Praise for *Everything Is Illuminated*

"*Everything Is Illuminated* is a zestfully imagined novel of wonders both magical and mundane. The young author Jonathan Safran Foer is capable of remarkable storytelling acrobatics, but more importantly he cares deeply about his subject. He will win your admiration, and he will break your heart." — Joyce Carol Oates

"J.S. Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* is a novel intricate in structure, fantastical in story, and irreverent in 100 different ways. Told with unwavering charm and wit, this is a book about a journey — one I found myself deeply involved in. A journey wellworth taking." — Nathan Englander

"Jonathan Safran Foer has written a glittering first novel about the search for family history — that closest and darkest of secrets — and he has managed to do so with great humor, sympathy, charm, and daring. Every page is illuminated." — Jeffrey Eugenides

"Clearly, the author of this first novel is an extraordinarily gifted young man. Rare enough, surely, but this young man also happens to possess something approaching wisdom. Don't just check him out. Read him." — Russell Banks

"*Everything Is Illuminated* is a gift, a wonder, a work of profound technical achievement and near-prescient empathetic connection. It's also very funny. To call it the best first novel I've ever read..."
belittles it: it is one of the best novels I've ever been fortunate enough to hold in my hands." — Dale Peck

"To put the matter baldly, *Everything Is Illuminated* is not only an extraordinary addition to novels about the Holocaust, but also the most impressive first novel I've read in years . . . With this extraordinary novel, Foer deserves both our thanks and our most enthusiastic of welcomes." — Sanford Pinkser, *Hadassah Magazine*

**Praise from Booksellers**

"More than one English language is at work in Jonathan Safran Foer's absolutely captivating book, *Everything Is Illuminated*. The jubilantly fractured English of Ukrainian narrator Alex, erstwhile guide, companion, and correspondent to a character named Jonathan Safran Foer, is but a part of that. This book's real riches (and they are many) lie in its astonishing range: of emotion, humor, horror, an awareness of past and present, and a presence that takes very certain words to say. Say them Jonathan Safran Foer does: daringly, dauntingly, and deeply. This is one of the most fabulous books I've read in a long, long time." — Rick Simonson, Elliott Bay Book Co.

"The emotional rollercoaster of discovering something so meaningful, touching, clever, truly human was, well, dizzying. It makes me feel dizzy, actually, to ponder how it is that a new book can come along and nudge its way into my consciousness in such a way as to make me think about the book so much more than seems reasonable . . . And to nudge its way into my heart enough to make me remember the book as a sequence of emotions as much as a sequence of words . . . The threads that tie this book together are brilliant stories in and of themselves; but put them all together and the result is something downright magical." — Alison Morris, Wellesley Booksmith, Wellesley, MA

"The linguistic acrobatics that Jonathan Safran Foer so skillfully executes; the structural integrity that he builds, delicate and well-balanced as a house of cards; the truths that are seamlessly woven into the fabric of the fiction, all compel me to declare *Everything Is Illuminated* a work of undeniable brilliance. With all due respect to Dave Eggars, the book you now hold in your hand is truly a 'heartbreaking work of staggering genius.'" — Jules Davis, Pendragon Books, Oakland, CA

"I took Jonathan Foer's novel, *Everything Is Illuminated*, home the other evening, expecting to read a page or two. Before I knew it, the evening had gone, and I couldn't go to sleep without finishing it. It's a brilliant story, beautifully written, funny, poignant, and unforgettable. When Foer writes about the shtetl, I feel that I know every weird and wonderful character. When he writes of the hero and the guide and the grandfather and the dog searching for the shtetl, and learning what happened the day the Jews were killed there, my heart breaks. I must warn anyone who is thinking of reading *Everything Is Illuminated* that the characters will reveal themselves to you in the most amazing ways and then they won't leave you for a long time — maybe never." — Elaine Petrocelli, Book Passage, Corte Madera, CA
About the Author

Jonathan Safran Foer was born in 1977. He studied at Princeton where he won the freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior creative writing thesis prizes. He has also worked as a morgue assistant, jewelry salesman, farm sitter, and ghostwriter. Four years ago, he traveled to Ukraine to research his grandfather's life. He was chosen as the Zoetrope: All Story Fiction Prize winner (2000) and his short stories have appeared in the Paris Review and Conjunctions. He is also the editor of The Convergence of Birds, an anthology of fiction and poetry inspired by Joseph Cornell's birdboxes, which was a Boston Globe bestseller and a Book Sense 76 selection. An excerpt of Everything Is Illuminated appeared in the New Yorker's debut-fiction issue, eliciting a huge response and a flood of letters from admiring readers. Jonathan Safran Foer grew up in Washington, D.C., and now lives in Queens, New York. He is currently at work on his second novel, which takes place in a museum.

A Conversation with Jonathan Safran Foer

How would you summarize your novel?

In the summer after his junior year of college, Jonathan Safran Foer leaves the ivy of Princeton for the impoverished farmlands of eastern Europe. Armed with only a photograph of questionable origin, he hopes to find Augustine — a woman who might be a link to a grandfather he never knew. He is guided on his journey by Alexander Perchov, a young Ukrainian translator, poignantly insightful and absurd, who is also searching for lost family, but in his case, family that is very much alive and near. What follows is a quixotic misadventure, at sharp turns comedic and tragic, which culminates in the most essential existential questions: Who am I? What am I to do?

Woven into this narrative is the novel that Jonathan is working on — an imagined history of Trachimbrod, the shtetl that he and Alex investigate. As the contemporary section moves back in time, the imagined history moves forward. "Reality" and "fiction" meet in the final scene, when the Nazis invade Trachimbrod and all is, or isn't, lost.

Everything Is Illuminated is, above all things, about love — between parent and child, between lovers, friends, and generations, between what happened and what will happen.

How did the idea for the book originate?
When I was young, I would often spend Friday nights at my grandmother's house. On the way in, she would lift me from the ground with one of her wonderful and terrifying hugs. And on the way out the next afternoon, I was again lifted into the air with her love. It wasn't until years later that I realized she was also weighing me.

Being a survivor of World War II, being someone who spent years — approximately the years I am now experiencing — scrounging for food while traversing Europe barefoot, she is acutely, desperately aware of weights: of bodies, of presences, of things that do and don't exist. And it has always been with measuring — the distances between what is felt and said, the lightness of love, the heft of showing love — that I have connected with her. My writing, I have begun to understand — I am learning anew with each newly written word — springs from the same need to measure.

I did not intend to write *Everything Is Illuminated*. I intended to chronicle, in strictly nonfictional terms, a trip that I made to Ukraine as a twenty-year-old. Armed with a photograph of the woman who, I was told, had saved my grandfather from the Nazis, I embarked on a journey to Trachimbrod, the shtetl of my family's origins. The comedy of errors lasted five days. I found nothing but nothing, and in that nothing — a landscape of completely realized absence — nothing was to be found. Because I didn't tell my grandmother about the trip — she would never have let me go — I didn't know what questions to ask, or whom to ask, or the necessary names of people, places, and things. The nothing came as much from me as from what I encountered. I returned to Prague, where I had planned to write the story of what had happened.

But what had happened? It took me a week to finish the first sentence. In the remaining month, I wrote 280 pages. What made beginning so difficult, and the remainder so seemingly automatic, was imagination — the initial problem, and ultimate liberation, of imagining. My mind wanted to wander, to invent, to use what I had seen as a canvas, rather than the paints. But, I wondered, is the Holocaust exactly that which cannot be imagined? What are one's responsibilities to "the truth" of a story, and what is "the truth"? Can historical accuracy be replaced with imaginative accuracy? The eye with the mind's eye?

The novel's two voices — one "realistic," the other "folkloric" — and their movement toward each other, has to do with this problem of imagination. The Holocaust presents a real moral quandary for the artist. Is one allowed to be funny? Is one allowed to attempt verisimilitude? To forgo it? What are the moral implications of quaintness? Of wit? Of sentimentality? What, if anything, is untouchable?

With the two very different voices, I attempted to show the rift that I experienced when trying to imagine the book. (It is the most explicit of many rifts in the book.) And with their development toward each other, I attempted to heal the rift, or wound.

*Everything Is Illuminated* proposes the possibility of a responsible duality, of "did and didn't," of things being one way and also the opposite way. Rather than aligning itself with either "how things were" or "how things could have been," the novel measures the difference between the two, and by so doing, attempts to
Did you ever find the woman who apparently saved your grandfather from the Nazis?

I wasn't even close to finding her. The trip was so ill conceived, so poorly planned, so without the research that would have been necessary to have had any hope of accomplishing what I thought was my purpose — finding Augustine — that I never had a chance.

But in retrospect, I'm not sure that the purpose was to find her. I'm not even sure I wanted to find her. I was twenty when I made the trip — an unobservant Jew, with no felt connection to, or great interest in, my past. I kept an ironic distance from religion, and was skeptical of anything described as "Jewish."

And yet, my writing — what little I did then — began to take on a Jewish sensibility, if not content. To my surprise, I started asking genealogical questions of my mother, and sending Amazon.com workers to the darkest recesses of the warehouse for titles like *Shtetl Finder Gazeteer*, by Chester G. Cohen. (Chester G. Cohen?) I was a closeted Jew.

After twenty years of life, the feelings and facts had begun to diverge. I spent my time and energy on activities I didn't think I cared about. There was a split — a strange and exhilarating split — between the Jonathan that thought (secular), and the Jonathan that did (Jewish). Because my trip to Ukraine came at the beginning of this fracture — before I could appreciate the coexistence of my halves — I was not yet ready to want to find Augustine. I jeopardized my trip by refusing to prepare for it.

Thankfully. The complete absence that I found in Ukraine gave my imagination total freedom. The novel wouldn't have been possible had my search been that other kind of success.

Is the Jonathan Safran Foer in your story the Jonathan Safran Foer who wrote the story? If not, which one do you prefer?

I try to treat all Jonathan Safran Foers equally, appreciating their unique gifts, ignoring, when possible, their unique shortcomings, patting all of their heads when I think to, and saying things like, "You're smart," or, "You're cute."

Now, as for the particular JSF who wrote the book, and the one in the book, they are profoundly different people who happen to share a profound amount. It's useless to try to find points of convergence and divergence, just as it's useless to prefer one over the other, since both the writer and the character are always changing — neither under my control. And that possibility of change, that insistence on change, is what makes this kind of writing feel, for me, so exhilarating and terrifying. Will I grow away from the JSF in the book, or will we grow toward each other? In twenty years — God willing we both live that long — will we be like strangers? Or will we know each other completely?

What's the significance of the title?
It refers to a passage in the book in which all of the citizens of Trachimbrod are making love at once. The narrator puts forth a pseudoscientific "theory," the gist of which is:

From space, astronauts can see people making love as a tiny speck of light. Not light, exactly, but a glow that could be confused for light — a coital radiance that takes generations to pour like honey through the darkness to the astronaut's eyes.

In about one and a half centuries — after the lovers who made the glow will have long since been laid permanently on their backs — the metropolitan cities will be seen from space. They will glow all year. Smaller cities will also be seen, but with great difficulty. Towns will be virtually impossible to spot. Individual couples invisible.

The glow is born from the sum of thousands of loves: newlyweds and teenagers who spark like lighters out of butane, pairs of men who burn fast and bright, pairs of women who illuminate for hours with soft multiple glows, orgies like rock and flint toys sold at festivals, couples trying unsuccessfully to have children who burn their frustrated image on the continent like the bloom a bright light leaves on the eye after you turn away from it.

Some nights, some places are a little brighter. It's difficult to stare at New York City on Valentine's Day, or Dublin on St. Patrick's. The old walled city of Jerusalem lights up like a candle each of Chanukah's eight nights. Trachimday is the only time all year when the tiny village of Trachimbrod can be seen from space, when enough copulative voltage is generated to sex the Polish-Ukrainian skies electric. We're here, the glow of 1804 will say in one and a half centuries. We're here, and we're alive.

Of course, the title is also playing off the other notions of illumination, particularly revelation. The book traces an arc from ignorance to knowledge, from inexperience to wisdom.

I've also always loved the idea of illuminated manuscripts — embellished, overstuffed books. And I love the idea of books being more than books, or being, rather, something other than books. I think the ideal experience of my book would be like listening to music.

What are you working on now?

I'm trying to finish a draft of another novel, tentatively titled The Zelnik Museum.