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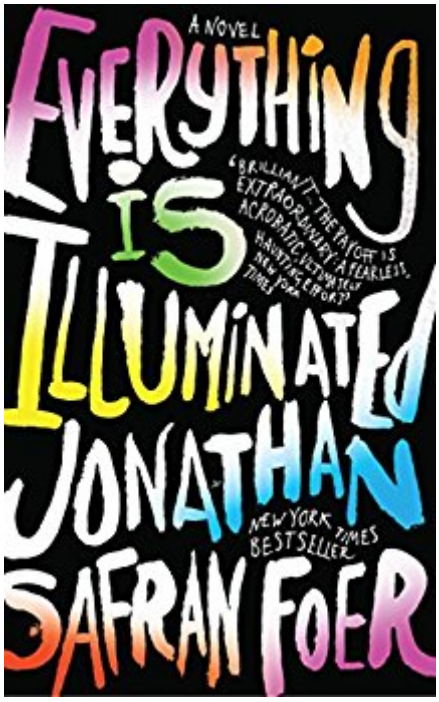
Everything Is Illuminated



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Synopsis

â œImagine a novel as verbally cunning as A Clockwork Orange, as harrowing as The Painted Bird, as exuberant and twee as Candide, and you have Everything Is Illuminated . . . Read it, and you'll feel altered, chastened â ” seared in the fire of something new.â • â ” Washington Post With only a yellowing photograph in hand, a young man â ” also named Jonathan Safran Foer â ” sets out to find the woman who might or might 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. Â As their adventure unfolds, Jonathan imagines the history of his grandfatherâ ™s village, conjuring a magical fable of startling symmetries that unite generations across time. As his search moves back in time, the fantastical history moves forward, until reality collides with fiction in a heart-stopping scene of extraordinary power. â œA rambunctious tour de force of inventive and intelligent storytelling . . . Foer can place his readerâ ™s hand on the heart of human experience, the transcendent beauty of human connections. Read, you can feel the life beating.â • â ” Philadelphia Inquirer

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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.

This is in many ways a brilliant book, brimming with energy and invention. Foer is blessed with enormous talent and I have no trouble at all imagining him becoming, in time, one of the major writers of the dawning century. This book, however, is not an unqualified success.In a way Foer was betrayed by the very reviewers who were somersaulting backwards in order to help him. I was expecting the book to be utterly hilarious but the effect fizzled because the reviewers had already related the best jokes. He was betrayed by them also in the sense that they built such unreasonable expectations into the minds of readers that it would be difficult not to disappoint. Foer only adds to the trouble through his hyper-ambitious title. No, everything is NOT illuminated by reading this book. The themes are a recycling of things I've heard before, very often in places like Hollywood movies. To praise the virtues of love and compassion is not illuminating: it may be true, but it is not new. Foer has his heart in the right place, but that may be part of the problem. I get the sense that he is trying too hard to please. There is nothing wrong with giving your reader pleasure (God knows so

few writers even know how) but in order truly to illuminate, in order to allow the reader to walk away with his world in some way changed, one must be ready to challenge, and perhaps even, to insult. Perhaps the success of this novel will embolden Foer to take off the kid gloves and hit us hard the way that, say, Philip Roth does.I don’t agree with the reviewers who complained that Alex’s English is either unrealistic ("no Ukranian would speak English that way") or offensive.

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