

Week three: Jonathan Safran Foer on the origins of *Everything is Illuminated*

The author talks about his fruitless trip to Ukraine

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Fri 19 Mar 2010 20.05 EDT First published on Fri 19 Mar 2010 20.05 EDT



Jonathan Safran Foer. Photograph: AP

I did not intend to write *Everything Is Illuminated*. I didn't intend anything – the book was the result of instincts rather than plans. But as I began to fill pages, I imagined that the result would take the form of a non-fictional chronicle of a trip that I made to Ukraine as a 20-year-old.

Armed with a photograph of the woman who, I was told, had saved my grandfather from the Nazis, I had embarked on a journey to Trachimbrod, the *shtetl* of my family's origin. It's a real place – or was one. And there really was a photograph of Augustine.

A young man named Alex did take me around, although we had absolutely no relationship whatsoever during the trip and did not correspond after. He was neither intentionally, nor unintentionally, funny. There was no Augustine. There were no boxes. There was no Sammy Davis Junior, Junior.

The comedy of errors was really a tragedy of errors, and it lasted a mere three days. I found nothing but nothing, and in that nothing – a landscape of total absence – nothing was to be found. (There is such a thing as a rich nothing, of course. But this was no such nothing.) Because I didn't tell my grandmother about the trip – she would never have let me go – I didn't know what questions to ask, or who to ask, or the necessary names of people, places and things. The impoverished nothing was as much a result of me as of what I encountered. I returned to Prague, where I was spending the summer, and sat down to explain, on the page, what had happened.

But what had happened? This is always the problem. Was it this way, or that way? Did the wagon flip and sink, or didn't it? Did Trachim B drown, or did he escape? It took me a week to finish the first sentence. In the remaining month, I wrote 280 pages. What made beginning so difficult, and the remainder so seemingly automatic, was imagination – the initial problem, and ultimate liberation, of imagining.

My mind wanted to wander, to invent, to use what I had seen as a canvas, rather than the paints. But, I wondered, is my family's experience of the Holocaust exactly that which cannot and should not be imagined? What are one's responsibilities to "the truth" of such a traumatic event, and what is "the truth"? Can historical accuracy be replaced with imaginative accuracy? Objectivity with the mind's eye?

Everything Is Illuminated proposes the possibility of a "did and didn't" duality, of things being one way and also the opposite way. Rather than aligning itself with either "how things were" or "how things could have been", the novel measures the difference between the two, and by so doing attempts to reflect a kind of experiential (rather than historical or journalistic) truth. Novels don't strive to get to the bottom of things, but to express what it's like never to be able to. The climax of the book, for me, is not when the Nazis raid the *shtetl* but when the two braids of the novel – Jonathan's fantastical history, and Alex's more realistic travelogue – are forced to confront one another.

I finished the book 10 years ago, as a 23-year-old. Of course there are many things that I would change about the novel – there is not a paragraph in the copy that I read from that isn't heavily marked – but at the various opportunities to edit the book, I've always decided not to.

I tried to follow my instincts, and did. The fact that my instincts have since changed is not an argument for the book changing but for writing another book.

I tried to write the book I would want to read, rather than the book I would want to write. And I did. *Everything Is Illuminated* is no longer the book I would want to read, and thank goodness for that.

I tried never to ask if something was smart or funny or interesting or moving. For the most part, I was able to avoid such questions, just as I am often able to avoid them now. Perhaps, in my moments of weakness, I come up with different answers than I did in my moments of weakness 10 years ago. But that implies only good things.

A set of themes rose to the surface: silence, invention, anxiety, naivety, absence, the difficulty of expressing love . . . I felt I couldn't push them down, and I chose not to try to. Voices became pronounced. Some characters became vivid, others vanished. A plot . . . happened.

If it sounds inefficient, I've described it properly. I cannot imagine how I could have been less efficient. But inefficiency is the point. You can use a map and drive to a destination. Or you can follow roads – trusting yourself, trusting the car and trusting the

logic of the pavement – and end up where you couldn't have realised you wanted to be until you got there.

My trip to Trachimbrod would have been better served by some smart plans. But I wouldn't have written a novel. Writing hates such intelligent preparation.