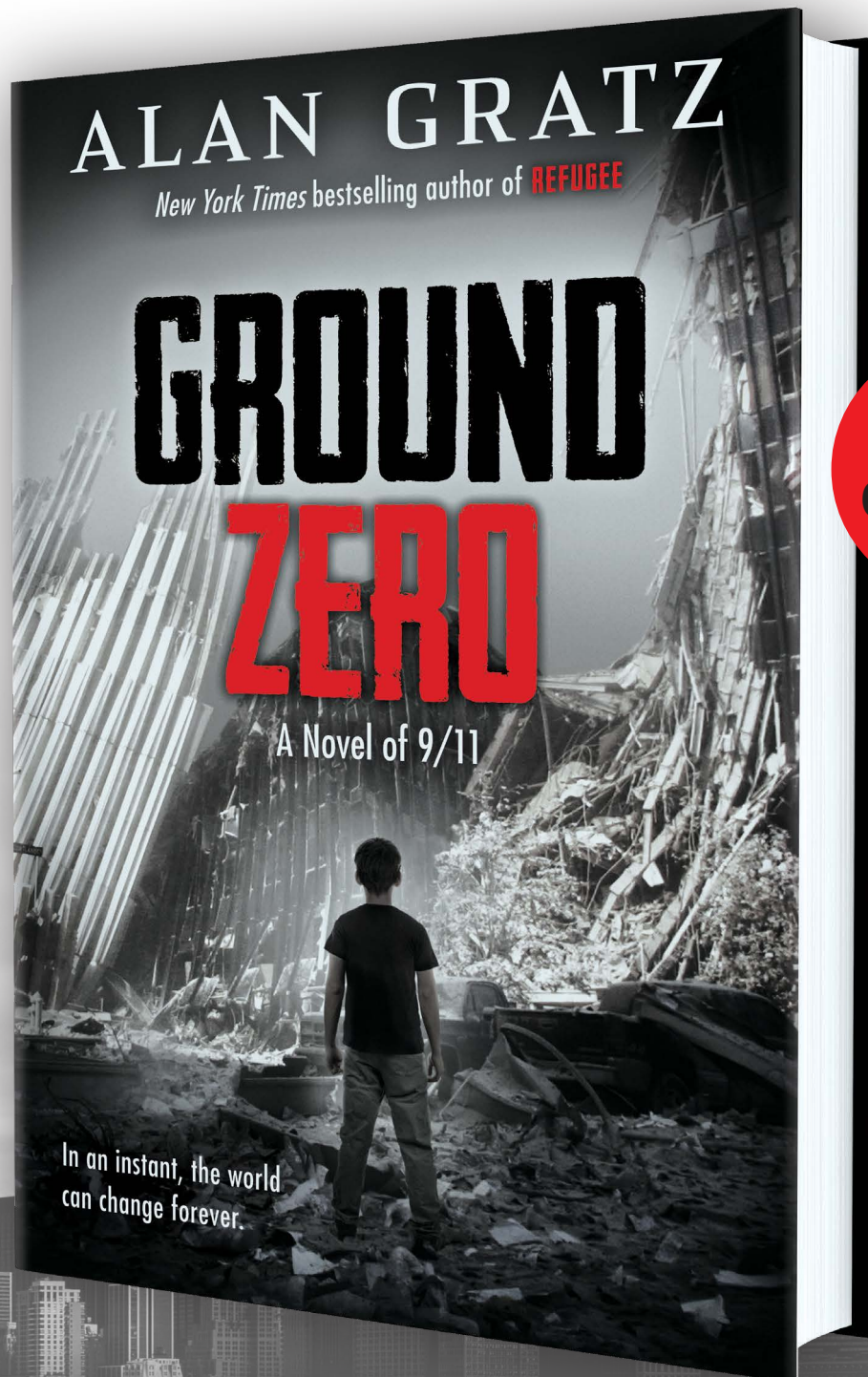


# Discussion Guide

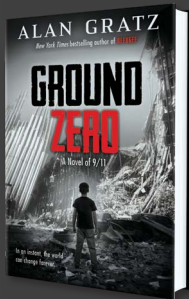
# GROUND ZERO: A NOVEL OF 9/11

by Alan Gratz



Ages 9–12  
Grades 4–7

# About *Ground Zero*



**September 11, 2001, New York City:** Brandon is visiting his dad at work, on the 107th floor of the World Trade Center. Out of nowhere, an airplane slams into the tower, creating a fiery nightmare of terror and confusion. And Brandon is in the middle of it all. Can he survive—and escape?

**September 11, 2019, Afghanistan:** Reshmina has grown up in the shadow of war, but she dreams of peace and progress. When a battle erupts in her village, Reshmina stumbles upon a wounded American soldier named Taz. Should she help Taz—and put herself and her family in mortal danger?

Two kids. One devastating day. Nothing will ever be the same.

## Pre-reading Activity

Discuss in small groups what the term “Ground Zero” means to you. What does the term “9/11” signify? What do you know about the country of Afghanistan? Make a list of questions you would like to find answers for about these concepts.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why does Brandon accompany his father to work? What do you learn about Brandon’s character in the first chapter? How do you learn what day and year it is?
2. What do you learn about Reshmina when she first appears, including where and when her story takes place? How is her life like her brother’s and how is it different? Why does Pason stop going to school and why does Reshmina want to continue and to learn English?
3. The concept of teamwork is important to both Brandon and Reshmina. Which family members do each of them consider part of their “team”? What feelings do they have when they are separated from those important people in their lives?
4. Why is Reshmina interested in the translator who accompanies the American soldiers to her village? What possibilities does the woman’s work present to her? Discuss her thought: “And without a dream, without ambition, what point was there to living?” (p. 44). Compare Reshmina’s dreams to her mother’s and her grandmother’s. Why does she decide to help the injured American soldier?
5. How does Brandon become separated from his father? In what ways does he come close to being trapped in the building after the plane hits? What changes for him when he is able to reach his father on a phone? Who are the people that assist Brandon in his escape? How does he form his bond with Richard?
6. How do Reshmina and Pason become separated on the hillside? In what ways does Reshmina put her life in danger when she goes after Pason? Discuss their different views of the problems in their country. What does Reshmina mean when she says to Pason, “You’re like a worm who crawls into a snake’s nest . . .” (p. 161)?
7. Discuss the difference between Brandon’s first and second phone call with his father. What has changed? What does his father want him to promise when he knows they can’t be together (p. 185)?
8. What does Reshmina mean when she says, “. . . sometimes what was right and what was easy were two different things” (p. 195)? Compare her image of the fossil in amber and the Kochi way of life to what she now knows that she has to do.
9. Compare Brandon’s experience in the underground mall to Reshmina leading the village people to the caves for safety. What makes each of those refuges unsafe? How do Brandon and Reshmina both lead their people to safety from underground? Discuss the significance of Taz’s reference to the songs “We’re Here Because We’re Here” and “Auld Lang Syne” (p. 260).
10. At what point did you realize the connection between Brandon’s story in 2001 and Reshmina’s story in 2019? Why do you think the Afghans in her village had never heard about the fall of the Twin Towers? Does learning about that event help Reshmina understand why the Americans are in her country? What does she mean when she says, “. . . the rules are different for the United States” (p. 281)?

# Extension Activities

## New York City Memorial

Take a virtual field trip to the 9/11 Memorial in New York City on the site of the Twin Tower buildings:  
[911memorial.org/learn/students-and-teachers/virtual-field-trips](http://911memorial.org/learn/students-and-teachers/virtual-field-trips)

## Afghanistan

Learn more about Reshmina's homeland, and look for answers to the question of how the geography of Afghanistan affects the history of the country and the people who live there. Compare what you learn to the artifacts from all the invasions of her country that Reshmina finds in the cave.

[britannica.com/place/Afghanistan](http://britannica.com/place/Afghanistan)

## Language and Culture

Certain words in the Pashto dialect guide the actions of characters in this story. Write a paragraph about the difference between the Pashtunwali code of badal and nanawatai, revenge and refuge, and discuss how these two concepts can be in conflict with each other.

# Recommended Further Reading

**America Is Under Attack: September 11, 2001: The Day the Towers Fell**, by Don Brown. Square Fish, 2014. This account of the events of this terrible day, illustrated with evocative watercolors, is part of the Actual Times series.

**Breadwinner Trilogy**, by Deborah Ellis. Groundwood, 2009. Eleven-year-old Parvana must help her family survive under the Taliban rule in Afghanistan.

**The Man Who Walked Between the Towers**, by Mordicai Gerstein. Roaring Brook, 2003; Square Fish, 2007. A Caldecott Award winner tells of the daring deed of aerialist Philippe Petit who walked on a tightrope between the Twin Towers soon after they were built.

**Ryan Pitts: Afghanistan: A Firefight in the Mountains of Wanat**, by Michael P. Spradlin. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019. This entry in the Medal of Honor series focuses on Staff Sergeant Pitts and his heroic actions during a desperate battle at an outpost in Afghanistan.

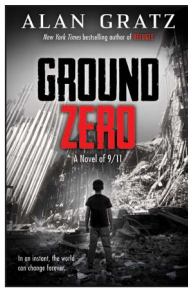
**Summer of My German Soldier**, by Bette Greene. Dial, 1973; Puffin, 2006. Twelve-year-old Patty, living in Arkansas during WWII, befriends and hides a German prisoner-of-war who escapes from a nearby camp. The award-winning book became an Emmy-winning TV movie in 1978.

**What Were the Twin Towers?**, by Jim O'Connor. Penguin Workshop, 2015. Factual account of the building, business, and commerce of the World Trade Center before the attacks in 2001.

**Words in the Dust**, by Trent Reedy. Scholastic, 2013. Based on a true story, a young girl in Afghanistan is given new hope and help for her facial deformity by American soldiers stationed in her country.

**9/11: The Book of Help**, edited by Michael Cart, et. al. Cricket Books, 2002. Children's authors respond to the tragedy of the World Trade Center attack through essays, short stories, and poems.

# Praise for Alan Gratz



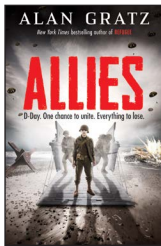
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“Gratz’s deeply moving writing paints vivid images of the loss and fear of those who lived through the trauma of 9/11.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

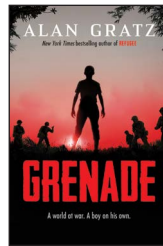
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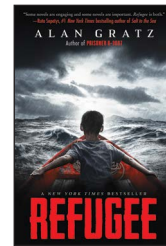


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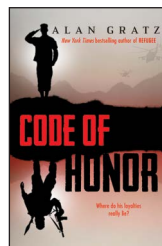
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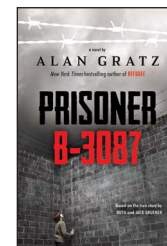
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14 state award master list nominations



## About the Author

Alan Gratz is the *New York Times* bestselling author of several highly acclaimed books for young readers, including *Allies*, *Grenade*, *Refugee*, *Projekt 1065*, *Prisoner B-3087*, and *Code of Honor*. Alan lives in North Carolina with his wife and daughter. Find him online at [alanguatz.com](http://alanguatz.com).

Discussion guide prepared by Connie Rockman, Youth Literature Consultant, and editor of the 8th, 9th, and 10th Books of Junior Authors and Illustrators.