



Everything is Illuminated

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Everything Is Illuminated is Jonathan Safran Foer's bestselling novel of a search for truth, published as a Penguin Essential for the first time.

The inspiration for the Liev Schreiber film, starring Elijah Wood

A young man arrives in the Ukraine, clutching in his hand a tattered photograph. He is searching for the woman who fifty years ago saved his grandfather from the Nazis. Unfortunately, he is aided in his quest by Alex, a translator with an uncanny ability to mangle English into bizarre new forms; a "blind" old man haunted by memories of the war; and an undersexed guide dog named Sammy Davis Jr, Jr. What they are looking for seems elusive -- a truth hidden behind veils of time, language and the horrors of war.

What they find turns all their worlds upside down . . .

Everything is Illuminated Details

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From Reader Review Everything is Illuminated for online ebook

Robert Beveridge says

Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (Dutton, 2002)

My, what a clever novel!

In any case, that, I imagine, is what Jonathan Safran Foer kept saying as he was writing this. And really, much about it is clever. The comparisons to *A Clockwork Orange* are completely unwarranted, as Alex, Foer's Ukrainian hero, destroys the English language in a quite different way than does Burgess' Alex. (A less politically correct but more conceptually accurate comparison would be *Charlie Chan*, as written by Earl Derr Biggers.) Foer's intertwining of stories is also quite clever, and his use of the two narrators to tell the main storylines.

However, with all the cleverness going on, Foer seems to have forgotten in many places to actually insert a novel. Threads pick up in odd places and then die with no fanfare, never to be resurrected again; the story has holes without being told an enough of an impressionist way to allow the reader to fill in enough blanks; the characters are obviously there as vehicles to carry off the cleverness, instead of being fully-realized human beings. In other words, this is a linguistic roller coaster, not a novel.

Not to say Foer doesn't write well when he forgets about the tricks and applies himself. Especially in the novel's last eighty pages, there are scenes of great beauty and tragedy that are conveyed in powerful manner that make the reader sit up and take notice. (The emotional impact of every last one of them is dramatically undercut by Foer's following each with a needlessly scatological and/or pornographic piece of attempted humor, each of which fails because of its positioning, but the tragic pieces themselves are extremely well-written.) Unfortunately, these scenes are all too few. One of them is going along swimmingly until he decides to interject a Rick Moody-esque three-page unpunctuated sentence. Horrid. (And a trick he repeats a couple of times afterwards, also throwing in run-on words. Even more horrid.)

The book is billed as a comedy, and Foer tries to carry it off as such, but when the finest-written scenes are those of tragedy, it's hard to call it a success as attempted. Foer has the makings of a fine dramatic writer, once he gets away from being so consciously clever. **

Graeme Hinde says

This gets an extra star for a truly funny gag that carries the book for the first fifty or sixty pages. That's surprising and impressive mileage for a simple bit (the narrator, a non-native English speaker, relies heavily on a thesaurus, so that "a hard journey" is "a rigid journey"), but after it wears off -- grinding agony.

Foer wants to be Gabriel Garcia Marquez, but his magic is insipid and his realism is lazily dishonest. He consistently goes for an easy lie over a more complex truth. For example, near the end the hero's grandfather is talking to a statue, and the statue tells a story about a couple living near a waterfall. At first the wife hates the constant noise. Over time she gets used to the sound, until finally she can't hear it at all. She dances and splashes in the falls, completely deaf to the roar. The metaphor is that parents eventually get over the death of a child, and that's essentially true, but it's made dishonest by Foer's lazy cuteness. When you're inside

washing dishes maybe you don't hear the waterfall anymore, but if you go up and splash in it, it's deafening.

The cuteness crops up constantly ("first they had meetings every day, then every other day, then every other every other day"). At best I could imagine Peter Falk reading it to me a la Princess Bride, but even that was an effort to keep up and eventually some piece of repulsiveness would shatter the illusion. All this cuteness, and all this dishonesty, could possibly be overcome, if only the story was good. But it's not. Foer builds up some suspense by withholding information and other cheap trickery, but there's nothing up his sleeve. By the time the big illumination finally comes, we've already pretty much guessed it. This book is all style, no substance, and other than the one great gag, the style isn't very good.

Steve says

When JSF was a freshman at Princeton he took Intro to Writing with JCO (Joyce Carol Oates). She told him he possessed the most important trait a writer can have: energy. I guess I can see the evidence of that in this, his first novel, published when he was only 25. It was based on real-life research he had done in the Ukraine trying to find the woman in an old family picture who helped his grandfather escape the Nazis. He put a fictionalized wrapper around all this that bundled not only the family history, but tales about life in the shtetl, an account narrated by his young Ukrainian translator (Alex), and the correspondence between them. The writing was usually pretty lively no matter whether it was JSF or Alex at the helm. The switching between them kept the pace spritely as well. But with all this energy, something else was lacking. It falls under the more mundane category of editing.

First, there were the gimmicks. There was nothing inherently wrong with them, I just didn't feel like they were very well-executed. The fact that JSF himself was a character in the novel was a contrivance, but understandable. At least he could write convincingly from that particular point of view. His Ukrainian counterpart, though, Alex, was not as plausible. His narration was meant to be funny, replete with idiomatic inventions and not-quite-right synonyms. For instance, he would close each correspondence with "Guilelessly" rather than "Sincerely." Actually, that was one of the better ones. Others were more far-fetched, and the repetition got old. That was part of an overall inconsistency in tone, sort of like if a classically trained violinist tried to play hillbilly-style every third or fourth measure.

Good editing could have helped in a few other areas, too. For instance, the sex scenes in the early days of the shtetl didn't ring true, pre-dating by many years movies like *Long Dong Silver* where the outlandishness might have been more fitting. The stories, in general, were sort of inane. Then there was an extreme case of Deus ex machina to explain how Alex's grandfather, who was the putatively blind driver in this investigation, connected to the people they met. Foer was also criticized for overstating the part Ukrainians played in abetting the Nazis in the actual historical event at Trochenbrod (which was the model for his story).

I'm sure Foer is a real talent. My feeling with this one, though, is that he had no one in his corner telling him anything other than how great he was. He's probably matured since then, as have his people, and the editing is bound to have improved. Can anyone who's read any of his later books confirm this?

Afterthought: For a much better Holocaust story with a twist, try *The Complete Maus*.

Jason says

One of the nice things about being stoned is the added dimension of humor or profundity that otherwise inconsequential things can assume in our impression of them. I remember once having my mind blown at the idea of language, and how any two unrelated people, having been raised in the same country and while having no connection at all to each other, or there being any crossover among those who have taught or influenced them, can meet each other one day and have a mutually intelligible conversation. Fascinating, right? Well, no not really, but it sure as hell seems fascinating when you're high.

I feel as though the only way I could have read this book and found it as funny and profound as other readers found it is if I were completely and totally baked.

Everything Is Illuminated is essentially comprised of two narratives interwoven in a nonlinear arrangement. The first is the account of a small Jewish settlement in the Ukraine which, along with most of its quirky inhabitants, is wiped out by the invading Nazis in 1941. The “writer” of this section is a fictionalized version of Foer himself, who is a direct descendant of some of these villagers. The second narrative is that of a present-day Ukrainian who recounts his experiences with Foer as they try to locate a mysterious woman who Foer believes helped his family escape that aforementioned invasion. The Ukrainian, whose name is Alex, is hired by the fictional Foer as a translator in his endeavors.

While Alex is the source of much of the book’s comedy in his unintentional misuse of the English language, the comedic value stemming from this quickly ran dry for me. I think there is also an absurdity with which Foer describes the ancestral characters in the Ukrainian village (called Trachimbrod) but to me most of the quirkiness seemed forced and unnatural, and ruined what could have provided an endearing element to the story. I mean, we’re talking about a village wherein characters collect each other’s tears in thimbles and send each other pieces of string that match the length of their body parts in order that their recipients be assuaged of any fear that their loved ones have “changed.” (Blech.)

And then there are the sentences, the ones I think are meant to sound deep and awe-inspiring but which only come across as shallow and trite in my non-Coloradan state of sobriety. (Sorry, Coloradans, but I guess that’s your *thing* now.) Sentences, for example, like these!

We burned with love for ourselves, all of us, starters of the fire we suffered—our love was the affliction for which only our love was the cure.

They reciprocated the great and saving lie—that our love for things is greater than our love for our love for things—willfully playing the parts they wrote for themselves, willfully creating and believing fictions necessary for life.

She never ran from his fists, but took them, went to them, certain that her bruises were not marks of violence, but of violent love.

The Kolker was trapped in his body—like a love note in an unbreakable bottle, whose script never fades or smudges, and is never read by the eyes of the intended lover—forced to hurt the one with whom he wanted most to be gentle.

Yes, there is a lot of talk of love in this book. (I think JSF wrote it before he got himself hitched.)

Anyway, there *is* a section toward the end of the novel during which Alex’s grandfather reveals an atrocity

that occurred in his presence, and in which he was involved, and that revelation was very heartfelt and exemplifies, possibly, what JSF can be good at. But it wasn't enough to rescue this book from its overall effect of having kind of irritated the crap out of me.

Tea Jovanovi? says

Jedna od onih neobi?nih "otka?enih" knjiga koje mi s vremena na vreme nalete i osve?e mi dan... Imala sam zadovoljstvo da je ?itam u rukopisu pre objavljivanja... Mnogo kasnije nastao je film... Knjiga je, na?alost, kod nas pro?la nezapa?eno i sre?om u me?uvremenu mu se promenio izdava?... Koji ?e mo?da vi?e u?initi za ovog autora jer on to zaslu?uje... Ako volite Marka Haddona ili Dana Rhodesa... ovo je autor za vas... :)

Shovelmonkey1 says

Jonathan Safran Foer has magical powers.

No, really he does.

Look I'll prove it.

He can make anyone who reads his books spontaneously vomit adjectives in great abundance.

Proof?

The cover of Everything is Illuminated.

Let's examine the evidence:

Gripping, entertaining, dazzling - The Evening Standard

Outrageous, extraordinary - Financial Times

Hilarious, exhilarating, moving - Jewish Chronicle

Serious, funny - Herald

Powerful, shocking, harsh, sincere - List

Spectacular, funny, brilliant, moving - Observer

Showy, smart - Susan Sontag

Startling, original, comic, tragic - Nicci Gerard

Extraordinary, brilliant, shattering - San Francisco Chronicle

Glittering - Mark Lawson

Bold, exuberant - Daily Mail

Subtle, profound, fantastic, bold, imaginative - Boston Globe

Funny, brilliant - Esquire

Effervescent, reckless, vibrant, playful - TLS

Astonishing, shattering - Independent

See, the covers are spattered, inside and out, with a veritable adjective pebble-dash. Proof, Mr Safran Foer that you are not the only person in possession of a Thesaurus and that even the people at Esquire and the Daily Mail have one too.

Jon-fen is searching for a woman who saved his Grandfather during World War II. To find her, he has travelled from America to the Ukraine. He has only a photograph and a name. He had a map but that was

eaten by the bitch. He is helped, and hindered in equal measure by Alex and his Grandfather who is responsible for the bitch. The bitch is a seeing-eye dog called Sammy Davis Jr, Jr. The inclusion of the dog is for humorous purposes. Jonathan is in the Ukraine to uncover a part of his family history, however his presence forces Alex's grandfather to examine his own past too. Alex acts as interpreter and guide and puts his own inimitable spin on the English language. Told in three parts with three separate voices, sadly none of which belong to the bitch, the tone of the book alternates between melancholy, mirth and malapropisms.

This book is difficult to categorise and many people have tried to cram it into the box marked holocaust. Others have said, no it belongs in the box called love. Or family. Or remembering. Or war. Or semi-autobiographical. Or biographical. Or atonement. Or lost. Or old country.

Does it really need to go in a box? Lets just put it on top of the box and see what happens.

Bram says

Everything Is Illuminated is one of the most focused books I've read. It doesn't meander inappropriately, and there's almost no excess. Seriously, this book's got less fat than Christian Bale in *The Machinist*. It's either in full-on comedy mode, full-on fanciful mode, full-on drama mode, or some well-balanced combination of the three. Foer spent years editing the novel from his initial college thesis draft, and it shows—in a good way. There's no lag, and given some of the other books I was reading at the time (e.g. *The Recognitions*), this leanness and pacing were very welcome.

Moreover, I don't think I've ever been so off-base with my preconceptions of a book. I'd somehow come to the conclusion that the controversy surrounding Foer was due to his pretentiousness, and I was prepared for something in-your-face erudite, clever, showy, and snarky (since I'd heard it was funny) with his first effort. This probably sounds idiotic for those of you familiar with Foer's work, but that's what I was expecting. The only question for me was: would he be able to use his pretentiousness in a way that I'd find enjoyable? But as I got into the book, what I found was one of the *least* pretentious literary novels I've ever read. And perhaps this puts the backlash that this guy's received into a whole new light, although I don't want to get into that right now. I'd rather talk about what Foer does (and does very well) in *Everything Is Illuminated*.

First, the humor. This book *is* funny, but not in the way I was expecting (Foer's basically anti-snarky). And it's with his comedy style that he probably makes most of his enemies. Instead of taking one of the modern American approaches to humor*, Foer utilizes the type of slapstick that ruled comedic cinema over 60 years ago and has more or less disappeared from popular culture. Bold, bold move. And one that I, as a long-time Abbot and Costello fan, happen to love. I've watched each Abbot and Costello movie between 3 and 25 times, and while I think their routines are brilliant, I'm also aware that the majority of Americans under 40 would likely yawn or cringe through many of them. It's just a different style, full of classic gags sans sarcasm or irony, and one where any constraints of realism are given the boot while the routine is in progress—just like in *Everything Is Illuminated*. From Alex's ludicrously over-the-top English, where Foer nabs Wallace's gag of incorrectly substituting difficult words for easy ones, to the hero's inconvenient

vegetarianism; from the absurd dog behavior to the classic mistranslation humor reminiscent of the Pequod's encounter with the French Rose-Bud, Foer never wastes an opportunity to inject an episode of hilarity. And to be honest, he's not always successful. But when it works, and if you're susceptible to this style of humor, you will laugh out loud.

I can't think of another book that blends this kind of extreme comedy with fanciful melancholy so well (or even at all). The initially hidden sadness builds (in both the present-day storyline and the 18th-century through WWII storyline) to a dramatic moment that didn't quite have the impact on me that Foer reaches for and that others have experienced. I'm not especially disappointed about this, although I *am* stuck knowing that I didn't experience the emotional tidal wave that this book is capable of unleashing. But you might.

*Here I must rely on an excerpt from David Foster Wallace's essay on Kafka's humor: *There's no recursive word-play or verbal stunt-pilotry, little in the way of wisecracks or mordant lampoon. There is no body-function humor in Kafka, nor sexual entendre, nor stylized attempts to rebel by offending convention. No Pynchonian slapstick with banana peels or rapacious adenoids. No Rothish satyriasis or Barthish metaparody or arch Woody-Allenish kvetching. There are none of the ba-bing ba-bang reversals of modern sit-coms; nor are there precocious children or profane grandparents or cynically insurgent co-workers.* Ok, so there's some word-play and maybe 'Pynchonian slapstick' could describe a few scenes in *Everything is Illuminated*, but since when was Thomas Pynchon's sense-of-humor considered part of 'contemporary U.S. amusement'?

emma says

Ho-ly shit.

<https://emmareadstoomuch.wordpress.co...>

This book was incredible. Truly. I've taken the last hour or two to just kind of continue with my life and try to absorb that experience. Because even though I've been reading this book for almost three weeks (bananas long for me), it still feels like one cohesive experience.

I just want to quote this book to you, if that's okay. Just for a hot sec.

“There is no love--only the end of love.”

Between a grandfather and a grandson:
“(You have ghosts?)
(Of course I have ghosts.)

(What are your ghosts like?)
(They are on the inside of the lids of my eyes.)
(This is also where my ghosts reside.)
(You have ghosts?)
(Of course I have ghosts.)
(But you are a child.)
(I am not a child.)
(But you have not known love.)
(These are my ghosts. The spaces amid love.)”

Maybe quoting it wasn’t a good idea, because I want to give swaths of it to you all. I’ll end up trying to trick you into reading by including ever-lengthening passages.

These characters may very well stay with me for the rest of my life. Lovely Alex, with his love for his brother and his grandiose lies and his dashed dreams and his wonderfully terrible English (“Did you manufacture any Zs?”). The metafiction how-much-is-real Jonathan Safran Foer, dedicated to his notebook, staunch vegetarian. Brod and her 613 sadnesses, her love for everyone and everything and no one and nothing. The Gypsy girl whose heart broke for Safran, whom she did not love, and his books organized by the colors of their spines. The shtetl of Trachimbrod, its Trachimday and the Time of Dyed Hands and surname-initialed residents (Bitzl Bitzl R was my favorite).

This book sometimes gave me a feeling like my heart was swelling up. My hand twitched for a pencil or a Post-It while I read these lovely words, but I was always too absorbed and soon forgot what I was trying to remember to do. That feeling is why I read.

This was slow to start, and I almost--god forbid--DNFed it. Can you imagine? Even two-thirds in I contemplated three stars, sadly reminiscing on my vast love of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*.

I know this review isn’t of YA, or a book that’s “in” right now, or a new release. I still hope you guys read this and will consider picking it up, though. Because I want to live inside this book.

Bottom line: I don’t even know what to say. I so badly want you to read it. But if you do and you don’t like it, even when you get to the beautiful, beautiful last seventy-five pages, please don’t tell me.

I want to write like Jonathan Safran Foer can write.

K.D. Absolutely says

You are burned out. So you suggested to your wife that the whole family spend the weekend in a beach resort. You left the house in the morning, drove the whole day and arrived at the resort few hours before the

sunset. You dropped your things, donned your beach wear, went barefoot and hurriedly went straight to the shore. The sand is not sugar-like but the pain is bearable. The wind is a bit cold and it gives you slight chills. You dip your feet into the water. It is still lukewarm since the sun is just about to set. You start to swim. Then you notice how beautiful the sun is. The kaleidoscope of colors: yellow, orange, bright orange, red, reddish orange. It's like God's canvas splattered with beautiful colors.

You feel mesmerized. Sunset is always breathtaking and you find yourself staring at it, perplexed and speechless. You are there standing, you feel the small stones piercing your soles. With wet hair, your wet clothes on, the water drips to your skin. With the afternoon sea breeze softly blowing, you feel cold. You feel the discomfort, but you don't care. You go on standing. You go on staring. You want to see the finality of the sunset.

Slowly, slowly. Down. Down. Until it's gone.

Darkness.

But you remain standing. You want to see what comes next. The shore is part of the bay and you can see lights starting to flicker from the nearby island. The fishermen light up the gas lamps on the boats. You look up at the sky. The crescent-shaped moon starts to appear over at the horizon. And the countless stars twinkle as if they are smiling at you. The small insects start to swarm and bite, you swat them with your hands. You feel the stones poking your skin. You start to shiver from cold. But you feel happy as you have just witness an unspeakable beauty. Something that we tend to ignore as we rush through our daily lives. A celebration of life. A miracle.

You feel utterly happy. Blissful. Joyous.

This is exactly how I felt reading Jonathan Safran Foer's debut novel *Everything is Illuminated*.

Amazing.

Ben says

Sorry but I didn't care for this at all. If Mr. Nobody wrote a book about himself as the main character, and used some uninventive malapropisms to make discussions with a foreigner amusing, the book would be tossed. But wait, Foer went to Yale. Unfortunately for me the quality of his writing shows me that nepotism will always beat out merit these days. Sorry to be harsh, but really, I found the writing to be quite poor.

Beth says

Probably in the top 3 best books I've read in the past 5 years. It is not an easy book to read, and it is at times bizarre and vaguely offensive. But it is also heartbreaking and heartwarming and funny and thought-provoking.

Throughout the novel, Jonathan is referred to as the "hero" by Sasha/Alex, but I believe that Sasha ends up being the real hero. I don't think that Jonathan becomes some sort of terrible person, but it is telling that

Jonathon and Sasha stop writing to each other. I believe it is because Sasha has come away with a much deeper understanding of himself from their trip, while Jonathan seems to have mostly come away with good writing material. Sasha becomes so angry with Jonathon's story because it is not truthful in the way that Sasha is truthful. Jonathan wants to take pieces of what he knows for sure, and embellish and expound and fictionalize it to make enticing fiction. In doing so, he does make his grandfather out to be a pretty bizarre person, taking only his supposition that his grandfather had a dead arm and a lot of teeth as a baby, and looking through his journal, and then making up this whole ridiculous story about how the Safran had affairs with over 2,000 women because they were strangely attracted to the dead arm. Sasha, on the other hand, comes away from the trip with a better understanding of, and deeper love for, his grandfather, and a commitment to truth. He realizes the value of truth in seeing what his grandfather had to live with and in coming clean on certain aspects of his life. For instance, he admits that he is a virgin, though he boasted in the beginning of how many women he was "carnal" with. And he is not especially tall, as he also boasted about in the beginning. He also embraces his love for Ukraine, giving his savings away and deciding to stay there and take care of his family. And he is finally able to stand up to his drunken father and banish him from the family.

So, I believe that the title refers to the way the past illuminates the present, and the present illuminates the past. But differently for our two "heroes". For Jonathan, he has found the material he needs to become the writer he believes he was born to be. For Sasha, he has found the truth he needs to become the man he wants to be. You could argue the value of each. Jonathan writes everything down, documents the names on all of Lista's boxes, reads guidebooks on properly dealing with Ukrainians. Sasha listens to the stories, takes it all in, doesn't think to worry about each little detail to remember forever. Sasha is more concerned with understanding the heart of the truth, in short, while Jonathon wants the material to use later.

In one final thought, I remember that Ernest Hemingway was mentioned at some point in the novel, I believe by Sasha in talking about Jonathan becoming a great American writer. I took an American Lit class in which we discussed the novel Garden of Eden by Hemingway, and the way in which Hemingway addressed the guilt of the writer who puts themselves and those they love in emotionally reckless positions in order to create good writing material. I just thought it was interesting that his name comes into this novel because of Jonathan's intentions. Not that Jonathan creates any sort of emotionally reckless situation, but he in some way sells out his family history in order to write an interesting book.

On a side note, don't see the movie if you want it to be like the book. The movie felt like the screenwriter thoroughly read the first half of the book, and then skimmed the rest in about 8 minutes and threw the movie together from that. I felt like it missed everything that was important about the story.

Brian Godsey says

If I haven't laid out my good-book-philosophy yet, then I'll do it here. It needs to be done some time, or else any reviews I write would be somewhat out of context. So, here goes:

To me, there are two main parts, or aspects, of a book. One is the story, and the other is the way it is written. When I say "story", I mean everything that happens in the book, as it would happen in real life (or some other life, in sci-fi), while the "way it is written" is, of course, the words that are chosen to describe these things and happenings, and their particular relationship with each other.

It is my [strong] opinion that any really good book not be lacking at all in the writing category, because a

story by itself is just a campfire tale or a Jerry Bruckheimer production. I have a collection of old Irish short stories, and the early ones are all like this; they were made to be told, by a trained storyteller, to groups of people on cold winter evenings. Yeah, you hear about some interesting people and interesting things happen to them, but they're stuck in some sort of one-dimensional, ambiguity-free world. So, if the writing's no good, even the best story in the world will only earn three stars (case in point: *Da Vinci Code*, not even to imply it has the best story in the world, but it does have a good one).

Tilting the scales the other way, all I remember from the first time I read *Catcher in the Rye* was that Holden got kicked out of school [again] and subsequently went home to New York and wandered around for a while. That's hardly a story, in the classical sense. Can you imagine telling the story of Holden Caulfield to a cabinful of people on a chilly January night? I can, and all the people would be asleep, or maybe they'd be gone, having a nip or vodka at someone else's house before tucking in. What I'm trying to say is that, even though there is a story in *Catcher in the Rye*, it's not an incredibly strong one. And yet it's the greatest book ever written (that I've read). Not once in J.D. Salinger's masterpiece do I find myself wanting to know what happens next, contrary to Dan Brown's perpetual "where's the GRAIL?!?" and any of the generally despicable "crime" genre, "who done it?". Salinger always lives in the moment, telling you what is happening without building it up into some sort of *Rocky* vs. *Drago* scene. That's good writing; I want to read it, not skip ahead to know the ending. That brings me to another point: if knowing the ending "ruins" a book, the book has bad writing. Salinger dedicates *CITR* to the "casual reader", if he exists (in 1955, presumably), because he reads when he has time, for enjoyment, and not to get to the end of the book. I was disappointed the second time I read *CITR*, last year, because it didn't just keep going. Salinger is perfect for casual readers, because nearly every page can be seen as a contextless example of good writing.

But enough talking up of Salinger [, who's a genius]. My next example is Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Very good writing. But the story gets in the way. It's a shame, because I'd like to hear more about what the kid (I have forgotten his name) has to say about a lot more stuff. JSF keeps hanging that "to what lock does this key belong" question in front of us. And some of the interstitial/backstory chapters are slightly off the mark and distracting, sometimes because those stories were too complicated and I couldn't keep all of the characters straight.

But what he did wrong in *Extremely Loud*, his second novel, he somehow managed to get, spot on, in his first, *Everything is Illuminated*. This book changed my entire perspective of novels, because I was starting to believe that a "good" (i.e. exciting, mysterious, goal-oriented) story cannot be paired with good writing without overshadowing it. Nope, JSF existed in some parallel dimension where this pairing is possible when he wrote *Everything is Illuminated*. The most powerful character by far is the Ukrainian guide (I forgot his name, too), and somewhere between his interactions with the "hero" (named Jonathan Safran Foer; I remembered that one), the letters he writes later, and the observations he makes on every aspect of the story, are nothing short of amazing. And then JSF includes, in between "main plot" chapters and the guide's letters, a wonderfully surreal (and surrealism is perhaps the best quality of JSF's writing, that I have seen so far) historical recount dating back some 200+ years, of which I never tired of reading.

Two observations that earn this book five stars: I enjoyed reading the book immensely without wanting to skip ahead, and at the end of the book my jaw was hanging open and I wanted to cry [just a bit]. Writing: check. Story: check. Do the writing and story play nicely with each other?: check.

Five stars.

As a final note, and not to take away from the unbelievable

awesomeness of Everything is Illuminated, but I don't feel like reading it again. I'm not surprised, because Catcher in the Rye is the only book I've ever read more than once, but I have to think about why I don't want to read Everything is Illuminated again, other than simply wanting to read other books instead. I want to read Salinger (any of them) over and over again. Let's just say that in a Salinger-less world, JSF would be on top, but here in this world, this is not the case.

Everything is Illuminated is awesome. Read it.

Amy | shoutame says

One of my best reads of this year so far! Straight into my goodreads favourites!

- This novel follows the story of Jonathan, a young man who is visiting Ukraine in the hopes of discovering the woman who saved his Grandfather from the Nazis fifty years before. On arriving in Ukraine Jonathan meets his translator, Alex who will be aiding him with his search. Along with Alex is Alex's Grandfather and his dog, Sammy David Jr, Jr. Their mission takes them around Ukraine and they slowly begin to unearth things relating to Jonathan's family.
- The format of this book is something that I really loved but also something that I have seen criticised. There are chapters which follow Jonathan and Alex in the present time, each one of them telling the story from their point of view (I have to say that I found Alex's jumbled English to be hilarious), but there are also chapters that go back in time to Jonathan's Grandfather and what actually happened to him. This intertwining of present day and the building story of Jonathan's ancestors was beautifully done and I'm eager to read something similar in the future!
- Overall I found the comedic nature of Alex mixed with the more solemn and dark undertones of the novel to be wonderfully written by Foer, I was pulled in and emotionally battered by the end!
- Hilarious, beautiful and heart-breaking. This is definitely a novel I will be rereading in years to come, 5 out of 5 stars from me!

Fabian says

The picaresque interchange between youths is like a more irreverent' albeit magic-natural take on Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer. The imperfect prisms, the barriers of language of history and the imagination all these tools of literary alchemy are proudly on display. It attempts to hide the real theme of pathos inherent in all immigrant stories, & that the reader desires desperately to unearth it like nothing else. (Ingeniously, in EiI, a potato falling to the ground becomes a thing of singular beauty. The writer simply must get props poor lathering up this sad story that includes the Holocaust with joyous amounts of high-grade and universal ripoaring comedy. One of the 10 most important novels of the new millennium. And its rich; exhilarating; it has balls. It is fresh prose-like-a-rose and exhibits one intuitive, clever, downright beautiful structure. With

its proud badges of a first--not to mention major) literary novel audaciousness it is a wondrous, always necessary!-- version of the Don Quixote legend. And you will definitely carve out something in your busy schedule to complete it. And, like me, somehow I really crave for a sequel to this, which I very rarely do, you will think the same.

"Everything is the way it is because everything was the way it was." 145

Kim says

Sometimes reading makes me so angry

Dammit.

I'm a freaking mess. I realize this and I accept it.

Ugh.

Why, Jonathan Safran Foer? Why? Why do you do this to me? And why the hell are you so young? I know that some call you gimmicky and think that you are just a phosphoresce in the pannikin (yes, I, too, have access to Thesaurus.com) but I just...just...spleen them. They can read their Anderson and their Coetzee and leave us dreamers alone. I am 'Team Foer'; others be damned. (I still wish you weren't so freaking young, though)

The story is fragmented, told through letters and hodgepodes of writings that might or might not be parts of a novel. There is the story about the people of Trachimbrod, which might be Trochenbrod, a city in western Ukraine that was decimated during WWII by a Nazi Invasion. There is the story of Alex and Jonathan and their journey to find out Who is Augustine? And to thank her for saving Jonathan's lineage. There is the story of Grandfather and Herschel (copious amounts of tears during *that* one).

And then there are the stories within the stories. The story of Brod, Jonathan's great great great great grandmother and her struggle with loving the idea of love and her 613 sadnesses ("Mirror Sadness", "Sadness of not knowing if your body is normal", "Beauty Sadness", "Sadness of Hands", "Sadness of knowing that your body is normal", "Kissing Sadness", "Sadness of wanting sadness", "Sadness of feeling the need to create beautiful things", "What if? Sadness", "Sadness", "Secret Sadness.")

The story of the would-be 'Augustine' and her house with its many labeled boxes ('Silver/Perfume/Pinwheels', 'Watches/Winter', 'Darkness', 'Pillowcases', 'Poetry/Nails/Pisces', 'Dust', 'Menorahs/Inks/Keys', 'Death of a Firstborn', 'In Case')

I loved them all. I love the awakenings and the not-truths. I love the humor and the tragedies and the friendships. I am giddy and heavy hearted. I am in love with the idea.

What I loved most, what I clung to after I finished the book, was this:

Jews have Six Senses

Touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing....memory. While Gentiles experience and process the world through the traditional senses, and see memory only as a second-order means of interpreting events, for Jews memory is

no less primary than the prick of a pin, or its silver glimmer, or the taste of the blood it pulls from the finger. The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins. It is only by tracing the pinprick back to other pinpricks—when his mother tried to fix his sleeve while his arm was still in it, when his grandfather's fingers fell from stroking his great-grandfather's damp forehead, when Abraham tested the knife point to be sure Isaac would feel no pain---that the Jew is able to know why it hurts.

When a Jew encounters a pin, he asks “What does it remember like?”

The idea of memory as a sense. Okay, I've admitted it before and will again and again. I'm a shiksa—a French-Canadian/German/NH bred—Shiksa. I can't fathom the horrors of having the Holocaust in my past, I won't even begin to pretend to imagine the ramifications. But I can appreciate this idea: “*What does it remember like?*” Aren't we all tied to the past? Aren't all of our future actions predetermined by a memory? “*Everything is the way it is because everything was the way it was.*”

So much for Free Will.

At one point, Alex begs Jonathan when writing their story: “*I beseech you to forgive us, and to make us better than we are. Make us good.*”

We have that power in writing. To take away the bad and to recreate. We usually choose not to. It has to be gritty...fairytales are for the young...we need to set the story straight... we need to exorcise our demons....and so on. *Make us good.* God, that just about killed me.

And this is why I will always defend Foer. His ability to bring me to this awareness and to break my heart in 300 pages or less.

Matthieu says

Gimmicks as substance.

BlackOxford says

Funny In a Tragic Way

What would the English of a bright Ukrainian who had learnt it largely from local pop culture and a thesaurus sound like? Hilarious actually. Especially in the telling of a tale which has both been told so many times, and can never be told adequately: the Holocaust.

There are two protagonists, the author, a young Jewish man off to find his roots in a now famous but obliterated shtetl near the Polish/Ukrainian border; and a young, ambitious lad from a dysfunctional family in Odessa who acts as guide and subsequent interlocutor. The author writes history (of a post-modernist sort); the lad writes of the trip and comments on the author's text.

It is these latter comments that are most compelling because they reveal both the essential irrelevance of the destruction of European Jewry to the lives of those who have inherited the unexpurgated guilt of the massacres, and the way in which that guilt remains an essential but unspoken feature of life. Without the comedic language to make this contradictory point, the book would likely fall flat. With that language, and its gradual 'normalisation' during the course of the tale, the book becomes a story of revelation.

Alex says

Jonathan Safran Foer comes with a full bag of tricks, all of which he uses in an attempt to dazzle you out of seeing what this book actually is, which is corny. Safran Foer calls himself the product of a sampling culture, but there's more of an air of desperation about this book, which employs play dialogue, diary excerpts, run-on sentences, and like three pages straight of ellipses. The lead character is a Ukrainian named Alex who's gone thesaurus-happy, with an effect that starts off funny and quickly gets insufferable; the funny talk disguises what he's actually saying, which is corny.

It's told in several voices: Alex writing to Safran Foer, Alex writing a book, and Safran Foer's history of his family. The multiple voices allow him to comment on himself as he goes: they're each other's critics, peanut galleries, cheering sections and study groups. Safran Foer congratulates Alex on a particularly clever line about families; Alex analyzes the possible symbolism of Safran Foer's grandfather's erotic dead arm. Since actual Safran Foer wrote all of it, this amounts to self-congratulation.

The family history seems to be entirely made up. It goes heavy on the magical realism. (Special debt to Gabriel Garcia Marquez, from whom Foer even borrows the butterflies.) Safran Foer did visit Ukraine when he was 19, but as far as I can tell no part of his family's story is real, even the parts that aren't obviously surreal. That makes you feel a little manipulated; Safran Foer seems to have appropriated the most heart-wrenching stories he knows about Nazis and Jews. It's easy to make an impact with a story about burning people.

Safran Foer belongs to a 21st century school of clown car authors - David Mitchell is another egregious example - who know a lot of tricks but not a lot of truths. Their stories are flashy but there's not a lot going on underneath. Without its razzle-dazzle, this is basically a maudlin and manipulative novel. Some of the tricks are fun! But it's like that old (racist) stereotype about Chinese food: fun to eat but you're hungry an hour later. This book is just okay.

Mike says

I watched the movie of this first and loved it. It was basically a movie about cultural misunderstanding and how people can be cruel without really knowing it. It is a story about what happens when you put an American and someone born out of the Soviet era in the same room and try to make them explain to one another why the other one thinks the way they do. In a word: hilarious.

After reading the book, I still like the movie, but it seems obvious to me that the filmmakers missed the point entirely. The book, while still a hilarious exploration of an American immersed in post-Soviet culture, is so much deeper and weirder.

The story is (sort of) about the author, Jonathan Safran Foer. He is an aspiring writer in his early 20s who travels to Ukraine to try to find the small Jewish village of Trachimbrod where his grandfather grew up and to find the woman who helped him escape the Nazis during the war. He speaks no Ukrainian or Russian, and his only maps of the area are 60 years old, so he enlists the help of Alexander, an Odessa native of about the same age, his blind grandfather, who acts as their driver (if you have read any modern Russian literature you will understand not to question this kind of thing) and their deranged seeing-eye bitch Sammy Davis Junior, Junior.

Half of the story (the half on which the movie is based) is ostensibly written by Alex. He writes in English with an accent, in that (I assume) it was written, then rewritten by looking up every third word in the thesaurus and replacing it with the least appropriate synonym. This section is a humorous, touching, narrative touching on the nature of friendship, grief and regret, among other things. It is accessible and easy to understand.

The other half (which is entirely ignored by the movie) is written by Jonathan, and covers the history of the village from the day it got its name in 1791 until its destruction by the Nazis in 1941, following the exploits of his ancestors. All of these sections have a very surreal quality. They jump around in time, different eras have glimpses into the past and future. Everything that happens is completely bizarre and makes no sense. It explores much more difficult topics, such as the nature of life, love, and art, and is in general much more philosophical and harder to get your head around.

These sections are split by letters from Alexander to Jonathan commenting on Jonathan's sections and introducing his own next section.

The weird thing about this book is that, at least for me, it gets frustrating to read the author's crazy attempts at philosophy. He wanders around so much, it seems like he is trying to write a little mini-story for every emotion he's every experienced in his entire life. Normally, I would discard a book like this and say, "Well, it's a young author's overeager first attempt, and he tried to cover too much." However, there are so many parts in Alex's letters and narrative where these things are addressed (once Jonathan says something like, "I want to be a writer, but I'm not good yet.") and Alex asks a lot of questions like Why do you write like this? and Why did you have the characters do that? The incoherence of it all becomes a part of the greater logic of the novel, which in turn provides an answer to the question, "Why did Jewish people stay in Poland and Ukraine when they knew the Nazis were coming?" This book's answer, I imagine, would be, "Because nothing anyone did in the village's 150 year history made sense, why should they have done the sensible thing in 1941?"

The book is hilarious, moving and disturbing among other things. I can't help but be annoyed by its weird narrative and pointless philosophical musings, but given that it bathes itself in its own strangeness, it raises itself up and becomes a pretty awesome book.

Nathan Pearson says

The gut-tickling malaprop voice of Alex, bragging falsely (but without a trace of guile) in a broken idiolect that suggests computer translation gone awry, is worth the price of admission all by itself. Sadly, the rest of the book -- much of it strung out in unimaginative flashback episodes -- is a turgid, half-baked mess. Reading just Alex's bits and ignoring the rest would be a bit like picking out all the chocolate chips from a bag of trail mix...but that may be the best way to snack here.

