

Common Summer Reading Program 2010

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close by Jonathan Safran Foer

Study Guide: Questions for Close Reading

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Reader Reactions; Setting and Structure

1. This book tends to spark intense reactions in its readers. What were your initial reactions to, thoughts on, and feelings about this book? Did you enjoy, love, or hate it? Did it confuse you? Is it anything like what you think a novel is or should be? Does it move you; make you think? *Why?*
2. What is the general structure of the novel? How many different stories/narrative voices does it contain? Which characters tell their stories?
3. How do these characters tell their stories—in what forms?
4. When and where does each story/narrative start and end?
5. How do these stories intermingle in the book? In what order/pattern do the different stories come? *Why?*
6. What is the overall effect of this type of organization or sequence? Is it disorienting? How does it make you feel about the characters? How does it help you see how the characters relate to each other? What does it accomplish that the novel could not accomplish if it were written in one story, told from start to finish, by only one character?
7. What is the exact setting of the novel? During what moment in time does it take place; during what span of time does its action unfold?
8. Look at the frontispieces (photos contained in the novel before the stories begin). How do we understand how they relate to the rest of the novel? What clues do we find in the text, the paper, the printing, etc? Do these images *belong* to the novel, or are they outside of the novel? How do we know? What does that mean? Does it matter whether they are in or out of the novel? What do they tell us about the novel?

Opening Chapter

9. The first chapter of the novel establishes a lot about the main character, Oskar, and the novel's themes. What do you make of its title, "What the?"?
10. What examples of Oskar's habit of inventing are in this chapter, and elsewhere in the novel? What do they tell us about Oskar, his needs, and about how he experiences the world?

11. Consider the story about the stacking turtles from the Hawking book. What does it say about most people's beliefs? What is Oskar's attitude about it?
12. What is the belief system in which he was raised? Notice the exchange between him and his father about existence.
13. Does his belief system change through the course of the novel? Think about his remarks in his last chapter about his atheism, and about his new understanding about his relationship with his mother.
14. How are his parents integral to his ideas about what he believes? How does he feel about his father, and how do we know? How does he feel about his mother, and how do we know? How do his feelings about his mother change over the course of the novel, and why is this change so important to his development as a character?

Oskar

15. What is Oskar's quest throughout the novel? What is he searching for and why is it so important?
16. How does he go about it? What happens to him along the way? How do these experiences change him?
17. What is the traumatic experience from which Oskar is trying to recover? The loss of his father is one thing—but really, it is more than that. What specifically is the trauma from which he must heal? Look especially at the Googleplex chapter.
18. What other characters have a traumatic center, a “hole” in the middle of them that they are trying to fill? How does each character attempt to fill that hole?
19. How does Oskar try to recover from this traumatic center? Why does he want to dig up his father's empty coffin? Why does his grandfather want to help him? What does his grandfather put in the coffin? Explain his grandfather's actions.
20. What does Oskar learn from Mr. Black? Why does he turn on his hearing aid? What does Oskar teach Mr. Black? Why is this scene so significant, and how does Foer signal to us that it is?
21. Look at the scene at end of this chapter between Oskar and his mom: what do we learn about him, his trauma, and his needs? Where else do we see this impulse toward physical violence because of his sadness?

Happiness, Happiness

In many ways, the chapter titled “Happiness, Happiness” is the heart of the novel. It comes right at the center of the novel, and is the central piece we get from Oskar. Also, it tells us a

lot about how the loss of his dad has affected him, and how inadequate are our traditional notions of healing.

22. Consider the Tomoyasu interview of the woman who experienced the bombing of Hiroshima. We find that Oskar himself has brought this material to class—why? How do the other students and his teacher react? Why does the woman repeatedly fail to answer the questions posed to her by the interviewer—what does that failure mean? What is her traumatic center?
23. Why does Oskar so want his fellow students to hear about this woman’s unimaginable suffering?
24. What does it mean that he “looks at the class” through the die cut excerpt from the stacking turtles story? Why this story? What is he implying?
25. Why does he so desire to preserve all the names in the current/2003 phone book as a record that all those people lived? What is Oskar trying to do with **writing, texts, books, words**?
26. Where does this chapter title come from—in what conversation does “Happiness, Happiness” come about? What does it mean?

Oskar’s Grandpa

27. Consider Oskar’s grandpa’s letters to his son/Oskar’s dad, in the chapters “Why I’m not where you are.” What period do they span? What is the grandpa’s goal in writing them?
28. What is/was Oskar’s grandpa’s relationship with his grandmother like? What is the point of the something and nothing places? What happens to those places? How does each of them relate to Anna?
29. What is the grandpa’s relationship to WORDS? Why does he stop speaking? Which words does he lose first, last?
30. How does language become material, tangible, embodied for the grandpa? What are some of the ways we see him making language material? Why does he do this?
31. How do other characters also make language solid and material in other ways? What do you think Foer is doing here with language? What does it mean to think of language as solid, impacting the world in physical ways? Have you ever thought about language in this way? Do most novels represent language in this way?

Oskar’s Grandma

32. Where does the grandma (and by the way, do we ever know her name?) write all of her letters to Oskar? Why? What is she doing there?

33. Think about the kinds of things that she tells Oskar in her letters. Some of them seem intense for a young child. What do these things tell us about what she feels she needs to say to Oskar? Why does she need to say these things to him?

Themes and Motifs

34. What is the status of knowledge in this book? That is, what does it mean for something to be “true”? What does it mean for something to be “beautiful and true”? What does Oskar learn by following all the “clues” in Central Park? Is this meaning-making? What does he think by the end of the novel?
35. What is the status of belief in this book? What does it mean for this boy to be both an atheist and someone who learns how to believe? What does he believe in, in the end? What does he learn from Hawking’s letter to him? How does this letter help him to heal his relationship with his mother?
36. What is the nature of language in this book? What are all the different forms in which we see language employed? Why does this book draw so much attention to acts and uses of language? What does language *do* in this book? What can it not do? Why does the grandpa bury all those letters in his son’s empty coffin? Why does the grandma save all the empty envelopes?
37. What is the nature of love in this book? How do different characters define it? What does it mean when the grandma says “How do you say ‘I love you’ to someone you love?”? Why does she say it anyway? What is the relationship between love and language in this book?
38. What is the effect of the mixed media in this novel—its inclusion of images and photographs? What do they add? How does the mixture and nontraditional use of text affect the way the novel reads, communicates, and means?
39. Some readers have accused Foer of exploiting the falling man in the famous photograph that he reverses and repeats like an optimistic flip book at the end of the novel. Why does Foer present this photo in this way? What is the effect of this sequence of photos at the end? What does Foer accomplish with it, in conjunction with the rest of the novel? Do you think he exploits the man and image, or honors them by including them?
40. What does Oskar learn from beginning to end in the novel? How do his feelings change? How do his beliefs change? What experiences, encounters, and conversations throughout the novel allow his feelings and beliefs to change? What *can* cause change, growth, healing, and connection in this world, according to this novel? How is language an integral part of that?