

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close by Jonathan Safran Foer

About the Author:

JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER is the author of the novels *Everything is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and a work of nonfiction, *Eating Animals*. His books have won numerous awards and have been translated into 36 languages. He lives in Brooklyn, New York

About the Book:

With humor, tenderness, and awe, Jonathan Safran Foer confronts the traumas of our recent history. What he discovers is solace in that most human quality, imagination.

Meet Oskar Schell, an inventor, Francophile, tambourine player, Shakespearean actor, jeweler, pacifist, correspondent with Stephen Hawking and Ringo Starr. He is nine years old. And he is on an urgent, secret search through the five boroughs of New York. His mission is to find the lock that fits a mysterious key belonging to his father, who died in the World Trade Center on 9/11.

An inspired innocent, Oskar is alternately endearing, exasperating, and hilarious as he careens from Central Park to Coney Island to Harlem on his search. Along the way he is always dreaming up inventions to keep those he loves safe from harm. What about a birdseed shirt to let you fly away? What if you could actually hear everyone's heartbeat? His goal is hopeful, but the past speaks a loud warning in stories of those who've lost loved ones before. As Oskar roams New York, he encounters a motley assortment of humanity who are all survivors in their own way. He befriends a 103-year-old war reporter, a tour guide who never leaves the Empire State Building, and lovers enraptured or scorned. Ultimately, Oskar ends his journey where it began, at his father's grave. But now he is accompanied by the silent stranger who has been renting the spare room of his grandmother's apartment. They are there to dig up his father's empty coffin.

Taken from: [Houghton Mifflin Harcourt](#)

Questions for Study:

1. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* was published in 2005; many reviewers thought of it as the first major 9/11 novel. What does it mean for a book to be a "9/11 novel"? Does our sense of what a 9/11 novel is change over time? How do you think the reading of this book differs now than from when it was first published? Do you think it will be read differently ten or twenty or fifty years from now?
2. Similarly, the book could be called a New York novel. In what ways is the book's sense of place integral to the story being told? In what ways is the setting universal?
3. When the book opens, Oskar is describing some of his "inventions." What do Oskar's inventions have in common? Which of his inventions were most effective?
4. Oskar writes letters to famous people—Stephen Hawking, Ringo Starr. Why does he write these letters? Oskar's letters to celebrities are only a few of the letters in the book. Who else writes letters?
5. On p. 99, we see an image of one of Oskar's "business cards," on which he defines himself with over a dozen titles. On pp. 157–158, we are introduced to his neighbor's card catalog, by which Mr. Black describes everyone he's ever met using one word. Which method of defining a person is more accurate? Which is more revealing? How does Oskar change how he defines himself over the course of the book? What about the other characters' self-definitions?

6. Some critics have wondered where Oskar's mother is and how the child is left alone to wander the streets of New York alone at night. Is that a relevant comment? Do you see this book as a work of realism (in which case the mother's role would matter) ... or as more of a fable, on the order, say, of *Life of Pi*? If the latter, what is *Extremely Loud* a fable of? (Like *Pi*, Oskar seems to be a quester—but of what?)
7. Jonathan Safran Foer has said that he writes about characters and their miscommunications: some characters think they're saying a lot but say nothing; others say nothing but end up saying a lot. Which characters fall into which category in *Extremely Loud*? What might Foer be saying about our ability to communicate deep-seated emotions?
8. What is the relationship in the book between writing and memory? How do characters use writing to remember things? How does writing obscure or impair or alter (perceived?) memory? How is writing manipulated—or manipulating? (Think about the Grandmother writing her life story, and the Grandfather reading it.) What is the relationship between writing and reality?
9. The two central traumas in the book occur in the lives of Oskar Schell and his grandfather, Thomas Schell. Does Foer encourage a kind of historical or moral equivalence between the two precipitating events—the attacks on 9/11 and the American bombing of Dresden? What is the author saying about the individual's role in history? How do both main plot and subplot (Oskar's grandfather and the bombing of Dresden) interweave with one another?
10. The book is full of typographical oddities, some playful, some sad. Some of the many photographs in the book are part of Oskar's compilation of "Stuff that Happened to Me"—yet most of the images he collects there (like images of a shark attack) didn't happen to him. What is Oskar's relationship to this material?
11. Characters throughout the book conflate the physical and the emotional; many of the characters make material totems of their emotional states—from the ball of his grandmother's yarn that Oskar tugs to indicate that he is okay, to the bracelet that Oskar's grandmother's grandmother said she would measure her wrist twice for, to make sure she could wear this symbol of her love. Why do you feel the characters use physical embodiments of their feelings in this way? In Oskar's imagining of the last moments at the World Trade Center, he says, "I read that it was the paper that kept the towers burning. All of those notepads, and Xeroxes, and printed e-mails, and photographs of kids, and books, and dollar bills in wallets, and documents in files... all of them were fuel" (p.325). What is the author saying about the ways we express ourselves?
12. The book is filled with liminal areas, borders between opposites. Many of the characters of the book seem to struggle with uniting these opposites (between Yes and No, between Something and Nothing, between Manhattan and the Sixth Borough). What is Foer saying about these efforts to unite opposites? Is it a longing to connect, to make something divided whole? Or is he advocating a rejection of the idea of opposites?
13. Oskar's narrative is structured by his quest to find the lock that his key will open. What other purpose does the quest provide? What is the result of the quest?

Study questions taken from:
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