

Foer, Jonathan Safran

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Jonathan Safran Foer (b. 1977) is the author of three novels: *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), and *Here I Am* (2016). Foer has also published the nonfiction works *Eating Animals* (2009) and *We Are the Weather* (2019), and the experimental work *Tree of Codes* (2010), a reworking of Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles* (originally from 1934) from which most of the words have been literally "cut out," resulting in a new story. Through their use of magical realism, intertextuality, and formal innovation, Foer's novels affirm fiction's ability to provide reality with meaning through an intersubjective exchange in which the reader is actively involved; as such, his work can be seen to move beyond postmodernism.

Foer was born in Washington, DC, in a Jewish family. He attended Princeton (1995–1999), majoring in philosophy and studying creative writing under Joyce Carol Oates. Oates also supervised Foer's thesis, an exploration of the life of his maternal grandfather, a Holocaust survivor, which Foer later expanded into his debut novel. In 2004 Foer married fellow writer Nicole Krauss,

whose work can be said to address themes and employ stylistic devices similar to Foer's. They divorced in 2014, an experience that, at least partly, seems to inform Foer's novel *Here I Am*.

Each of Foer's novels braids together several plotlines. *Everything Is Illuminated* features three narrative strands: the account of the visit of "Jonathan Safran Foer" (in what follows, I will refer to this character as "Jonathan" while referring to the author as "Foer") to Ukraine in search of traces of his Jewish ancestry, narrated by his guide Alexei Perchov in, through excessive thesaurus use, comically mangled English; the fictional, highly fantastic history of the Jewish village of Trachimbrod, written by Jonathan, since his actual search yielded little information, mainly focusing on his "great-great-great-great-great-grandmother" Brod (p. 16) and his grandfather Safran; and Alex's letters to Jonathan, which comment on their developing narratives.

Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close centers on the first-person narrative of nine-year-old Oskar Schell, in the second year after his father Thomas's death in the 9/11 attacks. Oskar interprets random things his father left behind as clues to be deciphered; upon finding a key in an envelope with "Black" written on it, Oskar visits everyone in the New York

The Encyclopedia of Contemporary American Fiction 1980–2020, First Edition. Edited by Patrick O'Donnell, Lesley Larkin, and Stephen Burn.

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phonebook named Black. The novel also features the narratives of Oskar's grandparents, both survivors of the Dresden firebombing during World War II: the narrative of the grandfather (also named Thomas) is made up of letters to his son, Oskar's father, which he never sent except one; and that of the grandmother consists of letters to Oskar.

Here I Am offers a collage of narratives, focusing on 42-year-old writer Jacob Bloch, and the four generations of his family. The novel revolves around two main events: at home, Jacob and his wife Julia's marriage falling apart, partly due to Jacob's infidelity, and their difficulty preparing their oldest son Sam's bar mitzvah; and on the world stage, a huge earthquake in the Middle East is taken to spell the "destruction of Israel," as Arab countries declare war on Israel, which in turn calls upon Jews around the world to "come home" (pp. 3, 454). In the face of these developments, Jacob struggles with his identity and responsibilities, as a husband, father, and an American Jew.

All three of Foer's novels can be said to contain magical realist elements. In *Everything Is Illuminated*, the Trachimbrod chapters offer a mythical world of Yiddish folktales – elements presented as a normal part of the shtetl's historical reality. The intertextual links between these chapters and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) are clear: "Both texts focus on small rural towns, [. . .] from their quasi-mythical beginnings to their apocalyptic destruction. Both narratives do so by following the fate of several generations of the founding family" (Huber 2014, p. 121). Alex's account and letters, despite their seemingly realist presentation, also acquire a fantastical quality, mainly due to his comical language use (e.g. that Alex is "a more flaccid-to-utter version of [his] legal name" and that his little brother is "always promenading into things" [p. 1]), giving these chapters an unworldly, slapstick tone.

Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close presents a recognizable post-9/11 story world mixed with fantastical elements. As a result, the narrative reality has a "storybook quality": on his wanderings through New York, Oskar "never once gets in harm's way," meeting a "motley assortment of characters, each more extravagant than the next"; overall, his "precocity alone is almost beyond belief" (Uytterschout 2010, p. 188) – take, for example, Oskar's constant inventions, such as shower water that includes a chemical making your skin color change according to your mood: "Everyone could know what everyone else felt, and we could be more careful with each other" (p. 163). Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959), and its protagonist Oskar Matzerath, is an obvious intertextual influence on Foer's novel. Both novels employ "magical realism" to convey the "trauma" of "life in the wake of manmade cataclysm" (Uytterschout 2010, p. 185). One fantastical motif in Foer's novel, the desire to reverse time, also links it to Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). Foer makes this link by presenting the final pages of the novel as a flipbook Oskar created, of photographs of a man falling out of one of the Twin Towers, that can make the man "fall" upward, presumably back to safety, which mirrors a "dream" that Oskar's grandmother has, reversing the firebombing of Dresden: "The fire went back into the bombs, which rose up and into the bellies of the planes whose propellers turned backward" (pp. 306–307) – a description that recalls, at points literally, Billy Pilgrim's reverse experience of that same bombing in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

By comparison, *Here I Am* seems to lack such fantastical elements. In his first two novels, Foer uses remarkable characters to shed light on real, historic disasters (and their aftermath), which are often deemed unthinkable, and unrepresentable – the Holocaust, the 9/11 attacks. In his third novel, conversely, Foer uses a counterfactual, imagined

disaster – “the destruction of Israel” – as a background to illuminate the crises of the Bloch family. Still, some similarities to the first two novels’ fantastical registers are visible. The children’s precociousness recalls Oskar Schell. The “bible” for the TV show Jacob is secretly writing about his life resembles documents from *Everything Is Illuminated*. Fantastic excess also appears in the depiction of the Middle East military conflict, for example, when the Israeli prime minister does something “so outrageously symbolic, so potentially kitschy, so many miles over the top,” namely: he “inhaled, and gathered into the ram’s horn the molecules of every Jew who had ever lived,” “aimed the shofar [. . .], [and] television screens trembled, they shook” (pp. 460–461). The most obvious intertextual link of *Here I Am* is to the Torah, specifically Abraham’s repeated use of the eponymous phrase “Here I am” in the Book of Genesis. Abraham uses it three times, in response to God, to Isaac, and to the angel who intervenes. In *Here I Am* the phrase is also repeatedly spoken, mainly by Jacob, to suggest a “presence” to different identities and responsibilities – those of husband, father, and American Jew – that he struggles to realize and combine.

The presence of such fantastical and intertextual elements in Foer’s novels is coupled with different nonconventional uses of text and visuality. In *Everything Is Illuminated*, language clearly points to itself, not just in Alex’s comical use of English, but also in formulations such as the opening sentence of the first Trachimbrod 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” (p. 8) – signaling the inability to render a historically accurate narrative. At one point, the authors of *The Book of Antecedents*, which documents Trachimbrod life, reach the present, so the only thing left to document is their own writing activity,

rendered in the novel by one and a half pages of the repeated phrase “We are writing. . .” (pp. 212–213). Furthermore, when the Nazis are about to bomb Trachimbrod, the narrator notes: “Here it is almost impossible to go on, because we know what happened, and wonder why they don’t.” A few lines further linguistic description indeed seems to halt, replaced by a page and a half of dots and some scattered phrases (pp. 270–271). This can be read as the narrator’s attempt to halt time, and also as a long ellipsis to signal the omission of the unrepresentable (Codde 2007, p. 245; Krijnen 2016, pp. 63–64); as such, the dots could even be seen to represent the bombs erasing Trachimbrod. Finally, Alex’s letters “highlight the constructed and fictional nature of Jonathan’s fictionalized history of Trachimbrod as well as Alex’s ostensibly factual report” (Krijnen 2016, p. 201).

Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close, too, makes use of diverse compositional elements. Besides the flipbook, the novel contains many photographs throughout, most of them representing Oskar’s clippings. The only letter the grandfather sent to his son is rendered with different markings in red pen, suggesting Thomas Schell, Jr.’s “corrective” reading (pp. 208–216). Furthermore, when the grandfather writes a final letter in his notebook, the pages of which are running out, the spacing between lines and letters becomes gradually smaller until they overlap, resulting in three illegible, black pages (pp. 281–284). And when the grandmother writes her life story and shows it to her husband, this is rendered by three blank pages (it later turns out the grandmother had only pressed the space for pages on end). The novel’s use of these “meta-texts” conveys the “difficulties in conveying traumatic experience through the absence and presence of fragmented traditional narrative structures” and the “self-reflexive nature of creating representation” of such experience (Atchison 2010, p. 365).

In contrast to Foer's first two novels, the form of *Here I Am* emphasizes fragmentation, more so than (self-awareness about) the difficulties of representation – perhaps because its central events, midlife crisis, marriage trouble, and the Middle East military conflict, are all too imaginable. In addition to the conventional free indirect discourse that makes up the majority of the novel, a set of other textual forms emphasizes the separation between different generations and identities, such as: Jacob's "bible" for his television show (with prescriptions for "how to play" certain family situations); transcripts of interactions in the online virtual world "Other Life"; a calendar of events of the Middle East conflict; and speeches by different political leaders. Of course, this array of different forms makes the reader very aware of the constructed nature of the text. This also holds for the recurring phrase "here I am" – the scriptural roots of which are described in the novel – causing a metafictional awareness of the intertextual link that is meant to imbue that phrase with meaning.

Some reviewers have criticized these aspects of Foer's fiction as empty, whimsical uses of worn-out, "postmodernist tricks" (for an overview of such critiques, see e.g. Huber 2014, pp. 113–116; Codde 2007, p. 250). Arguably, however, Foer's work employs these elements in new ways and as such moves beyond postmodernism.

The reflexive play with language, form, and myth in postmodernist literature is widely regarded as ontological in aim, expressing that all supposedly "natural" realities, official histories, and "grand narratives" are constructed – and, specifically, that language cannot access the traumatic events of the past – and rejoicing in the resulting ambiguity of fact and fiction. Conversely, Foer's work "shifts its attention from the possibility or impossibility of representation towards the responsibilities of fictions,

to their communicative value and their creative power," "focus[ing] more on ethical questions" (Huber 2014, p. 113).

Everything Is Illuminated, in Alex and Jonathan's discovery that there is nothing left of Trachimbrod, does not just reaffirm the impossibility of representation; rather, it asserts that we "can *only* and inevitably *represent*" (Krijnen 2016, p. 68). Through its fantastical elements and formal devices the novel makes clear that it is not presenting the Holocaust but a literary construction. Instead of endlessly deconstructing, it leaves behind the idea that words are supposed to conjure the "presence" of the events and experiences described. It is exactly the inability to access the past that confronts the reader with moral questions, with the responsibility to consider that past – illustrated, most importantly, by Alex's grandfather's confession that during the war he betrayed his Jewish friend Herschel. Herein, the novel actually reasserts the "boundary between fiction and reality" (Huber 2014, p. 117) that postmodernism had blurred: within the novel, the Trachimbrod chapters are clearly framed as fiction while, when Alex considers "improving" his grandfather's story, he realizes the "fundamental, epistemological difference" between his grandfather's confession and Jonathan's tale (Krijnen 2016, p. 203). Even in the latter narrative, when the Holocaust approaches, the ironic, magical-realist distance breaks down, reasserting Trachimbrod as a real place and its destruction as a real event (cf. Huber 2014, p. 124). These elements refer us to the reality of the historical and ethical issues prompted by the novel through fiction.

Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close similarly figures the 9/11 attacks, and the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima, as an inaccessible, traumatic past, with the novel's formal experiments "rendering the condition of the traumatized mind" (Codde 2007, p. 248), evoking the inability to communicate in Oskar and

his grandparents. But, through these devices, the reader *is* allowed the possibility for communication, for understanding these characters. It is not so much the general events of the past that are inaccessible to the characters, but rather that they are unable to cope with their failure to face the other in a time of crisis (Schreier 2015, p. 195) – most importantly, that Oskar did not answer the phone when his father called right before his death. The inclusion of Dresden and Hiroshima also questions claims to 9/11 as a unique, unimaginable event and the United States' exceptional moral stature – as perpetrator, not just victim. Again, these elements are ethical rather than ontological in their aim. This also applies to the flipbook: it does not suggest that, through fiction, history can be undone; it also does not present Oskar believing (or pretending) he can reverse what happened. In fact, Oskar's accompanying description is phrased in the conditional perfect – that his father “would've flown through a window, back into the building,” and “We would have been safe” (pp. 325, 326) – explicitly acknowledging its counterfactuality. Also, the flipbook does not include page numbers, so, in a sense, “there is no beginning or end,” “only the suggestion of a continuous cycle of floating and falling, forwards and backwards” (Vanderwees 2015, p. 188). As such, it embodies (Oskar's acceptance) that it is impossible to return to the past but that it has to be continuously faced in the present.

In *Here I Am* Jacob's writing of his television show “bible” remains a solipsistic exercise, replacing actual communication with his family and offering little insight into how such communication might be reestablished. The novel's hypothesizing of the “destruction of Israel” leads Jacob to understand his Jewish American identity as severed from the fate of Israel, but, again, mostly as an inevitable outcome of his passivity. Furthermore, even though *Here I Am* might be said to render

some diversity by offering very different Jewish voices, it is remarkable – also in comparison to the cross-cultural references in Foer's first two novels – that *Here I Am* features no substantial Palestinian or Arab voices (only caricatural declarations of war). It seems that Foer's third novel limits the redemptive, communicative potential of fiction to the children, especially Sam, in his interactions in online virtual worlds, where he is able to talk with others about the problems in his family and preparations for his bar mitzvah – thereby emphasizing, as in Foer's previous work, not the ontological blurring of real and virtual (fictional) worlds but their ethical interrelation.

In its affirmation of fiction's ability to provide reality with (ethical, intersubjective) meaning, Foer's work moves beyond certain postmodernist notions of textuality, history, and (inter)subjectivity. Such notions are represented and criticized, for example, in the character Brod, in *Everything Is Illuminated*, who understands the world through idealized conceptions – of love, beauty, happiness – against which the world always, inevitably, falls short, which leads Brod to conclude these things don't really exist: “So she had to satisfy herself with the idea of love,” to live “in a world once-removed” (p. 80). Such hyperreflexive solipsism and skepticism we can recognize in Jonathan, too, and also in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, above all in the grandfather: “the distance that wedged itself between me and my happiness wasn't the world, [it was me, my thinking]” (p. 17). All three characters can be seen to overcome, or at least ameliorate, this through connection to others: Brod to the Kolker (her husband), Jonathan to Alex, and grandfather to Oskar. They come to realize that meaning depends on intersubjective exchange. As Alex says to Jonathan: “With our writing, we are reminding each other of things” (p. 144). The novels' stylistic and formal devices serve to foster the reader's active involvement in

this dialogical process of meaning-making. As a result, Foer's novels feature the emergence of a "dialogic textual 'we' that engages characters and readers alike in a dynamic process of exchange" (Amian 2008, p. 185). In this way, Foer's work can be seen to move beyond postmodernism: "After scepticism has called everything into question and exposed all former certainties as fictions," his novels emphasize the need "to take responsibility for the kind of fictions we propose and subscribe to" and suggest that these should be fictions that "create intersubjective connections" and "break through the barriers of a solipsistic self" (Huber 2014, pp. 145–146).

SEE ALSO: After Postmodernism; Chabon, Michael; Debut Novels; Englander, Nathan; Fiction and Terrorism; Krauss, Nicole; Oates, Joyce Carol; Post-9/11 Narratives; Realism after Poststructuralism; Trauma and Fiction; Vonnegut, Kurt

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