



# Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

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## **Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close Jonathan Safran Foer**

Nine-year-old Oskar Schell is an inventor, amateur entomologist, Francophile, letter writer, pacifist, natural historian, percussionist, romantic, Great Explorer, jeweller, detective, vegan, and collector of butterflies.

When his father is killed in the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Centre, Oskar sets out to solve the mystery of a key he discovers in his father's closet. It is a search which leads him into the lives of strangers, through the five boroughs of New York, into history, to the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima, and on an inward journey which brings him ever closer to some kind of peace.

## **Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close Details**

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# From Reader Review Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close for online ebook

**brian says**

well, i'm naturally drawn to those people who are overwhelmed by existence, by people who hurt too easily; who, for them, life seems to be almost too much: for whom the unceasing cacophony of thought and memory and idea is just too painful and all the cruelty and the violence is inconceivable and the mystery of life and love and foreverness and the past and all of it is just overwhelming to the point in which one wishes one could scream so loud that it would just make it all go away, that one could exorcise all of it, that one could just somehow *leave*, just leave their body and leave the planet and get away from all the people and all the loss and all the memories that sit in the stomach and the chest and the throat and just get away from death and from the monotony of everyday life and also from the hysteria of those moments, those big lifechangers, and leave behind the fact that he will die and that everyone he knows or ever has known will one day be a slab of meat in a wooden box. it's too much sometimes.

and fuck if you are a writer that can somehow come up with the means to tell a story, a small story even, to summarize the totality of what it means to be alive on planet earth and to live amongst and around all these people and memories and ghosts and all the potential and possibilities... well, shit. how did this young twerp do it? and it's not perfect. yeah, it is precious at times, and, yes, he doesn't always mix tone that well, there are scenes that feel heightened when they could've played straight to more powerful effect, and blahblahblah. but fuck if the flaws don't add to the whole. i'd be suspicious if it was perfect because life itself is a messy affair. and that's what this book is about. but what are you going to do? leave it? no. you stick around. and you find those people you love and you never ever ever ever ever ever ever ever let go. and if they're taken from you or leave you, you rail and rant against your god or your country or their country or a cold uncaring universe or nature or dumb luck and you scream and you cry and threaten suicide or murder and pull out your hair and punch cement walls and then -- then you quiet down and mend your knuckles and straighten your hair and put down the gun and stop guzzling the bourbon and you get your shit together and you move on. but you're never the same.

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**Kim says**

There are books that affect me and then there are books that kill me. This falls in the latter. I cried on the couch, I cried on the bus, I cried at stoplights, I cried at work.. I cried more over this book than I did on the actual September 11th. Then I became upset that this piece of fiction could invoke such melancholia. Can I use the excuse of being in shock during the actual event? That it seemed like a movie?

I have no excuse.

Flash back: The second half of 1994, my then boyfriend and I living in the East Village, 23 years old and clueless. We were broke most of the time, not much into clubbing, so about 4 out of 7 nights we would walk. Never north.. only through the Village or SoHo and eventually our meandering would lead us to the Towers. No matter what path we'd take, it was our destination. I remember many nights sitting on this ratty red paint peeled bench staring across the river at Jersey, specifically the Colgate sign, and just talking about everything. Hours sped by and we'd drag our sorry asses back to the train and to our tiny apartment. I

remember nights where I'd hug the side of Tower One, pressing against it and lift my head as far back as I could and stare up until the glass met the sky and I'd get so dizzy I'd stumble back. I remember the night that we decided to marry, I remember exchanging our vows leaning against the railing staring up, always up.

I haven't been to New York in 13 years, I can't even imagine a New York without those buildings.

Anyway...

There are 43 '*Incrediblys*' and 63 '*Extremelys*' within this book. Does anyone really ever use those adverbs anymore? Is anything ever extreme or incredible enough for us? My daughter has taken to using 'perfectly' in almost every sentence and it brings a smile to my face each time.

The journey that the boy, Oskar, takes in this book is beautiful. The need to feel close to his father who died in the attacks, to spend just a bit more time with him. While Oskar is a bit unbelievable as a character, I felt that that was soon overshadowed by the images presented. I know I do this a lot in reviews, but I can't help it: Lines like "*Being with him made my brain quiet. I didn't have to invent a thing.*" or "*My insides don't match up with my outsides.*" and "*It takes a life to learn how to live.*"

I'm a sucker for a good line.

When Oskar is anxious he describes it as '*wearing heavy boots*' and when his Grandmother likes something or in a good mood she uses the term '*that was One Hundred Dollars*' and then there's a whole mention of a '*Birdseed shirt*' that I'm still unclear about but enjoy the imagery of.

But, this isn't just Oskar's journey.. this is also about Oskar's grandparents and that piece is as strong as his story, sometimes stronger. I won't go into that anymore, I'll let you read about it.

Some have called this 'gimmicky' or 'precious' but I was truly moved by this story and combined with the images presented, it will stay with me for a very long time to come. As will 1994.

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## Jason says

This book gives me heavy boots.

On the one hand, Foer writes an interesting story. An eight year-old boy Oskar, two years after his father's death in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, embarks on a scavenger hunt, searching for clues to a key his father left behind, a key that he believes opens a mysterious lock somewhere in New York City. Oskar is precocious to say the least. I thought several times that he reminds me a bit of Holden Caulfield, albeit younger and somewhat less pessimistic. Intertwined with Oskar's account are the stories of his grandparents who are survivors of the bombings of Dresden, Germany during World War II. The grandparents relate their own experiences of loss and grief through letters and journal entries that shed light on the national tragedy they lived through two generations earlier.

One of the problems I have with this book (i.e. the *other* hand) is that Foer's heavy use of typographical gimmicks is distracting and unnecessary. Some of Oskar's discoveries during his scavenger hunt occur somewhat too conveniently. And are we really supposed to feel bad for Oskar's grandfather for being so

“broken” over losing the love of his life? Because *I* don’t. It’s been 58 years, guy—get over it. You’re not tragic and pitiable, you’re a fucking *loser* for leaving your family.

And if there’s one thing I can’t wrap my head around, it’s the timing surrounding the disappearance of Oskar’s friend Mr. Black. Although it doesn’t weigh heavily on the plot of the novel, small details like this bother me. On p. 285, the first sentence reads, “The day after the renter and I dug up Dad’s grave, I went to Mr. Black’s apartment.” We know that when Oskar does go to Mr. Black’s apartment, he retrieves a biograph card from Mr. Black’s index. We also know that he is wearing this biograph card on his person during his meeting with William Black (a different Black) later that day (p. 295). How, then, is it possible that directly before the grave digging operation, Oskar is able to relate to his grandfather (the “renter”) the details of what he learned in his meeting with William Black (p. 302) if the grave digging operation itself is supposed to have happened *the day before retrieving the biograph card*??

If someone could explain that last part for me, I’d greatly appreciate it. In the meantime, here’s an overall timeline I made to help myself better understand the interweaving plot lines:

**1921** – letter written by prisoner of Turkish labor camp

**1936** – prisoner’s letter received by Oskar’s grandmother (who must have been about 6 years old and therefore born around 1930)

**1943** – after spending 7 years collecting letters for handwriting samples, Oskar’s grandmother collects a letter from Thomas Schell who is seeing her sister

**1945** – Dresden firebombings (indisputable), Anna dies

**1950** – Oskar’s grandmother (~20 years old) moves to USA and meets a mute Thomas Schell; this date is based on the grandmother’s declaration that “7 years had passed” which I took to assume since obtaining Thomas’s handwriting sample in 1943, as it’s the only thing that makes sense to me.

**1963** – Thomas Schell leaves Oskar’s grandmother

**1964** – Oskar’s father is born

**1995** – Oskar is born

**2001** – Oskar’s father dies (indisputable), Thomas Schell returns

**2003** – present day (Oskar discovers key, learns mystery of its origin, digs up his father’s grave, and Oskar’s grandparents move to the airport).

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## Fabian says

On top of the already devastating wreckage left from the September eleventh attacks, Foer describes a bittersweet form of intergenerational pain. (It eventually became an unpopular albeit Oscar-nominated film [which days later I watched & was disappointed with]) this is a huge deviation from his true masterwork (for I suppose that one is more universally great and, unlike this one, less personally divisive:) *Everything Is Illuminated*. It is so radically different and almost as complex and perfect as his first work. (Speaking of which, where & when will we see Foer's 3rd!?) Radical because in this one the reader flips through pages in a suspect fervor to navigate a, let's say it, mixed media novel. Will it succeed?

The infinitely creative, but mega precious child's voice is filled with its share of Truth and Whimsy. In this fictional world, suddenly everyone is unrude and all denizens of New York City are complex in a positive way. (...though there is a reason.) Oscar Schell, perhaps the biggest problem I see in the novel (The! Protagonist!), truly reflects a New York City post 911 that's probably all too sure of itself for its own good. Because it has to be.

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## Laurel says

I hate to keep pointing out to everyone that I listened to the audio version of this or that book, as it gets repetitive after awhile, and for the most part, it is usually irrelevant. In this case, though, it seems to have made a difference.

When I finished *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, I went online to read some reviews. I was surprised by what I read. It seemed that just about everyone who gave their opinion on this book, whether positive or negative, commented on Foer's "experimental" writing style. Apparently, Foer would at times not use proper punctuation, or would clump words on top of each other so that they appeared to look like scribbles, or would insert photographs, or even leave several pages blank. I hate to look like I'm trying to be cute by using the phrase which appeared so often in the book, but my reaction to this was exactly that: What the.... ?

There is no evidence of any of these experimental writing tactics in the audio version whatsoever. I mean, there is mention of a memoir having nothing but blank pages, but that is part of the story itself... there was no sense of actual blank pages within Foer's book. There was no sense of words piling up on each other, either. And, clearly, there were no pictures.

I'm not sure how I would have felt about the book with all of the above thrown in. Some seemed to have found it distracting, and perhaps I'd have felt the same. Without them, though, you are left with nothing but the story itself, pure and uncluttered, and which I found to be beautifully written.

The narration by the various actors was also superbly done. Sometimes I get annoyed by the fact that my current situation limits me to audiobooks, as I miss having a real book in my hand and reading the words on a page in my own voice with my own interpretation. And then I come across a book like this one, and I am glad. Some books, it seems, are even better read aloud.

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## Christina White says

This was horrible. The writing was horrible. The book jumped around and around and was so hard to follow. It was like reading something written by someone who was half squirrel and half crack head. Instead of creating colorful and deep characters using words, he used punctuation. The grandfather spoke using an abundance of useless commas, the grandmother used lots of periods and Mr. Black spoke in sentences using only exclamation points. I was thankful no spoke by asking only questions. If I would have seen a page full of question marks I think I might have thrown the book across the room! I found Oskar to be the only unique and real character in the book, but after awhile he even started to annoy me. His little quirks were too over the top, like the author was trying to compensate and distract the reader from the nonexistent plot. A boy loses his father and finds a key in an envelope with the name "Black" on it. We go through pages and pages of meeting lots of people with the name "Black" only to find out the key had nothing to do with his dad in the first place. He has weird grandparents who like to write him letters about their sex life and who really didn't add anything to the plot of the story that I could tell. Then he digs up his father's empty coffin and fills it with letters, the end. (Seriously?????)

I found the subject matter heart breaking, and did tear up at times, but it's hard not to tear up when anyone

talks about that horrible day. I hated the pictures the most. The book had pages of meaningless pictures. But one picture stood out from the rest and made me cringe. He filled over a dozen pages with pictures of someone's loved one falling to their death from one of the burning towers of 9/11. I am outraged by this! Horrible!!!!!!

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## Lawyer says

### **Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close: *Jonathan Foer's novel of love, loss, and memory***

There are events that leave an indelible stamp on us for a great portion of our lives. This happens from generation to generation.

Ask those living at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor where they were and what they were doing, they will be able to tell you the answer. Similarly, ask me where I was when I heard John F. Kennedy was shot, I can tell you.

Ask what I was doing when the attacks of 9/11 occurred, I can tell you. I had arrived at work at the District Attorney's Office. My chief side kick with whom I was working prep for a trial, ran into the grand jury room and said turn on the television. I did. What I saw was something I could not accept.

Jonathan Foer goes far past the point of remembrance. Foer drops you into the shoes of 8 year old Oskar Schell. For him, 9/11 is not simply an event which he will remember for its historical significance. It is an event he lives daily because he lost his father that day. And the event is brought home to him, for he has a cell phone with his father's messages sent from the twin towers that day. This is a secret he keeps from his mother, for he wants to protect her from the pain of those messages. It is an incredible burden for a child to bear.

Oskar is left with a gamut of guilt and fears, resulting in a state of vicarious traumatic response to his father's death. His grief is all the more palpable because he is extremely gifted and incredibly cursed with an intelligence far more gifted than children his age.

Oskar shared a bond with his father, who fostered that intelligence, by devoting great attention on his son, gently lulling him to sleep at nights by reading him the New York Times and circling the errors they found in red ink. His father challenged Oskar's intelligence by setting up questions for Oskar to solve, leaving clues amounting to a trail of breadcrumbs leading him to a solution of the problems he designed for him.

Or did he? Did his father actually do this? Or is this something which Oskar has perceived in his mind alone?

The action of this novel occurs a year after the fall of the Towers. Oskar is still dealing with the traumatization of his father's loss. In an effort to keep the memory of his father close, Oskar frequently hides in his father's closet where the scent of his father's shaving still lingers in his mind, if only in his mind.

A bundle of memories and his fears cripple Oskar in his dealings with others, especially his schoolmates,

whom are not affected by the fall of the Towers as Oskar is. Nor does Oskar perceive his mother to be as deeply affected by the loss of his father. She has a new friend, Ron, who becomes a frequent visitor to the apartment. Oskar hears their laughter in the living room, as he hides in his father's closet. At one point, typical of a child, he tells his mother he wishes it had been her who died that day. It is something a child would say, intentionally hurting the remaining parent, then immediately struck with the hurt he inflicted on his mother whom he loved without question.

There are strong clues that while Oskar is undoubtedly a prodigy of intelligence far beyond his years, that Oskar just might suffer from more than childhood fears. Is it that Oskar is afflicted by Asperger's Syndrome? A look into the Diagnostic Services Manual--I believe we're in the fifth edition of that psychological cookbook, now, reveals that this is a distinct possibility.

Oskar is enveloped in a net of pattern and design, a characteristic shared by children with this diagnosis. He is awkward in his social interactions. Nor does he seem to grasp the results of his actions in social settings. Play on words which Oskar finds hilarious are lost and misunderstood by those around him. Oskar's behavior in filling daybooks with events that have happened to him, including other tragic events occurring before and after 9/11 take on a ritualistic quality, echoing some of the characteristics shared by those diagnosed with Asperger's, which is considered a sub diagnosis of autism. It is a matter of degree, not an exclusion from that diagnosis.

That Oskar is unaware of the consequences of his behavior on his teacher and his fellow students is clear. In graphic detail, he explains the results of the bombing of Hiroshima, sharing a video interview with a survivor of the first use of an atomic bomb against a civilian population.

That Oskar's last name is Schell is a clever device used to great benefit by Foer. For Oskar is a veritable Chambered Nautilus consisting of impenetrable chambers of secrets revealed only by gently bisecting the shell of a nautilus.

Oskar's mother carries her son to be counseled by Doctor Fein, who is anything but fine in his ability to reach Oskar and release him from all the fears held within him, brought about from his father's death.

It is only through Oskar's discovery of one last mystery he believes was left him by his father to solve, that Oskar begins to live outside himself and become engaged with people outside his immediate family that just might allow him to move forward from the prison of the loss of his father.

Quite by accident, Oskar spies a blue vase on the top shelf of his father's closet. Stacking his works of Shakespeare in his father's closet, Oskar stretches to reach the vase, only to tip it off the shelf, shattering it on the floor of the closet. It contains a key, with an envelope. Written on the envelope is the word "Black" written in red ink.

Oskar determines that the answer to his father's last mystery is the key and someone named Black. Although the number of locks in New York City is mind shattering, Oskar, a child of the internet, decides to track down all the Blacks in New York City in an effort to find the secret of what the key opens.

It is this journey, if anything, that will allow Oskar to move beyond the death of his father and live his own life.

Foer, in a display of brilliance, introduces us to Oskar's grandmother and the grandfather, Oskar never knew. Thomas Schell, for whom Oskar's father was named, also is trapped within the memories of another terrible



incident in Human history, the firebombing of Dresden. The elder Thomas, although once capable of speech, can no longer speak a word, but communicates by writing in blank day books. He disappeared before the birth of Oskar's father.

We learn of the elder Thomas's history through his letters to his unborn child and through his life with Oskar's grandmother, who lives in an apartment building across the street from Oskar. Oskar and his grandmother communicate by walkie talkies at all times of the day and night.

It is through the writings of the elder Thomas Schell that we experience first hand the horror of living through one of the great acts of inhumanity against man--the fire bombing of Dresden during World War II by the Royal Airforce and the United States 8th Airforce from February 13-15th, 1945. Those events leave Thomas Schell a man forever changed.

The beauty of Foer's novel is the answer he provides in the resolution of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. We recover from the tragedies of our lives through the bonds we share with others. This is the ultimate beauty of life.

While some critics, and some readers, find Foer's novel, manipulative and cloyingly sweet, I find it an affirmation of life. To paraphrase Faulkner's Nobel Acceptance Speech, it is through reaching out to others that not only are we able to endure, it is the way we prevail.

This is a solid **6 Stars** literary masterpiece. If it makes you cry, take joy for the fact Foer reminds us we are human, not only capable of acts of inhumanity, but also capable of acts of great love and forgiveness.

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## Paul Bryant says

I'm Oskar with a k like Liza with a Z cause Oskar with a k is krazy (also kind, clever and cultured). I'm 10 going on Dalai Lama. I make jewellery (I know!) and collect butterflies who have *died naturally* and play a tambourine constantly. You have to wonder why no one has killed me since I must drive people insane with my maximum cuteness. Oh, and have shortwave radio conversations with my grandma over in another desirable residence in the Upper West Side. I have empathy for *every living thing* including you. This great and terrible tragedy happened to me so nobody, not even those horrid GR people, can make fun of me, even when I'm so twee a hobbit would thwow up all over the nearest elf. This is the way I speak with my Mom :

"Mom?" "Yes?" "Nothing."

"What is it, baby?" "Well it's just that wouldn't it be great if mattresses had spaces for your arm, so that when you rolled on to your side, you could fit just right?" "That would be nice." "And good for your back, probably, because it would let your spine be straight, which I know is important." "That is important."

"Also, it would make snuggling easier... And making snuggling easier is important." "Very."

Here, you can use this bin, or the sink, whichever. I'm so kloying and keen to make everyone's lives better by befriending deaf centenarians and lonely billionaires and dragging them off on eccentric heart-twanging dead-father-related quests that Amelie from that kooky French movie *Amelie* would be out-cloyed and out-eccentriced at every turn & would have to throw herself out of my window wearing a birdseed dress which is an invention of mine for suicides by defenestration as the birdseed would attract birds who would carry the

person aloft & thus prevent their self-destruction. Okay maybe when the birdseed was gone then the person would plummet, but I don't think that far about any of my kooky schemes, magical children who could never possibly exist don't do that.

My brain is just naturally like Pixar HD.

*I'll invent an invisibility suit that has a camera on my back that takes video of everything behind me and plays it onto a plasma screen that I'll wear on my front, which will cover everything but my face. It'll look like I'm not there at all.*

You may be wondering how I got to be like I am. Well, there's a long line of cutesypie narrators in my family. My grandfather, frinstance. He's tweeter than me. Is that a word? It is now. He explained How I Met Your Grandmother like this:

*I had so much to ask her, "Do you lie on your stomach and look for things under the ice? Do you like plays? Do you like it when you can hear something before you can see it?... in the middle of my youth, in the middle of Europe, in between our two villages, on the verge of losing everything, I bumped into something and was knocked to the ground... at first I thought I'd walked into a tree, but then the tree became a person...*

I would like to explain that I am depressed about my father but as I'm in this novel I don't call it that, I say I'm *wearing heavy boots*. I would also like to say that what with all this smiling through tears, the grandma, the grandfather, the old guy who can hear again, the mom who is probably schmoozing with some guy in the next room, the sad quest to find the Blacks of New York, AND 9/11 AND let's throw Hitler into the mix, you don't have to look any further for a dictionary definition of emotional blackmail.

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## **Ben says**

There must be something wrong with me. I'm not as smart as my goodreader friends. I lack empathy. My humor is deficient. I have no compassion. And I suck at life.

Of the 40 of you "friends" who read this, this is how you rated it:

5-stars: 18 people

4-stars: 13 people

3-stars: 7 people

2-stars: 2 people

1-star: 0 people

Something wrong with me indeed.

(Or something wrong with all of you.)

No. I didn't finish it. I value opportunity and freedom too much for that. I listened to it. People tell me if I had read it instead of listening to it I would have liked it more. I now tell them that I don't care.

I have returned this grouping of compact discs to my local library. They are now safely out of my hands. Its

twelve separate discs no longer have to worry about me yelling obscenities at them extremely loudly. They need not be concerned that they get thrown again at the passenger side door, incredibly closely.

So go away Jonathan Safran Foer. Don't cry for me Argentina. It's your birthday, don't cry if you want to. Stop your sobbing. I was crying just to get you, now I'm dying cause I let you -- do what you do down on me. Or not. Okay, please don't. Seriously, I've had enough. You are cheesy and you annoy me. I'm done. So take your forced cuteness and your vegan cupcakes and go home.

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## **Amanda says**

Today while tutoring, I've met with one student right at 1 and another at 4. In between those times, I read *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Perhaps that was not the smartest thing to do...

Sometimes I find the book so funny that I laugh out loud. Which is fine if I had a quiet laugh, but I don't. And I tutor in a common meeting space which is a center room with offices surrounding it. Clearly, everyone in the office knew I was getting paid to laugh at what I was reading. I felt bad; if I was working, I wouldn't want to hear someone who was getting paid to read laughing. In my defense, at least everyone could see that writing matters to me and I appreciate quality literature, which further proves my already-established qualifications as a tutor.

But then I got to the climax of the book, and I was moved by how the climax was written because it felt so "real" to me, because it captured how I feel and think (if those things could be replicated in language other than poetry), and I loved the characters as I love my families, and I loved the twist in the plot and how it came together in a way I didn't think it would come together because I was being skeptical and I thought it would be more trite, so I'm reading in the middle of this common room but I wouldn't call it reading as much as I would call it immersing myself into the novel when I start crying. Once the tears got in the way of my reading, I looked away from the page to wipe them, and realized I wasn't at home. I was in the Student-Athletics Department. I was tutoring. I had to pull my shit together.

What I love is that a book could do that to me. That it could inspire me--to write, to live, to not be afraid, to not be embarrassed when I bawl at work. I love this book so much I'm going to buy a copy of it. I would marry it if I wasn't married to FD. I want to put Kiedrowski's frosting on it and eat it.

I love the multi-genre-ness of it. It's brave and out-there and absolutely gorgeous.

I still have one chapter left. Once I started crying, I thought maybe I should wait until I was home to finish it--just in case I need to sob for a couple of minutes or hours.

It's moments like these that make me happy to be a reader, and even more so a writer...

~

It's almost 9 p.m., and I finished the book. I didn't cry. I didn't sob. I just finished it while BBQ-ing tonight's dinner (Chicken, roasted potatoes, and broccoli), ate dinner while watching the newest *Deadliest Catch*, cleaned-up, and talked to Pops. What's funny is, though, all the while I was doing this business, I was thinking about this book. And I have a feeling I'm going to think about this book for a long while. Like when I see a great film that moves me, it sticks with me, such as *Dancer in the Dark*.

And when I read something so good, like *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, I believe in God more than any other time in my life. Because without God how could such a great book come into existence? Or such a great author who is able to write such a great book? And then such a great mind? And the food such a great mind eats? And the air such a great mind breathes? (You probably can see where this is going.)

I can't review this book like other books. Mostly because I'm too emotional right now. But I can say if you read this blog, you should this book, if you haven't already.

And before I give my HK rating, a fellow McGuire/Facebook buddy said about Foer's book, "it's seriously chronic. i already bought *Everything is Illuminated*." Chronic, people! Dr. Dre and Snoop would be up on this shit! C'mon!

For the first time ever and maybe only time ever...5 Hello Kittys.

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## **Bart says**

When Thomas Pynchon invented what James Wood later named "hyper realism", he did literature no favors. To read Pynchon is to witness genius at its most joyless. A mind capable of inventing myriad things and compelled to record them all. But at least Pynchon showed genius.

What Jonathan Safran Foer shows, however, is mere gimmickry. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* takes readers who thought they might have seen a glimmer of greatness in *Everything is Illuminated* and convinces them all they really saw were special effects.

It's very difficult to read Foer's second novel without reflecting on his first. *Everything is Illuminated* began in such an original way that a reader forgave the 150 or so dull pages of less-than-compelling writing that came along throughout the rest of the book. The reader forgave the puerile reflections on the Holocaust and the manufactured confession of homosexuality. Because the book began so originally.

But Foer is a one-trick pony. In *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, he's once more co-opted a mass tragedy and made a fruit salad of it with various voices and narrative tricks. Oh sure, the book has an underlying tone of sadness – sadness, not seriousness – because, clever as he wants to be, Foer didn't dare go wholehog with a tragedy still as fresh as 9/11. But that's about the only restriction he put on his vanity.

To indulge himself with a hundred irritating digressions and quips, Foer invented a child narrator. This has become more and more common among the hyper-realism set in the last 10 years. Raised by guidance counselors who told them to never stop being childish, these novelists give us hundreds of pages of "exploring their inner child" – all under the guise of serious artistic endeavor.

But this is not serious art. This is an author who makes the easy choice every time. When he thinks he has something profound to say, he doesn't hesitate to have his nine-year-old narrator couch things in college-level language. The rest of the time, when he feels like writing about whichever page of the encyclopedia he happened to turn to that morning, he has the little professor wander off wherever he wishes, always with a literary safety net that says, "I'm trying to depict the world through a child's eyes!"

But we should ask ourselves why a novelist feels compelled to depict a mass tragedy through a child's eyes. After all, this isn't biography; Foer could have depicted the tragedy through anyone's eyes at all. Better put,

when he sat down to write about the savagery of Napoleon's 1812 battle with Russia, why didn't Leo Tolstoy depict the burning of Moscow through the eyes of a nine-year-old and his nutty and mute grandfather? Probably because a nine-year-old would have limited Tolstoy's vocabulary too drastically; a nine-year-old doesn't know enough to say anything original about war.

Tolstoy, in other words, was too concerned about making an original commentary to worry about being a "fresh new voice!" in the contemporary fiction scene. Tolstoy took a large subject and made it larger. Foer takes a large subject and makes it tiny.

*But sometimes, I've learned, large things must be tiny.* That's how Foer's narrator would say it. And he'd be wrong, of course. But then, that's why we don't publish books written by nine-year-olds.

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## **Brad says**

I read the first chapter and stopped. I am pissed off. I have rarely felt so manipulated as a reader in my life, and I think the manipulation is more about the way it is written than what it is written about, although that is, in itself, fairly manipulative. If this is how Foer usually writes, I want no part of him or his work. Still, if this was a short story and I reached the point where the Dad is about to talk to his son before the towers collapse, I would be excited by the cleverness of the moment, would look forward to the conversation, and be pleased in anticipation of the genuine anguish that must be coming. But it's not a short story. It's the first chapter in what is a pretty long book, and I imagine all manner of excruciating crapness is to come. Couple that with a first person narrative in the voice of a "precocious" kid -- so precocious, in fact, that he sounds like a thirty-something man trapped in a kid's body rather than a genuinely precocious kid (I often suspect, when these impossibly precocious characters appear, that the author wants to write as a child but realizes he isn't good enough, so he makes them precocious so he can just write as themselves at their least disciplined and pretend it is a child) -- and I want to tear my eyeballs out after only twenty some-odd pages. Even worse, I didn't know this was about the WTC attack until I got this to the cash register. I just saw it on sale, knew it had good buzz, liked the cover and thought, "What the hell?!" I need to reexamine my impulse buying, apparently, because I would not have bought this book if I'd known what it was about before I did. I think, too, that if I keep reading this book it is going to be lucky to get one star, so it's probably best to leave it where it is for now: on my to-read shelf, buried under that copy of *Shogun* that's been there for a decade.

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## **Catriona (LittleBookOwl) says**

Oh, wow.

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## **Matt Holloway says**

Extremely Precocious and Incredibly Irritating

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## Andy says

A more apt title would have been Terribly Artificial and Unbearably Pretentious. This seems like the kind of thing I would have thought was a profound idea when I myself was nine, laboring on crayon illustrations to include with my manuscript into the wee hours of the morning. Maybe that means Foer succeeded. I happen to think it means his efforts were an abject failure, and that he has a great many readers and critics completely snowed.

With a book like this, you either accept it as charming wistfulness, or you don't. You either think random tabbing on pages is innovative, or you don't. You think empty pages and single phrases on other pages is a daring deconstruction of traditional publishing mores, or you don't. I don't.

Foer's grieving young narrator is a ridiculous creation, the book's pagination is something a stricter editor should have vomited upon, and the situations in which Oskar finds himself are fabricated of glitter-encrusted papier-mâché. This story is never once believable; therefore any emotion generated is as phony as a three-dollar bill. Now don't misunderstand; I read lots of far-fetched books, so I believe genuine emotion can be achieved through stories about the tooth fairy, WMDs, sympathetic lawyers or any number of myths. But too many times in this book, people do things just to do them, and things happen just to have them happen or to give Foer scanty reason to wax poetic for pages at a time – without such bourgeoisie restrictions as paragraphs or punctuation (or sensible storytelling) muddling up the artiste's vision.

Foer's stream-of-consciousness narrative reminds me of the saying about the infinite monkeys: sooner or later one of an infinite number of monkeys on an infinite number of typewriters is going to randomly type the complete works of Shakespeare. Except in Foer's case, it's as though he was one of the monkeys in the middle of infinity, a bright but underachieving chimpanzee picking nits and banging the keys petulantly with a hardened piece of fecal matter. If Foer wished to write a thick book entirely in free verse (broken up with pictures now and again so people don't become "bored"), then he should have had the cajones to do so, not foist this vanity project upon the public under the guise of a novel claiming to be about reaction to 9/11.

This is a book for a self-important Attention-Deficit society. I think most people in today's age of texting while driving and non-stop news alerts and picture-in-picture don't actually read every word on the page anyway. They scan pages looking for the "good stuff," and that's all they remember. So therefore they're not put off by the author's interminable ramblings, his attempt to bludgeon the reader with a thick blanket of nonsensical phrases, hoping they will be distracted into thinking they come together to create some sort of profound stew greater than the sum of its silly parts. But for those of us who think each word matters, this practice is annoying subterfuge, and ultimately meaningless.

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