



## Jonathan Safran Foer

**Everything Is Illuminated**  
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### An Interview with Jonathan Safran Foer

#### How would you summarize your novel?

In the summer after his junior year of college, Jonathan Safran Foer leaves the ivy of Princeton for the impoverished farmlands of eastern Europe. Armed with only a photograph of questionable origin, he hopes to find Augustine - a woman who might be a link to a grandfather he never knew. He is guided on his journey by Alexander Perchov, a young Ukrainian translator, poignantly insightful and absurd, who is also searching for lost family, but in his case, family that is very much alive and near. What follows is a quixotic misadventure, at sharp turns comedic and tragic, which culminates in the most essential existential questions: *Who am I? What am I to do?* Woven into this narrative is the novel

that Jonathan is working on - an imagined history of Trachimbrod, the shtetl that he and Alex investigate. As the contemporary section moves back in time, the imagined history moves forward. "Reality" and "fiction" meet in the final scene, when the Nazis invade Trachimbrod and all is, or isn't, lost. *Everything Is Illuminated* is, above all things, about love - between parent and child, between lovers, friends, and generations, between what happened and what will happen. **How did the idea for the book originate?**

When I was young, I would often spend Friday nights at my grandmother's house. On the way in, she would lift me from the ground with one of her wonderful and terrifying hugs. And on the way out the next afternoon, I was again lifted into the air with her love. It wasn't until years later that I realized she was also weighing me. Being a survivor of World War II, being someone who spent years - approximately the years I am now experiencing - scrounging for food while traversing Europe barefoot, she is acutely, desperately aware of weights: of bodies, of presences, of things that do and don't exist. And it has always been with measuring - the distances between what is felt and said, the lightness of love, the heft of showing love - that I have connected with her. My writing, I have begun to understand - I am learning anew with each newly written word - springs from the same need to measure. I did not intend to write *Everything Is Illuminated*. I intended to chronicle, in strictly nonfictional terms, a trip that I made to Ukraine as a 22-year-old. Armed with a photograph of the woman who, I was told, had saved my grandfather from the Nazis, I embarked on a journey to Trachimbrod, the shtetl of my family's origins. The comedy of errors lasted five days. I found nothing but nothing, and in that nothing - a landscape of completely realized absence - nothing was to be found. Because I didn't tell my grandmother about the trip - she would never have let me go - I didn't know what questions to ask, or whom to ask, or the necessary names of people, places, and things. The nothing came as much from me as from what I encountered. I returned to Prague, where I had planned to write the story of what had happened. But what had happened? It took me a week to finish the first sentence. In the remaining month, I wrote 280 pages. What made beginning so difficult, and the remainder so seemingly automatic, was imagination - the initial problem, and ultimate liberation, of imagining. My mind wanted to wander, to invent, to use what I had seen as a canvas, rather than the paints. But, I wondered, is the Holocaust exactly that which cannot be imagined? What are one's responsibilities to "the truth" of a story, and what is "the truth"? Can historical accuracy be replaced with imaginative accuracy? The eye with the mind's eye? The novel's two voices - one "realistic," the other "folkloric" - and their movement toward each other, has to do with this problem of imagination. The Holocaust presents a real moral quandary for the artist. Is one allowed to be funny? Is one allowed to attempt verisimilitude? To forgo it? What are the moral implications of quaintness? Of wit? Of sentimentality? What, if anything, is untouchable?

With the two very different voices, I attempted to show the rift that I experienced when trying to imagine the book. (It is the most explicit of many rifts in the book.) And with their development toward each other, I attempted to heal the rift, or wound.

*Everything Is Illuminated* proposes the possibility of a responsible duality, of "did and didn't," of things being one way and also the opposite way. Rather than aligning itself with either "how things were" or "how things could have been," the novel measures the difference between the two, and by so doing, attempts to reflect the way things feel. Did you ever find the woman who apparently saved your grandfather from the Nazis? I wasn't even close to finding her. The trip was so ill conceived, so poorly planned, so without the research that would have been necessary to have had any hope of accomplishing what I thought was my purpose - finding Augustine - that I never had a chance. But in retrospect, I'm not sure that the purpose was to find her. I'm not even sure I wanted to find her. I was twenty when I made the trip - an unobservant Jew, with no felt connection to, or great interest in, my past. I kept an ironic distance from religion, and was skeptical of anything described as "Jewish." And yet, my writing - what little I did then - began to take on a Jewish sensibility, if not content. To my surprise, I started asking genealogical questions of my mother, and sending Amazon.com workers to the darkest recesses of the warehouse for titles like *Shtetl Finder Gazeteer*, by Chester G. Cohen. (Chester G. Cohen?) I was a closeted Jew. After 20 years of life, the feelings and facts had begun to diverge. I spent my time and energy on activities I didn't think I cared about. There was a split - a strange and exhilarating split - between the Jonathan that thought (secular), and the Jonathan that did (Jewish). Because my trip to Ukraine came at the beginning of this fracture - before I could appreciate the coexistence of my halves - I was not yet ready to want to find Augustine. I jeopardized my trip by refusing to prepare for it. Thankfully. The complete absence that I found in Ukraine gave my imagination total freedom. The novel wouldn't have been possible had my search been that other kind of success. **Is the Jonathan Safran Foer in your story the Jonathan Safran Foer who wrote the story? If not, which one do you prefer?**

I try to treat all Jonathan Safran Foers equally, appreciating their unique gifts, ignoring, when possible, their unique shortcomings, patting all of their heads when I think to, and saying things like, "You're smart," or "You're cute." Now, as for the particular JSF who wrote the book, and the one in the book, they are profoundly different people who happen to share a profound amount. It's useless to try to find points of convergence and divergence, just as it's useless to prefer one over the other, since both the writer and the character are always changing - neither under my control. And that possibility of change, that insistence on change, is what makes this kind of writing feel, for me, so exhilarating and terrifying. Will I grow away from the JSF in the book, or will we grow toward each other? In 20 years - God willing we both live that long - will we be like strangers? Or will we know each other completely? **What's the significance of the title?**

It refers to a passage in the book in which all of the citizens of Trachimbrod are making love at once. The narrator puts forth a pseudoscientific "theory," the gist of which is: From space, astronauts can see people making love as a tiny speck of light. Not light, exactly, but a glow that could be confused for light - a coital radiance that takes generations to pour like honey through the darkness to the astronaut's eyes. In about one and a half centuries - after the lovers who made the glow will have long since been laid permanently on their backs - the metropolitan cities will be seen from space. They will glow all year. Smaller cities will also be seen, but with great

difficulty. Towns will be virtually impossible to spot. Individual couples invisible. The glow is born from the sum of thousands of loves: newlyweds and teenagers who spark like lighters out of butane, pairs of men who burn fast and bright, pairs of women who illuminate for hours with soft multiple glows, orgies like rock and flint toys sold at festivals, couples trying unsuccessfully to have children who burn their frustrated image on the continent like the bloom a bright light leaves on the eye after you turn away from it. Some nights, some places are a little brighter. It's difficult to stare at New York City on Valentine's Day, or Dublin on St. Patrick's. The old walled city of Jerusalem lights up like a candle each of Chanukah's eight nights. Trachimday is the only time all year when the tiny village of Trachimbrod can be seen from space, when enough copulative voltage is generated to sex the Polish-Ukrainian skies electric. We're here, the glow of 1804 will say in one and a half centuries. We're here, and we're alive. Of course, the title is also playing off the other notions of illumination, particularly revelation. The book traces an arc from ignorance to knowledge, from inexperience to wisdom. I've also always loved the idea of illuminated manuscripts - embellished, overstuffed books. And I love the idea of books being more than books, or being, rather, something other than books. I think the ideal experience of my book would be like listening to music. **What are you working on now?**

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