

A Reader's Guide



Everything Is Illuminated

by Jonathan Safran Foer

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Questions for Discussion

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *Everything Is Illuminated* for every reader.

1. *Everything Is Illuminated* is a novel written in two voices: Alex's account of the fictional character Jonathan Safran Foer's journey to Ukraine, and Jonathan's magical history of the village of his ancestors. How would you describe these two voices? How is the language different? In what ways do the two narratives intersect or diverge? Why do you think the author chose to write the novel in this way?
2. On page 1, Alex refers to Jonathan Safran Foer as "the hero of this story." Is he the hero? Why do you think the author Jonathan Safran Foer chose to give the protagonist of the novel his name? Does this decision affect how you read the story? Would the experience of reading *Everything Is Illuminated* be different if this character had another name?
3. Why does Jonathan travel to Ukraine? What is he searching for? What are Alex and his grandfather searching for on the journey? What does each character find?
4. On page 3, Alex says, "I had never met a Jewish person until the voyage." How would you describe Alex's view of Jewish people? What about his grandfather's? Do these views change as the journey progresses?
5. On page 61, referring to his grandmother, Jonathan explains to Alex: "I couldn't even tell her I was coming to the Ukraine. She thinks I'm still in Prague." Why can't Jonathan tell his grandmother about his trip? Why is it a secret? Which other characters have secrets they cannot tell their families? What secrets are concealed? What secrets are revealed?

6. Many of the chapters are titled "Falling in Love." There are many kinds of love in the novel.

On page 83, Jonathan writes about the love between Brod and Yankel: "But each was the closest thing to a deserving recipient of love that the other would find. So they gave each other all of it." How would you describe this love?

There is also Jonathan's love of Augustine, the woman he is searching for. Alex writes, on page 24, "I am certain that I can fathom it." In what ways do Jonathan and Alex love Augustine? How does Alex's grandfather love her?

Brod loves the Kolker, the man she marries. And there is Safran's love for the Gypsy girl. What other kinds of love are there in the novel? How are they similar or different from each other?

7. Many of the reviewers of the book have noted the unusual and successful use of humor in the novel, especially in light of its concern with the tragic history of the Holocaust. On page 53, Alex writes to Jonathan: "Humor is the only truthful way to tell a sad story." How would you describe the humor in the novel? How does it relate to tragedy? What are your feelings about using humor in a novel that deals with the Holocaust?

8. On page 79, Jonathan writes that Brod "would never be happy and honest at the same time." And on page 117, Alex, frustrated by not finding Augustine, explains that "not-truths hung in front of me like fruit. Which could I pick for the hero? Which could I pick for Grandfather? Which for myself?" What roles do lies and deception play in *Everything Is Illuminated*? When and why are lies sometimes necessary? When do they hurt either the liar or the ones they lie to?

9. Many things and people are split in the novel: the two narratives; the twins, Hannah and Chana; the Kolker, his head literally split by a saw blade; the Double-House in Trachimbrod. What other doubles are there? Why do you think this is such a prominent theme in the novel? What does it reflect about human nature? How does it relate to the question of how we write about historical events, as made clear by the opening sentence of the second chapter: "It was March 18, 1791, when Trachim B's double-axle wagon either did or did not pin him against the bottom of the Brod River."

10. On page 154, following the realization that he has not found Augustine, Alex writes that "I persevered to think of her as Augustine, because like Grandfather, I could not stop thinking of her as Augustine." Why do Alex and his grandfather refuse to acknowledge that the woman they meet is not Augustine? Why do they want her to be Augustine? Who is the woman really?

11. Guilt is a big theme in *Everything Is Illuminated*. On page 187, Alex's grandfather, responding to the account of the Nazis' murdering innocent Jews, tells Alex: "You would not help somebody if it signified that you would be murdered and your family would be murdered." On page 227, Alex's grandfather says, "I am not a bad person. I am a good person who has lived in a bad time." Do you think Alex's grandfather did anything wrong? Should he feel in any way guilty? If your answers to the two questions are different, how can that be? Are we responsible for the bad things that others do if we do nothing to stop them?

Should we feel guilty if a family member did something bad in the past? Can we free ourselves from guilt for past deeds?

12. On pages 265-6, Jonathan writes, "Every widow wakes one morning, perhaps after years of pure and unwavering grieving, to realize she has slept a good night's sleep, and will be able to eat breakfast, and doesn't hear her husband's ghost all the time, but only some of the time." How do the characters in *Everything Is Illuminated* live their lives in the wake of tragic events? How do we both move on and still remember these events? What roles do stories play in reconciling ourselves with the past?

13. Do you consider the ending of the book hopeful or tragic? Why?

14. What does the title of the novel, *Everything Is Illuminated*, mean? Does it mean one thing? What things are illuminated? What is illumination? What is gained and lost by illumination?

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

Q) How would you summarize your novel?

A) 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.

Q) How did the idea for the book originate?

A) 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 reflect the way things *feel*.

Q) Did you ever find the woman who apparently saved your grandfather from the Nazis?

A) 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.

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

A) 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?

Q) What's the significance of the title?

A) 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.

Q) What are you working on now?

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