the response was bound to be particularly intense and subjectively complex. The literature featuring 9/11 thus cannot escape being to a considerable extent littérature engagée, involved as it is in the real to a far greater extent than is usually the case. For the same reason, it has had – and will continue to have for some time – a heightened cultural and social importance that raises some questions. From one point of view, there seems to be the problem that, with literature being fictional and creative, if not to say always somewhat playful, it may be considered to be never factually truthful enough and ethically adequate. An example of this view can be found on the internet under the title “Does Literature Sell 9/11 Short?” in the Guardian books blog.¹ From the opposite perspective, the engagement with a catastrophic event with such a strong emotional impact can also be regarded as a severe hindrance to this literature’s aesthetic reception – a kind of reception that cannot come about without a certain amount of distance (or, in Wordsworth’s words, “recollec- tion in tranquility”).

In this essay, I will therefore focus on the questions of how, and to what extent, this problem has been resolved in some of the literary

works dealing with 9/11. As the novels have already received more critical attention than the plays, I will confine myself to discussing several plays and just one novel. Nonetheless, I hope that in dealing with different genres in this rudimentary form at least some of their strengths and weaknesses regarding the chosen focus will be revealed.

In order to show that we are indeed dealing with samples of “engaged” literature, I will first, with due brevity, demonstrate the way in which the works I selected feature 9/11. My first example, a series of dramatic monologues by Lavonne Mueller with the title *Voices from September 11th*, was published in 2002 and staged off-off-Broadway. The author’s objective is to foster the impression of listening to authentic reports from average Americans on how they experienced the attacks. In order to make them appear representative, Mueller presents the “Voices” of seven women and four men from different walks of life and ranging in age between 17 and 67 years. As a final gag, she even includes Franklin D. Roosevelt’s dog Fala, who – alluding to Pearl Harbor – encourages the audience by saying, “We came through those dark times. And you will come through, too.” What all the “Voices” have in common is a strong patriotic tenor: at the very end, “the lights come up on the actors as they stand holding each other up (for moral support) so that they are looking like the famous Iwo Jima picture”.\(^2\)

The second play, Anne Nelson’s *The Guys*, is a mixture of monologues and dialogues based on the playwright’s personal experience. The piece was staged already on 4 December 2001, “twelve weeks to the day after the World Trade Center attack”. Devoted “To the Captain, and to the guys. And to all the captains, and to all the guys”,\(^3\) the work is meant to be a memorial to the 343 firemen who lost their lives in the rescue operations at the Towers. The slight plot involves conversations between a fire captain and a journalist who gives him some help in writing the eulogies he has to deliver at the memorial services for the men from his company who were among the victims. The monologues of the journalist provide a biographical frame for this and commentaries on the immediate impact of the attack. But the really moving part is comprised of the captain’s characterizations of his men and the eulogies based on them, because they show that, although

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