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BookBrowse.com Homepage**PRINT THIS PAGE**[How to print a part of this page, not all of it?](#)**Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close**

by Jonathan Safran Foer

Please be aware that this discussion guide may contain spoilers!**Introduction**

Meet Oskar Schell, an inventor, Francophile, tambourine player, Shakespearean actor, jeweler, pacifist, correspondent with Stephen Hawking and Ringo Starr. He is nine years old. And he is on an urgent, secret search through the five boroughs of New York. His mission is to find the lock that fits a mysterious key belonging to his father, who died in the World Trade Center on 9/11.

An inspired innocent, Oskar is alternately endearing, exasperating, and hilarious as he careens from Central Park to Coney Island to Harlem on his search. Along the way he is always dreaming up inventions to keep those he loves safe from harm. What about a birdseed shirt to let you fly away? What if you could actually hear everyone's heartbeat? His goal is hopeful, but the past speaks a loud warning in stories of those who've lost loved ones before. As Oskar roams New York City, he encounters a motley assortment of people who are all survivors in their own way. He befriends a 103-year-old war reporter, a tour guide who never leaves the Empire State Building, and lovers enraptured or scorned. Ultimately, Oskar ends his journey where it began, at his father's grave. But now he is accompanied by the silent stranger who has been renting the spare room of his grandmother's apartment. They are there to dig up his father's empty coffin.

Discussion Questions

1. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* was published in 2005; many reviewers thought of it as the first major 9/11 novel. What does it mean for a book to be a "9/11 novel"? Does our sense of what a 9/11 novel is change over time? How do you think the reading of this book differs now than from when it was first published? Do you think it will be read differently ten or twenty or fifty years from now?
2. Did reading the book bring back memories of 9/11 for you? Do you remember how you felt in the days and weeks that followed that event? Do you remember what scared you? What you were grateful for?
3. Similarly, the book could be called a New York novel. In what ways is the book's sense of place integral to the story being told? In what ways is the setting universal?
4. Nine-year-old Oskar Schell is the central figure of the book. Did you find him believable? Compelling? Did you empathize with him? Think about Oskar's literary precedents: Salinger's Holden Caulfield or Zoey Glass; Gunter Grass's Oskar of *The Tin Drum*; even Foer's own character of Alex in *Everything is Illuminated*. Do you feel that Foer built on the tradition of the child narrator in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*? Did he subvert it in any way?
5. When the book opens, Oskar is describing some of his "inventions." What do Oskar's inventions have in common? Which of his inventions resonated the most with you?
6. Oskar writes letters to famous people—Stephen Hawking, Ringo Starr. Why does he write these letters? Oskar's letters to celebrities are only a few of the letters in the book. Who else writes letters? Do you consider this an epistolary novel? Why or why not?
7. On p. 99, we see an image of one of Oskar's "business cards," on which he defines himself with over a dozen titles. On pp. 157–158, we are introduced to his neighbor's card catalog, by which Mr. Black describes everyone he's ever met using one word. Which method of defining a person is more accurate? Which is more revealing? How does Oskar change how he defines himself over the course of the book? What about the other characters' self-definitions?
8. What is the relationship in the book between writing and memory? How do characters use writing to remember things? How does writing obscure or impair or alter (perceived?) memory? How is writing manipulated—or manipulating? (Think about the Grandmother writing her life story, and the Grandfather reading it.) What is the relationship between writing and reality?
9. The two central traumas in the book occur in the lives of Oskar Schell and his grandfather, Thomas Schell. Does Foer encourage a kind of historical or moral equivalence between the two precipitating events—the attacks on 9/11 and the American bombing of Dresden? What is the author saying about the individual's role in history?

10. The book is full of typographical oddities, some playful, some sad. Some of the many photographs in the book are part of Oskar's compilation of "Stuff that Happened to Me"—yet most of the images he collects there (like images of a shark attack) didn't happen to him. What is Oskar's relationship to this material? How did it make you feel, as the reader, to encounter these images while you read the book?
11. Characters throughout the book conflate the physical and the emotional; many of the characters make material totems of their emotional states—from the ball of his grandmother's yarn that Oskar tugs to indicate that he is okay, to the bracelet that Oskar's grandmother's grandmother said she would measure her wrist twice for, to make sure she could wear this symbol of her love. Why do you feel the characters use physical embodiments of their feelings in this way? In Oskar's imagining of the last moments at the World Trade Center, he says, "I read that it was the paper that kept the towers burning. All of those notepads, and Xeroxes, and printed e-mails, and photographs of kids, and books, and dollar bills in wallets, and documents in files... all of them were fuel" (p.325). What is the author saying about the ways we express ourselves?
12. The book is filled with liminal areas, borders between opposites. Many of the characters of the book seem to struggle with uniting these opposites (between Yes and No, between Something and Nothing, between Manhattan and the Sixth Borough). What is Foer saying about these efforts to unite opposites? Is it a longing to connect, to make something divided whole? Or is he advocating a rejection of the idea of opposites?
13. Oskar's narrative is structured by his quest to find the lock that his key will open. What other purpose does the quest provide? What is the result of the quest?
14. What is the importance of last words? Do they mean more than other words? Think about the last words you've said to someone, or they've said to you. Do they feel more meaningful than other conversations?
15. What did you make of the novel's closing sequence, with the flip-book images? Did you find them moving? Trivializing? Helpful? Hopeful?

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Discussion questions written by Erin Edmison.

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Discussion Questions for *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer

(Some questions taken or adapted from

<http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/13-fiction/313-extremely-loud-and-incredibly-close-foer.>)

1. Is the book's title a good one?
2. How does *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* relate to life in the U.S. today?
3. Who was your favorite character? Why?
4. How much of a person's character would you say is shaped by the times in which they live?
5. Oskar is an unusually precious child. Do you find him sympathetic or annoying? Or both?
6. For Shakespeare buffs: Oskar "plays Yorick" (the long dead jester whose skull Hamlet holds in his hand) in a school production. What is the significance of that role to this book? (See *Hamlet*: Act V, Scene I, Line 188)
7. Jonathan Safran Foer has said that he writes about characters and their miscommunications: some characters think they're saying a lot but say nothing; others say nothing but end up saying a lot. Which characters fall into which category in *Extremely Loud*? What might Foer be saying about our ability to communicate deep-seated emotions?
8. Some critics have wondered where Oskar's mother is and how the child is left alone to wander the streets of New York alone at night. Is that a relevant comment? Do you see this book as a work of realism (in which case the mother's role would matter) ... or as more of a fable? If the latter, what is *Extremely Loud* a fable of?
9. Do you find the illustrations, scribbles, over-written texts, etc. a meaningful, integral part of the work? Or do you find them distracting and gimmicky? Why are they there?
10. How do both main plot and subplot (Oskar's grandfather and the bombing of Dresden) interweave with one another?
11. Were there any passages or scenes that you remember well or particularly liked?
12. Has anyone had any experiences that relate to places or experiences in the book?
13. Any comments about the way the book ended?
14. Would you recommend this novel to a friend?
15. Are there any questions you would like to ask?



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Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

Jonathan Safran Foer, 2005

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

368pp.

ISBN-13: 9780618711659

Summary

Nine-year-old Oskar Schell has embarked on an urgent, secret mission that will take him through the five boroughs of New York. His goal is to find the lock that matches a mysterious key that belonged to his father, who died in the World Trade Center on the morning of September 11.

This seemingly impossible task will bring Oskar into contact with survivors of all sorts on an exhilarating, affecting, often hilarious, and ultimately healing journey.

Jonathan Safran Foer emerged as one of the most original writers of his generation with his best-selling debut novel, *Everything Is Illuminated*. Now, with humor, tenderness, and awe, he confronts the traumas of our recent history. (*From the publisher.*)

Author Bio

- Birth—1977
- Where—Washington, D.C., USA
- Education—B.A., Princeton University
- Currently—lives in New York City

Jonathan Safran Foer was born in 1977 in Washington, D.C. He is the editor of the anthology *A Convergence of Birds: Original Fiction and Poetry Inspired by the Work of Joseph Cornell*, a *Boston Globe* bestseller. His stories have been published in the *Paris Review*, *The New Yorker* and *Conjunctions*. He lives in Queens, New York.

Recent literary history is rife with auspicious debuts, and Jonathan Safran Foer's arrival was one of 2002's brightest and most media-friendly. After all, the backstory was publicist-ready: *Everything Is Illuminated* began as a thesis at Princeton under advisers Joyce Carol Oates and Jeffrey Eugenides, and Houghton Mifflin reportedly paid somewhere around half a million dollars for the rights.

Foer achieved a fresh, creative approach to the English language by viewing it through the eyes of his foreign narrator, a young Ukrainian man named Alex who works in a family tour operating business targeted toward American Jews seeking their family roots. Alex's comical, dictionary-aided writing consists of not-quite-right sentences such as "He is always promenading into things. It was only four days previous that he made his eye blue from a mismanagement with a brick wall." Alex's client, an American Jew named Jonathan Safran Foer, wants to find a woman who hid his grandfather from the Nazis. The two set out—with an old picture, and the name Augustine—to find the woman, bringing Alex's grandfather and an odiferous seeing-eye dog.

The story unfolds both through Alex's eyes and in a later correspondence with Jonathan, who reveals chapters of a fictionalized version of Augustine's story. Despite the novel's decidedly earnest and serious themes, what's most striking about it is its strange, resonant humor. *Publishers Weekly* saw "demented genius" in it; and Francine Prose, who also used the adjective "demented" for Foer's writing, noted in the *New York Times Book Review*, "The problem [with the book] is, you keep laughing out loud, losing your place, starting again, then stopping because you're tempted to call your friends and read them long sections of Jonathan Safran Foer's assured, hilarious prose."

Since Foer admitted to doing little research (although he did take a trip similar to the fictional Foer's, inspiring the book), and the historical fiction sections earned some critical gripes for being uneven (Salon called them "dime-store García Márquez"), the chief strength of *Everything Is Illuminated* lies in a scope and wit that are stunning from an author who was still finishing up college at the time he began it. The paperback rights for *Everything Is Illuminated* later went for reportedly close to \$1 million. The book was adapted to film in 2005 with Elijah Wood in the lead role. (*From Barnes and Noble.*)

More

In his second novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, published in 2005, Foer uses 9/11 as a backdrop for the story of 9-year-old Oskar Schell learning to deal with the death of his father in the World Trade Center. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* utilizes many nontraditional writing techniques. It follows multiple but interconnected storylines, is peppered with photographs of doorknobs and other such oddities, and ends with a 12-page flipbook.

Foer's utilization of these techniques resulted in both glowing praise and harsh censure from critics. Despite diverse criticism, the novel sold briskly and was translated into several languages.

Extras

- A vegetarian since the age of 10, Foer recorded the narration for "If This Is Kosher..." (2006), a harsh exposé of the kosher certification process that advocates vegetarianism and also includes Rabbi David Wolpe and Rabbi Irving Greenberg.
 - Foer is the middle child of three sons. His older brother, Franklin, is the editor of The New Republic. His younger brother, Joshua, is a freelance journalist specializing in science writing. Foer married Nicole Krauss in June 2004. Their first child, Sasha, was born in February 2006.
 - In the spring of 2008 he taught writing for the first time, as a visiting professor of intermediate fiction at Yale University. ("*More*" and "*Extras*" from Wikipedia.)
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Book Reviews

[Foer's] depiction of Oskar's reaction to phone messages left by his father as he awaited rescue in the burning World Trade Center, his description of Oskar's grandfather's love affair with Anna and his experiences during the bombing of Dresden—these passages underscore Mr. Foer's ability to evoke, with enormous compassion and psychological acuity, his characters' emotional experiences, and to show how these private moments intersect with the great public events of history.

Michiko Kakutani - New York Times

Oskar's unconscious comedy and his poignant search for information about the man who spun bedtime stories out of fantasy and science. All he wants is some way to go back to that moment of sweet security before zealots murdered his father. The tragedy of September 11 has made Oskar older than his years, but in Foer's tender portrayal the grief that weighs him down makes children of us all.

Ron Charles - Washington Post

Oskar Schell, hero of this brilliant follow-up to Foer's bestselling *Everything Is Illuminated*, is a nine-year-old amateur inventor, jewelry designer, astrophysicist, tambourine player and pacifist. Like the second-language narrator of *Illuminated*, Oskar turns his naïvely precocious vocabulary to the understanding of historical tragedy, as he searches New York for the lock that matches a mysterious key left by his father when he was killed in the September 11 attacks, a quest that intertwines with the story of his grandparents, whose lives were blighted by the firebombing of Dresden. Foer embellishes the narrative with evocative graphics, including photographs, colored highlights and passages of illegibly overwritten text, and takes his unique flair for the poetry of miscommunication to occasionally gimmicky lengths, like a two-page soliloquy written entirely in numerical code. Although not quite the comic tour de force that *Illuminated* was, the novel is replete with hilarious and appalling passages, as when, during show-and-tell, Oskar plays a harrowing recording by a Hiroshima survivor and then launches into a Poindexterish disquisition on the bomb's "charring effect." It's more of a challenge to play in the same way with the very recent collapse of the towers, but Foer gambles on the power of his protagonist's voice to transform the cataclysm from raw current event to a tragedy

at once visceral and mythical. Unafraid to show his traumatized characters' constant groping for emotional catharsis, Foer demonstrates once again that he is one of the few contemporary writers willing to risk sentimentalism in order to address great questions of truth, love and beauty.

Publishers Weekly

An emotionally devastating climax. No spoilers here, but we will say that the book—which includes a number of photographs and some eccentric typography—ends with what is undoubtedly the most beautiful and heartbreaking flip book in all of literature.

Booklist

Oskar Schell is not your average nine-year-old. A budding inventor, he spends his time imagining wonderful creations. He also collects random photographs for his scrapbook and sends letters to scientists. When his father dies in the World Trade Center collapse, Oskar shifts his boundless energy to a quest for answers. He finds a key hidden in his father's things that doesn't fit any lock in their New York City apartment; its container is labeled "Black." Using flawless kid logic, Oskar sets out to speak to everyone in New York City with the last name of Black. A retired journalist who keeps a card catalog with entries for everyone he's ever met is just one of the colorful characters the boy meets. As in *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), Foer takes a dark subject and works in offbeat humor with puns and wordplay. But *Extremely Loud* pushes further with the inclusion of photographs, illustrations, and mild experiments in typography reminiscent of Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* (1973). The humor works as a deceptive, glitzy cover for a fairly serious tale about loss and recovery. For balance, Foer includes the subplot of Oskar's grandfather, who survived the World War II bombing of Dresden. Although this story is not quite as evocative as Oskar's, it does carry forward and connect firmly to the rest of the novel. The two stories finally intersect in a powerful conclusion that will make even the most jaded hearts fall. —Matthew L. Moffett, Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale, VA.

School Library Journal

The search for the lock that fits a mysterious key dovetails with related and parallel quests in this (literally) beautifully designed second novel from the gifted young author (*Everything Is Illuminated*, 2002). The searcher is nine-year-old Oskar Schell, an inventive prodigy who (albeit modeled on the protagonist of Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum*) employs his considerable intellect with refreshing originality in the aftermath of his father Thomas's death following the bombing of the World Trade Center. That key, unidentified except for the word "black" on the envelope containing it, impels Oskar to seek out every New Yorker bearing the surname Black, involving him with a reclusive centenarian former war correspondent, and eventually the nameless elderly recluse who rents a room in his paternal grandma's nearby apartment. Meanwhile, unmailed letters from a likewise unidentified "Thomas" reveal their author's loneliness and guilt, while stretching backward to wartime Germany and a horrific precursor of the 9/11 atrocity: the firebombing of Dresden. In a

riveting narrative animated both by Oskar's ingenuous assumption of adult responsibility and understanding (interestingly, he's "playing Yorick" in a school production of *Hamlet*) and the letter-writer's meaningful silences, Foer sprinkles his tricky text with interpolated illustrations that render both the objects of Oskar's many interests and the memories of a survivor who has forsworn speech, determined to avoid the pain of loving too deeply. The story climaxes as Oskar discovers what the key fits, and also the meaning of his life (all our lives, actually), in a long-awaited letter from astrophysicist Stephen Hawking. Much more is revealed as this brilliant fiction works thrilling variations on, and consolations for, its plangent message: that "in the end, everyone loses everyone." Yes, but look what Foer has found.

Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions

Use our LitLovers Book Club Resources; they can help with discussions for any book:

- How to Discuss a Book (helpful discussion tips)
- Generic Discussion Questions—Fiction and Nonfiction
- Read-Think-Talk (a guided reading chart)

Also consider these LitLovers talking points to help get a discussion started for *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*:

1. Talk about Oskar—an unusually precious child. Do you find him sympathetic or annoying? Or both?
2. For Shakespeare buffs: Oskar "plays Yorick" (the long dead jester whose skull Hamlet holds in his hand!) in a school production. What is the significance of that role? (See *Hamlet*: Act V, Scene I, Line 188).
3. Jonathan Safran Foer has said that he writes about characters and their miscommunications: some characters think they're saying a lot but say nothing; others say nothing but end up saying a lot. Which characters fall into which category in *Extremely Loud*? What might Foer be saying about our ability to communicate deep-seated emotions?
4. Some critics have wondered where Oskar's mother is and how the child is left alone to wander the streets of New York alone at night. Is that a relevant comment? Do you see this book as a work of realism (in which case the mother's role would matter) ... or as more of a fable, on the order, say, of *Life of Pi*? If the latter, what is *Extremely Loud* a fable of? (Like *Pi*, Oskar seems to be a quester—but of what?)
5. Do you find the illustrations, scribbles, over-written texts, etc. a meaningful, integral part of the work? Or do you find them distracting and gimmicky? Why are they there?
6. How do both main plot and subplot (Oskar's grandfather and the bombing of Dresden) interweave with one another?