

Press Release



Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

by Jonathan Safran Foer

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About the Book

Jonathan Safran Foer's new novel is in many ways about the power of human imagination and invention. Ask Jonathan about Oskar's inventions: What about a birdseed shirt? What about the world's biggest tin-can phone? What about pneumatic tubes connecting all the boroughs of New York? If you've read about some of Foer's projects, you might well think that these are real inventions he's created on behalf of worthy causes. Once you get to know nine-year-old Oskar, the narrator of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, you'll realize that these are only a few of the hundreds of ideas he dreams up daily, some of them preposterous, all of them with a single purpose. Oskar, whose father was killed in the World Trade Center on September 11, is obsessed with keeping everyone he loves safe from harm. An inspired creation, Oskar Schell is endearing and exasperating, and "readers won't soon forget him" (*Booklist*). In his school's version of *Hamlet*, he plays the role of Yorick. He writes letters to famous people—everyone from Ringo Starr to Stephen Hawking—offering to be their apprentices. ("I've written my share of fan letters," admits Foer.) Oskar collects pretty much anything and tells a lot of jokes, mostly bad ones involving the French language, which is one of the many things, as he says, he knows about.

But there are many things he doesn't know about: why his father, who owns a jewelry store, had a meeting at the World Trade Center on September 11. Or why his mother seems to have gotten on with her life with a guy named Ron. Or why Oskar's grandmother across the street has never let him meet the renter who lives in her spare bedroom. Or, most curious, what a mysterious key he discovers in his father's closet unlocks. The key is in an envelope with the word "Black" written on it. To find the lock it fits, Oskar sets out to track down every person in New York whose last name is Black—uptown, downtown and through all five boroughs and possibly a sixth (the *New York Times* recently reprinted Foer's story "The Sixth Borough" on its op-ed page). In

the process of his search, Oskar befriends an array of odd characters, including a 103-year-old war reporter and a tour guide in the Empire State Building who hasn't left the building for decades.

His search finally ends eight months later, in a meeting that is devastatingly heartbreaking but, as Oskar would say, also beautiful and true. "It's hard to believe that such an inherently sad story could be so entertaining," writes *Library Journal*. Foer doesn't confront only recent disasters. He takes the story back in history and far from New York. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* encompasses other tragedies, equally horrendous: the bombing of Hiroshima and the destruction of Dresden, which Oskar's grandparents survived. Yet amid the darkness there is light. In Oskar we see ways to regain our humanity — our connection to one another — when all humanity seems forsaken.

Foer will be on national tour starting April 4. He continues to be involved in many unusual projects, from the Pintchik Oracle (see the *New Yorker* piece) to community art projects in Central Park (all involving people). Ask him about his unique use of visual elements in the novel. The book ends with "what is undoubtedly the most beautiful and heartbreaking flip book in all of literature" (*Booklist*). Discuss his other projects: writing a libretto for the Berlin Opera House or his political work for MoveOn. The movie of *Everything Is Illuminated*, directed by Liev Schreiber, is coming to the big screen this August. And film rights to *Extremely Loud* were snapped up by Scott Rudin.

[See and hear the author Jonathan Safran Foer discussing his work.](#)

About the Author

Jonathan Safran Foer was born in 1977. His first novel, *Everything Is Illuminated* was published by Houghton Mifflin in April 2002, excerpted in *The New Yorker's* annual debut fiction issue, and translated into 26 languages. It quickly established itself as a bestseller here and throughout Europe. A movie based on the book will be released in August 2005. It stars Elijah Wood as Jonathan Safran Foer, Eugene Hutz as Alex, with Peter Saraf as producer and Liev Schreiber directing. Foer has had stories published in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, and *Conjunctions*. He is the editor of an anthology of writing, inspired by *A Convergence of Birds*, the bird boxes of Joseph Cornell, and *The Future Dictionary of America*, an anthology of words all Americans will need to know in the coming years. These projects included more than 75 contributing authors, and all proceeds went to progressive groups such as MoveOn and the Sierra Club. The forthcoming book *Joe* (fall 2005) is a collaborative art project between Foer, the sculptor Richard Serra, and the photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto. Additionally, Foer is working on two public art projects, "The Whispering Parabolas" (in which two massive parabolas will be built on opposite sides of the Central Park Reservoir to facilitate intimate conversations in the middle of Manhattan) and "10,000 Windows," in collaboration with students from La Guardia High School. Foer recently finished a libretto, "Seven Attempted Escapes from Silence," which was commissioned by the German National Operahouse in Berlin. The opera will have its premiere in September 2005.

Foer lives in Brooklyn, New York, and is currently at work on a new novel. Warner Brothers and Paramount have jointly acquired the film rights to *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. It will be produced as a feature film by Scott Rudin.

A Conversation with Jonathan Safran Foer

How would you summarize your novel?

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

To make a long story short, I've tried to follow my instincts. I've tried to write the book I would want to read, rather than the book I would want to write. I've tried never to ask if something was smart, but instead if it felt genuine. A set of themes rose to the surface: silence, invention, anxiety, naiveté, absence, the difficulty of expressing love, war . . . I felt I couldn't push them down, and I chose not to try. Voices became

pronounced. Some characters became vivid, others vanished. A plot . . . happened. If it sounds inefficient, I've described it properly. I cannot imagine how I could have been less efficient. But maybe inefficiency is the point. You can use a map and drive to a destination. Or you can follow the most interesting, beautiful roads — trusting yourself, trusting the car, and trusting the logic of the pavement — and end up where you couldn't have realized you wanted to be until you got there. Writing, for me, is about following roads. And that intuitive, wandering approach explains not only why this book is so far from where I started, but why I feel it so personally, so viscerally, and so, well, loudly and closely.

Where does the character of Oskar come from? Were you at all like him? Are you still?

My parents have a photograph of me on their refrigerator. I'm about six years old, asleep on the sofa, wearing a plaid blazer, a blue sequined bowtie, and rings on each of my ten fingers. Apparently, the look was indicative of my sense of fashion for about a year. That photograph was one of my major sources of inspiration for Oskar. As for how much I actually was like him, it's hard to say. Like most children, I had a number of collections. And I suppose my interests tended toward the esoteric, and my style toward the precocious and annoying. I sent my share of fan letters, suffered numerous failed attempts to kiss women my mother's age, and did work in the family jewelry business for a summer . . . Am I still like that? Fortunately, or unfortunately, most of Oskar has been civilized out of me.

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.

What's the significance of the title?

I like titles that contribute to the meaning of the book rather than describe the book's contents. Which is to say I'm not going to have a great answer to this question, any more than I'd be able to describe the significance of Oskar. Oskar is Oskar. The title is the title. But that's a bit annoying. Maybe I could say that things in the novel are loud and close. War is loud and close — for Oskar's grandparents, who survived the firebombing of Dresden, and for Oskar, who lost his father in the World Trade Center attacks. The future is loud and close. Love is loud and close. And many things are silent and far away. There are mute characters, and characters who can't hear. Characters who travel halfway around the world to be distant from those they love, and characters who endlessly wander the city in an attempt to get home. And then there are the things — like Oskar's relationship with his father — that are simultaneously loud and silent, and close and far away . . . In reference to the novel itself, I hope the reader feels it loudly and closely. If I had a good voice, and all the time in the world, I'd like to sing my thoughts and feelings directly into people's ears. Given that my voice is terrible, and time is limited — and who would want me that close to their face, anyway? — I write the best substitute I can.

What are you working on now?

I recently finished a libretto for the Deutsche Staatsoper (German National Opera House) titled, "Seven Attempted Escapes from Silence," and am now working with the director and set designer on bringing the words to the stage. (The opera will premier in September 2005.) I'm also working on finishing up a collaborative art book, *Joe*, with the sculptor Richard Serra and photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto, to be published this fall. Finally, I've been working on two public art projects, "The Whispering Parabolas" (in which two massive parabolas will be built on opposite ends of the Central Park Reservoir, to facilitate intimate conversations in the middle of Manhattan), and "10,000 Windows," in cooperation with the students of La Guardia High School.

Prizes and Nominations for *Everything Is Illuminated*

Winner — Zoetrope All-Story Fiction Prize 2001
Winner — National Jewish Book Award for Fiction 2002
Winner — *The Guardian* Book Prize 2002 (U.K.)
Winner — BGN Book of the Year 2002 (Holland)
Winner — Premio letterario Adei Wizo 2002 (Italy)
Winner — New York Public Library's Young Lions Fiction Award 2002
Finalist — *Los Angeles Times* Book Award 2002
Winner — William Saroyan International Prize for Writing 2002
Winner — Harold U. Ribalow Award 2002
Listed — *Rolling Stone's* People of the Year 2002
Named — "Best and Brightest" writer by *Esquire* Magazine 2002
Long listed — IMPAC Literary Award 2003
Winner — Corine International Book Prize 2003 (Germany)
Winner — PEN/Robert Bingham Fellowship
Winner — Prix Amphi 2004 (France)

2006 Tour Schedule

DENVER

The Tattered Cover, Historic LoDo — Mon., April 3, 7:30 pm

NEW YORK

Makor Talk (Steinhardt Building, 35 W. 67th Street) — Wed., April 5, 7 pm

Barnes & Noble, Union Square — Mon., April 10, 7 pm

AUSTIN

Barnes & Noble (10000 Research Blvd.) — Mon., April 17, 7 pm

MILWAUKEE

Harry W. Schwartz Bookshop (2559 N. Downer Ave.) — Tues., April 18, 7 pm

CHICAGO

Borders, Lincoln Park — Wed., April 19, 7 pm

Goose Island Brewery: Wrigleyville (3535 North Clark Street) — Wed., April 19, 9:30 pm

BOSTON

Brookline Booksmith Event at the Coolidge Corner Theater — Thurs., April 20, 6 pm

LOS ANGELES

Santa Monica Reads (Santa Monica College Pavilion) — Sun., April 23, 3:00 pm

Dutton's Brentwood — Mon., April 24, 7 pm

SAN FRANCISCO

A Clean Well-Lighted Place for Books — Tues., April 25, 7 pm

Cody's Books — Wed., April 26, 7:30 pm

PORTLAND

Powell's City of Books (Burnside) — Thurs., April 27, 7:30 pm