

"Everything is Illuminated" by Jonathan Safran Foer

In hilariously mangled English, a Ukrainian boy describes his efforts to help a young American Jew find the village his grandfather fled in World War II.

By Laura Miller



April 26, 2002 | There are two stories wound together in this first novel, and as is often the case, one is more engaging than the other. The first describes a visit to Ukraine by a 20-year-old American named Jonathan Safran Foer. (You just have to ignore the fact that the device of putting a character with the author's name in a novel outlived its freshness before Foer was born, in 1977.) This part of the book is told by Alexander Perchov, a Ukrainian, also 20, who gets shanghaied into acting as Foer's tour guide and semi-competent translator when Foer visits the country. Like many Jews of his generation, Foer wants to touch the pulse of his roots, to see the village of Trachimbrod, where his grandfather was born and raised, and to meet the woman whose family saved him from the Nazis. The two young men are trading manuscripts, and so the narrative alternates excerpts from Alex's account of Foer's visit and his letters to Jonathan with installments of Jonathan's own novel.

At first, Alex's version of English resembles an out-of-control garden hose turned on full-force and allowed to thrash away on a summer lawn. He's got a thesaurus and he'll be damned if he's not going to use it. After bragging about the number of girls who "want to be carnal" with him, and his propensity for "performing so many things that can spleen a mother," he explains his love for American-style culture: "I dig Negroes, particularly Michael Jackson. I dig to disseminate very much currency at famous nightclubs in Odessa." His youth and his mangled English at first make him seem simply naive, but that hides a native apprehension that, uninhibited by oversophisticated politesse, can be startling. "There were parts of it I did not understand," he writes of Jonathan's novel. "But I conjecture that this is because they were very Jewish, and only a Jewish person could understand something so Jewish. Is that why you think you are chosen by God, because only you can understand the funnies that you make about yourself?"

If only the fictional Jonathan's novel were really that esoteric. The manuscript he sends to Alex is a tiresomely familiar thing, a folklorical saga of life in the shtetl of Trachimbrod, full of lusty villagers and their quasi-magical adventures. The Alex sections of the book feel utterly alive and teeter invigoratingly between hilarity and a terrible, creeping dread.

By contrast, the Trachimbrod sections only remind the reader of other works -- rehashed Chagall and dime-store Garcia Marquez. There are some pretty passages here, but even these have a framed, almost twee quality. (And, in what seems to be an effort at earthiness, the story also strays into the simply gross, as when a male character with a withered arm uses it as a dildo to console all the widows in town.)

Ordinarily, this caveat would make "Everything is Illuminated" uncommendable, but the Alex portions of the novel are so good that in the final calculation they far outbalance the book's weaknesses. (Plus you can skim the Trachimbrod sections without missing that much.) With Alex's grandfather (who keeps claiming he's blind and insists on bringing along a "seeing-eye bitch" obtained from "the home for forgetful dogs") as their driver, the two youths head into the Ukrainian countryside and the darkness of the past. Their burgeoning friendship and the way that history and chance keep the balance of power between them -- and their capacity to know each other -- in constant flux, make this feel like a story that, astonishingly enough, has never really been told before.

Foer exquisitely executes the book's best jokes: the way that Jonathan's minor flaws -- his vanity, his American cluelessness, his tendency to patronize -- filter through Alex's admiring portrait of the young man he calls his "most premium friend" and "the hero." As the novel shades inexorably into the tragic mode, and as Alex comes to be a much better writer than Jonathan, with both a finer sense of truth and a more urgent understanding of the need for happy endings, his stumbling English incandesces into eloquence. And that alone is worth the price of admission.