

Biography/Interview/Conversation:

Jonathan Safran Foer



Jonathan Safran Foer is the author of the bestseller *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), named Book of the Year by the Los Angeles Times and the winner of numerous awards, including the Guardian First Book Prize, the National Jewish Book Award, and the New York Public Library Young Lions Prize. Foer was one of Rolling Stone's "People of the Year" and Esquire's "Best and Brightest." Foreign rights to his new novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) have already been sold in ten countries. The film of *Everything Is Illuminated*, directed by Liev Schreiber and starring Elijah Wood, will be released in August 2005. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* has been optioned for film by Scott Rudin Productions in conjunction with Warner Brothers and Paramount Pictures. Foer lives in Brooklyn, New York with his wife, the author Nicole Krauss.



Interview

An interview with Jonathan Safran Foer about *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

(an interview about *Everything Is Illuminated* follows immediately afterwards)

How would you summarize your novel?

Oskar Schell is an inventor, jewelry designer, amateur entomologist, Francophile, percussionist, avid fan-letter writer, pacifist, Central Park archeologist, romantic, Great Explorer, jeweler, actor (Yorick in the winter production of Hamlet), inconsistent vegan, collector of: rare coins, butterflies that have died natural deaths, Beatles memorabilia, miniature cacti and semi-precious stones. He is nine years old. After being let out of school on the morning of September 11, he walks home to his family's apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side. His watch reads 10:18:32. He listens to the five messages on the answering machine: from 8:52, 9:12, 9:31, 9:46 and 10:04. All are from his father, who is trapped in the World Trade Center. Before Oskar has time to time to figure out what to do, or even what to think or feel, the phone rings. His watch reads 10:22:29. He looks at the caller ID, and sees that it's his father. The story proceeds from this moment, following Oskar in his efforts to make sense of his father's senseless death. That inward journey takes him through the five boroughs of New York, as he attempts to solve a mystery surrounding a key he discovers in his father's closet, which he thinks is central to his father's life and death. The story moves freely between members of Oskar's family, careening from Central Park to Dresden, deep space to Hiroshima, and ending, ultimately, where it began: at Oskar's father's grave. But this time it's the middle of the night. Oskar is accompanied by a strange man who has been renting a room in his grandmother's apartment. They are there to dig up Oskar's father's empty coffin.

This is a novel of balances: humor and tragedy, destruction and invention, Something and Nothing, life and death.

How did the idea for the novel originate?

Very organically. It began with a museum, actually. A once-famous European writer disappeared for forty years, and then reappeared. Over the course of successive rewrites—as my passions and sense of writing changed, and as the world changed—the novel was destroyed and rebuilt many times. The writer and museum fell by the wayside. A precocious young boy in a damaged city took center stage. I've written thirty-nine distinct drafts of this book. Like a boat whose every plank is replaced while journeying at sea, the first and last drafts have nothing tangible in common— no characters, themes or plot—and yet are one in the same. And to get to the 400 or so pages that ultimately comprise the novel, I had to write well over 2,500. Which is to say the boat has been an aircraft carrier, at times. It's been a volatile process.

To make a long story short, I've tried to follow my instincts. I've tried to write the book I would want to read, rather than the book I would want to write. I've tried never to ask if something was smart, but instead if it felt genuine. A set of themes rose to the surface: silence, invention, anxiety, naiveté, absence, the difficulty of expressing love, war... I felt I couldn't push them down, and I chose not to try to. Voices became pronounced. Some characters became vivid, others vanished. A plot... happened. If it sounds inefficient, I've described it properly. I cannot

imagine how I could have been less efficient. But maybe inefficiency is the point. One can use a map and drive to a destination. Or one can follow the most interesting, beautiful roads—trusting oneself, trusting the car, and trusting the logic of the pavement—and end up where you couldn't have realized you wanted to be until you got there. Writing, for me, is about following roads. And that intuitive, wandering approach explains not only why this book is so far from where I started, but why I feel it so personally, so viscerally, and so, well, loudly and closely.

**Where does the character of Oskar come from? Were you at all like him?
Are you still?**

My parents have a photograph of me on their refrigerator. I'm about six years old, asleep on the sofa, wearing a plaid blazer, a blue sequined bowtie, and rings on each of my ten fingers. Apparently, the look was indicative of my sense of fashion for about a year. That photograph was one of my major sources of inspiration for Oskar. As for how much I actually was like him, it's hard to say. Like most children, I had a number of collections. And I suppose my interests tended toward the esoteric, and my style toward the precocious and annoying. I sent my share of fan letters, suffered numerous failed attempts to kiss women my mother's age, and did work in the family jewelry business for a summer... Am I still like that? Fortunately, or unfortunately, most of Oskar has been civilized out of me.



Much of the novel has to do with war. What made you want to take this on as a subject matter?

Of course the news has been saturated with the Iraq war. And before that the war in Afghanistan. And before that September 11. And there are so many other wars—big and small—that receive less, if any, attention. And there are wars within our country, between increasingly polarized ideologies, and within our households: intimate wars, wars within families, between lovers. Breakfast table wars. Silent wars. My generation of Americans has been among the most privileged in history, in our ignorance of military war. Our sense of the armed forces was defined by benevolent actions that more often than not came too late—in Bosnia, in Rwanda. In other words, war, American war, was good.

It's been a painfully disillusioning few years for my generation, not only because we've had to face malevolent wars, but because we've had to face our own foolishness. It's only now that we're able to digest the lessons and use them. Toward what end? Toward the end of preventing war. There's a brief scene in the book, in which Oskar plays an interview with a Hiroshima survivor. She says, "That is what death is like. It doesn't matter what uniforms the soldiers are wearing. It doesn't matter how good the weapons are. I thought if everyone could see what I saw, we would never have war anymore."

Those words are loosely based on an actual interview transcript, and I believe

them. The more closely we look at something, the more responsible we will be with it. Which is why the most important decision a novelist can make is what he or she chooses to look at—in so far as there's a choice at all.

The form of the book is quite new, particularly the use of photography. How did that come about?

I was browsing the Internet one night—allowing links to carry me farther and farther from the news sites I normally visit—and was shocked by the breadth and graphicness of the images I quite unintentionally came across. I don't mean that in a naïve or prudish way. There's something exhilarating about being so close to everything at once, something beautiful. But there's something incredibly lonely about it, too. And ugly. It made me think about children, and the visual environment in which they are now developing. What must it be like, as a nine year old, to see beheadings, and home videos of famous actresses having sex, and dogs fighting, and babies being born, and people jumping from planes with broken parachutes? Some of the images in the novel pertain directly to Oskar's story, but many are there to provide context to his life, and give the reader access to a different kind of sympathy. That is, the photographs show not only what Oskar's eyes might see, they show his eyes.

What's the significance of the title?

I like titles that contribute to the meaning of the book, rather than describe the book's contents. Which is to say I'm not going to have a great answer to this question, any more than I'd be able to describe the significance of Oskar. Oskar is Oskar. The title is the title.

But that's a bit annoying. Maybe I could say that things in the novel are loud and close. War is loud and close—for Oskar's grandparents, who survived the firebombing of Dresden, and for Oskar, who lost his father in the World Trade Center attacks. The future is loud and close. Love is loud and close. And many things are silent and far away. There are mute characters, and characters who can't hear. Characters who travel halfway around the world to be distant from those they love, and characters who endlessly wander the city in an attempt to get home. And then there are the things—like Oskar's relationship with his father—that are simultaneously loud and silent, and close and far away...

In reference to the novel itself, I hope the reader feels it loudly and closely. If I had a good voice, and all the time in the world, I'd like to sing my thoughts and feelings directly into people's ears. Given that my voice is terrible, and time is limited—and who would want me that close to their face, anyway?—I write the best substitute I can.

What are you working on now?

I recently finished a libretto for the Deutsche Staatsoper (German National Opera House) titled, "Seven Attempted Escapes from Silence," and am now working with the director and set designer on bringing the words to the stage. (The opera

will premier in September, 2005.) I'm also working on finishing up a collaborative art book, *Joe*, with the sculptor Richard Serra and photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto, to be published this fall. Finally, I've been working on two public art projects, "The Whispering Parabolas" (in which two massive parabolas will be built on opposite ends of the Central Park Reservoir, to facilitate intimate conversations in the middle of Manhattan), and "10,000 Windows," in cooperation with the students of La Guardia High School.

A Conversation with Jonathan Safran Foer about *Everything Is Illuminated*

How would you summarize your novel?

In the summer after his junior year of college, Jonathan Safran Foer leaves the ivy of Princeton for the impoverished farmlands of eastern Europe. Armed with only a photograph of questionable origin, he hopes to find Augustine — a woman who might be a link to a grandfather he never knew. He is guided on his journey by Alexander Perchov, a young Ukrainian translator, poignantly insightful and absurd, who is also searching for lost family, but in his case, family that is very much alive and near. What follows is a quixotic misadventure, at sharp turns comedic and tragic, which culminates in the most essential existential questions: Who am I? What am I to do?

Woven into this narrative is the novel that Jonathan is working on — an imagined history of Trachimbrod, the shtetl that he and Alex investigate. As the contemporary section moves back in time, the imagined history moves forward. "Reality" and "fiction" meet in the final scene, when the Nazis invade Trachimbrod and all is, or isn't, lost.

Everything Is Illuminated is, above all things, about love — between parent and child, between lovers, friends, and generations, between what happened and what will happen.

How did the idea for the book originate?

When I was young, I would often spend Friday nights at my grandmother's house. On the way in, she would lift me from the ground with one of her wonderful and terrifying hugs. And on the way out the next afternoon, I was again lifted into the air with her love. It wasn't until years later that I realized she was also weighing me.

Being a survivor of World War II, being someone who spent years — approximately the years I am now experiencing — scrounging for food while traversing Europe barefoot, she is acutely, desperately aware of weights: of bodies, of presences, of things that do and don't exist. And it has always been with measuring — the distances between what is felt and said, the lightness of

love, the heft of showing love — that I have connected with her. My writing, I have begun to understand — I am learning anew with each newly written word — springs from the same need to measure.

I did not intend to write *Everything Is Illuminated*. I intended to chronicle, in strictly nonfictional terms, a trip that I made to Ukraine as a twenty-year-old. Armed with a photograph of the woman who, I was told, had saved my grandfather from the Nazis, I embarked on a journey to Trachimbrod, the shtetl of my family's origins. The comedy of errors lasted five days. I found nothing but nothing, and in that nothing — a landscape of completely realized absence — nothing was to be found. Because I didn't tell my grandmother about the trip — she would never have let me go — I didn't know what questions to ask, or whom to ask, or the necessary names of people, places, and things. The nothing came as much from me as from what I encountered. I returned to Prague, where I had planned to write the story of what had happened.

But what had happened? It took me a week to finish the first sentence. In the remaining month, I wrote 280 pages. What made beginning so difficult, and the remainder so seemingly automatic, was imagination — the initial problem, and ultimate liberation, of imagining. My mind wanted to wander, to invent, to use what I had seen as a canvas, rather than the paints. But, I wondered, is the Holocaust exactly that which cannot be imagined? What are one's responsibilities to "the truth" of a story, and what is "the truth"? Can historical accuracy be replaced with imaginative accuracy? The eye with the mind's eye?

The novel's two voices — one "realistic," the other "folkloric" — and their movement toward each other, has to do with this problem of imagination. The Holocaust presents a real moral quandary for the artist. Is one allowed to be funny? Is one allowed to attempt verisimilitude? To forgo it? What are the moral implications of quaintness? Of wit? Of sentimentality? What, if anything, is untouchable?

With the two very different voices, I attempted to show the rift that I experienced when trying to imagine the book. (It is the most explicit of many rifts in the book.) And with their development toward each other, I attempted to heal the rift, or wound.

Everything Is Illuminated proposes the possibility of a responsible duality, of "did and didn't," of things being one way and also the opposite way. Rather than aligning itself with either "how things were" or "how things could have been," the novel measures the difference between the two, and by so doing, attempts to reflect the way things feel.

Did you ever find the woman who apparently saved your grandfather from the Nazis?

I wasn't even close to finding her. The trip was so ill conceived, so poorly

planned, so without the research that would have been necessary to have had any hope of accomplishing what I thought was my purpose — finding Augustine — that I never had a chance.

But in retrospect, I'm not sure that the purpose was to find her. I'm not even sure I wanted to find her. I was twenty when I made the trip — an unobservant Jew, with no felt connection to, or great interest in, my past. I kept an ironic distance from religion, and was skeptical of anything described as "Jewish."

And yet, my writing — what little I did then — began to take on a Jewish sensibility, if not content. To my surprise, I started asking genealogical questions of my mother, and sending Amazon.com workers to the darkest recesses of the warehouse for titles like *Shtetl Finder Gazeteer* by Chester G. Cohen. (Chester G. Cohen?) I was a closeted Jew.

After twenty years of life, the feelings and facts had begun to diverge. I spent my time and energy on activities I didn't think I cared about. There was a split — a strange and exhilarating split — between the Jonathan that thought (secular), and the Jonathan that did (Jewish). Because my trip to Ukraine came at the beginning of this fracture — before I could appreciate the coexistence of my halves — I was not yet ready to want to find Augustine. I jeopardized my trip by refusing to prepare for it.

Thankfully. The complete absence that I found in Ukraine gave my imagination total freedom. The novel wouldn't have been possible had my search been that other kind of success.

Is the Jonathan Safran Foer in your story the Jonathan Safran Foer who wrote the story? If not, which one do you prefer?

I try to treat all Jonathan Safran Foers equally, appreciating their unique gifts, ignoring, when possible, their unique shortcomings, patting all of their heads when I think to, and saying things like, "You're smart," or, "You're cute."

Now, as for the particular JSF who wrote the book, and the one in the book, they are profoundly different people who happen to share a profound amount. It's useless to try to find points of convergence and divergence, just as it's useless to prefer one over the other, since both the writer and the character are always changing — neither under my control. And that possibility of change, that insistence on change, is what makes this kind of writing feel, for me, so exhilarating and terrifying. Will I grow away from the JSF in the book, or will we grow toward each other? In twenty years — God willing we both live that long — will we be like strangers? Or will we know each other completely?

It refers to a passage in the book in which all of the citizens of Trachimbrod are making love at once. The narrator puts forth a pseudoscientific "theory," the gist of which is:

From space, astronauts can see people making love as a tiny speck of light. Not light, exactly, but a glow that could be confused for light — a coital radiance that takes generations to pour like honey through the darkness to the astronaut's eyes.

In about one and a half centuries — after the lovers who made the glow will have long since been laid permanently on their backs — the metropolitan cities will be seen from space. They will glow all year. Smaller cities will also be seen, but with great difficulty. Towns will be virtually impossible to spot. Individual couples invisible.

The glow is born from the sum of thousands of loves: newlyweds and teenagers who spark like lighters out of butane, pairs of men who burn fast and bright, pairs of women who illuminate for hours with soft multiple glows, orgies like rock and flint toys sold at festivals, couples trying unsuccessfully to have children who burn their frustrated image on the continent like the bloom a bright light leaves on the eye after you turn away from it.

Some nights, some places are a little brighter. It's difficult to stare at New York City on Valentine's Day, or Dublin on St. Patrick's. The old walled city of Jerusalem lights up like a candle each of Chanukah's eight nights. Trachimday is the only time all year when the tiny village of Trachimbrod can be seen from space, when enough copulative voltage is generated to sex the Polish-Ukrainian skies electric. We're here, the glow of 1804 will say in one and a half centuries. We're here, and we're alive.

Of course, the title is also playing off the other notions of illumination, particularly revelation. The book traces an arc from ignorance to knowledge, from inexperience to wisdom.

I've also always loved the idea of illuminated manuscripts — embellished, overstuffed books. And I love the idea of books being more than books, or being, rather, something other than books. I think the ideal experience of my book would be like listening to music.

Copyright Houghton Mifflin Publishing