*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, by Jonathan Safran-Foer

Extremely loud was the sound of the reception given to Jonathan Safran Foer when he illuminated everything in 2002. And it wasn't just arcane literati crying out from the pages of obscure journals: 250,000 plus copies of Foer's first novel were sold in the US alone, and Hollywood soon came knocking as well. Three years later, with the fifth anniversary of 9/11 approaching, Foer published his second novel, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close. Despite the title's boisterous promise, as well as the high volume of ambient praise upon its arrival, Extremely Loud starts off quietly, at times awkward and hesitant as it searches for the proper tone. It's not until midway through that the book finds its footing, with the last third achieving a striking and distinct level of passion. Though there are moments when Foer's experimentation fails and detracts from the story, on the whole this is a consistently well told tale, an excellent second book, and hopefully an indication of what we can continue to expect from Foer.

Most of the din surrounding Foer's first novel, Everything is Illuminated, was justified. It's funny, quirky and passionate, and many of the themes and techniques, such as multigenerational wrestling with suffering, a focus on patrimony and the use of multiple narrators, are taken up again in Incredibly Loud. Everything is Illuminated received its fair share of attention, and those same fans came out in droves for Incredibly Loud as well: fellow authors, critics, readers and yes, Hollywood again, have clamored to wax lyrical and crown Foer with grandiose accolades intended to endow importance, both his and those who proffer such plangent praises. This is an activity the literary world seems especially prone to; to my mind much of this can be attributed to this community's hesitant and tenuous (and jealous?) relationship with pop culture, especially movie and rock stars. It is safe to say that all this extremely loud noise has elevated Foer to the literary equivalent of those other stars whose faces appear in glossy magazines and whose names are always incredibly close to our minds, the end result being that Foer can no longer walk down the hallways of the Graduate English Department at the local state college without being mobbed by devoted fans.

As he did in Everything is Illuminated, Foer utilizes a multi-narrative structure to guide readers through his story. The bulk of the narration is carried out by Oskar Schell, a precocious nine-year old whose father was killed during the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks. Much of Oskar's motivation throughout the novel, besides the sense of loss from his father's death, is the guilt that he feels from having hidden the answering machine on which his father left five messages the morning of 9/11. While going through his father's effects one day, Oskar finds a key in an envelope with the word "Black" written upon it. Perplexed by the possible meaning of the envelope, Oskar is spurred on the main quest of the book: to visit every person in New York with the surname Black to see if they can't fill in the gap left by his father's death and the puzzling envelope. The task is of course insurmountable: there are far too many Blacks in the city for a young boy to visit, a fact Oskar is all too aware of; but the image works well to enforce the idea of searching for answers in the face of the inexplicable, a theme that becomes clearer as the story progresses.

The other narrators Foer employs are Oskar's grandparents, who are united through individual and shared tragedies of their pasts. During WWII Oskar's grandfather, the adolescent Thomas Schell, falls in love with Anna, the young woman he impregnates and plans to marry. Anna's sister is Oskar's grandmother (she remains unnamed throughout), and both she and Thomas are deeply in love with Anna. However, for three days in February of 1944 Allied planes firebombed the city of Dresden, Germany, resulting in the deaths of at least 25,000 people, many of whom were civilians. Anna and her unborn child are among those killed, leaving Thomas in ruins, the most obvious manifestation of his grief being his devolving ability to speak. Several years later Oskar's grandmother runs into Thomas at a diner in New York, and the two, united by their shared grief, marry. Eventually they become pregnant with Oskar's father, at which point Thomas, haunted by the memory of Anna, leaves Oskar's grandmother and flees back to Germany.

Foer uses the relationship between Thomas and the grandmother as the means for a powerful exploration in communication, or, as in the grandparents' case, a glaring lack thereof. This is clearly a topic of interest to Foer, who wrote a series of sharp and frequently beautiful essays on the subject in 1999 and 2000 that appeared in the journal *Conjunctions*. Writing about the journal kept by Isaac Bashevis Singer's while he was emigrating from Poland to America, Foer sees therein "a seemingly impossible faith in communication – of person to person, idea to utterance, mind to hand to paper." This of course is the bedrock underlying all struggles with language, especially those involved in learning another's: the confusion and frustration are endured because the hope persists – needs to persist – that communication is and will be possible

In sketching Thomas as a mute capable of expressing himself solely through an ever-increasing number of notebooks while his wife fakes blindness and writes her life story on a ribbon-less typewriter, Foer can't be held to expectations of realism; rather he is clearly representing our intensely necessary faith – in his own words an "impossible faith" – that our efforts at connection and communication will succeed. As Thomas notes in one of his thousands of letters to his son, "I want an infinitely long blank book and the rest of time…", for perhaps, with enough effort, time, patience and willpower the things that need to be said will finally be communicated appropriately, especially so in the face of tragic events.

Foer's choice of the firebombing of Dresden – perhaps most famously depicted in fiction by Kurt Vonnegut in Slaughterhouse Five – sets up an interesting parallel with the events of 9/11. While it was not uncommon for Allied forces throughout WWII to bomb German cities in an attempt to impair Nazi progress, Dresden has remained a source of heated debate with many historians and writers who consider the bombing, due to its high death toll upon civilians, to have been a war crime (one of the more notably outspoken critics being the Nobel prize winning German author Günter Grass, whose own recent admission of Nazi participation has drawn renewed attention – and contention – in Germany and abroad). In Dresden, Foer has a strong counterpart to the WTC bombings: an inexplicable and seemingly unnecessary act of violence upon non-combatants. Further, with the grandfather and grandson standing as bookends upon

either side of these tragedies, Foer nicely establishes a chasm over which their burgeoning relationship can reach.

Where Foer succeeds in drawing parallels between 9/11 and the bombing of Dresden, the book stumbles occasionally under the narration of Oskar. Choosing a child to narrate is a difficult proposition for any author: in order to carry the narrative forward the child must be precocious and overly-insightful for her age while still retaining a credible youthful ignorance. In relying upon Oskar, Foer achieves intermittent success: while Oskar's all-white outfits, incessant tambourine playing and other quirks endear him as a highly unique child, much of his emotional accessibility flounders on this tension, and what Foer gain in exposition often comes at the price of interest and compassion.

A lot of attention has been placed on Foer's writing style, which, especially when he's writing from the grandparents' perspective, tends towards a flowing stream of consciousness. For the most part Foer handles this well, using the style to enhance the disjointed and apprehensive nature of the grandparents' relationship. Foer is also inclined to experiment with the use of pictures interspersed throughout the text. Perhaps the most successful of these is when Thomas is writing one of his many letters to his now-dead son: the font slowly decreases in size and the words begin to jumble tightly together until they finally stumble over one another, and the pages fill up with an unreadable blackness. For the most part, however, his usage of pictures simply seems clever, as if written by an uncertain author eagerly hoping to please, and quite often the pictures serve to distract from, rather than enhance, the text itself.

A lot of emphasis has been placed on this being a "post-9/11 novel". I suppose this moniker has been chosen for marketing purposes to help with book sales, but I find the phrase misleading on two fronts. First, September 11th was such a resounding catastrophe, both on the national and international levels, that unless one can imagine an utterly insular, cave-dwelling individual, all art – especially American art – will, to some degree or another, be "post-9/11". Second, though the events of 9/11 provide the impetus for Oskar's search for his father, Foer is tackling an issue larger than the events of that day, both in New York and elsewhere. To my mind the concerns driving this book are the efforts made to continue living in the wake of inexplicable, non-context-able loss. Each character: Oskar, Thomas, the grandmother, the mother, all the Blacks encountered, is striving not only to make sense of the tragedies that they have encountered, but even more so attempting to create livable strategies in their aftermath.

The book ends with about fifteen pages of pictures showing a person jumping from one of the WTC buildings. The pictures are arranged in reverse; flipping through them, you get the notion that the person is falling back into the safety of the building. Foer is staking out a fictional ground that, while fully aware of itself as fiction, nevertheless expresses its desire to supplant fact. This is the hoped-for conclusion that is expressed in a dream the grandmother has:

> At the end of my dream, Eve put the apple back on the branch. The tree went back into the ground. It became a sapling, which became a seed.

God brought together the land and the water, the sky and the water, the water and the water, evening and morning, something and nothing.
He said, Let there be light.
And there was darkness.

If one were inclined to being a stickler, I suppose criticism could be laid on Foer for attempting to avoid reality and regress into the fictionalized hoped-for, a pre-Edenic state of painlessness. But faulting Foer for failing to find a new or comprehensive "answer" to this "problem" would be unfair. Once the book finally starts rolling, pain and confusion seep like saturated runoff from its pages. Foer's efforts, like most whose heads aren't in the abstract realm of analytics, are content to stop at the limits of the human: with expression, the putting-to-words of the (unfortunately) all-too-familiar cry of pain. The focus is no more Salvation than it is Comprehension; neither option, in any comprehensive or reliable sense, is within grasp.

If there is Sense to be made from 9/11 or Dresden or any act of suffering, it is beyond our capacity to create, and it seems anyone who would argue for some sense of Sense must be willing to admit that it's at best a fraction of Sense, a facet of whatever Understanding or Justice or Knowledge that may – or may not – someday come. Foer's awareness should be our own: that as humans we can draw upon all of our resources, from literature to theology to philosophy and beyond, to express our hatred, anger, hurt and desperation in the face of our ceaseless sufferings. It is a bitter and unsatisfying pill to swallow, but there is no other medicine to take.