

debut

# BOOK OF LOVE

WHAT CAN A TWENTY-FOUR-YEAR-OLD GUY BARELY OUT OF COLLEGE POSSIBLY HAVE TO TEACH US ABOUT LOVE AND LIFE AND LOSS? IN JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER'S STUNNING LITERARY DEBUT, EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED

Jonathan Safran Foer is not in love. And maybe that's why he is so good at writing about it. His first novel, *Everything Is Illuminated*, to be published by Houghton Mifflin this spring, is an inspired, incisive take on the heart's choked ignitions. It's also about the devastation and dislocation of the Holocaust, the unearthing of horrible family secrets, and a mad search for roots in the dark fields of emptiness. But don't let that deter you. Foer's style is stellar, confidently controlled, and intricately layered—so much so that it's almost unfathomable to think that he wrote the whole thing when he was a twenty-year-old undergraduate at Princeton.

*Everything Is Illuminated* is three narratives in one: The first is the story of a college student named Jonathan Safran Foer who ventures to the Ukraine in search of the woman who rescued his grandfather from the Nazis; the second is a fictional history of the Polish town Trachimbrod, Foer's ancestral home; the third is a series of letters written in biting broken English by Foer's young Ukrainian guide and translator Alex. As Foer's present-day quest geographically approaches the scene of disaster, the town's mythic lineage of lovers and losers races historically toward the same fate. In between these two drives, a map of comic loss and tragic love emerges, and along the way, we somehow fall in love with Jonathan Safran Foer.

Already wrapping up his second novel and sitting on the chunk of a very lucrative book deal, Foer came to the Gramercy Park Hotel bar to discuss what it's like to be a young writer, an eligible bachelor, and a yearning soul. **Christopher Bollen**

**CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN** So *Everything Is Illuminated* comes out this spring. Are you excited? This is the first book you've published.

**JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER** It's my first novel, but it's not my first book. Last year I edited a collection of literary essays on the artist Joseph Cornell.

**CB** How did you get interested in Joseph Cornell's work?

**JSF** I took a bunch of art classes at Princeton. I think becoming an artist was always secretly what I wanted to do. Maybe it still is—and largely because of Cornell. His work is evidence of something that I had believed in but had never seen before. It's perfect expression. I don't know that there's anything more that I could want than to have someone say that about my work.

**CB** Cornell's artwork doesn't have a traditional narrative. It's more bits and pieces worked together, which, in a way, is a lot like the three disparate narratives running through your book. Do you think you write like he creates?

**JSF** So much of what he did was done out of longing. Or at least about making things out of places he wasn't going or people he wasn't meeting. To some extent, I feel like what I write is an attempt to create places that I'm not but would prefer to be.

**CB** Is that why you wrote this book? To get away?

**JSF** In the most literal way, I write the book that I want to read, the book that doesn't exist right now. Which isn't to say there aren't books that I love out there. There are. But not ones that fulfill this certain thing that I want.

**CB** So many first novels fall into the trap of copying the style of a more established writer, but your book offers a voice that I haven't heard before.

**JSF** For me, one of the most important things is to do something new. Not for any sort of theoretical, literary-critical reasons—I don't believe that newness is necessarily a good thing or that it should be one's end. I do it for emotional reasons. There's this weird duality when you write. One half of you says, "I feel things in a way unlike how other people feel them, and I want to express that." On the other hand, there's this faith that someone else will read it and say, "Oh, yeah. Me too."

**CB** When did you start writing the novel?

**JSF** I started the novel the summer after my sophomore year because of a trip I made that vaguely resembles the trip in this book. I did go to the Ukraine; I did have a photograph of the woman who ostensibly saved my grandfather from the Nazis. But there wasn't anyone like the character Alex or his grandfather—none of that other stuff.

**CB** There was no one guiding you?

**JSF** There was, but we had no relationship on the trip and no correspondence afterward. I went to Prague for the rest of the summer, for ten weeks, and I wrote almost the whole book there. I wrote it very, very quickly, and the next two and a half years I worked on editing it. It's funny, a lot of people have said, "Wow, you must work really hard." For sure. In a sense, I work much harder than anyone could know. Writing takes twenty-four hours a day and everything in your life focusing on it. But in another sense, I work much less. We know it only takes two minutes to type a page if you know what you are going to type. The act of composition is nothing.

**CB** How do you feel about being so young and getting—what?—\$500,000 at twenty-four to publish a novel? That kind of deal is almost unheard of. Do you feel lucky?

**JSF** Yeah. I feel very lucky. And it beats the alternative, which I also experienced: being a receptionist and having really crappy jobs. On the other hand, that wasn't my goal. My goal was to write the book. And in a way, that wasn't my goal either. My goal is to be someone who writes many books, each of which is a significant growth from the previous book. I haven't accomplished that yet, and I don't even know that I'm on the right track. You know, when I'm not working well on the new book, the old book feels like shit. It's like if you've dated someone for a long time and break up and a friend says, "Don't you feel proud of that previous relationship?" Yes, in a way, but it's not you now. It's not as if anyone wants to have a great relationship in their past. What they want is to be happy and in love in the present.

**CB** That's interesting, because love and the loss of love seem to be the central themes in your book.

**JSF** Yes. But it's funny because love is completely absent from my life. I have no love at all.

**CB** Wait a minute. No love in your life whatsoever?

**JSF** Well, I have familial love, and I have friends whom I love, and I love everyone who passes me on the street. But no, no active love. Joseph Cornell had this great quote in response to someone asking him if he ever had sex. He said, "No, because then I could never make art." Well, that's obviously silly, but...

**CB** So you think that those who aren't in love are the ones who can best write about love?

**JSF** I think there is something very useful about not knowing what you write about, or talk about for that matter.

**CB** Because you're too close to separate yourself from the subject?

**JSF** Yeah. Love is one of those things. You know, it's not like math. If you don't know calculus, you can't do calculus. Thinking about love and writing about love are not the same things as practicing love. So it's not the case that the person who practices it understands it best.

**CB** Do you want to fall in love?

**JSF** Yes, of course. Love is exactly the thing you want. It's impossible to say you don't want to fall in love. If so, then you aren't talking about love.

**CB** You're saying you don't have to practice what you write about, yet you did go on this trip that is the basis of the book. You did go to find the woman who saved your grandfather, and you even had her photograph. What exactly did you find?

**JSF** Nothing. I didn't find her. I didn't even find the town. I mean, it was on the map, but nothing was there. It doesn't exist anymore.

**CB** So you made up the whole history of the town from scratch? All of Trachimbrod?

**JSF** Yep. I made it all up, A to Z.

**CB** When writing the history of a Jewish society, do you feel in any way accountable? The novel ends with the Holocaust and genocide. That's more than just a political topic. Did you feel like you had to be true to certain facts?

**JSF** No. The book is not historically accurate. I was willfully sacrificing one kind of accuracy for another, but I wanted to make something that was emotionally true. Clearly, love in this book is not how love is in real life, but hopefully it casts shadows that are familiar to someone who has been in love. If I wanted to write something true to the dates and the numbers and names, I would write nonfiction. But that's not the point of the novel.

**CB** Do you think that will upset people?

**JSF** I don't really think of the book as being about the Holocaust. Yes, it's important to the book, and some interesting issues are raised, but I would hope the description "Holocaust book" wouldn't be applied. The issues that it's more explicitly about are loss, grief, responsibility...sex.

**CB** You're already writing your next book, aren't you?

**JSF** I'm supposed to have the draft done in a few weeks.

**CB** That's quick.

**JSF** Well, remember, I wrote this first one a long time ago.

**CB** And yet it's only just coming out now. Do you still feel connected to it?

**JSF** It couldn't be weirder. I gave a reading the other night, and I thought, Why would I read this? It's like taking an ex to the prom. You know, *why?* It doesn't make any sense. This party's great, so let's do it the right way. I do think it's the best representation of my abilities at a certain age, which is not the age I am now. But that's what fiction is. It's not like you're trying to run the one-hundred-yard dash faster and faster. Rather, you are trying to express yourself as fully as you can for where you are.

**CB** Has your style changed?

**JSF** Yeah, it has. This next book takes place in a museum in New York devoted to the life of this diarist who wrote in the '20s and became this huge international success. Everyone read his diaries. It was considered the masterpiece of masterpieces. He ended up committing suicide. When the Anne Frank diaries were published after the war, his diaries went out of favor.

**CB** In the first novel, you used yourself—down to your very name—as a main character.

**JSF** I'm a character in this second book, too.

**CB** The same exact character?

**JSF** Well, sort of. I'm an eleven-year-old kid who thinks he's a child prodigy but isn't. He falls in love with a university professor, and he carries on this fantasy love affair with her. He's a kid with no control over his emotions. He has completely ridiculous and unrealized notions of love.

**CB** But why yourself each time? Why Jonathan Safran Foer?

**JSF** It feels right. It's the way to feel most vulnerable and emotionally invested while I am writing. It raises the ante for me. If you imagined it to be someone else in *Everything Is Illuminated*, it would change the tone of the whole thing.

**CB** Is that why you write about the Jewish heritage so much? To feel emotionally invested?

**JSF** It's the thing I'm most familiar with, the best soil in which to plant seeds, but it isn't the point of the book.

**CB** You don't want to be called a young Jewish writer?

**JSF** It doesn't matter what I want. That's what I am. I'm young, and I'm Jewish, and I'm a writer. Like Toni Morrison is a black woman. Good writers do what they can do well. No writer has the ability to tell just any story he or she wants successfully. There's a reason why writers keep returning to certain territories.

**CB** Do you feel your life has changed since you got this break and you still do. You were single before, and now you're still single....

**JSF** Actually, I think I wasn't single when I got the book deal.

**CB** I see. So you have been in love before.

**JSF** Oh, maybe. Well, actually, maybe not.

**CB** Does the idea of becoming a celebrity writer interest you?

**JSF** It doesn't matter, because I won't. Nobody reads books. Not on the scale that produces celebrity.

**CB** Aren't there celebrity writers?

**JSF** You could say Dave Eggers is a celebrity writer. But he could walk anywhere on Earth and nobody would recognize him. What's celebrity but being recognized?

**CB** So you aren't moving to Manhattan anytime soon and wearing designer clothes and dating models?

**JSF** I renewed my old lease, and this shirt's from the Gap. Don't knock it. I just want to write a good book. That probably sounds like bullshit, but it's what I want. If I can do that, the whole world—the world that I care about—would be in my hand.

**CB** Well, what about dating models?

**JSF** Man, I fucking hope so.

Photography Roe Ethridge

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