

EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE

BY JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER

REVIEWED BY SARAH GUTMAN

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close authentically portrays the spectrum of trauma sequelae in people, their families and communities. It explores transgenerational trauma, mass interpersonal violence and war, with a clarity attained only through the simple complexity of nine-year-old eyes. Through this small protagonist we experience and accept: the alexithymia of extreme stress, the hypermnesia of traumatic material, the remembering by repeating, the search to make sense after senseless violence and near intolerable grief. It is a postmodern novel that plays with format and conventions, moving the reader to a compassion beyond trauma. Sarah Gutman's review of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is followed by a conversation with the 29-year-old author Jonathan Safran Foer.

"People seem to have two reactions to books. Either they describe what they're about or they describe how the book made them feel." – Jonathan Safran Foer

In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, we feel. Jonathan Safran Foer has managed to create a masterpiece which imparts the turmoil of a precocious 9 year old boy following his father's murder in the September 11 attacks. Simultaneously uplifting and heartbreaking, *Extremely Loud* explores the grief of 8 million New Yorkers through the eyes of this one child, while paralleling disasters of bombings in Hiroshima and Dresden. In a novel fundamentally about bereavement and trauma, Foer acknowledges that human suffering is seldom tangible and concrete. So while historical catastrophes are cited, they are only a medium to explore what is truly tragic to human beings. Through the main characters' experiences we learn that love and loss are inextricably linked, for "you can't love anything more than something you miss".

The protagonist, Oskar Schell, is searching all five Boroughs of New York City to solve the mystery of a key that belonged to his father. Throughout his journey Oskar's thoughts range from his outrageous inventions, "What about a birdseed shirt to let you fly away?" to his core emotions, "I miss my dad more now than when I started". This juxtaposition of humour and solemnity is one of Foer's greatest feats. A similar triumph is the character of Oskar himself. He is a self described "Inventor, Jewellery Designer, Jewellery Fabricator, Amateur Entomologist, Francophile, Vegan, Origamist, Pacifist, Percussionist, Amateur Astronomer, Computer Consultant, Amateur Archaeologist, Collector of: rare coins, butterflies that died natural deaths, miniature cacti, Beatles memorabilia, and semiprecious stones." The unique

Oskar is homage to New York City; despite (and perhaps because of) his youth and vulnerability, he is unflinching resilient.

Across the street to Oskar lives his paternal grandmother. Her narration is a moving adjunct. Through Grandma we learn about Oskar's grandfather who – although absent since Oskar's father's birth – personifies the themes of this novel. Speechless as a result of the Dresden bombings, Oskar's grandfather tattoos the words "yes" and "no" on each hand – "...when I rub my hands against each other in the middle of winter I am warming myself with the friction of YES and NO, when I clap my hands I am showing my appreciation through the uniting and parting of YES and NO". His decisions in the novel reflect this concrete thinking and while we want to believe that his traumas manufactured his distance, he leaves whilst Oskar and his grandmother stay and endure.

Despite the fact Oskar does not heal throughout the novel, his youth engenders the hope that one day his pain will diminish. Conversely, the palpable sadness of Oskar's grandparents is even more harrowing – they have lived the majority of their lives in anguish and have little chance of relief. In perhaps one of the most moving parts of the novel, we discover that when encouraged to write her life story, Grandma sits for days in a room repetitively hitting the typewriter's spacebar. Her "life story was spaces". Similarly poignant is the division of Oskar's grandparents' apartment into "something" and "nothing" spaces. Tragedy forces a reaction in humans. Do we do something or nothing? Or, do we remain in limbo and surrender our choice, allowing the something and nothing to envelop us until we are robbed of our will to live?

Post 9/11 novels don't have to be political. They don't have to condemn terrorism or the Bush administration or the United States. They don't even have to comment on Western values or Iraq. And really, who wants to read about all that when there are children out there who are hurting so much and just wishing that we could turn back time so "we would have been safe".

Segments from a conversation with Jonathan Safran Foer (Reprinted with permission © 2006 Houghton Mifflin Company):

[How would you summarise your novel?](#)

Oskar Schell is an inventor, jewelry designer, amateur entomologist, Francophile, percussionist, avid fan-letter writer, pacifist, Central Park archeologist, romantic, Great Explorer, jeweller,

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 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: humour 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 39 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 they are one in the same. 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 that the boat has been an aircraft carrier at times. It's been a volatile process.

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. 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 — insofar 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.



Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close is published by Houghton Mifflin and is available at quality book stores. More information can be found at www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com

