

**UNLOCKING JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER AND *EXTREMELY LOUD & INCREDIBLY CLOSE***

Candace Letizia

It is impossible to discuss a literary work without discussing, in some way, its author. As a young and successful author, Jonathan Safran Foer is one whom reviewers are particularly vocal, both in terms of his persona and of his literary skills. While researching the reception of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, I found that disparities exist between professional and personal reviewers' intent and content. One must take into account that while professional critics—staff and freelance contributors to popular magazines and newspapers, or trade publications—are paid to write as they do, personal critics—unaffiliated amateur bloggers, Amazon.com reviewers, web writers, etc.—write for their own pleasure and with the goal of helping others. This, in turn, demonstrates how a professional critic's reputation may color his opinions of authors and literary works; whereas a personal critic's relative anonymity on the internet may allow him to speak more freely.

It is also interesting to note that in both professional and personal reviews, those critics who included comment on Foer's personal characteristics tended to reflect those qualities in the type of review his work received. This shows a distinct trend among reviewers to attempt to sway readers' opinions of the book by critiquing the author, thus demonstrating the reviews' subjectivity. It is important, however, to see all the sides of a story. Thus, in reviewing *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and discussing Jonathan Safran Foer's personal experiences, it is necessary to research both professional and personal reviews in addition to the projected and public perceptions of the author and his work in order to understand why he writes as he does.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Professional Reviews: *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*

Professional reviewers tend to focus either almost exclusively on Foer's written work or also on aspects of his personality. Of the reviewers who focus purely on his writing, there are both positive and negative critiques of his main character, Oskar, and of Foer's strong use of mixed media. Nine-year old Oskar is controversial among professional reviewers because of his age, eccentricity, and intelligence. The very fact that Oskar is a child narrator presents a problem for some critics. In "Mixed Messages," a critique published in *The New Yorker*, John Updike states that

novelists have not taken children seriously enough to make them protagonists. However sensitive or observant, the ordinary child lacks property and the capacity for sexual engagement; he exists, therefore, on the margins of the social contract—a rider, as it were, on the imperatives and compromises of others.

Updike subtly shows readers that his opinions are formed by what he has read and what he is used to by acknowledging the historical literary constraints placed upon child narrators. This is a very important aspect of his review because he directly comments on the fact that he, as both a reader and as a person, approaches the text with predetermined ideas of what a child is and how a child behaves in literature. Thus, for such a respectable novelist, poet, and critic like Updike to go on to state that he respects Oskar as a fully-formed character, shows that Foer has constructed Oskar deliberately and with well-thought ideas. Laura Miller, a critic for NYmag.com, states in contrast that Foer is

painfully aware of the perils of sentimentality. With a child narrator like Oskar, you can finesse the problem; he can't be expected to realize his own poignancy, let alone be accused of wallowing in it. The distance makes Foer think—incorrectly—that he can get away with whimsies.

Such a view is supported by Michiko Kakutani and Walter Kirn, who think of Oskar as both an exercise of Foer's imagination and as a compilation of other literary characters. Kakutani calls him "an entirely synthetic creation, assembled out of bits and pieces of famous literary heroes past" (1). This, however, is simply Kakutani's opinion that Foer should be inspired by completely original thoughts and not be affected by the literature he has read throughout his life. Yet, if literature has shown anything, it is that there are certain archetypal characters that appeal to both writers and readers. Almost every character written is one person's rendering of an archetype. Thus, it is natural that Oskar be the work of the many different literary figures Foer has encountered.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that Kakutani, as a critic, is not known for giving positive reviews: she is described as demonstrating "a refusal ever to take her eyes off the thumbs up/thumbs down prize, or to lay any of her own prejudices, tastes, or tangentially relevant observations on the table" (Yagoda, 2). This criticism is interesting because although critics are apt to judge others, they rarely appear to judge themselves or be judged. This statement also emphasizes the subjectivity of reviews by showing how a professional critic often builds a career out of writing strictly a positive or harsh review.

Kirn, a fellow author and critic, criticizes Oskar's methods of communication as the reason why he is not a believable character. He states that Oskar's "rain of truisms, aphorisms, nuggets of wisdom and deep thoughts... were trying to corner a market in

ironic existentialist greeting cards” (2). This is Kirn’s opinion that children cannot communicate in high-styled prose. Similarly, when Miller states Oskar’s “reflections are beyond the emotional sophistication of any kid, however brainy” and Tom Barbash states that “the boy’s hobbies and interests ... have the effect of making us think Oskar is either older, or else an unreasonable invention” they are both simply opining how they think nine-year olds think and behave. Each of these critics’ personal opinions negates their view of Oskar and the success of Foer’s writing.

Other professional critics, however, found Oskar an original character and sympathetic child. Mike Flanagan states that “Oskar’s voice is distinctively funny and his thoughts unique, making it often a great pleasure to be wandering around New York inside his head.” Similarly, W.R Greer states that “despite his intelligence that gives him a better understanding of the physical and historical aspects of the world, Oskar retains the emotions, confusion, and exasperation of a 9-year old.” The same inventions that were viewed unlikely and unnecessary by some critics were viewed by others as Oskar’s “desire to improve an implacatable world” (Updike 3). These reviews also emphasize the subjectivity of book reviews, because the exact three categories that the first critics disliked, these latter three enjoyed. These disparities are important to recognize because they show how individual experiences and opinions affect the way a book is read. Flanagan, Greer, and Updike most likely accept Oskar as a legitimate narrator and character because they have either experienced children like him before or because they have allowed different interpretations of what a child can be. Again, this shows that there are characters and personalities that some people relate to and enjoy, and there are some characters and personalities that some people do not.

Many of the critics agreed, however, that Foer's use of mixed media was distracting and, at times, very unnecessary (Kakutani; Miller; Kirn). They differed, however, in their opinion of why Foer styled it as he had. Kirn stated that Foer was trying to be experimental in a "popular mode that's no more controversial than pre-ripped jeans" (2), whereas Greer understood that the media was "all supposed to be reflective of Oskar's mind" (1). This shows a difference in the way that Foer, as an author, is being perceived by his critics. While to some he may appear to use mixed media for show, to others he appears to use the mixed media deliberately for function within the novel. In any case, the mixed media was primarily reviewed as lacking and distracting. Amitava Kumar, a reviewer for *The Times of India*, stated she was "half opposed to them because often they are mere distractions, like a cell-phone ringing in a restaurant" (1). Similarly, Barbash states that none of the techniques would be horrible individually, but that together they are "distracting, and pull us off the page to ask extraneous questions"(2). He later says, however, that "by the novel's end, Foer has wriggled out from under most of these burdens. The writing is evocative and emotional, and the relationships are believable" (2). This is important because even though Barbash did not connect with the images, he was still able to find strength in Foer's words.

Similarly, Kakutani finds that the book is most successful when "when Mr. Foer abandons his willful use of experimental techniques and simply writes in an earnest, straightforward manner, using his copious gifts of language to limn his characters' state of mind" (2). Thus, although Barbash and Kakutani did not find meaning in the mixed media, they were still able to understand how it may work for others. Even Kumar shows her own ambivalence by also stating that she was "half in support of gimmicks because it

allows readers to creatively participate in the novel” (1). Comparatively, Updike states that the falling man’s ascent at the end of the novel was “one of the most curious happy endings ever contrived, and unexpectedly moving” but that the other “hyperactive visual surface covers up a certain hollow monotony in its verbal drama” (3). Again, Updike is showing how sometimes an artistic or textual elements works in one part of a story, but fails in another. Although the rest of the mixed media may have distracted Updike, he was still able to find meaning in the falling man’s ascent. For Foer, I think that one connection among readers makes the format worthwhile.

Finally, when Kirn states that “today’s neo-experimental novels are not necessarily any better suited to get inside, or around, today’s realities than your average Hardy Boys mystery,” it sounds more like he is critiquing the use of mixed media as a whole, and not simply in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2). He, and other critics, may simply not be used to—or respect—having anything other than text in a novel. Foer chose the non-traditional style decisively: by doing so he alienates, in some fashion, many of his older readers who are not used to the hyperactivity of the internet and MTV youth culture. It may take a younger reader who is more familiar with the internet and its connectivity to fully grasp Foer’s use of mixed media. It is not surprising that older critics and readers, who have grown up reading books primarily text and illustration, will not be used to the interactivity of Foer’s design. Since it is virtually impossible to ignore the media, such readers would naturally be annoyed or distracted whereas other readers open to different formats could strengthen their emotional connection to the novel. Thus, the mixed media may be an aspect that adds to a reader’s experience or takes away from it, but much of that depends on the reader’s own personal experiences.

The disparities and similarities between the professional critics' opinions and reviews of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* demonstrate that personal opinion, one's own written work, and professional biases may color a reviewer's critique of a book. Although each of these critics had something laudatory to say about Foer's novel, they each brought their own biases to the table, whether it was personal, professional, or learned. Oddly enough, these critics seemed to focus more on the book's main elements (its design, characters, and plot) instead of discussing its emotional gravity. This demonstrates a distance between the reader as a critic and the reader as simply a reader. Deemphasizing a book's emotional power is, perhaps, another aspect of being a professional reviewer. As we will see in the next section, however, ordinary people are more likely to share personal experiences in lieu of critiquing a book technically.

### **Personal Reviews: *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close***

The internet's potential for connectivity makes it an excellent forum for ordinary people who desire to opine on literary works. The surge in personal blogs, online communities, and internet-based book selling websites (such as Amazon.com) allows average people to say what they want. Furthermore, the anonymity allowed by creative user names deletes any agenda: when one's name and professional reputation are not visible, it is much easier to speak freely. Those who choose to give their real name do take a risk by putting themselves out there; yet, for them to do so and write freely demonstrates how strongly they must feel about a novel.

As mentioned in the previous section, published and broadcasted book reviews are likely to contain a significant amount of personal and professional biases because the reviewer was held accountable professionally for whatever was said. This means that

some reviews and reviewers may have not have been completely reliable because their comments may have been motivated by something other than personal desire. Thus, by reading both personal and professional reviews, one will be able to see the disparities and similarities that exist between them.

The majority of personal reviews for *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* were positive, unlike many of the professional reviews: many focused less on literary techniques and more on personal emotional connections and intercharacter relationships. One Amazon.com reviewer, N. Gargano, said that he “laughed and cried and even when I was laughing, I was profoundly sad. I loved the characters and their flaws, their fears, their stories, their realistic humanity even among such unrealistic situations.” In reviewing the book, Gargano is really reviewing how he felt while reading and the ways in which he felt connected to it.

Comparatively, Debbie Lee Wessleman, another Amazon.com reviewer, said that “everyone should read this novel. You will not emerge unchanged.” This again demonstrates the personal connection she felt with the novel. To write that strong a statement under her real name shows her profound emotional connection with the book and also her courage to put her opinion out there for many people to see. Likewise, personal reviewers who disliked the book also shaped their review around their emotional experiences: Dave Schwinghammer describes Oskar as an “irritating little brainiac,” who makes the novel “too contrived to be believable.” Although he is discussing Oskar, he relates his opinion back to how he felt while reading *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Because he did not find Oskar an authentic character, his experience reading the book was ruined. This is a legitimate claim. By discussing individual emotional experiences,

personal reviewers acknowledge that people feel and read things differently. Their reviews make no absolute judgments regarding the novel's worth, but are reflective of and relative to their own personal feelings. This differs from many professional reviewers who make judgments based primarily on their literary taste without acknowledging their own feelings or personal biases.

In terms of overall book critique, personal reviewers also tended to take others' personal interests into account when rating the book. Many discussed aspects of the book that they liked along with aspects of the book that they disliked, without decreeing it will be one way or the other for all readers. For example, B. Capossere, an Amazon.com book reviewer, forthrightly states that the novel will "live or die on a particular reader's personal taste." Likewise, Brett Benner, a reviewer on Amazon.com, stated:

There is no question in my mind it won't be for everyone, and as much as I'd love to share it with as many people I know, its non-linear and nearly multimedia presentation will be off-putting to many.

It is interesting that this is one of the first cases where a reviewer openly acknowledges that the same literary works and format that worked for him may not work for everyone else. He enjoyed the novel because of his emotional connection with it, but does not expect his experience to be the same experience of others.

Similarly, fellow Amazon.com reviewer Gregory Baird states that "there are moments of brilliance in this novel, but they are mired in a treacly sentimentality that leaves you with a sour taste in your mouth." He, apparently, had an experience very different than Benner: he found the dialogue "over simplistic" and the grandparent subplot to have "dissonance," but he makes a point of reiterating that he is "sure that many

people will not be bothered by all the schmaltz.” Baird does not enjoy the novel, but he does note the parts he likes along with the parts he does not like. He also allows fellow readers to decide whether or not they should read it (or like it). These two reviewers differ from many of the professional reviewers in that they neither exalted nor damned the book for everyone. They did not imply that their opinion is and should be that of everyone who reads the book, but allowed wiggle-room for the personal differences that would make a random person like or dislike the novel. By openly discussing likes and dislikes, they are able to give their opinion without making it mandatory and to serve as guides instead of authorities.

Much like professional reviewers, however, personal reviewers spent time discussing *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*'s characters, relationships, and format. They were also split on whether or not the literary and graphic creations functioned successfully, with both Oskar and Foer's use of mixed media the primary targets for criticism. E.A Solinas states “child genius Oskar will probably make you want to either smack him or hug him.” Similarly, among Amazon.com reviewers, Oskar is described both as “a wonderful, eccentric little boy... who is hurt and confused and brilliant in his way,” but also “the most precocious nine-year-old on the planet” (Barbercheck; Bigelow). These descriptions emphasize the disparities among people's personal tastes. Much like the professional reviewers, some personal reviewers love his characteristics and flaws, whereas others are put off by them. Priya Jain, a reviewer on Salon.com, stated that Oskars “isn't exactly what you would call a realistic invention, but he is nonetheless an endearing and funny narrator.” Again, reviewers' personal perceptions of nine-year-old children shape the way they approach Oskar. If they can relate Oskar to a child they

know (who may be very eccentric and learned, but also a bit annoying and precious) they may be more likely to believe Oskar is an authentic representation of a child. Such prevalence of personal taste is, at least, acknowledged: “if you can stomach Oskar’s voice and mannerisms, you’ll probably end up enjoying the book” (Capossere). Though phrased harshly, the reviewer makes a point that is true for all books: if readers are unable to sympathize or empathize with a main character, they will most probably dislike the book.

The same theory applies to Foer’s formatting of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*: personal reviewers were just as divided on whether it added or detracted from the book’s emotional and interpersonal power. These opinions also greatly depend on the personality and experiences of the individual reviewer. Many of personal reviewers who disliked his use of mixed media felt as though he was just using the images, photographs, and bursts of color as “gimmicks” and “tricks” (Capossere; Phelps; Schwinghammer). Capossere, in particular, felt as though Foer had overdone it:

In the end, ELIC was a story ruined by talent, though I couldn’t decide whether it was insecure talent (propping up his story with gimmicks) or self-indulgent talent (throwing in everything and anything just because he could).

This opinion is supported by others: the mixed media is described by Schwinghammer as “all tricks and devices...just there to annoy the reader,” and are questioned as being “clever writing ‘devices’ or gimmicks to keep your interest” by Phelps. These three critics agree with the professional reviewers that the mixed media formatting does not aid their reading or interpreting of the text. They do not get anything extra out of the images

and so see them as unnecessary distractions. Because these reviewers are relatively anonymous and are not known public figures, the emotional and professional experiences that they bring into their reading (along with their educational and personal history) are not easily known. Thus, readers must simply take their dislike as a valid point and as an alternative opinion on Foer's use of mixed media.

Other personal reviewers, however, felt that Foer's use of images, color, typography and photographs greatly added to their reading of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. Wesselmann states that

Foer embraces postmodernism by including stock photos that don't have a depth of meaning until the text gives it to them, as well as letters, email, handwritten notes and a numerical conversation between Oskar's grandparents... the artifacts [contained here] illustrate the depth of Oskar's longing and the complexity of the world we live in.

For Wesselmann, the multimedia strengthens the emotional connection between Oskar and readers by reminding of all the horrible, wonderful, and confusing events that lead up to and happened after September 11, 2001. Those who were old enough to live through September 11<sup>th</sup> know the extent of the media's coverage: there were continuous, in-depth reports on not only the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, but also on the terrorists, the terrorists' government, our own government, the surge in patriotism, and the backlash against Muslim-Americans. For most adults, this is a lot of information and images to try and understand. For a young nine-year-old boy, who has just experienced a great personal loss, this informational and visual coverage is even more trying. Thus, the images "add to the authenticity of the novel and experience" because they visually

represent the chaos Oskar is experiencing (Barbercheck). Foer places images in the areas which his words are ill-equipped.

The multimedia also allows readers to grasp the extent to which Oskar has been influenced by the internet, in addition to providing a means of looking deeper into the story's meaning. Joy Renee, author of the blog *JoyStory*, states:

...I do not agree with those who were made uncomfortable by them. I did not find them distractions or 'too precious' or 'gimmicky'. I found them not only to deepen the experience of seeing the world through Oskar's eyes but also to hold clues that unlocked elements of the theme and the meanings we are to take away from the story, things that Oskar's limited perspective could only hint at. (2)

For many readers, Renee included, the multimedia functions on three levels: to foster emotional depth, to comprehend the chaos in Oskar's world, and to provide a jumping-board into other emotions and meanings. Although it may be an old and over-used cliché, in this case, a picture is worth a thousand words. Writers craft novels with clear intentions: they formulate characters, plots, sub-plots and symbolism with well-thought clarity. Often, however, they may see aspects of their book which may be ambiguous and vague to their readers. This ambiguity allows readers to make their own discoveries and to insert their own meaning into the story. For Foer, it appears that the added images provide readers with indistinct (and yet, concrete) clues that will encourage the attentive reader to look deeper into the storyline. When Renee comments that the images may "hold clues that unlocked elements of the theme and of the meanings we are to take away from the story," she shows how, as a reader, she was encouraged to do so. It is easy for

some readers to simply glance at the images before moving to the next page, but those who spend time looking may discover another dimension that would have been lost had they not looked deeper.

Furthermore, Foer's use of September 11, 2001 as a backdrop for *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* was as debatable among personal reviewers as it was among professional reviewers. Many of the criticisms stem from the fact that when this book was published in 2005, it had only been four years after the attack. For many people and reviewers, there had not yet been enough time to come to terms with what had happened: professional critic Laura Miller states "we're still not entirely sure what it signifies, or even if, philosophically speaking (and this is the hardest possibility to contemplate), it might signify nothing at all." This demonstrates hesitation about the novel because it concerns a time in U.S history that is not yet fully understood. Even seven years later, intense emotional, political and cultural problems remain unresolved. W.R. Greer comments that "with the horrors and wounds of the 9/11 attacks still fresh, this novel may be too close to home for some people." Greer acknowledges that the book may be too soon for some, but that it may be appropriate and enjoyable for others.

Among professional critics, however, it is agreed that Foer chose 9/11 specifically and deliberately. Walter Kirn states that Foer chose 9/11 for "an ingenious reason":

it evokes, on a primal cultural level, the benevolent, innocent New York that was vaporized, even as a fantasy, when the towers were toppled. Not all the victims, Foer knows, were real, live people. Eloise and Stuart Little died, too.

This statement shows the extent to which New York City was damaged: it was not only the real people who lived there that were affected, but the imaginary ones too. 9/11 was more than a human event: it was a geographic, historic, literary, and political one as well. Thus, Foer's use of 9/11 attempts to demonstrate all of those changes felt within the city.

Unlike the professional critics who focused more on the general cultural reactions of September 11<sup>th</sup>, personal critics tended to relate the affect of the writing on themselves. Although Phelps thought that Foer used 9/11 as “the ultimate cheap-shot low-blow tear-jerker backdrop” in order to manipulate readers' feelings, many other personal reviewers felt differently. Solinas states that although “historically, only a short time has passed since 9/11...Foer doesn't use cheap sentimentalism to draw in his readers, nor does he exploit the losses of September 11<sup>th</sup> families.” Similarly, Barbercheck states that “this isn't a book about Sept. 11<sup>th</sup>, it's a book about a little boy who is hurt and confused and brilliant in his way,” and Benner comments that he never felt that Foer was “manipulating emotions or writing something simply for effect.” Similarly, Jain acknowledges that 9/11 is often “too difficult to render in fiction without the kind of overearnestness that ultimately estranges the reader ... that's why I was surprised to find that Jonathan Safran Foer's touching account of the grief and disorientation of 9/11's aftermath is so strangely healing.” For Jain, the characters' emotional and interpersonal struggles are what make the book human, and keep the focus away from numbers, statistics, and violence.

These are very important readings on *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, because they emphasize the differences in the way that people perceive and judge art, in general. Although Foer's use of real geographic locations and events may appear to some

to be capitalizing on loss, others may view it as a way for our culture to begin healing. I must note that while discussing this book in class, it was overwhelmingly agreed upon that 9/11 was neither exploited nor written as the focal point of the story. The Dean's Readers found it to be the personal story of one family trying to overcome their grief and begin living again after the tragedy. We, like many of the personal reviewers, did not find it to be written in a way as to profit from the loss felt by the country.

The individual reviewers' use of personalizing the text before critiquing it contextualizes the differences between their reviews and the reviews of the professionals. Most personal reviewers enjoyed *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* because it did something for them emotionally. Regardless of their personal opinions of Oskar or the multimedia format, there was something within Foer's writing that spoke to them. Their ambivalence of some aspects and appreciation of others further demonstrates how personal reviewers allowed for some parts to be better than others. By discussing those grievances and enjoyments, however, they also acknowledge the differences in personal taste that exist between people in general. This differs greatly from the professional reviewers, who, once their judgment is cast, mainly expect others to adhere to it. Thus, it is apparent that personal reviewers put forth their opinions to help guide others in choosing a book, instead of dictating what readers should find in a book. Individual critics discuss their personal experiences and feelings because they know that one's life experiences shapes the way that they will approach a book. As we will see in the next section, personal experiences are essential in writing a book, as well.

**Author Information: Jonathan Safran Foer**

As a young and relatively new author, Jonathan Safran Foer has not yet been the subject of any extensive biographical writing. As an ambitious, social, and connected person, however, he has interviews and outside writing that allow readers to form a picture of who he is both as an author and as a person. According to an interview with Deborah Solomon that was published in the *New York Times*, Foer grew up in Washington DC as the middle of three boys. He was described by his mother as a “character almost from the first moment” but one that was “also very sensitive” (Esther Foer qtd. in Solomon 3). Foer had a happy childhood, although one marred by a devastating accident that occurred when he was eight-years old and attending a summer program. One day, his teacher laid out combustible materials and directions on how to make sparklers.

Foer found the assignment ‘boring,’ and left the classroom to go to the bathroom... he was returning to his table when suddenly there was a deafening bang and the room filled with thick smoke. Screams and pandemonium followed. Moments later, out in the hall, he found his best friend slumped against a wall. It was hard to look at his bloodied face, but harder not to, Foer recalled. The boy’s glasses were crushed over, his skin shredded. ‘Being a child, or being in shock, or just being myself, I told him what he looked like and begged him to describe my own face to me,’ Foer said. ‘I asked him if the skin was peeling from my face. He said no. I asked him again. He said no. I remember making him promise.

(Solomon 4)

Four children were injured in the blast. Foer himself was taken to the hospital with second-degree burns on his hands and face, and later fell into a depression caused by both the shock and physicality of the accident (Solomon 4). Foer states that the experience “made me a person:” it forced him to understand that things happen without any notice and cannot always be controlled (qtd. in Solomon 4). After living “something like a nervous breakdown drawn out over about three years,” Foer was able to conquer his fears and depression (qtd. in Solomon 4). He grew up a well-liked student, graduated at the top of his high school class, and attended Princeton. There, he studied philosophy and became well-versed in works by Kafka, Joyce, Nietzsche, and Bruno Schultz. While still at school, Foer wrote his first novel *Everything Is Illuminated*, a story about a fictional Jonathan Safran Foer who travels to the Ukraine to find the woman he believes saved his grandfather from the Nazis. The book, which was published in 2002, was adapted into a film in 2005.

Foer has found much success since the publishing of his first book. He has published many different other types of work that demonstrate his authorial potential: an editorial on dog-leash laws in New York (“My Life as a Dog”), a short fiction story (“About the Typefaces Not Used in this Edition”), a collection of poetry inspired by Joseph Cornell (“A Convergence of Birds: Original Fiction and Poetry Inspired by the Work of Joseph Cornell”) and an operetta, among others. In the spring semester of 2008, he also taught a “writing workshop as a visiting professor in the English department” at Yale (Torbati). Such versatility demonstrates not only his creativity and adaptability, but also his ambition and intelligence. Foer is a literary figure whom is making his mark on the literary, academic, and social worlds.

After hearing accounts of his childhood and his work, many must wonder what Foer is like as a person. Interviews especially help demonstrate his temperament and humor. He states: “I’m not funny... people assume that because my books are funny, I’ll be funny in real life. It’s the inevitable disappointment in meeting me” (qtd. in Solomon 1). Regardless of what he may have explicitly stated, this quote shows his self-deprecating, dry, and ironic sense of humor. Similarly, in an interview by Dave Weich, he discusses his interest in vegetarianism, animal welfare, the *Decemberists*, and artwork by Andy Goldsmith. These illustrate his alternative lifestyle, because he discusses interests that are outside of mainstream pop culture. He also “has a penchant of giving money away,” especially to charities such as PEN, which encourage free expression and international literary fellowship (Solomon 3). Professional writer Alden Mudge states that

if an Ogre Foer exists, he is nowhere in evidence... instead there is merely the polite, charmingly elusive Jonathan Safran Foer, a novelist more likely to answer questions with anecdotes about the lives of poets and painters than with bold, self-regarding statements about his own life and work.

An author is a public figure, whether he wishes to be or not. And regardless of how he may wish it, his personal and professional reputation invariably affects the reception of his written work. Luckily for Foer, it appears that a personal reputation such as his can have no detriment cast upon it by reason. He both is presented and presents himself as an amiable character, whose characteristics include humor, intelligence, charity, and modesty. If one needed any more reason to read one of his novels, his personal and professional reputations should only encourage it.

## CONCLUSION

After reading professional and personal criticisms of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* and also investigating Jonathan Safran Foer himself, one may wonder how it ties in together. To put it simply: everything is intertwined. It is important first to understand where and from whom a novel's criticisms come; to understand that biases occur among paid critics and fellow writers whom may have personal factors that determine professional taste. Such factors certainly color one's opinion of a text. With the prevalence of internet book-selling sites, it is also essential to include personal reviews because they tend to focus on how a book works in terms of personal taste and emotions. Such reviewers do not have a boss or a professional reputation that may constrain their opinions, and so will be able to speak directly (and perhaps, more truthfully to readers). Similarly, Jonathan Safran Foer himself demonstrates how conflicts between one's personal and professional reputation may color how his literary work is received. It is often easier to dislike a person than to exult them. Thus, while critically reading a book and its criticisms, it is important to gain a complete understanding of the author and his critics.

## DISCUSSION

Jonathan Safran Foer's personal life experiences undoubtedly caused him to write *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* the way that he did. He has said that

Tragedy primes one for humor, and humor primes one for tragedy. They amplify each other. As a writer, I am trying to express those things which are most scary to me, because I am alone with them...I write because I want to end my loneliness. Books make people less alone. That, before

and after everything else, is what books do. They show us conversations are possible among distances.” (qtd. in Solomon 2)

This observation summarizes not only Foer’s intent in writing *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, but also its characters and format. While writing about Oskar, Foer drew upon his experiences as a child: the new and intense emotions he felt after the chemistry explosion appear to be very similar to the emotions Oskar faces after his father’s death. Foer writes about anger, fear, confusion, love, grief, hope, and uncertainty with unflinching clarity: he breathes universal human emotions into Oskar. Much like the personal reviewers, Foer realizes that although the details of intense experiences vary between people, the emotions behind them are universal. Although Foer did not lose his father in the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, he has had a traumatic experience that caused him to question the point of his life and to deal with issues beyond his level of maturity.

The crossroads between hope and grief are at their most poignant long after Oskar has started looking for the lock to the key he discovered in his father’s closet. The physical and emotional journey Oskar goes on in order to connect once more with his father demonstrates how intertwined hope and grief are regardless of the age at which one experiences loss. Oskar states: “I turned on the radio and found a station playing ‘Hey Jude.’ It was true, I didn’t want to make it bad. I wanted to take a sad song and make it better. It’s just that I didn’t know how” (Foer 207). This is an incredibly heartfelt moment: Oskar wants to feel good again, but he does not know how to do so. He does not know how to be happy but remember his father; he does not know how to forgive his mother for trying to move on; he does not know how to live anymore. Everything he had

known up until September 11<sup>th</sup> is foreign to him. Such feelings are not only poignant, but empathetic: readers can acknowledge that Oskar's (and Foer's) experiences are unique to their lives, but that their emotions are universally inescapable. Everyone goes through a trying time in life, regardless of age, nationality, wealth, or title.

Thus, if the reviews, content, and author of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* demonstrate anything, it is that experience and taste are subjective. It is that people lead very different lives and have unique experiences at different ages, locations, and contexts. But it is also that loss, and the feeling of hope that succeeds loss, is human. It is that grief, love, anger, frustration, confusion, and hope is felt by all regardless of particular details. This, and not the mixed media format or September 11<sup>th</sup>, is what Jonathan Safran Foer emphasizes in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*.

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