Book Club Discussion Guide

About the Author

Book Title: Extremely loud and incredibly close
by Jonathan Safran Foer

• Birth—1977
• Where—Washington, D.C., USA
• Education—B.A., Princeton University
• Currently—lives in New York City


Recent literary history is rife with auspicious debuts, and Jonathan Safran Foer's arrival was one of 2002's brightest and most media-friendly. After all, the backstory was publicist-ready: Everything Is Illuminated began as a thesis at Princeton under advisers Joyce Carol Oates and Jeffrey Eugenides, and Houghton Mifflin reportedly paid somewhere around half a million dollars for the rights.

Foer achieved a fresh, creative approach to the English language by viewing it through the eyes of his foreign narrator, a young Ukranian man named Alex who works in a family tour operating business targeted toward American Jews seeking their family roots. Alex's
comical, dictionary-aided writing consists of not-quite-right sentences such as "He is always promenading into things. It was only four days previous that he made his eye blue from a mismanagement with a brick wall." Alex's client, an American Jew named Jonathan Safran Foer, wants to find a woman who hid his grandfather from the Nazis. The two set out—with an old picture, and the name Augustine—to find the woman, bringing Alex's grandfather and an odiferous seeing-eye dog.

The story unfolds both through Alex's eyes and in a later correspondence with Jonathan, who reveals chapters of a fictionalized version of Augustine's story. Despite the novel's decidedly earnest and serious themes, what's most striking about it is its strange, resonant humor. Publishers Weekly saw "demented genius" in it; and Francine Prose, who also used the adjective "demented" for Foer's writing, noted in the New York Times Book Review, "The problem [with the book] is, you keep laughing out loud, losing your place, starting again, then stopping because you're tempted to call your friends and read them long sections of Jonathan Safran Foer's assured, hilarious prose."

Since Foer admitted to doing little research (although he did take a trip similar to the fictional Foer's, inspiring the book), and the historical fiction sections earned some critical gripes for being uneven (Salon called them "dime-store García Márquez"), the chief strength of Everything Is Illuminated lies in a scope and wit that are stunning from an author who was still finishing up college at the time he began it. The paperback rights for Everything Is Illuminated later went for reportedly close to $1 million. The book was adapted to film in 2005 with Elijah Wood in the lead role.
Nine-year-old Oskar Schell has embarked on an urgent, secret mission that will take him through the five boroughs of New York. His goal is to find the lock that matches a mysterious key that belonged to his father, who died in the World Trade Center on the morning of September 11.

This seemingly impossible task will bring Oskar into contact with survivors of all sorts on an exhilarating, affecting, often hilarious, and ultimately healing journey.
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Discussion Questions

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1. *Talk about Oskar—an unusually precious child. Do you find him sympathetic or annoying? Or both?*

2. For Shakespeare buffs: Oskar "plays Yorick" (the long dead jester whose skull Hamlet holds in his hand!) in a school production. What is the significance of that role? (See *Hamlet*: Act V, Scene I, Line 188).

3. 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?

4. 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?)

5. Do you find the illustrations, sribblings, over-written texts, etc. a meaningful, integral part of the work? Or do you find them distracting and gimmicky? Why are they there?

6. How do both main plot and subplot (Oskar's grandfather and the bombing of Dresden) interweave with one another?
Reviews

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[Foer's] depiction of Oskar's reaction to phone messages left by his father as he awaited rescue in the burning World Trade Center, his description of Oskar's grandfather's love affair with Anna and his experiences during the bombing of Dresden—these passages underscore Mr. Foer's ability to evoke, with enormous compassion and psychological acuity, his characters' emotional experiences, and to show how these private moments intersect with the great public events of history.

*Michiko Kakutani - New York Times*

Oskar's unconscious comedy and his poignant search for information about the man who spun bedtime stories out of fantasy and science. All he wants is some way to go back to that moment of sweet security before zealots murdered his father. The tragedy of September 11 has made Oskar older than his years, but in Foer's tender portrayal the grief that weighs him down makes children of us all.

*Ron Charles - Washington Post*

Oskar Schell...is a nine-year-old...[who] turns his naïvely precocious vocabulary to the understanding of historical tragedy.... Foer demonstrates once again that he is one of the few contemporary writers willing to risk sentimentalism in order to address great questions of truth, love and beauty.

*Publishers Weekly*

An emotionally devastating climax. No spoilers here, but we will say that the book—which includes a number of photographs and some eccentric typography—ends with what is undoubtedly the most beautiful and heartbreaking flip book in all of literature.

*Booklist*
The humor works as a deceptive, glitzy cover for a fairly serious tale about loss and recovery.... [A] powerful conclusion that will make even the most jaded hearts fall. —Matthew L. Moffett, Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale, VA.

School Library Journal

[B]eautifully designed second novel from the gifted young author.... Oskar discovers...the meaning of his life (all our lives, actually).... Much more is revealed as this brilliant fiction works thrilling variations on, and consolations for, its plangent message: that "in the end, everyone loses everyone." Yes, but look what Foer has found.

Kirkus Reviews