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Literary Criticism

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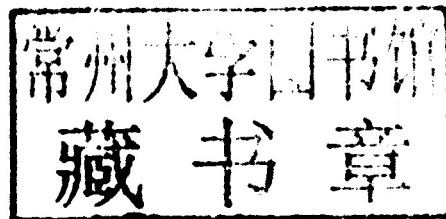


Volume 301

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works  
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and  
Other Creative Writers

**Jeffrey W. Hunter**  
PROJECT EDITOR



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**Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 301**

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 76-46132

ISBN-13: 978-1-4144-4928-9

ISBN-10: 1-4144-4928-3

ISSN 0091-3421-4927-5

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." In *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*, edited by Mickey Pearlman, 41-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 276-82. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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# Jonathan Safran Foer

## 1977-

American novelist and nonfiction writer.

The following entry presents criticism on Foer's career through 2010.

### INTRODUCTION

Foer is regarded as one of the most popular and critically acclaimed young authors in American fiction. Recognized for his postmodern vision of the personal and global implications of trauma, he has written about two of modern history's most harrowing events—the Holocaust and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Despite the somber nature of his subject matter, Foer is known for combining humor and pathos with formal experimentation in a manner that conveys the fragmentation and emotional variance of contemporary existence.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Foer was born in Washington, D.C., to Albert Foer, an attorney, and Esther Safran Foer. After graduating from Georgetown Day School, he studied philosophy and literature at Princeton University. One of his professors at Princeton was renowned author Joyce Carol Oates. With Oates acting as his advisor, Foer composed a narrative account of the life of his maternal grandfather, a Holocaust survivor, for his senior thesis. The piece won a creative writing thesis prize and was the basis for his first novel, *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002). Upon receiving his degree in 1999, Foer traveled to Ukraine to conduct research for the completion of his novel. The book was a commercial and critical success, earning a National Jewish Book Award and the *Guardian* First Book Award. Recognition of his work increased with the 2005 release of his second novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and the screen adaptation of *Everything Is Illuminated* that same year. In 2007 he was named one of *Granta's* Best Young American Novelists. An occasional vegetarian since age ten, he detailed the ethical implications of his dietary practices in *Eating Animals* (2009), his first work of nonfiction. He joined the faculty of New York University as a professor in the creative writing program in 2009.

### MAJOR WORKS

Echoing the works of such writers as Kurt Vonnegut and John Barth, Foer's fiction is marked by an irreverent and frequently humorous unraveling of traditional narrative forms. Having discovered that his grandfather's place of birth, the small Jewish village (or shtetl) of Trachimbrod, remained only in the form of a memorial plaque, Foer began composing an embellished version of his Ukraine trip, interwoven with an imagined history of Trachimbrod from its founding in 1791 to its destruction in World War II. This narrative outline, coupled with his senior thesis, became the foundation for *Everything Is Illuminated*. Featuring a fictionalized version of the author, the novel follows "Jonathan Safran Foer" as he is led by Alex Perchov, an Ukrainian translator who runs a business helping Jews trace their roots in Eastern Europe. Accompanying them in their search are Perchov's ill-tempered grandfather and his feeble seeing-eye dog named Sammy Davis, Junior. The bulk of the text is comprised of the correspondence between Perchov and Foer after the author returns to the United States. Perchov's letters are filled with his absurdly botched rendition of the English language, while Foer's missives contain excerpts from his novel about the history of Trachimbrod. The narrative concludes by recounting Foer's and Perchov's encounter with the last surviving inhabitant of Trachimbrod, Lista, who explains to the young men how the Nazis murdered the Jews of the shtetl.

*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* tackles another profoundly traumatic event, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The protagonist of the novel is Oskar Schell, a nine-year-old prodigy who spends his days imagining marvelous inventions and collecting Beatles memorabilia. After his father is killed in the collapse of the World Trade Center, Schell finds a mysterious key labeled "Black" among his father's belongings. Convinced that this key will provide insight into his father's life and death, Schell begins contacting everyone in New York City with the last name of Black. The primary subplot concerns Schell's grandfather, Thomas, a survivor of the Allied fire-bombing of Dresden during World War II. The horrors of Dresden caused Thomas to become mute, and he now communicates via the words "yes" and "no" tattooed on the palms of his hands. The jarring nature of



the novel's subject matter is accentuated by the inclusion of such visual and cryptic devices as photographs, erratic text spacing, and numerically encoded passages. The final pages of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* consist of a flip-book of a man falling from one of the Twin Towers only to be suddenly swept heavenward.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Foer's work has garnered a mixed response from critics. Some have deemed his novels precious rather than precocious, claiming that his lack of experience as a writer makes him ill-suited to tackle such demanding topics as the Holocaust and the destruction of the World Trade Center. A common complaint leveled against Foer's fiction is that it traffics too heavily in the glib irony of postmodernism. Responding to the prevalence of visual media and textual flourishes in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, reviewer B. R. Myers stated, "After a while the gimmickry starts to remind one of a clown frantically yanking toys out of his sack: a fatal image." Because his novels address particularly solemn historical events, some critics have found his aesthetic practices not only fatuous, but also offensive.

At the same time, scholars have lauded *Everything Is Illuminated* as a complex and provocative look at the Holocaust on par with Michael Chabon's *Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* and James McBride's *Miracle at Sant'Anna*. Similarly, the investigation into cultural memory and ethnic tradition contained in Foer's debut novel has prompted favorable comparisons to Dave Eggers's *You Shall Know Our Velocity* and Allen Hoffman's *Small Worlds*. From a formal perspective, commentators have focused on the epistolary construction of the book, along with its deft fusion of postmodernism, modernism, and realism. Tonally, *Everything Is Illuminated* has been praised for creating a tension between tragedy and comedy. Critic Menachem Feuer contended that "there is a struggle between comic and tragic modes of literary representation. . . . The outcome of this struggle has implications for anyone interested in how one represents the Holocaust." Furthermore, reviewers have defended the use of graphic images in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by suggesting that such devices call into question the role played by visual representation in the establishment of historical reality. In her analysis of the novel, Elisabeth Siegel claimed, "[I]t is precisely the use of images . . . that allow[s] for a reading of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* as a critical contribution to the discourse on 9/11 and the role images play in the construction of a collective memory

of this event." Others have interpreted the novel's references to Dresden and Hiroshima alongside the Twin Towers as an incitement to close the gap between notions of victim and victimizer. Moreover, reviewers have characterized *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* as a work that invokes multiple, fragmented narrative strands to highlight the difficulty of communication in the face of lingering trauma on a personal and public scale. According to scholar Philippe Codde, "The inaccessibility of one's own traumatic past becomes one of the important themes of the novel, particularly the failure and inaptness of language for historical reconstruction." Regardless of the critical divide over his work, Foer remains a prominent figure in modern American literature.

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## PRINCIPAL WORKS

*Everything Is Illuminated: A Novel* (novel) 2002  
*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (novel) 2005  
*Eating Animals* (nonfiction) 2009

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## CRITICISM

### Brooke Allen (review date April 2002)

SOURCE: Allen, Brooke. Review of *Everything Is Illuminated*, by Jonathan Safran Foer. *Atlantic Monthly* 289, no. 4 (April 2002): 141-42.

[In the following review, Allen contends that Foer is too inexperienced to tackle the subject matter in *Everything Is Illuminated*.]

Jonathan Safran Foer is a twenty-four-year-old recent Princeton graduate whose first novel, *Everything Is Illuminated*, has attracted a great deal of pre-publication success and attention. It received a huge advance, reportedly in the neighborhood of \$500,000; is the lead debut-section title on Houghton Mifflin's spring list; and is soon to be translated into thirteen languages. Quite a bonanza for an inventive but immature fictional excursion, sometimes pleasant, sometimes just pretentious.

The book was inspired by a trip Foer took to Ukraine to search for his ancestral shtetl and for the heroic woman who saved his grandfather from the Nazis. It consists of two alternating narratives: an imagined his-



tory of the shtetl from the eighteenth century to the twentieth (a fanciful vision that owes a little to Fellini and a lot to Rushdie), and the contemporary story of a search very much like Foer's own, made by a young man named, of all things, "Jonathan Safran Foer."

If this seems like the last word in juvenile solipsism, let it quickly be said that the author makes no attempt to delve into his fictional self's psyche: the narrator and principal character of the modern story is not the quixotic "Jonathan Safran Foer" but his Sancho Panza, a swaggering young Ukrainian named Alexander, whom the American has hired as a guide. Much of the novel's humor derives from Alexander's fractured English and his posturing antics.

That humor, though bought rather cheaply, is deft, but the too frequent flights of lyricism stink of affectation: the long passages on shtetl life are magical-realist in a specifically Jewish way, with the illogic of unrelenting poeticism intensified by the illogic of Talmudic pedantry. And when the two strands of the tale finally come together, it is in an orgy of melodrama and bathos, as we discover that Alexander's gentile family—surprise!—was complicit in the murder of Jews, and that the blustering Alexander himself is really a sensitive gay guy in disguise.

Foer has taken on the Big Subject of the past century—the Holocaust. And, not too surprisingly, it proves to be *too* big a subject for his undeveloped talent. "I wondered," he mused in a statement about his approach to history, "is the Holocaust exactly that which cannot be imagined? What are one's responsibilities to 'the truth' of an event, and what is 'the truth'? Can historical accuracy be replaced with imaginative accuracy?" This seems the height of callowness: for the many people alive who can remember the Holocaust, the answer is that it can be "imagined" only too well. The generation that witnessed it and, to a certain extent, the generation that came directly afterward have treated it as a real, solid, ugly fact of all our lives. To Foer, born more than thirty years after Auschwitz, it is merely the unremembered past, ripe for reinvention and reinterpretation by the artist.

#### Gordon Houser (review date 6-19 November 2002)

SOURCE: Houser, Gordon. Review of *Everything Is Illuminated*, by Jonathan Safran Foer. *Christian Century* 119, no. 23 (6-19 November 2002): 44.

[In the following review, Houser lauds the humor and formal complexity of Foer's novel.]

Often we look to the past to find ourselves, to learn from our forebears who we are. If that past—unreliable at best—is unavailable, we may have to use our

imaginations to reconstruct it. This is the dilemma Jonathan Safran Foer presents in his stunning debut novel [*Everything Is Illuminated*].

A young man, also named Jonathan Safran Foer, travels to the Ukraine to try to find the woman who saved his grandfather from the Nazis. He brings an old photograph of his grandfather and three others, with these words on the back: "This is me with Augustine, February 21, 1943." Foer's guide and translator in the Ukraine, Sasha, arrives with his own grandfather and their dog, Sammy Davis Junior, Junior. Sasha serves as one of the book's narrators, and his muddled English is one of the novel's hilarious elements.

The narrative structure is complex yet fairly easy to follow. Sasha narrates their search for the woman Augustine and the village of Trachimbrod, the shtetl where Jonathan's grandfather grew up. Interspersed in the text are sections from an imagined history of Trachimbrod that Jonathan writes, as well as letters from Sasha to Jonathan written after Jonathan has returned to the U.S.

Holocaust literature is an attempt to tell a tale that is impossible to tell. The genre includes historical research, powerful memoirs such as Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*—plus many works of fiction, including last year's *Austerlitz*, by W. G. Sebald.

Foer's approach assumes that "humorous is the only truthful way to tell a sad story," as one of Sasha's letters puts it. Foer uses Sasha's fractured English and some slapstick as the three travelers and the flatulent dog make their car trip, along with numerous fantastical elements in the history of Trachimbrod, to finally get to the illumination of a truth too dark to fully understand, too awful to look at.

Because the history of his ancestors has been destroyed except for the one photograph, Jonathan must manufacture memory through imagination. As he has his great-great-great-great-grandmother say, "If there is no love in the world, we will make a new world." Sasha's letters serve as a commentary on Jonathan's emerging story. He points out that "love, in your writing, is the immovability of truth." But later he chastises Jonathan for letting harsh truth override love. He calls Jonathan's relatives cowards because "you are all in the proximity of love, and all disavow love."

Foer is trying to make some kind of sense out of a story that makes no sense. He uses indirection and humor to get at wounds that seem too terrible to men-



tion. And because “there is no God” for the majority of these characters, all that’s left is imagination, creating love or truth however one can.

The most tangible hope in the story’s illumination is Sasha’s decision to face the truth of his father’s abuse and break free. Perhaps that is Foer’s point. He—and all of us—must break free of those people and forces that want to keep us in chains and in the dark.

**Tim Bissell (review date March/April 2005)**

SOURCE: Bissell, Tim. “Whimsy in the Face of Terror.” *New Leader* 88, no. 2 (March/April 2005): 28-9.

[In the following review, Bissell posits that *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is a well-written and creative novel that suffers from an abundance of affected whimsy.]

At 28, Jonathan Safran Foer is the most commercially and critically successful fiction writer of his generation. His first novel, *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), is a hilarious and often touching work that manages to make even its own failings somehow endearing. The book is simply great fun to read—though the judgment of the famously hostile critic Dale Peck, who proclaimed it one of “the best novels I’ve ever been fortunate enough to hold in my hands,” was little short of preposterous. Peck’s reliable addiction to hyperbole aside, it is among the most mature and fully realized books ever produced by someone comparably young, placing Foer among the ranks of Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, Martin Amis, and John Updike.

A movie version of *Illuminated* [*Everything Is Illuminated*], with Elijah Wood—Frodo in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy—playing the Foer character, is in the offing. In other words, the klieg lights are not yet warm. If one admires Foer’s talent, this has been worrying, for it is hard to think of any writer for whom panoramic celebrity has not proved massively complicating. Novelists who hit triple cherries on their first trip to the casino often respond with work that is rushed and diminished—a calculus of failure stretching from Norman Mailer to Jay McInerney to Zadie Smith.

When searching for subject matter, writers generally need more time than the culture (or their publisher) is willing to allow them. In the most reductive sense, Foer’s first novel was about the Holocaust, and it would be hard to come up with second-novel material as daunting. But Foer has done it. He has written a novel addressing the one public tragedy everyone in

the United States over the age of five experienced at varying degrees of remove but, all the same, experienced vividly and horribly. He has written a 9/11 novel.

Foer will be attacked for this. He will be championed too. One suspects that much of the outrage will not be that such an explicit 9/11 novel has been written but that it is Jonathan Safran Foer who has written it. His fans will say, “As the leading literary voice of his generation, who better?” His foes will argue, “The main problem with fame is that it is attracted only to fame, and perhaps America’s leading young writer should pick his subject matter with more evident humility.” The novel itself turns out to be an endorsement of both views, for it is filled with moments of wrenching power and yet marred by a threadbare cleverness.

The majority of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* is narrated by nine-year-old Oskar Schell, whose father, Thomas, was attending a meeting in the upper reaches of one of the World Trade Center towers the morning of the attack. The boy, the jacket copy tells us, “is an inventor, Francophile, tambourine player, Shakespearean actor, jeweler, pacifist.” He is also a Beatles fanatic, a former atheist, a vegan, and a pest-terer of celebrities.

Does Oskar, in his precocity and breadth of interests, remind us of anyone? Indeed, the extent to which he serves as a spiritual stand-in for Foer is left a queasily open matter. By any measure, Oskar is a ludicrous creation; the wake of charm he leaves in the minds of Foer’s readers will vary. For this reader, the author’s small stumbles do not help: Would a boy who reads *A Brief History of Time* for pleasure and has a cat named after Buckminster Fuller really not know who Winston Churchill is? Why does this supposed little Beatlemaniac not know that “Something in the Way She Moves” is a James Taylor song while “Something” is a Beatles song?

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The fantastically fictional yet nevertheless familiar Oskar—a character as instant as Ramen noodles—is a product of the New Whimsy, a mode fashionable among many young artists for the last decade. In the main, the New Whimsy takes “creativity” as its chief concern, favoring the garishly imaginative, subordinating the political and displaying fitful but knowing circumspection. Two of the style’s earliest and most brilliant practitioners are Dave Eggers and the filmmaker Wes Anderson. Their *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) and *Rushmore* (1998), respectively, are both genuine works of art.



Eggers has abandoned the New Whimsy—his most recent work, the story collection *How We Are Hungry* (2003), does not much resemble *Hearbreaking*. His departure is not surprising, for his whimsy always contained thorns of immense personal loss. Anderson's whimsy was less serious but more fun. He found a fresh character type in *Rushmore*'s Max Fisher, from whom Oskar Schell plainly descends: the boy genius short on actual talent and overflowing with enchantingly misplaced ambition. Hedging one's view of genius has since proved a pure New Whimsy move.

From the latest efforts of Anderson and the rest who have kept at the New Whimsy, it is becoming clear that the fashion had a definite expiration date. Sui generis at first glance, still fairly appealing at second, somewhat irritating at third, the New Whimsy was cleaved in two by geopolitics. Yet it has stuck around and remained at least commercially strong. Foer is among the more cunning and talented of its post-9/11 practitioners, so his decision to write about the attacks seems inevitable. Can one treat an antidote with a snakebite? And is a tsunami novel next?

*Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* is much less explicit about 9/11 than its naysayers will accuse it of being. Portions of it are concerned with the story of Oskar's grandparents, who before fleeing to New York survived the firebombing of Dresden—arguably an all too obvious parallel. Foer renders the burning Dresden scene terrifyingly well, but the remainder of the grandparental story does not always seem vital, and in this it resembles the derivatively “magical” aspects of *Illuminated*'s similar backstory. Both feel, in some crucial sense, autopiloted, borrowed, false.

As for the book's main story, the September 11 attacks are, thankfully, merely the backdrop of a very Foerian conceit. It concerns a key that belonged to Oskar's father and becomes an obsession. Because Oskar finds the key in an envelope labeled “Black,” he decides to hunt down all those named “Black” in New York City to learn which lock (he has calculated that the five boroughs are host to 162 million) the key opens. Along the way we are treated to a menagerie of colorful characters—who often are as peculiar as Oskar—plus photos Foer has inserted into the text and many, many typographical escapades: pages whose words crowd together to make an angry black swarm, colored pages, pages with red circles, pages that contain only one sentence.

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Some will be bothered by these flourishes, others will relish them. In the end, none surpass the effects of artful prose, as Foer seems to believe. It would be dif-

ficult to argue that this novel would suffer one bit without its extraliterary excursions. If anything, they leave an unappealing impression—that of an author who has been fatally overindulged.

Foer is at his best when he writes with the least whimsy and fewest conceits. The conversation between Oskar and his mother, who has a new boyfriend, about the child's resentment—with the unforgettable crescendo it reaches in his announcement that he wishes she had died instead of his father—is brilliantly executed and as painful as an exposed nerve. Similarly, one brief scene that finds Oskar chatting with his therapist reminds us, with its careful, casual, yet still hard-won humor, of Foer's true strengths. The growing revelation of what Oskar knows about his father's fate, and how he knows it, pounds away at the reader with a sick foreboding. In the novel's scattered allusions to the doomed Washington intern Chandra Levy, Foer exhibits a wonderfully light touch while reminding us how absurd many of our concerns were before (in Oskar's understated words) “the worst day.”

There are also the occasional wonders of Foer's language. He is less a prose writer than a line writer, but what lines he is capable of. When Oskar says, “Being with [my father] made my brain quiet,” or describes “a lot of stuff that made me panicky, like suspension bridges, germs, airplanes, fireworks, Arab people on the subway (even though I'm not racist), Arab people in restaurants and coffee shops and other public places, scaffolding, sewers and subway grates, bags without owners, shoes, people with mustaches, smoke, knots, tall buildings, turbans,” that little boy is as real as the children we all became at isolated moments in those first terrible days after the attacks. This is empathetic writing of a high order, and it has nothing to do with Shakespeare or veganism, but rather with the hard work of diligently imagining one's way into another life.

Much of Foer's artistic platform is founded on the idea that creativity is inherently valuable and should be promoted at all times. This is, of course, a debatable notion. Creativity is only as good as the skill, or the motive, powering it. (The 9/11 plotters were, among other things, sinisterly creative.) The more time one spends with *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, the more one is impressed by the sheer brio that went into its conception. Foer connects Dresden to muteness, to 9/11, to the souls of several wounded New Yorkers, and does so with considerable adroitness. But spending more time with *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* also increases an awareness of the places it does not go frequently enough and those in which it spends far too much time. This is a good novel. It is not nearly good enough.