

S A N T A M O N I C A

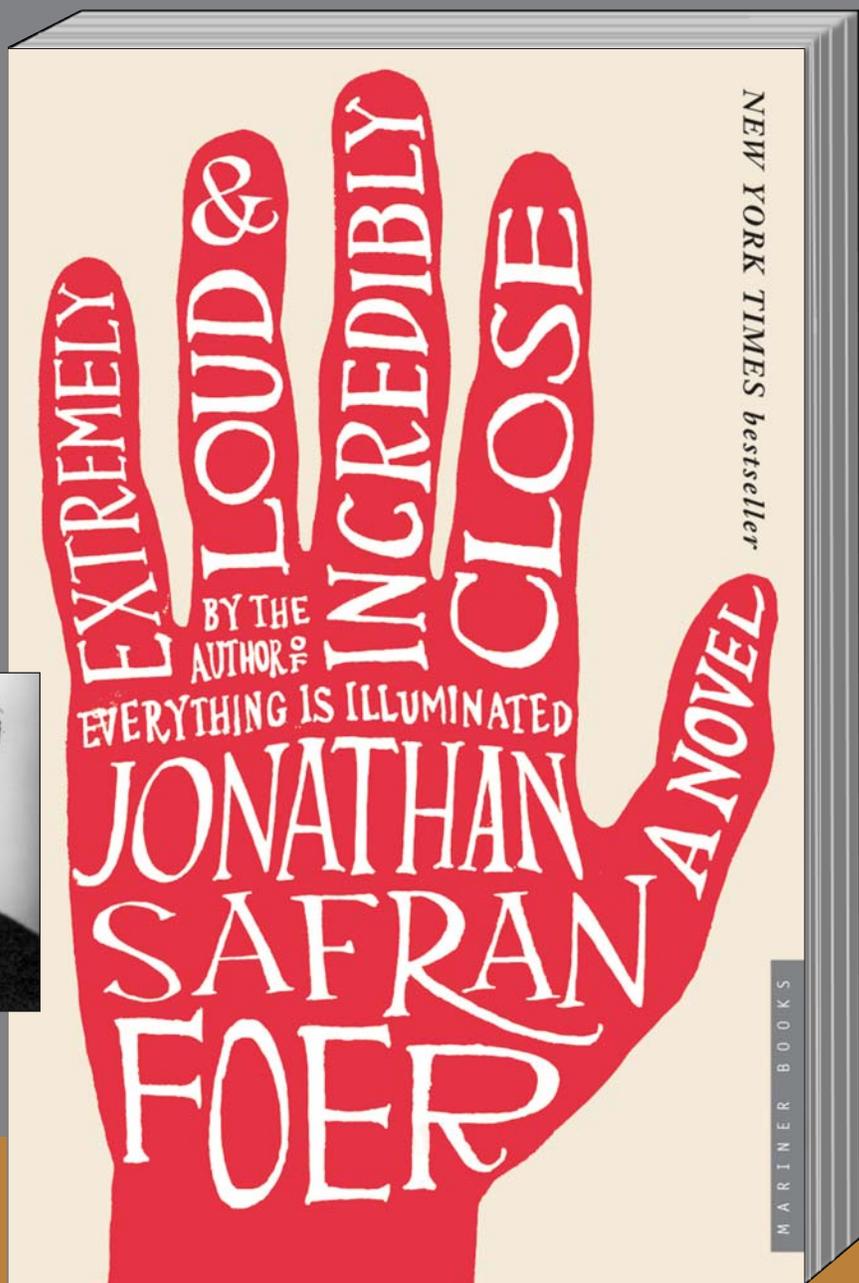
READS CITYWIDE

JOIN A
**CITYWIDE
BOOK CLUB**

APRIL 3
THROUGH
MAY 6
2006

For free public
book discussion
groups and
other events,
check the Santa
Monica Citywide
Reads Web site

www.smpl.org/cwr
or call 310.458.8600



CITYWIDE READS

WELCOME

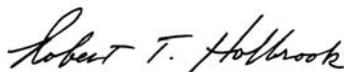
Welcome to the fourth annual Santa Monica CITYWIDE READS program. This program encourages people who live and work in or visit Santa Monica to read the same book concurrently and come together to discuss it in book clubs held citywide.

This year's book is *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, by Jonathan Safran Foer. He enjoyed great success with his award-winning *Everything Is Illuminated* and followed it up with the bestselling *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, published in 2005. Set in New York after September 11, the book follows nine-year-old Oskar's quest to learn more about a key found in his deceased father's closet.

The book's setting deals with the aftermath of September 11. Themes of loss and grief will resonate with many readers, while many will enjoy the moments of humor provided by the protagonist. Whatever experiences we bring as a reader, this novel is certain to provide a framework for meaningful dialogue in our community.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close is available from the Santa Monica Public Library or your local bookstore. Please plan on attending one of the many public book discussions or related events being held April 3 to May 6.

I hope that your participation in CITYWIDE READS is a rewarding experience that brings you together with your community through literature.



Robert T. Holbrook, Mayor
City of Santa Monica

JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER

"It's hard to tell somebody what you mean to say. And that's an idea that I'm obsessed with. It's why I write."

Jonathan Safran Foer [*Pages*, by Todd Peterson, March/April 2005]

Born in 1977, Jonathan Safran Foer grew up in Washington, DC. He attended Princeton University and won the Creative Writing Thesis prize each year that he was a student there. His love of literature and learning runs in the family. Both of his brothers have careers in publishing. His mother is president of a public-relations firm, and his father founded the American Antitrust Institute, a non-profit education, research, and advocacy organization.

After graduating from Princeton in 1999, Foer traveled to the Ukraine to research his family. This trip resulted in *Everything Is Illuminated*, the story of a writer named Jonathan Safran Foer who visits the Ukraine, hoping to find the woman who saved his grandfather from the Nazis. Published in 2002, *Everything is Illuminated* won the National Jewish Book Award and the Guardian First Book Prize. *Los Angeles Times* named it the Book of the Year. This best-selling novel was also adapted into a feature film, directed by Liev Schreiber and starring Elijah Wood.

Jonathan Safran Foer has varied interests and talents. He collects blank paper from the desks of authors such as Susan Sontag and Isaac Bashevis Singer, and his website, *The Project Museum*, www.jonathansafranfoer.com, documents this ever-growing collection and other ongoing projects. In addition to his novels, Foer has written many short stories that have appeared in magazines such as *The Paris Review* and *The New Yorker*. He also wrote the libretto for "Seven Attempted Escapes From Silence," an opera produced in September 2005 by the German National Opera House in Berlin. Each of the seven chapters of the libretto was scored by a different composer and represented a different country.

A resident of Brooklyn, New York, Jonathan Safran Foer lives with his wife, Nicole Krauss, author of the novels *Man Walks Into a Room* and *The History of Love*. While in New York City, you may glimpse him writing his next novel or working on his latest project, as he prefers to work in public spaces like libraries and coffee shops.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of the title?
2. What are the most prominent themes of the book for you?
3. Do you like Jonathan Safran Foer's writing style?
4. Is Oskar a believable character? Is he likeable? Does your opinion of him change?
5. What is stronger in the novel: plot or character development?
6. How would you characterize the relationship between Oskar and his grandmother?
7. Do the graphic elements in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* add anything to the story? Detract anything?
8. Was this a sensitive portrayal of New York after the World Trade Center attacks? Is fiction a good way to explore September 11?
9. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the book?
10. This title has been optioned for a film. What aspects of the novel lend themselves to cinematic treatment?
11. Do you find the book uplifting and/or depressing?

"The book isn't the party itself – it's the invitation. The party is like the human community; people talking and laughing and being together."

Jonathan Safran Foer [*Pages*, by Todd Peterson, March/April 2005]

ABOUT THE BOOK

"Books make people less alone. That, before and after everything else, is what books do. They show us that conversations are possible across distances."

JSF [*New York Times Magazine*, by Deborah Solomon, February 27, 2005]

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close is set in post-9/11 New York City, and follows the adventures of Oskar Schell, a precocious and curious nine-year-old boy. With Oskar, Jonathan Safran Foer aimed to create a protagonist he could sympathize with, guessing that would make for a compelling character. As inspiration for the eccentric and theatrical Oskar, Foer drew upon a photograph of himself at age six, clad in a plaid jacket and flashy bowtie, wearing numerous rings on his fingers. The Oskar who comes alive on the page is a jeweler, inventor, vegan, tambourine player, pacifist and actor, among many other things. To document his life, Oskar keeps a scrapbook titled "Stuff That Happened to Me." He writes letters to his heroes, including Ringo Starr, to whom he also sends a set of "bulletproof drumsticks" he invented, and Stephen Hawking, to whom he offers his services as a protégé. Oskar is also a voracious learner, constantly seeking answers to the questions that life throws in his path.

Oskar's story begins after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. Oskar's father died in the attack on the Twin Towers, and Oskar clings to answering machine messages left by Mr. Schell between the time the towers were hit and their ultimate collapse. More than a year later, Oskar finds a key enclosed in an envelope with the word "Black" on it, hidden in a vase in his deceased father's closet. Believing this to be a clue his father has left him, Oskar embarks on a scavenger hunt to find the lock that the mysterious key fits.

Oskar's close relationship with his paternal grandmother, who immigrated to the U.S. from Germany after World War II, drives the novel's secondary plot, involving her past as a young girl growing up in Germany before and after the Dresden bombings and her new life in America. This storyline highlights the importance of history, a thread carried throughout the novel.

There are many additional themes interspersed throughout the novel. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* explores survival, grief, and making sense of death. It is a novel of balances: humor with tragedy; invention with destruction; life with death. Jonathan Safran Foer found that September 11 was a visual experience, with loops of images from the tragedy playing repeatedly on television for months. He incorporated this element of media-saturation into the novel, interspersing photographs and unusual typography with the narrative.

Jonathan Safran Foer wrote thirty-nine drafts and 2,500 pages to create the final version of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Houghton Mifflin published it in 2005, and it immediately became a *New York Times* bestseller. *Scholastic Journal* also named it to their list of best adult books for high school students.

READ-ALIKES

"Reading is the way that people are most human and humane."

Jonathan Safran Foer [*Toronto Life*, by Katherine Ashenburg, October 2005]

Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, 2003

This book features another precocious and unique child protagonist on a journey of discovery. Christopher, a gifted and autistic fifteen-year-old, investigates the murder of his neighbor's dog.

Nicole Krauss, *The History of Love*, 2005

This novel has similar themes of loss and survival, as well as eccentric characters. Sixty years after the publication of his book, Leo Gursky, living in New York, pines for his lost love and son, while a girl, named for a character in Leo's books, seeks to find the inspiration for her name.

Ian McEwan, *Saturday*, 2005

The Booker Prize-winning author writes a day-in-the-life story featuring a London neurosurgeon. The protagonist has many interior monologues, like Oskar, and the book also explores finding peace in a violent, anxious world.

S. J. Rozan, *Absent Friends*, 2004

Set in the aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks, the novel also deals with a search for answers and an examination of secrets and the nature of truth. A reporter attempts to uncover a September 11th hero's past and his relationships with six childhood friends.

Kate Wenner, *Dancing with Einstein*, 2004

This protagonist also struggles with questions about her father in the aftermath of a major historical event, in this case the atomic bomb. Marea moves to New York and attempts to come to terms with her father's past as a Manhattan Project scientist and his mysterious death.

WEB RESOURCES

- Jonathan Safran Foer's website, www.jonathansafranfoer.com
- The September 11 Digital Archive, www.911digitalarchive.org/
"The September 11 Digital Archive uses electronic media to collect, preserve, and present the history of the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania and the public responses to them."
- Stephen Hawking's website, www.hawking.org.uk/
Learn more about Oskar Schell's hero on his official website.
- NoveList, a readers advisory database available online at www.smpl.org/research

RELATED RESOURCES

- *Portraits 9/11/01: The Collected Portraits of Grief from the New York Times*, 2003
The Portraits of Grief collection that ran in *The New York Times* from September 15, 2001 through February 5, 2002 features "snapshots of lives interrupted as they were being actively lived," according to executive editor Howell Raines.
- Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, 2004
Pulitzer Prize-winner and New Yorker, Spiegelman expresses his 9/11 experiences in this powerful, politically-charged graphic novel.

BOOK DISCUSSIONS

Trained volunteer facilitators lead these free public book discussions. No registration is required.

Monday, April 3 | 7:00 pm

Main Library,* 601 Santa Monica Blvd., Multipurpose Room

Thursday, April 6 | 6:30 pm

Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, 3150 Ocean Park Boulevard

Tuesday, April 11 | 7:30 pm

Barnes & Noble, 1201 3rd Street Promenade

Tuesday, April 18 | 2:00 pm

Ken Edwards Center,* 1527 4th Street

Wednesday, April 19 | 4:00 pm

Teen Discussion: The Bookmark Café at the Main Library,* 601 Santa Monica Boulevard

Wednesday, April 19 | 7:00 pm

Montana Avenue Branch Library,* 1704 Montana Avenue

Thursday, April 20 | 7:30 pm

Borders, 1415 3rd Street Promenade

Saturday, April 22 | 2:00 pm

Café Bolivar, 1741 Ocean Park Boulevard

Saturday, April 29 | 11:00 am

Fairview Branch Library,* 2101 Ocean Park Boulevard

Monday, May 1 | 12:00 pm

The Bookmark Café at the Main Library,* 601 Santa Monica Boulevard

Saturday, May 6 | 11:00 am

Ocean Park Branch Library,* 2601 Main Street

*City of Santa Monica facilities are wheelchair accessible. To request a disability-related accommodation, call Library Administration 458-8606 (TDD 395-8499) at least 3 working days (Monday-Friday) in advance.

THANKS TO THE FOLLOWING FOR SUPPORTING BOOK DISCUSSIONS AND PROGRAMS:

BARNES & NOBLE
BOOKSELLERS

BORDERS



SPECIAL CITYWIDE READS EVENTS

Free admission. Seating is on a first-arrival basis.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close: 9/11 in Context

Saturday, April 8 | 2:00 pm

Main Library, Multipurpose Room
601 Santa Monica Boulevard

How will the United States look back on the attacks of 9/11? What role does fiction play in understanding the impact of such a historically significant event? Join scholar Jack Nordhaus for a discussion on the historical consequences of 9/11 and how fiction, such as *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, can provide additional insight into historical events.

An Afternoon with Jonathan Safran Foer

Sunday, April 23 | 3:00 pm

Santa Monica College, Pavilion
1900 Pico Boulevard

The award-winning author of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *Everything Is Illuminated* presents a reading and discussion, followed by a book signing.

Co-sponsored by the Santa Monica College Associates.

The Future of Fiction

Thursday, May 4 | 7:00 pm

Main Library, Martin Luther King Jr. Auditorium
601 Santa Monica Boulevard

The graphic elements and stylistic choices of Jonathan Safran Foer illustrate just one possible direction for contemporary fiction. National Endowment for the Arts Director of Literature David Kipen and the four Southern California NEA Prose Fiction grant winners from 2005 discuss the future of fiction.

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