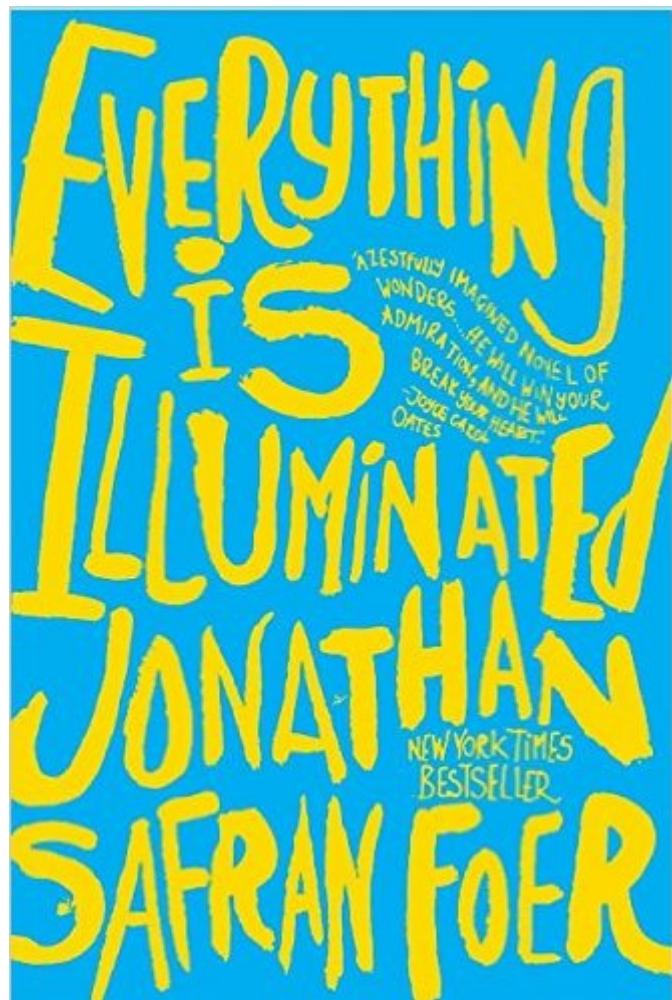


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Everything Is Illuminated: A Novel



Synopsis

With only a yellowing photograph in hand, a young man -- also named Jonathan Safran Foer -- sets out to find the woman who may or may not have saved his grandfather from the Nazis.

Accompanied by an old man haunted by memories of the war; an amorous dog named Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior; and the unforgettable Alex, a young Ukrainian translator who speaks in a sublimely butchered English, Jonathan is led on a quixotic journey over a devastated landscape and into an unexpected past.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Foer is a pretty endearing writer, no doubt, and one who is already on my watch list. But this novel is not something I'd be seen heaping praises on, as several other reviewers have been. The book's narrative is inventive, mildly funny (depending on your sense of humor) and occasionally even strewn with streaks of universal wisdom. But some of Foer's devices of story telling seem a little, er, affected. The lead-in into the novel is a bit wobbly and I took time to warm up to the goings-on -- in reality, the it is a tapestry of SEVERAL stories, the prime theme being one of a young American Jew named Jonathan Safran Foer (eponymous as the author, note) who travels to the Ukraine searching for the woman who saved his grandfather from the Nazis in 1941. We read of his search through the eyes of his Ukrainian guide and translator, Alex, whose imperfect English provides comic relief. Part of the story of Jonathan's search is told in straightforward prose, but part is told through letters from Alex. Other stories are told in dreams or in plays. Concurrently, we also get the story of several of Jonathan's forbears, going as far back as 1791. Much of the novel's humor stems from Alex's

under-developed English and his posturing antics. Such comic relief is deft, but the all too frequent flights of lyricism stink of affectation to me, not of staggeringly impressive command of language or anything. Foer is no Wodehouse, not yet. Everything Is Illuminated is ultimately more of an experience than a book, an episodic, thoughtful and rewarding work. But perhaps you may want to start with a fresh slate instead of a baggage of high expectations, a mistake I made. It is not worthy of a pedestal, but definitely worth a read if only for the sheer boldness of the narrative. Pick it up!

Somewhere, buried in Everything is Illuminated is a poignant, moving, original story about a man searching for the woman who saved his Grandfather from the Nazis. Aiding him in his search is the most endearing character in the novel, Alex, who writes English by always searching for a thesaurus term to replace the plain original word - resulting in a highly entertaining brand of comically prolix English. This device is the best narration technique in the novel (although not, as many critics in the blurb claim, a linguistic achievement on a par with Burgess in *A Clockwork Orange*). The rest of the novel, however, is taken up with an aggressive array of flashy modern narrative devices - magic realism, hysterical realism, Jewish confession etc., all of which blast the reader with great 'look at me' demonstrations of the writer's virtuosity, but lack any sense of pacing, rhythm, balance and poise. The principal gripe I have with modern novels such as this, is that in such a competitive, overcrowded market, young writers feel pressured to burst out with something dazzling and innovative, often invoking a range of literary techniques (as Foer does) without really understanding how they can be used most effectively. If the New York publishing scene was less preoccupied with hyping up flashy new bestsellers, and let talented young writers develop slowly, modern novels might have a chance to display some of the quiet literary inspiration that is the hallmark of past masterpieces.

The eccentric and attention-seeking graphics of the bookjacket convey the idea that this book is fresh, daring, kooky, and inventive--and the book is all these things! But it is also serious and thoughtful, touching on universal themes and the essence of what makes us human. With young "heroes" who are sometimes both earnest and sweetly vulnerable, the book contains moments of profound melancholy, as well as deep sadness, behind its bravado and its finger-snapping brio. Jonathan Safran Foer, a character bearing the same name as the author, is looking for the woman he believes saved his grandfather Safran from the Nazis. Traveling to the Ukraine, he meets Alex Perchov, a young man representing a Ukrainian travel agency which specializes in taking tourists to the sites of vanished shetls. Alex, a not-quite-fluent translator, and his "blind" grandfather,

who serves as the driver, travel with Jonathan to the site of Trachimbrod, his family's village, collecting stories and legends which will help Jonathan learn about his family and his Ukrainian Jewish heritage. Parts of the book are a bit sophomoric. (How many farting dog jokes does one need? And do we really need to know the details of Grandfather Safran's 132 mistresses?) The fictional Jonathan's letters and comments as he writes a novel about his trip are an artificial device for dealing, perhaps, with the author's uncertainties and/or heading off criticism, while the chapters he includes for Alex's review, are, of course, the actual chapters of this book. And Alex's misuse of language, while often very funny, begins to pall after numerous repetitions. But these are minor criticisms in view of the author's immense achievement in dynamically presenting two young men as they explore who they are, where they come from, and how they fit in the world. As the sought-after story of each boy's grandfather emerges, the depth and breadth of family relationships and cultural history become clearer to character and reader alike. The dramatic and moving conclusion clearly establishes Foer's credentials as a brilliant new talent. Mary Whipple

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