

# After 9/11

Jonathan Safran Foer's catastrophic genius

Jon Catlin

German theorist Theodor Adorno famously wrote in 1949 that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.”<sup>1</sup> A remark often misinterpreted and taken out of context, it nevertheless popularized Adorno’s theory that social consciousness fundamentally changes as a result of historical catastrophes. Here, Adorno uses poetry as a stand-in for art as a whole and its legacy of glorifying the triumphs of Western civilization; to write poetry after Auschwitz is to absolve that culture of its faults, which were revealed in the Holocaust. But his more radical ethical claim is that the Holocaust changed the very way we should live; his philosophical reflections on the Holocaust are even collected under the title *Can One Live After Auschwitz?* One wants to dismiss such a question as absurd, but for Adorno that would be a refusal to acknowledge the scar Auschwitz left on the world.

I want to ask whether such an approach could apply to a tragedy weighing on American consciousness today: the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Adorno’s theoretical project of delineating what changed after Auschwitz could only take place after the Holocaust had achieved enough historical closure to be considered as a distinct event from the rest of World War II. Today, it has been over twelve years since 9/11, the memorial at Ground Zero has recently been completed, and the affiliated museum is scheduled to open in May 2014. The two major wars 9/11 sparked are effectively over. America seems poised to enter a new phase of 9/11 remembrance, not unlike what happened with the Holocaust. The question is what this phase will look like. Will 9/11 come to be remembered as a truly epochal event? Will the

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1. Theodor W. Adorno, “Cultural Criticism and Society” (1949), trans. Samuel Weber and Sherry Weber Nicholsen, in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedmann, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 162.

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people of our generation take up the phrase “After 9/11”? And if they do, will this call for a reformulation of all of Western civilization, as Auschwitz does for Adorno, or affect us only as Americans?

One of the most prominent figures asking these questions today is Jonathan Safran Foer, a thirty-six-year-old Jewish-American writer whose two novels put responses to these very catastrophes in dialogue. Foer is uniquely positioned to comment on the status of 9/11 in a broader cultural context. As a New Yorker, he sympathizes with those Americans, especially children, for whom the event was uniquely traumatizing. But as the grandson of two survivors of the Holocaust and a writer who positions himself in its shadow, Foer also considers 9/11 in a comparative light. Foer’s response is therefore ambivalent, or, more precisely, double. His approach does not necessarily disqualify 9/11 from epochal status, but it does necessitate a move away from American exceptionalism and toward a more universal concern for human suffering.

### FROM THE HOLOCAUST TO 9/11

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**O**n February 1, 2013, President Obama tapped Foer for the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, the body that oversees the national memorial and museum, making him one of the youngest members ever appointed. This new title makes Foer’s literary status semi-official: the writer of catastrophe for his generation.

Foer’s engagement with catastrophe began with his first book, *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), a fictionalized account of an event in Foer’s own life. One summer, while a philosophy major at Princeton, the protagonist (named Jonathan Safran Foer) travels to the Ukraine looking for the woman who had saved his Jewish grandfather during the Holocaust. He hires a translator and drives through the countryside looking for a lost shtetl, Trachimbrod. As it turns out, nothing remains of the town: its inhabitants and the site were completely destroyed during the war. But one woman who remains has miraculously preserved the Jews’ possessions and stories.

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Everything is a story of loss, but also the wonders of coincidence and memory. The novel is written as a series of letters between Jonathan and his translator, Alex. The friendship they develop signals hope—from both perspectives—for Gentile-Jewish reconciliation. But Jonathan is also off on his own project: when he can't recover the real history of the Jews of the town, he creates a mythology for them going back hundreds of years, complete with festivals, orgies, and founding folklore. Foer seems to suggest that this leap into imagination is just Jonathan's way of mourning. When there's nothing left of his real family history because it has been so completely destroyed, he must create it in order to achieve closure.

What's really true in Foer's story? Though Foer's grandfather survived the Holocaust, he lost a daughter and his first wife, and that trauma is what Foer takes up in his writing. Crucial is the fact that Foer's grandfather died long before Foer was born, so even the story of his grandfather's survival is one level removed. Philippe Codde thus considers Foer representative of third-generation Holocaust victims: "those who were not directly affected by the event, but who nevertheless seem to carry the burden of this traumatic past."<sup>2</sup> Codde also suggests that subsequent generations can become even more haunted by the traumatic event than the first, "due to the obsession that arises with the black hole, the hidden horror in their family history," especially when the survivors do not share their experiences.

2. Philippe Codde, "Keeping History at Bay: Absent Presences in Three Recent Jewish American Novels," *Modern Fiction Studies* vol. 57, n. 4 (Winter 2011): 673-4, 675.

As Jonathan narrates in *Everything*, "The origin of a story is always an absence," and he writes as if he had no choice but to fill that absence with narratives spun from the scraps of information he was left with.<sup>3</sup> Dominick LaCapra would consider this a healthy response to trauma in that it constitutes "acknowledging and affirming, or working through, absence as absence," rather than mistaking one's ancestral loss for one's own loss and thinking of oneself as a victim.<sup>4</sup> For LaCapra, accepting absence and working through it "requires the recognition of both the dubious nature of ultimate solutions and the necessary anxiety that cannot be eliminated from the self or projected onto others." It involves accepting anxiety about the past as one's own and "opens up empowering possibilities in the necessarily limited, nontotalizing, and nonredemptive elaboration of institutions and practices in the creation of a more desirable, perhaps significantly

3. Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), p. 230.

4. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 58.

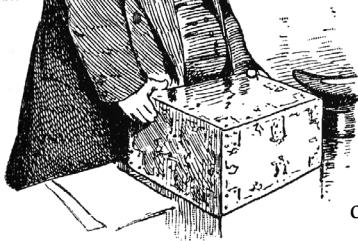
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different—but not perfectly unified—life in the here and now.” Everything is the story of a hopeful young Foer working toward that uneasy acceptance of his family’s past.

Everything won the National Jewish Book Award in 2002 and established Foer as an important Jewish writer. Though the book is impressive, Foer delves even deeper into the aftermath of catastrophe in his 2005 *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. *Extremely Loud* is on its surface the story of a nine-year-old boy, Oskar, who loses his father on 9/11. The story is told mostly through Oskar’s own voice; he exaggerates much of what he sees and uses phrases like “extremely hilarious,” which give the book its title. Oskar goes on a quest around New York City to find the lock for a key he found that he believes to be his lost father’s, sharing the story of his loss with the people he meets and achieving closure on his father’s death in the process.

The use of a disorienting, untraditional voice isn’t new for Foer, who wrote *Everything* partly in the equally-entertaining, Borat-like voice of Foer’s Ukrainian translator Alex, which brings unexpected humor to a tragic story. As if this weren’t enough, Foer disorients the reader of *Extremely Loud* by interspersing images Oskar collects for his scrapbook, “Stuff That Happened to Me.” Chapters narrated by Oskar alternate with unsent letters written by his grandparents, who fled Germany after the allied bombing of Dresden decades earlier. Between these several narrators, pages come in all varieties—some blank, others containing one word, some corrected with red pen, others totally full of numbers, and still others on which the letters get gradually closer together until the page is almost solid black with ink. The struggle of communicating trauma is made visible: sometimes there is nothing one can say, and other times there are not words to communicate what one needs to say.

The act of paying is perhaps the most uncomfortable infliction that the two orchard thieves entailed upon us.



These imaginative representational strategies are inspired by the many literary references Foer incorporates into his works. The name of *Extremely Loud*’s Oskar is borrowed from the protagonist of German writer Günter Grass’s *The Tin*

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Drum, the story of another traumatized boy's fantastical travels in the wake of World War II. The photographs of banal items scattered throughout *Extremely Loud* recall those in W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*, the story of a Jewish man who escaped the Holocaust as an infant from Czechoslovakia on a Kindertransport to Britain. As Deborah Solomon remarked, "Foer might be called a European novelist who happens to be writing in America."<sup>5</sup>

### WHY WRITE THE CATASTROPHE?

Foer remarked on the subjects of his novels in an interview: "Both the Holocaust and 9/11 were events that demanded retellings... The accepted versions didn't make sense for me. I always write out of a need to read something, rather than a need to write something. With 9/11 in particular, I needed to read something that wasn't politicized or commercialized, something with no message, something human."<sup>6</sup> Foer attempted to return to 9/11 and rethink it from the ground up. As he said on another occasion, "We need as many voices as possible because unfortunately our national storytellers about [9/11] have been politicians and they've been telling a story so different than most people I know experienced the day."<sup>7</sup> Foer's personal response to 9/11 was more open-ended: "profound sadness," as he put it, or, as Oskar frequently says, "heavy boots."

Foer attempts to convey this open sense of loss indirectly by juxtaposing 9/11 with fictional survivor testimonies of the allied bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima during World War II. Oskar's grandparents are survivors of the allied bombing of Dresden, and deeply traumatized individuals, though Oskar is too young to think of them as such. The reader learns of their trauma mostly through letters Oskar's grandfather writes to his unborn son, who perished in utero during the bombings. In the course of a school project, Oskar then stumbles upon an oral testimony of a man who lived through the bombing of Hiroshima that Foer transcribes in the novel. These counter-narratives, hastily written off as "thrown in"<sup>8</sup> and "in here, too, for good measure"<sup>9</sup> by dismissive critics, serve the important role of situating 9/11 in a broader, more self-reflective framework.

"The way September 11 is talked about in America is entirely

5. Deborah Solomon, "The Rescue Artist," *New York Times Magazine*, 27 Feb., 2005.

6. Ibid.

7. David Swatling, "Imagination Is the Instrument of Compassion," *Radio Netherlands Worldwide*, 4 Feb., 2010.

8. Walter Kirn, "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close: Everything Is Included," *New York Times Book Review*, 3 Apr., 2005.

9. John Updike, "Mixed Messages," *The New Yorker*, 15 Mar., 2005.

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without any kind of global or historical context,” Foer remarked. “It’s talked about in absolutes—absolute good and evil, absolute terror and justice—with no perspective...I thought including [Dresden and Hiroshima] was not only a way of introducing a kind of historical perspective but also to reiterate how awful it is when these things happen.”<sup>10</sup>

10. Swatling, 2010. Foer thus describes *Extremely Loud* as a humanistic intervention into the 9/11 discourse, not a political one. But we can’t help but note that the bombings of both Dresden and Hiroshima were inflicted by America on other civilian populations. Roughly 25,000 civilians perished in the allied fire-bombing of Dresden, and the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima killed over 100,000. Nearly 3,000 Americans perished in the 9/11 attacks. We have by and large justified the former as a society in the name of winning World War II. Yet from the same limited American perspective, 9/11 seems anomalous and uniquely evil, paving the way for political arguments for American exceptionalism. By juxtaposing distant narratives of American-inflicted suffering with one of American suffering close to home, Foer puts moral closure on each of them into question.

### WE DON’T NEED THE TRUTH

Critics reviewed *Extremely Loud* harshly, but not on account of Foer’s writing alone: many were apparently upset by what they perceived as an evasion of 9/11 itself in a novel about 9/11. Annoyed by the novel’s playful design and unorthodox narrative voices, one reviewer wrote, “A man like Thomas Schell”—Oskar’s father, whose perspective we get only indirectly, through the phone messages he leaves for Oskar while trapped in the burning towers—“has a riveting story to tell, after all. We don’t need gimmicks to keep our attention; we just need the truth.”<sup>11</sup> This criticism echoes across most reviews of *Extremely Loud*: enough with the literary gimmicks, we want the truth about 9/11—just set the scene, build the suspense, and vividly depict the terror and outrage of the version of 9/11 most of us remember.

But such a demand is not only unreasonable; it is also unimaginative. Foer circumlocutes the actual 9/11 attacks by delivering them through Oskar, a child who barely understands them. But this is no failure. Foer shows us that the task of good fiction is not to deliver some purported truth, but to make us search for it ourselves in new places,

11. Steve Almond, “The Boy Who Knew Too Much,” *The Boston Globe*, 3 Apr., 2005.

precisely beyond the standard narratives we have already heard. That so many critics of *Extremely Loud* failed to take up Foer's challenge exposes a deeper problem in American cultural consciousness. Over a decade after 9/11, established and unimaginative narratives of the event still dominate our attention. Architectural critic Michael Sorkin noted a year after 9/11 that the "endlessly 'realistic'" language of competing views on memorializing 9/11 failed to acknowledge that "Every memorial invents the event it recalls. That 'event' of 9/11 cannot simply be absorbed into things as they are: a year later it still exceeds our ability to describe it."<sup>12</sup>

Joyce Carol Oates has noted a similar expectation of American audiences with regards to 9/11 narratives. While much survivor and eyewitness testimony had already appeared, she wrote in 2006, "few writers of fiction have taken up the challenge and still fewer have dared to venture close to the actual event; September 11 has become a kind of Holocaust subject, hallowed ground to be approached with awe, trepidation, and utmost caution."<sup>13</sup> In comparison to eyewitness accounts of such an inviolable subject, fictional accounts like Foer's strike us as misplaced and inauthentic. "The popular bias for memoir in our time, even fictionalized memoir," she goes on, "is this wish for 'authenticity' on the part of the author who has also been a participant in his story." American audiences want the thrill of experiencing the event from a "true" or "authentic" perspective that initiates a chain of emotional overidentification with the narrator, unquestioning solidarity with one's fellow readers, and finally the unearned closure of an easy, uplifting message at the story's conclusion. But as a long tradition of the literature of catastrophe shows us, a genuine response to catastrophe is far more complex.

### THE POLITICS OF NARRATIVE EMPATHY

"Imagination is the instrument of compassion" is a line by Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert that resonates deeply with Foer. In fact, it inspired an explicit "After 9/11" pronouncement from him: "Books have a very important function in the world—a function more important now than it was before September 11th—which is to tell stories of individuals, stories in which people in other cultures can recognize themselves."<sup>14</sup> Along with historical context, Foer suggests

12. Michael Sorkin, "The Dimensions of Aura," *All Over the Map* (London: Verso, 2011), p. 37.

13. Joyce Carol Oates, "Dimming the Lights," *The New York Review of Books*, 6 Apr., 2006.

14. Swatling, 2010.

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that such imaginative and morally complicating compassion—trying to understand the suffering of Americans in light of suffering Americans have inflicted on others—is what was missing from America’s 9/11 response. Foer’s “After 9/11” statement is a plea for cross-cultural understanding.

While Foer chose not to comment directly on the politics of 9/11, cartoonist Art Spiegelman, a fellow New Yorker and child of Holocaust survivors, did so bluntly in his comic strips collected as *In the Shadow of No Towers*, a series he drew in the months following 9/11. In his representations of 9/11, Spiegelman drew openly upon his experience creating *Maus*, his Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic narrative account of his parents’ experience at Auschwitz. At several points in the comic on 9/11, Spiegelman represents himself as a mouse, the same way he represents Jews in *Maus* (with cats as their Nazi captors). At one point, having turned mid-strip into a mouse, Spiegelman says, “I remember my father trying to describe what the smoke in Auschwitz smelled like...The closest he got was telling me it was ‘indescribable’...That’s exactly what the air in Lower Manhattan smelled like after Sept. 11!”<sup>15</sup> Spiegelman’s work makes evident the way we process new experiences through the lens of past ones. Given his secondhand experience of the Holocaust, Spiegelman witnessed 9/11 through the lens of his Judaism as well as his terrified position as a New Yorker worried about his family.

<sup>15.</sup> Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, (New York: Pantheon, 2004), p. 3.

Spiegelman openly expresses his political conclusions about 9/11 in several panels in *In the Shadow of No Towers*:

Nothing like the end of the world to help bring folks together...

But why did those provincial American flags have to sprout out of the embers of Ground Zero?

<sup>16.</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

Why not...a globe??!<sup>16</sup>

He also narrates a patriotic scene with a telling caption:

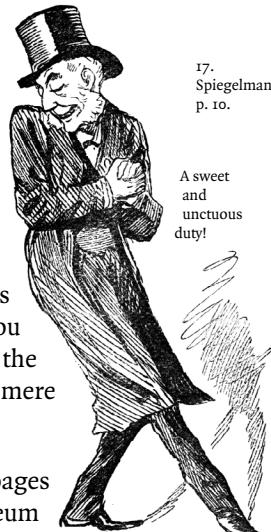
By September '04, Cowboy boots drop on Ground Zero as New York is transformed into a stage set for the Republican

Presidential Convention, and Tragedy is transformed into Travesty...<sup>17</sup>

Spiegelman suggests that such remembrance efforts actually helped America forget 9/11 as a real historical event. For stereotypically proud, cocky New Yorkers, this meant moving on quickly from 9/11: “On 9/11/01 time stopped. / By 9/12/01 clocks began to tick again... / You go back to thinking you might live forever after all!” For all Americans, the “Genuine Awe” of the attacks was “reduced to the mere ‘Shock and Awe’ of jingoistic strutting.”

When I recently viewed newspaper front pages from September 12, 2001 on display at the Newseum in Washington DC, I observed just how common this sentiment was. The San Francisco Examiner ran the headline “Bastards!” across an image of the burning towers. Others ran the headlines “Outrage,” “Evil Acts,” “Mass Murder,” “War on America,” “It’s War,” and “Bush Vows to Strike Back.”<sup>18</sup> (More measured headlines avoided these loaded labels and leaps to retaliation: “Terror,” “Attacks Shatter Nation,” “Unthinkable,” and the poignant “We Mourn” allowed the tragedy to sink in—at least for one day.)

Ilka Saal considers *Extremely Loud* exemplary of the “universalizing” and “decentering” politics of the philosopher Judith Butler. Butler writes that “our collective experience of a cataclysmic event always emerges within a particular narrative frame, and it is this very frame that can either open up or preclude ‘certain kinds of questions, certain kinds of historical inquiries.’”<sup>19</sup> For Butler, the narrative frame we adopt determines whether “the experience of violence and loss have to lead straightaway to military violence and retribution” or whether “something can be made of grief besides a cry for war.”<sup>20</sup> With regard to 9/11, Saal says that “while the event momentarily disrupted the American nation’s narcissistic understanding of itself, providing it with an opportunity to acknowledge its interdependency with other nations, the narratives triggered in its wake immediately shored up a first-person perspective that reassured impenetrable boundaries between self and other.”<sup>21</sup>



17.  
Spiegelman,  
p. 10.

A sweet  
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18. “Today's Front Pages,” September 11, 2001, Newseum, [http://www.newseum.org/todaysfrontpages/default\\_archive.asp](http://www.newseum.org/todaysfrontpages/default_archive.asp)

19. Ilka Saal, “Regarding the Pain of Self and Other: Trauma Transfer and Narrative Framing in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* vol. 47, n. 3 (Fall 2011): 454.

20. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, (London: Verso, 2006), p. xi.

21. Saal, p. 454.

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Rather than settling for first-person accounts, Foer takes up Butler's challenge to "narrate ourselves not from the first person alone, but from, say, the position of the third, to receive an account delivered in the second."<sup>22</sup> He delivers an account of 9/11 through the eyes of Oskar, a child too young to politicize the event, and his grandparents, conflicted witnesses who have suffered their entire lives on account of American-inflicted destruction. These narratives are themselves framed through Foer's own encounter with the Holocaust, which appears in *Extremely Loud* as an ellipsis in the Grandfather's narrative. In one of his letters to his unborn son, he mentions Simon Goldberg, a Jewish friend of his father-in-law, who after disappearing from Germany sent him a short, touching letter from Westerbork transit camp in Holland. While the Grandfather thinks he may have seen Goldberg after the war in New York, the reader knows how dubious this sighting would have been: detention in Westerbork usually meant deportation to Auschwitz.

These alternative, "decentering" narrative frames for 9/11 raise the question, as Saal puts it, "What...if the nation was to start the narrative not on September 11 but earlier by way of deciphering the very conditions that produced terrorism in the first place?" Butler hopes that inhabiting these decentered positions of vulnerability might prompt Americans to "endeavor to produce another public culture and policy in which suffering unexpected violence and reactive aggression are not accepted as the norms of political life."<sup>23</sup>

True to his goal, Foer humanizes 9/11 by portraying the suffering it caused intimately. Yet he similarly humanizes the suffering of Dresden and Hiroshima. Foer's universalized, rather than exceptionalist, framing of suffering thus entails an unstated political conclusion. It is not simply the liberal flipside of the jingoism Spiegelman critiqued. It is a call for a human-centered outlook on suffering, no matter how much of an "other" the victim may be.

Foer's work offers no direct commentary on the US government's actions in the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima, nor, for that matter, Afghanistan and Iraq. Instead, it raises up a mirror to the reader and asks her to see the suffering of innocent people for what it is: unacceptable. Foer presents us with multiple catastrophes so

<sup>22.</sup> Butler,  
p. 8.

<sup>23.</sup> Ibid.,  
p. xii.

that we see how each one affected its victims with similar intensity. As Susan Neiman writes on 9/11 in relation to other catastrophes, “Dividing evils into greater and lesser, and trying to weigh them, is not just pointless but impermissible.”<sup>24</sup> Foer rightly avoids such comparison, but illustrates that each of the catastrophes in *Extremely Loud* entailed unacceptable suffering, no matter what the degree. Considering 9/11 through a wider narrative frame allows us to more accurately determine multiple things we find unacceptable about it, and to condemn this multiplicity of wrongs.

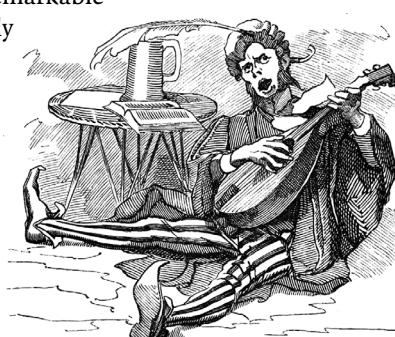
24. Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 286.

### LEARNING FROM THE PAST

**W**idening the lens through which one thinks about a particular catastrophe also allows for more effective mourning, in addition to better history. While critics have focused on Oskar’s narrative, his story comprises only half the book, and we are meant to read his narrative in light of his grandparents’, and vice versa. His grandfather is traumatized into silence and speaks only through the tattoos “yes” and “no” on his palms and short written notes. Yet Oskar learns from his grandfather’s misery, even though the family is so dissolved that Oskar knows him only as “the renter” of his grandmother’s apartment. After the two dig up Oskar’s father’s empty coffin and fill it with the Grandfather’s unsent letters to him, “the renter reminded me that just because you bury something, you don’t really bury it.”<sup>25</sup> The past haunts Oskar, but he is on the path toward healing. Oskar’s generation (and Foer’s before his) has seen firsthand how psychically destructive his grandparents’ generation’s silence about their trauma was, and taken a different route.

25. Jonathan Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (New York: Mariner, 2005), p. 322.

The Grandfather is a remarkable character who embodies a deeply traumatized, and now largely lost, generation of those who suffered unimaginably in the war. After his fiancée dies in the bombing of Dresden, he marries her sister, Oskar’s grandmother. They live miserable lives, haunted by



It requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off.

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the past, and establish an impossible code of rules that keep them in separate “nothing spaces” so as to avoid the tragic reality of their lives. One rule is particularly damaging: as the Grandfather writes in one of many unsent letters to Oskar’s father, “Your mother and I never talk about the past, that’s a rule.” When he leaves Oskar’s grandmother, she asks, “Why are you leaving me?” He responds, in writing, “I do not know how to live.” “I do not know either, but I am trying,” she says. “I do not know how to try,” he writes back.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26.</sup> Foer,  
*Extremely Loud,*  
pp. 108, 181.

These people are truly damaged by what they experienced. As is typical of victims of trauma, they cannot put what they experienced into words, even many decades later. As Cathy Caruth explains this phenomenon, it is because the traumatic event’s “violence has not yet been fully known.”<sup>27</sup> In the way trauma is experienced by the individual, it is an ongoing process, not a singular event that ever achieves full temporal closure. Yet closure is still a goal worth striving for, and necessary for moving on with life.

<sup>27.</sup> Cathy  
Caruth,  
*Undamed  
Experience:  
Trauma,  
Narrative,  
and History*

(Baltimore: The  
Johns Hopkins  
University  
Press, 1996),

p. 6.

Following Freud, LaCapra breaks responses to trauma into two types that characterize Oskar and his grandparents’ responses. First there is *acting out*, which fits the Freudian concept of melancholia. This form of remembering collapses distinctions of tense: traumatic memories flood into the present, which is experienced as a reliving of the past. By holding onto the past, the subject is unable to conceive of and work toward a livable future. For example, Oskar identifies his quest around New York City as a way for him to stay close to his father for a little longer. In acting out, one is unable to convert one’s traumatic memory into a narrative. This is made literal in the case of Oskar’s grandfather giving up speech entirely. Oskar is also initially stuck in this stage; he feels threatened by the world around him and wants to “zip...up the sleeping bag of [him]self.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28.</sup> Foer,  
*Extremely Loud,*  
p. 6.

On the other hand, *working through* fits the Freudian concept of mourning. It is a process of recalling the past but treating it as in the past, thus allowing the formation of retrospective narratives that make sense of it. Oskar’s quest around the city and encounter with other tragic narratives leads him to gradually stop acting out and start working through—to begin to make sense of his own trauma and situate it in the past. Though the quest begins as a way for Oskar to

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stay connected to his father, having to narrate his trauma to those he meets ultimately allows him to move beyond it.

The grandparents are clearly trapped in the process of acting out, unable to live day to day as the past floods into the present. This leads them to embody Adorno's model of life fundamentally changing after Auschwitz. The reader observes a different outlook after 9/11 for the Grandmother and after Dresden for the Grandfather. The Grandmother writes in a letter:

*My parents' lives made sense.*

*My grandparents'.*

*Even Anna's life.*

*But I knew the truth, and that's why I was so sad.*

*Every moment before this one depends on this one.*

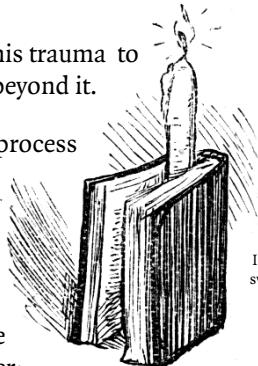
*Everything in the history of the world can be proven wrong  
in one moment.<sup>29</sup>*

29. Ibid., p.  
232.

Even the life of her sister Anna, who died in Dresden, makes sense to her, but after losing her only son on 9/11, the latter event becomes uniquely important and from the Grandmother's perspective invalidates her entire life before it. As the Grandfather similarly says in his account of Dresden, "one hundred years of joy can be erased in a second." He remarks at another point that after what he has lived through, "Life is scarier than death."<sup>30</sup> What is so tragic here is that even though these victims feel the same way, and are married, they are so trapped in their individual pasts that they are unable to share their thoughts with one other. Busy acting out, they are unable to work through their pasts together, and so remain painfully isolated through the end of the novel. "Every relationship in the book is built around silence and distance," Foer said. "Extremely loud and incredibly close is what no two people are to one another."<sup>31</sup>

30. Ibid. pp.  
215, 322.

31. Solomon,  
2005.



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Disappointingly, in the film adapted from Foer's book, the grandparents' parallel narratives of living through catastrophe were cut entirely. This greatly reduced the film's potential to say anything serious about 9/11. Without the backstory of Dresden to explain his muteness, the Grandfather is in the film made into a silly puppet. This element frustrated many reviewers, including Roger Ebert, who, though he credited Foer with humanizing 9/11, nonetheless focused on finding the truth. Bashing several of Foer's plot elements as "the stuff of fairy tales," Ebert writes, "There must be a more plausible story to be told about a boy who lost his father on 9/11."<sup>32</sup>

32. Roger Ebert,  
"Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close,"

Rogerebert.com,  
18 Jan., 2012.

"The events of 9/11 have left indelible scars," Ebert concludes. "They cannot be healed in such a simplistic way." In fact, Foer's vision of healing is, through his book's different narrators, quite multivalent. This complexity was cut entirely in the film adaption, which ends with the sentimental reconnection of Oskar and his mother—an ending Ebert rightly found too easy. One gets the sense from reviews that most readers focused in on Oskar's happy ending and found the book cathartic. Note, however, that the grandparents are excluded from this final healing. The unharmonious failure of the grandparents' lives disqualifies *Extremely Loud* from Ebert's accusation of it as a story of totalized, simplistic healing, which, in LaCapra's words, "deny the trauma that called them into existence" by prematurely "harmonizing events, and often recuperating the past in terms of uplifting messages or optimistic, self-serving scenarios."<sup>33</sup>

33. LaCapra,  
p. 78.

*Extremely Loud* ends with the line, "We would have been safe," followed by a reverse flipbook of a man falling up back into one of the towers.<sup>34</sup> Saal argues that the "we" here is a return to the single perspective of Oskar's self as a New Yorker, and it is easy to read *Extremely Loud* as a neat story of personal healing. Oskar has not forgotten his father's death, but rather learns to accept it; he never quite gets over his post-9/11 fears of skyscrapers, public transit, and elevators, but he learns how to live with them. But the unresolved narratives of the traumatized grandparents, and above all, of Simon Goldberg, can never be erased or healed. Even if the primary narrative conclusion of *Extremely Loud* is uplifting, these specters leave us with a sense of the irresolvable complexity of such tragedies.

34. Foer,  
*Extremely Loud,*  
p. 326.

## CATASTROPHIC GENIUS

**A**side from Foer, I want to give two telling examples of what I'll call catastrophic genius: drawing upon catastrophes of the past in working through ones in the present.

First, the designer of the 9/11 memorial, Michael Arad, is Israeli. Though born in London and educated in the United States, he lived in Israel for nine years and drew upon his familiarity with Holocaust remembrance sites in his winning design for the memorial, *Reflecting Absence*, which was completed last year. Arad's memorial testifies to the importance of public remembrance sites for healing, a message learned from the Holocaust, but not, for him, unique to the Holocaust. As he said in an interview with a Jewish newspaper, "I can talk about memory and loss of life—it's something I grew up with a sensitivity to. But I'm always hesitant to hold these out as a foil against some other kind of remembering. They're universal."<sup>35</sup> Arad's finished memorial resembles two gaping wounds—permanent scars—where the towers once stood. But it is also a space for collective remembering and even beauty with its enormous illuminated waterfalls pouring into deep pools. Arad's memorial applies the aesthetic practices used to commemorate the Holocaust to 9/11 in a natural way.

Second, Adam Zagajewski, the so-called poet of 9/11, is well-versed in catastrophe. Zagajewski wrote the poem "Try to Praise the Mutilated World," which was featured in the first issue of *The New Yorker* after 9/11 (which also featured Art Spiegelman's black-on-black silhouette of the towers on the cover) and widely reproduced in remembrance materials. A December 2001 article on Zbigniew Herbert's fellow countryman and Nobel Prize-winner Czeslaw Milosz, noted the choice of Zagajewski's work, as Milosz's literary descendent and fellow "poet of ruin," for the 9/11 issue: it was "as if America were entering the nightmare of history for the first time and only a Polish poet could show us the way."<sup>36</sup> Matthew Kaminski writes that Zagajewski avoids glorifying suffering but does see value in writing about it. In "the past in general and not only in Europe," Zagajewski says, "the rule was to forget, to move on. There's a relatively new idea that you have to work on it—that you have to keep everything in our memory. Which I like. It's changing us."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup>. Eric Herschthal, "Filling the Void," *The New York Jewish Week*, 6 Sept., 2011.

<sup>36</sup>. Harvey Shapiro, "The Durable Czeslaw Milosz," *The New York Times Book Review*, 2 Dec., 2001.

<sup>37</sup>. Matthew Kaminski, "Adam Zagajewski: The Poet of 9/11," *Newsweek*, 5 Sept., 2011.

## AFTER 9/11

According to Kaminski, the historical events foremost on Zagajewski's mind are "the Holocaust and Stalin's purges and Gulag Archipelago—more so than 9/11, which he says didn't fundamentally change his worldview." Zagajewski's so-called 9/11 poem is based upon a trip he took with his father through Ukrainian villages forcibly depopulated by the Soviet Union in the immediate aftermath of World War II. "This was one of the strongest impressions I ever had," he says. Describing the abandoned village in ruins being reclaimed by nature, he remarked, "It became in my memory this mutilated world, these villages, and at the same time they were beautiful. It was in the summer, beautiful weather. It's something that I reacted to, this contest between beauty and disaster." And so the major poem of 9/11 was written far from New York, years before the attacks. What does this tell us about the human response to catastrophe if not that it is universal, somehow woven into the fabric of human experience?

The universal messages of these cultural borrowings from other catastrophes brought to the mourning of 9/11 testify to the value of Foer's comparative approach. They leave us with an understanding of suffering as universal that encourages genuine healing and steers us clear of cheap political and moral palliatives. The approach worked for Oskar without him even realizing it, and it has done much for Americans' mourning of 9/11 as well. After 9/11, the priority of storytelling not only renews literature's importance; it endows it with the ethical responsibility of representing the other and, as the quote from Herbert suggests, building compassion through literary imagination.

I wonder if  
he'd give a  
poor devil  
like me the  
model of  
his nose

