

# Post-9/11 Narrative in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

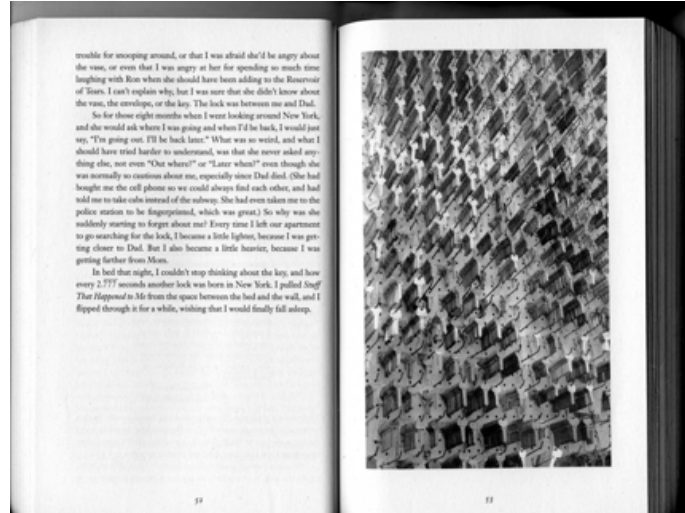
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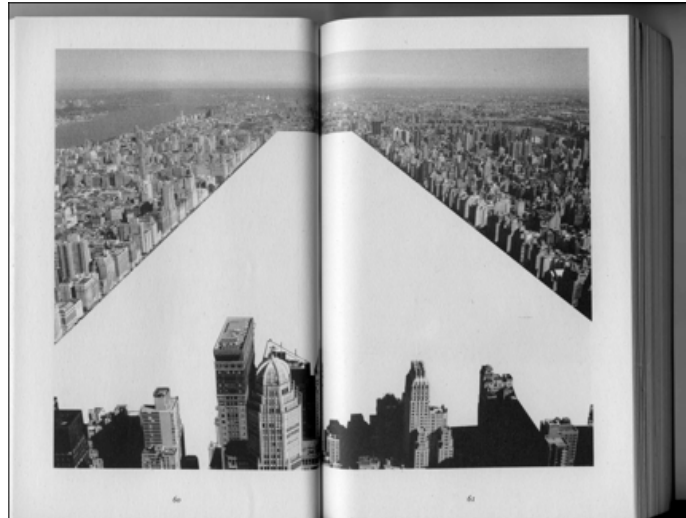
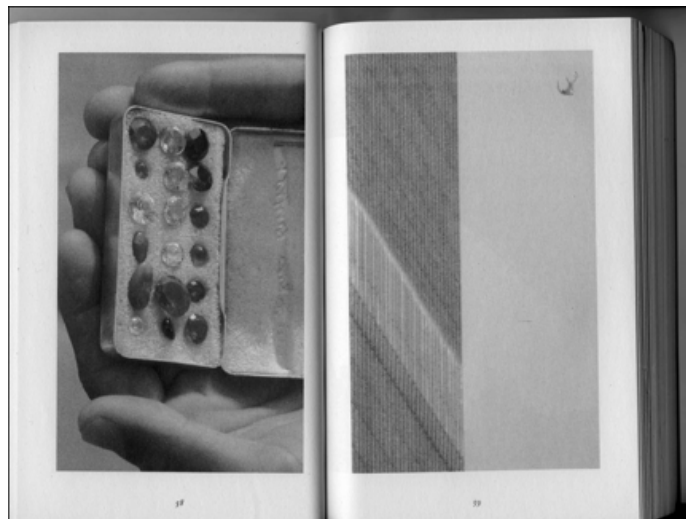
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Hello everyone, my name is Trisha Remetir. I am currently a fourth year English major with Professor Katie Snyder as my thesis mentor. My research project focused on how postmodern storytelling techniques function in trauma about September 11th. I'd like to share with you a few images that I've spent my summer looking at (Figures 1-3).

Fig. 1: [2, p. 52-53]



This collection of images was taken from Jonathan Safran Foer's 2006 novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, a story about a child's search for healing after he loses his father in the World Trade Center attack. Just as our cultural understanding of September 11th is shaped by news reports, iconic images, viral videos and online conspiracy theories, so too does fiction about September 11th feature alternate modes of communication and conflicting accounts to commu-

**Fig. 2:** [2, p. 60–61]**Fig. 3:** [2, p. 58–59]

nicate trauma. I focused my research around Foer's novel not only because the plot of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* addresses the topic of September 11th, but also because the author makes very brave use of narrative devices—letters, images, and conflicting stories—to communicate the boy's trauma to the reader.

In this preliminary paper for my thesis, I will argue that Foer uses a number of postmodern narrative techniques that not only tie readers closely to the

experience of trauma, but also give us the opportunity to make our own decisions on the age-old question of whether or not trauma can be healed. I will start by analyzing the postmodern elements of fragmentation and pastiche at work in Foer's novel. Next, I will outline a brief history of trauma theory and tie several topics to the plot of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. And finally, I'd like to come back to those images—Figure 2 in particular—to reveal how an image like this reproduces in us the same questions theorists have discussed for years. By reading the novel through the frameworks of postmodernism and trauma theory, I outline the major themes at stake for narratives about 9/11.

## Postmodernism and the Novel

Before I discuss *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* as a postmodernist text, I'd like to define literary postmodernism for the purposes of this paper. Postmodernism is generally understood as a rejection of and reaction to the modernist ideas of art, politics, economics and philosophy in the late 20th century [4]. Literary postmodernism, however, goes further than this broad definition by identifying certain shared characteristics of post-WWII fiction. Some examples of these postmodernist elements are the concepts of fragmentation and pastiche.

Many postmodern novels subscribe to the idea of fragmentation—the idea that what was once whole is no more, that—to borrow Yeats' words—“things fall apart, that the center cannot hold” [5]. Fragmentation can occur in some novels through images, wordplay, and metaphors. In Foer's novel, fragmentation takes the form of multiple narrators: instead of the narrative being told in a single voice, the narrative is split into three, that of the 8-year-old Oskar Schell, his grandmother, and his grandfather. From these adjoining stories, we learn that just as Oskar suffers the trauma of losing his father, so too do his grandparents suffer the memories of the bombing of Dresden. Now, the exact reason why Foer includes these three narratives in one novel is a little unclear—by juxtaposing such differing accounts of trauma into one novel, does Foer mean to draw a parallel between two kinds of losses? The answer is difficult to find out. Together though, these fragmented voices speak to Bakhtin's concept of a “dialogic text”: unlike other narratives in which there is an authoritative third-person narrator, the text is a multitude of voices that lack a mediator to tell us how these separate stories resonate with each other. Postmodernism's diverse range of voices, histories, and points of view allow for a variety of interpretations to occur.

The use of pastiche is another characteristic popular in postmodern novels. Similar to the idea of fragmentation, a pastiche is a hodgepodge of elements that indeed come “from a variety of sources” [4]. What makes it different from fragmentation is that pastiche takes fragments from media and culture to piece together new meanings. We can see this come into play in these pages: embedded in the text are several images culled from various news reports and (as Oskar lovingly admits) from Google, that both jar and enhance the reader's experience.

As a literature student, I'm used to analyzing words and structures to uncover new meanings. But there's something different about expecting to "read" a novel and instead seeing Figure 2. It's a little bit jarring, for one. At first glance one can tell that it's a picture of a city, possibly Manhattan, with the center cut out of it—maybe Central Park, maybe not. But as an American, and given the interest of this book, this empty white space may bring up other associations—a symbol of loss, or namely, Ground Zero, the site at which the Twin Towers fell—and is what many have called the symbolic and physical mark of absence for the United States since 9/11. The fact that this image incites a personal reaction attests to the power of the pastiche and to postmodern techniques in general. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* goes further than telling to the point of physically showing, and this produces an effect that's more visceral, more real.

So what does it mean for Foer to include postmodern elements in his work? What kind of emotion is he trying to produce in us, and furthermore, what does he expect us to do with it? When I first began my research, I wasn't aware that these ethical questions only skim the surface of the greater discussion of representing trauma in literature. To find out why this novel utilizes such postmodern elements, we have to look at themes of trauma present in this book.

## Trauma Studies

In order to get a full understanding of how these images are used in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, let's take a step back and approach Foer's novel from the context of trauma. Firstly, what is trauma studies? It began as an interdisciplinary study about trauma from structuralist, psychoanalytic, and historical discourses. Cathy Caruth was a significant figure in this study, applying psychoanalytic readings to postwar trauma narratives. In her 1996 book *Unclaimed Experience*, she describes trauma as "...an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" [1, p. 12]. In other words, traumatic experience has certain qualities of belatedness, of uncontrollable and unlocatable visual images, and "suddenness" of flashbacks. Since then, theorists have discussed the curious link between trauma and literature by defining "traumatic qualities" and also questioning the values behind them. Some major themes of trauma fiction are the desperate need to articulate loss, to put testimony to events entirely out of control, and indeed, to ask whether or not trauma can be healed.

With this background research in mind, I reread *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and tried to pinpoint instances of trauma in the plot. To my surprise, the examples were plentiful. The 8-year old Oskar Schell alone exhibits many traumatic behaviors by obsessively wearing all white, acting out fits against teachers and bullies in his head, and consistently combing foreign websites for censored information about the World Trade Center attacks. A scene in which Oskar overhears a gap-ridden conversation about possible hospitalization makes

his trauma more pronounced.

Additionally, the novel's mystery-esque subplot can also be read in terms of Oskar's journey to overcome trauma. It first begins when Oskar finds a key in the vase of his father's closet with the word "Black" written on it. Thinking it may be a clue to his father, he embarks upon a journey to find the lock to that key, thus beginning his earnest and sometimes frustrating account of opening every lock in New York:

That was my great plan. I would spend my Saturdays and Sundays finding all of the people named Black and learning what they knew about the key in the vase in Dad's closet. In a year and a half I would know everything. Or at least know that I had to come up with a new plan. [2, p. 51]

It quickly becomes apparent that this narrative is deeply invested in the notion of trauma. Think about it: an 8-year-old finds a "key" that he believes will solve all of his problems. He goes around Manhattan, talking to a benevolent cast of people who share their troubles and traumas with him. He learns a little and they do too. And as we read of the various encounters with Abe Black, Ada Black, Ira Black and co., we too hope that Oskar's key doesn't necessarily lead to his father, but unlocks a new community, one of healing. Through Oskar's search, we see that working through one's troubles and sharing experience is a possible way to heal from trauma.

And yet Foer doesn't simply give us this story and ask us to accept it. At the same time, we are presented with evidence that healing isn't possible, evident in the two narratives told by his grandparents. Having lost both of their families in the Dresden bombings, both of Oskar's grandparents dwell on their losses to the point of losing the ability to speak (in the case of the grandfather), and the futile wish to reverse time. You can see this in the grandmother's narrative when she says, "My thoughts are wandering. . . They are going to Dresden, to my mother's pearls, damp with the sweat of her neck. . . Each day has been chained to the previous one" [2, p. 181].

So what does it mean to have evidence that trauma is and isn't healable in the same text? Interestingly enough, these two perspectives on trauma emphasize a finer point in trauma studies, which is the difference between *working through* one's trauma versus *acting out*. As Dominick LaCapra notes, whereas "working through" involves the productive process of facing one's trauma in order to heal (i.e. Oskar and his search for a community), "acting out" simply repeats painful memories without the hope of getting better [3, p. 128-129]. The grandparents become so upset with the past that they actually let the past envelope them.

By tracing trauma in the plot, we can see the author give us an incredibly diverse collection of themes that trauma studies have examined since the Second World War—in particular, the difficulties of putting words to one's trauma and the difference between "acting out" versus "working through." Ultimately, this distinction reframes the mystery of Oskar's story not necessarily to whether he finds the lock, but whether finding it helps him get over the death of his father. Will he successfully work through his trauma, learn from it and go on? Or will

he become enveloped in the past just like his grandparents? The reiteration of traumatic themes in the plot of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* shows that this novel is not only postmodernist, but highly invested in the study of trauma, and highly interested in the question of how to recover from trauma.

### Images and Trauma in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

This brings us back to the image introduced to all of you at the beginning of my paper. What does this image, an element I have described as postmodern, have to do with trauma, and how does it speak to the complicated themes at stake in the book?

The day that Oskar resolves to find the lock, he recalls lying awake at night thinking about “how every 2.777 seconds another lock was born in New York.” As he states, “I pulled *Stuff that Happened to Me* from the space between the bed and the wall, and I flipped through it for a while, wishing that I would finally fall asleep” [2, p. 52]. On the next few pages, we (the readers) are presented with a whole slew of images from this book called *Stuff that Happened to Me*. Some images—like the rows and rows of keys and the picture of a man falling from a building—are obvious because they’re intensely relevant to Oskar’s trauma. But others, like the paper plane outline and the climbing turtles, are a little less obvious. Thus, it’s the images given without clear context that make us rack our brains trying to remember at what time in the novel they made sense to us, if they ever did.

In fact, the images in Oskar’s scrapbook *Stuff that Happened to Me* produces such an extraordinary sense of paranoia and creates a visual mark upon our personal and cultural memories, that it actually mimics Caruth’s definition of trauma: in the “belatedness” of experience, since what Oskar shows us is always what happened already and we’re seeing it all too late, and in the “repetition” of certain key visual images, images that unwittingly cause emotion in us before we even know what they mean. The pastiche of images ultimately ties the effect of trauma closely to the reader, allowing us to not only picture Oskar and the Schell family’s suffering, but to empathize with it.

I started out asking the simple (and perhaps a little too ambitious) question of the significance of postmodern narrative techniques, and whether or not trauma can be healed. I learned a lot—mainly, that *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* follows a tradition of narratives that are always trying to put words to the unspeakable, always trying to understand the inexplicable. But I also learned that post-9/11 narratives today are equipped with the narrative techniques that tie the reader more closely to the character’s experience. Thus: Oskar’s trauma is our trauma.

So, with a combination of postmodern techniques and trauma theory, Foer offers us this question: Will Oskar ever end up healing from the trauma of 9/11? Can any of us? Although we are never given a definite answer, we are instead presented with three narrators demonstrating different kinds of trauma. We are presented with their images, voices, experiences, and backgrounds. And

most importantly, we're presented with the power to choose. It is up to us, as informed readers, to take these elements and decide for ourselves.

## References

- [1] Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
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- [3] LaCapra, Dominick. *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2004.
- [4] "pastiche, n." The Oxford English Dictionary. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 2011. <http://dictionary.oed.com/>.
- [5] Yeats, W.B. *The Collected Poems of W.b. Yeats*. New York: Macmillan, 1956. Print.