

## Author Spotlight

# JONATHAN FOER



Jonathan Foer emerged as one of the most original writers of his generation with his best-selling debut novel, *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) and established himself at age 25 as a literary wunderkind. Since his debut novel, he has written *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), *Here I Am* (2016) and a work of nonfiction, *Eating Animals* (2009). Foer is the middle son of a Jewish family whose maternal grandparents were Holocaust survivors. He completed his secondary education in Washington, D.C., and in 1999 graduated from Princeton University, where he majored in philosophy but studied creative writing under the mentorship of author Joyce Carol Oates. He briefly attended the Mount Sinai School of Medicine before dropping out to pursue his writing career. He lives in Brooklyn and has two children with his former wife and author Nicole Krauss. He teaches creative writing at New York University.

In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, with humor, tenderness, and awe, Foer confronts the traumas of our recent history and discovers solace in that most human quality—imagination. Meet nine-year-old Oskar Schell, who is an inventor, Francophile, tambourine player, Shakespearean actor, jeweler, pacifist, and correspondent with Stephen Hawking and Ringo Starr. 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, he encounters a motley assortment of humanity who are all survivors in their own way. Ultimately, Oskar ends his journey where it began, at his father's grave.

*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.

Prepared by Maureen Socha

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## Discussion Questions for *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*

1. Talk about Oskar—do you find him sympathetic or annoying? Or both?
2. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* was published in 2005 and 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?
3. 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 were you grateful for?
4. 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?
5. Nine-year-old Oskar Schell is the central figure of the book. Did you find him believable? Compelling? Did you empathize with him? Do you feel that Foer built on the tradition of the child narrator in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*? Did he subvert it in any way?
6. 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?
7. Oskar writes letters to famous people. Why does he write these letters? Who else writes letters? Do you consider this an epistolary novel? Why or why not?
8. Do you find the illustrations, scribbles, and over-written texts, a meaningful, integral part of the work? Or do you find them distracting and gimmicky? Why are they there?
9. How do both the main plot and subplot (Oskar’s grandfather and the bombing of Dresden) interweave with one another?
10. 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 and Incredibly Close*? What might Foer be saying about our ability to communicate deep-seated emotions?

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