

Towers Falling

A powerful novel by award-winning author Jewell Parker Rhodes set fifteen years after the 9/11 attacks.

When her fifth-grade teacher hints that a series of lessons about home and community will culminate with one big answer about two tall towers once visible outside their classroom window, Dèja can't help but feel confused. She sets off on a journey of discovery, with new friends Ben and Sabeen by her side. But just as she gets closer to answering big questions about who she is, what America means, and how communities can grow (and heal), she uncovers new questions, too. Like, why does Pop get so angry when she brings up anything about the towers? Award-winning author Jewell Parker Rhodes tells a powerful story about young people who weren't alive to witness this defining moment in history, but begin to realize how much it colors their every day.

As the fifteenth anniversary of September 11th nears, *Towers Falling* explores the thought-provoking question of how kids born after 2001 can find meaning in events they have no personal memory of, but which still have a monumental impact on their families, educators, and communities. In the tradition of her revered body of middle grade work including *Ninth Ward*, *Sugar*, and *Bayou Magic*, once again Jewell Parker Rhodes deftly weaves historical and socio-political layers into a story that is at its heart about friendship, family, and finding your way in a complicated world.

Time Magazine

Sarah Begley

July 21, 2016

In the hours, days and months after the 9/11 attacks, Americans asked a series of questions: What happened? How many people died? Who did this? And, in the parlance of cable news, Why do they hate us?

For those of us who lived through the attacks, the responses to those questions are familiar if not complete. But 15 years later, parents of children born after 2001 struggle to come up with answers that explain the events and their aftermath without diminishing the terror of that sunny September day.

In Jewell Parker Rhodes' new novel, *Towers Falling*, 10-year-old Dèja has never heard about the attacks. As the present-day story begins, her family of five have just been evicted from their Brooklyn apartment and moved into a homeless shelter, in part because her depressed, chronically ill father can't work. The new surroundings destabilize Dèja, but the shelter is in a nicer neighborhood with a better school. There, she happily makes friends with a new boy from Arizona and a popular Muslim girl, and she's shocked by lesson plans and after-school chatter about 9/11. As she processes the information, she struggles to see what it has to do with her life. "I wasn't even born. I'm sorry they're dead," she says. "But why should I care?"

Rhodes has a talent for teaching kids to care about major events—her 2010 Hurricane Katrina novel, *Ninth Ward*, is a Coretta Scott King Honor Book—and her emphasis on critical thinking would make *Towers Falling* at home on a Common Core curriculum. By the end of the book, Dèja does understand why she should care about the past, not least because she learns that 9/11 has something to do with her father's coughs and headaches.

In *Dèja*, Rhodes has created a curious, resilient character whose journey can help other children process the horrible events that shape the world into which they are born. Parents too will appreciate the age-appropriate takeaways that play it sagely down the middle. "History is about feelings, too," Dèja writes in a school essay. "I'm happy I'm American. But sometimes American history isn't happy."

—SARAH BEGLEY

This appears in the August 01, 2016 issue of TIME.

Kirkus Reviews

TOWERS FALLING

by Jewell Parker Rhodes

Age Range: 8 - 12

Dèja Barnes doesn't want to stand out at the integrated Brooklyn Collective Elementary, and she wishes her family could move out of the Avalon Family Residence into a home; despite her fears, Dèja tackles new friendships, a new teacher, and the mystery behind her father's deep sadness.

On the first day of fifth grade, the African-American girl makes fun of Mexican-American Ben's cowboy boots and Muslim Sabeen's cheery attitude, but despite her defensiveness, Dèja grows to appreciate her new friends' backgrounds. The trio draws from each of their experiences to help them navigate Miss Garcia's 9/11 curriculum. Dèja hates thinking about the past—her old best friend, her old neighborhood, her old home—yet the more she learns, the more she understands that this event affected her and every American. Rhodes pulls off the difficult feat of making a well-known story new. Sept. 11 is anchored in the minds of many readers, but for a new generation, it is history they learn in school, like Dèja. Through her eyes the event becomes fresh, heavy, and palpable, but at times 9/11 appears to be a competing rather than complementary protagonist. The cadences of the fifth-graders flow almost like slam poetry, emphasizing their feelings and senses over drawn-out descriptions or narration.

This tender retelling of tragedy is a solid vessel to help young readers understand the gravity of 9/11 and how it touches all Americans, no matter where we come from. (author's note) (Fiction. 8-12)

<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/jewell-parker-rhodes/towers-falling/>

Publishers Weekly

Towers Falling

Jewell Parker Rhodes. Little, Brown, \$16.99 (240p) ISBN 978-0-316-26222-4

With the 15th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks approaching, Dèja's fifth-grade teacher draws the students' attention to the skyline outside their classroom window, pointing out where the towers once stood. At first, Dèja is unable to fathom how something that happened so long ago could have any bearing on her, especially when she has more immediate problems—her family is currently living in a shelter. But she learns that the events of 9/11 have a long reach, affecting those closest to her in ways large and small. Rhodes (Sugar) gives readers an approachable entry point to consider the terrorist attacks of 9/11, as well as homelessness, discrimination, divorce, and other subjects. Through Dèja's interactions with classmates from a range of backgrounds (Dèja is African-American, and her new friends Sabeen and Ben have Turkish and Mexican heritage, respectively), readers will develop a richer understanding of what it means to be American, as well as the interconnectedness of the present and past. Rhodes approaches a complex, painful topic with insight and grace, providing context to an event distant to the book's audience. Ages 8–12. Agent: Michael Bourret, Dystel & Goderich Literary Management. (July)

<http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-316-26222-4>

Books and Whatnot

Review (Plus): 'Towers Falling' by Jewell Parker Rhodes

Bookshelf Blurp: 9/11 devastated our nation and for 15 years, children have been born who have no idea of how this event united people from sea to shining sea. History comes alive through three best friends who live in Brooklyn, NY in 2016.

Ms. America's Review:

As I listened to the laughter and shouts of joy coming from my two children who were happily watching bombs bursting in air, I realized how innocent and free these 9- & 11-year-old boys were. I watched my 9-year-old place a whirly-bird on the ground and then take off running for his life as he knew the fuse would soon blow. Once he was a safe distance away, he turned back to watch the firework launch into the air and explode in a multitude of lights above his head. I didn't turn to watch the show, but instead turned to watch his angelic, innocent face and see his eyes reflecting the glow of the night.

Feeling my stare, he turned to look at me, then asked, "Mommy, are you crying?"

I shook my head, wiping away tears, and explained, "This reminds me of the book I am reading about a time you weren't alive to know about. It was a time that made us realize our freedom comes at a price." He knew I was upset, not an angry kind of upset, but one of pure sadness. He sat down beside me as his brother took his turn blowing something up and asked me again, "Why are you crying about a book?"

Towers Falling by Jewell Parker Rhodes is a book of truth. It will make the adult readers pause and tell the young reader in whose hands this book should belong, exactly the time and place they were the moment they learned that suicidal terrorists flew planes into four US locations: the Pentagon, a field in Pennsylvania and into two of the largest buildings in New York City: The Twin Towers.

Jewell Parker Rhodes won the Coretta Scott King Honor Award for her book *Ninth Ward* and I hope to see her recognized again for her ability to tell the story of 9/11 through the words of a homeless 10-year-old girl, Deja.

After her family of five have been evicted from their home, Deja has to learn to embrace who she is despite her ailing father, a working mother and her two younger siblings. On the first day of school she meets Ben, who is also new and has just moved to Brooklyn from Arizona, and Sabeen, a young Muslim student who has lived in NY all of her life. The three children are in Miss Garcia's homeroom where this unlikely friendship forms between a white boy, a black girl and a Muslim girl.

Within the first few days of school, Miss Garcia informs her students they will be working on a class unit learning about the absence of the towers which they could see from their classroom

windows 15 years ago. Deja is unaware of this event, and through the friendship of Ben and Sabeen, she soon learns of the devastation and ruin. She has to learn how this affected our nation, but also how this event is the reason her father can no longer hold a job or maintain sanity.

Fifteen years has passed since this attack occurred, but to many people, this tragedy will forever be a part of their life. Freedom is given to us in the United States, but present day children do not realize how freedom can be taken away in mere moments. Pass this book on to our youth. Teach them a moment of history through the perspective of one of their 5th grade peers....Deja learns more about herself and her family through our history of 9/11.

Jewell Parker Rhodes is the author of the Louisiana Girls children's book trilogy, which includes *Ninth Ward*, *Sugar*, and *Bayou Magic*. Her children's books have received the Parents' Choice Foundation Award, the Coretta Scott King Author Honor Award, and the Jane Addam's Children's Book Award, among others. *Towers Falling*, her new middle grade novel, was published in July 2016.

Jewell is also the author of six adult novels: *Voodoo Dreams*, *Magic City*, *Douglass' Women*, *Season*, *Moon*, and *Hurricane*, as well as the memoir *Porch Stories: A Grandmother's Guide to Happiness*, and two writing guides, *Free Within Ourselves: Fiction Lessons for Black Authors* and *The African American Guide to Writing and Publishing Non-Fiction*.

Her work has been published in China, Korea, France, Germany, Italy, Canada, Turkey, and the United Kingdom, and has appeared on NPR's "Selected Shorts." Her adult literary awards include: the American Book Award, the National Endowment of the Arts Award in Fiction, the Black Caucus of the American Library Award for Literary Excellence, the PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Award for Outstanding Writing, two Arizona Book Awards, and a finalist citation for the Hurston-Wright Legacy Award.

Jewell grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and earned a Bachelor of Arts in Drama Criticism, a Master of Arts in English, and a Doctor of Arts in English (Creative Writing) from Carnegie Mellon University. She is also a professor of Creative Writing and American Literature and the former Director of the Master of Fine Arts Program in Creative Writing.

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A new novel by
Jewell Parker Rhodes



