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The Rescue Artist

By DEBORAH SOLOMON

"I'm not funny," Jonathan Safran Foer announced when I walked into his office in the Park Slope neighborhood of Brooklyn. "People assume that because my books are funny, I'll be funny in real life. It's the inevitable disappointment of meeting me."

It is true that our hero might seem a little pale compared with the characters who inhabit his fiction, that charred terrain haunted by the specter of historic calamities. Foer, who just turned 28, is a thin, bespectacled figure with an air of boyish earnestness and a solemn, sometimes shy, expression. When he smiles, he looks even younger, with teeth that seem too white and straight for a person of his depth. On this winter afternoon, he was sitting on a metal folding chair, dressed in jeans and his bedroom slippers, his arms crossed protectively in front of his chest.

"I just watched a documentary about Martin Luther King last night," he said. "I spent all morning getting down about my speaking voice and seeing if I could do a vibrato. When King spoke, he sounded like he was singing. I wish I could offer you something a little more. . . . " He stopped midsentence to search for a word.

"Baritone?" I volunteered.

"No, black, essentially," he said by way of correction.

As his comment suggests, Foer is given to comic self-invention, to feats of distortion and parody -- some of which are dauntingly literary. He was all of 25 when he emerged out of nowhere, in 2002, with his widely acclaimed first novel, "Everything Is Illuminated." Begun while he was still an undergraduate at Princeton, it tells the story of a young, self-deprecating writer named Jonathan Safran Foer who travels to a vanished shtetl in Ukraine, searching for a woman he believed saved his grandfather from the Nazis. The book has sold more than 100,000 copies in hardcover and another 150,000 in paperback, making it that rare event in the publishing industry, a literary best seller, and proving that a difficult, cerebral novel is not doomed to sell 23 copies, all of them to the author's mother. A film version of the novel, directed by Liev Schreiber, is scheduled to be released in August.

Foer's second novel, "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close," will be published in about a month. It shifts his landscape from the wounded earth of Eastern Europe to a fresher site of devastation. The

book's main narrator is Oskar Schell, a 9-year-old schoolboy whose father was killed in the attack on the World Trade Center. An aspiring inventor, Oskar consoles himself by thinking up far-fetched creations that could protect people from all sorts of injury. In the process, he becomes a kind of artist, someone whose dreams are so romantic that they are destined to failure. Oskar's creativity is echoed in the design of the novel, a highly experimental affair that draws upon photographs and typographical play in an attempt to blur the old boundaries between image and text. "It's the kind of book that will look great next to the toilet," Foer said jokingly, in response to a compliment about the novel's appearance.

His office occupies a small rented room within walking distance of his home. The place is furnished sparsely, with little besides a long work table, a set of Ikea bookshelves and an oversize canvas dog bed reserved for a female creature named George, apparently a Great Dane mix. A curious object -- a carpenter's hacksaw -- hangs on an otherwise blank wall above the desk. ("You never know when you'll have a bad day," Foer explained.) Opposite the door, there is a lovely ink drawing circa 1940, an original self-portrait by Isaac Bashevis Singer, his eyes glinting beneath his pronounced cranium. "You shouldn't make too much of that," Foer told me, not quite convincingly. "'Gimpel the Fool' is probably my favorite short story, but I don't feel any real affinity with Singer. His morality is so 19th century."

Oddly enough, the room lacks a telephone, a detail that might lead you to envisage the author hunkered down in silent, undisturbed concentration. But the image is a total sham. Foer, as I later learned, didn't compose his new novel in this office, or in any office at all. A kind of poet-wanderer, he does his writing all over town: in public libraries, in coffee shops and even in the homes of friends. The process of writing has traditionally been romanticized by its creators as an act of self-imposed isolation, but Foer redefines it as something more open and oxygenated, an expansive social activity best undertaken amid the clamor of life. Of course, all of this prompts the question of why he needs an office in the first place. "I need an office," he explained, a bit enigmatically, "so I can have a place where I don't write."

At first glance, there is nothing in the arc of Foer's biography, no cherished hoard of disappointments or losses, that might help explain the fecundity of his imaginative life. He grew up in Washington, in the opulent shadow of the Reagan White House, a popular student and the valedictorian of his high-school class. Then he headed off to college, where he earned a degree in philosophy. He managed to make his entry into fiction without undergoing the usual rites of first-noveldom. He never wrote a tremblingly sensitive account of his adolescence, a novel featuring toxic mothers and passive, gone-to-sleep fathers, a novel abounding with malls and S.U.V.'s and suburban anomie. Instead, he has found his inspiration in the darkly fragmented masterworks of European modernism (Kafka, Joyce, Bruno Schulz) and nursed a vision that seems inseparable from the destructive underside of history. Foer might be called a European novelist who happens to be writing in America.

"Both the Holocaust and 9/11 were events that demanded retellings," Foer said when asked about his preoccupation with seminal tragedies. "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."

To judge from Foer's fiction, his vision of the human is tethered to the inhuman; his world is one of

abrupt and unaccountable shifts between comedy and violence. "Tragedy primes one for humor," Foer said. "And humor primes one for tragedy. They amplify each other. As a writer, I am trying to express those things that are most scary to me, because I am alone with them. Why do I write? It's not that I want people to think I am smart, or even that I am a good writer. I write because I want to end my loneliness. Books make people less alone. That, before and after everything else, is what books do. They show us that conversations are possible across distances."

Of course, not all conversations are equal, and some are to be actively avoided. Foer, by his own account, frowns upon the seductions of Manhattan-style celebrity, the chance to clink wineglasses and trade drolleries all over town. He'd rather be home in Park Slope, in his three-story limestone town house, curled in his bed by 9 or 10, "at the latest," as he says. All in all, he is loath to be observed or noticed except as the cloaked and baroquely reinvented self he presents to the world through his fiction.

Foer becomes particularly tight-lipped when the subject turns to his career. If you ask him about the size of a book advance, he will try to convince you that he earns neither more nor less than anyone else. It was at just short of gunpoint that his agent, Nicole Aragi, revealed to me that he received a $500,000 advance for his first novel and a $1 million advance for his second, meaning that he is probably the highest-earning literary novelist under 30. "Jonathan has had to live with so much jealousy, it's had me ripping my hair out," she says.

It was also through others that I heard of his penchant for giving money away. Last May, at the 2004 PEN Literary Awards, for instance, Foer shuffled up to the stage to accept a major prize -- a $70,000 fellowship, to be paid out over two years. In his acceptance speech, instead of thanking the usual roster of literary codependents and enablers (agent, editor, high-school English teacher, pet dog), he blurted, a bit awkwardly, "I have decided to give the money back to PEN." A few weeks later, when Foer married -- his wife, Nicole Krauss, is a 30-year-old writer with a novel of her own coming out this spring -- he asked his guests to hold off on the toasters and retro blenders and to instead make donations to PEN. Some $6,500 was raised that way.

Even Foer's close friends seem destined to learn of his worldly attainments only secondhand. There is little in his manner that hints at his rigorous professionalism, the bursts of industry that allowed him, for starters, to complete a draft of his first novel at Princeton and also edit a book of other writers' short stories inspired by the eccentric box maker Joseph Cornell. "I saw Jonathan right after he sold his first novel," recalls his best friend, Sam Messer, 49, a figurative painter and an associate dean of the Yale University School of Art, "and all he told me was: 'Good news. Someone likes the book.' Then he went out to celebrate by buying a new pair of Converse sneakers."

Foer's modesty, you might assume, is intended to mask the breadth of his ambition, lest he appear too boastful or striving. But, eventually, in the course of our meetings and voluminous correspondence -- which came to include, in scarcely more than a month, some 150 e-mail messages from Foer, many of them wickedly hilarious, others gravely literary, and running to thousands of words -- I came to view his reticence as rooted more in fear than in pride. As he wrote in an e-mail message one evening: "Thinking on the ride back from D.C.: Time heals all wounds. But what if time is the wound?"

Foer grew up in a redbrick house in northwest Washington, in a Jewish household where sabbath candles were lighted on most Friday evenings. As a family, the Foers are close-knit, and they can sound nearly Victorian in the abundance of their teary-eyed affection for one another. The author's mother, Esther Safran Foer, is a Polish emigre who works as the president of a public-relations company, FM Strategic Communications. His father, Albert Foer, is a nonpracticing lawyer who "reads a book every two days," as his son says, and is fond of fulminating against the excesses of corporate gigantism. After working for many years as a jeweler, he founded the American Antitrust Institute, a nonprofit policy institute that he runs out of his home.

Jonathan, the middle of three boys, was a born performer who knew early on that his gifts could claim the admiration of the public. "He was a very flamboyant child," recalls his older brother, Franklin, 30, who is a senior editor at The New Republic and the author of a recent book on soccer and globalization. "He was a big ham. In one play, he was cast as a hunter, and I can still see him taking giant Elmer Fudd steps across a stage. In fifth grade, he was incredibly popular, and he had the makings of being a big-time ladies' man."

Indeed, in a photograph taken when he was still in grade school, Jonathan looks like a miniature Liberace -- he is dressed gaudily in a plaid jacket and a polka-dot bow tie, with six chunky rings gleaming on as many of his plump fingers. "Jonathan was colorful," recalls his doting mother. "He was a character almost from the first moment. For his third birthday, he wanted a vest that sparkled. That is not an easy thing to find, and I had my sister-in-law make one for him.

"He was also very sensitive," she continues. "He could look at me and talk to me and reach right down to my core. And he adored his younger brother, Josh. When Josh was less than 2 months old, I went to his crib to look for him one day and he was gone. Jonathan was carrying him around. Josh was Jonathan's lovey, his blanket." (Joshua is now 22, a Yale graduate who majored in ecology and evolutionary biology and is working as a freelance journalist.)

The memory of Foer as a child performer, however cherished by his family, is not one that he himself finds particularly revealing. For all his extravagance as a novelist, his love of tangled themes and emotions, the narrative he chooses to impose on his childhood is curiously linear and reductive. Astoundingly, he insists that his development as a writer was shaped less by his parents and by his genetic endowments, less even by the novelists and poets he loves, than by a single event: the Explosion, as he calls it. "It made me a person," he claimed in a lengthy and startling e-mail message he sent one night last month.

It began: "Firstly, let me say that these are, quite literally, the first words I've ever written about this. Ever. Literally not a single word." Foer told me later that he had composed the message at home, at the desk in his cluttered basement workshop, his thin face streaked with tears. The letter recounted, in some detail, the event that split the idyll of his childhood in two: the years before Aug. 12, 1985, and the years after.

That bright Monday morning began innocently enough. Foer, a boy of 8, was attending a summer program at Murch Elementary, a public school not far from his home. The first lesson of the day was a chemistry project, and in an act of nearly unbelievable carelessness, the teacher laid out bowls of combustible materials. The goal was to make sparklers. Foer found the assignment "boring" and left the

classroom to go to the bathroom. "I dawdled a bit, drank some water I didn't really want and went back to the room," he wrote. He was returning to his table when suddenly there was a deafening bang and the room filled with thick smoke. Screams and pandemonium followed.

Moments later, out in the hall, he found his best friend slumped against a wall. It was hard to look at his bloodied face, but harder not to, Foer recalled. The boy's glasses were crusted over, his skin shredded. "Being a child, or being in shock, or just being myself, I told him what he looked like and begged him to describe my own face to me," Foer said. "I asked him if the skin was peeling from my face. He said no. I asked him again. He said no. I remember making him promise."

Four children were injured in the blast, two of them critically. Foer, who was one of the less seriously injured, was taken by ambulance to Children's Hospital with second-degree burns on his hands and his face. The following day, a front-page story in The Washington Post reported that he had "suffered shock as a result of the violent blast."

In the days and weeks afterward, his hands remained bundled in gauze. He says that he no longer wanted to leave his house or to play. He wanted nothing, except to be outside his own skin. "I had a very hard time after that, something like a nervous breakdown drawn out over about three years," he said. "I went to the bathroom in my pants a lot. I couldn't really go to school. I developed an intense fear of public speaking."

As I read his account of the explosion, it suddenly occurred to me that the title of his new novel, "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close," might refer directly to it. The blast had been "extremely loud," and Foer's brush with disfigurement had been "incredibly close." Young Oskar Schell, the scientifically inclined prodigy who narrates most of the novel, is roughly the age Foer was when the incident occurred. And yet the chemistry-class accident is nowhere mentioned in the book.

In writing his novel, Foer, it might be said, combined a personal trauma that occurred in 1985 with the national trauma that befell the country on Sept. 11, 2001. Inside the spaces of his mythologizing imagination, the classroom of his childhood became a metaphor for loss and redemption. In reality, he could not keep the explosion from happening. But he could repair the loss in his art, where he seeks to unmake the past, to unbreak hearts, to get things back to the safe place where they once were.

That, at any rate, is the ambition of Oskar Schell. After the assault on the World Trade Center, he has a kind of nervous collapse: he cries easily, loses interest in school and, by his own account, feels as if he is "in the middle of a deep black ocean, or in deep space, but not in the fascinating way. It's just that everything was incredibly far away from me." His one consolation is his potent imagination. On countless nights, he lies awake in his narrow bed, pitching ideas to himself, ideas for inventions that could keep people secure.

"What about frozen planes," Oskar proposes in a typical moment, "which could be safe from heat-seeking missiles?

"What about subway turnstiles that were also radiation detectors?

"What about incredibly long ambulances that connected every building to a hospital?"

Oskar's narrative is intertwined with forlorn letters from his grandfather Thomas Schell, a German sculptor scarred by his experiences in war-torn Dresden a half-century earlier. He, too, lost someone he loved. Anna, his pregnant lover, died in the war. But unlike young Oskar (who is named after the protagonist of Gunter Grass's "Tin Drum"), his grandfather is crippled by the past. He stops making sculpture, loses his capacity for speech and becomes so afraid of expressing himself that he basically ceases to be human. He answers the questions that are posed to him in the most condensed style: he raises either his right hand to reveal the word "no" tattooed on his palm or his left hand, inked with "yes."

It is easy to discern parallels between the fictive Thomas Schell and Foer's actual maternal grandfather, Louis Safran, a Polish Jew who lived through the Holocaust and the extermination of his first wife and young daughter. Safran immigrated to this country after the war, but Foer never met him; he died in 1954, more than two decades before his grandson was born.

"I don't remember how old I was when I learned of the life my grandfather had before the life that led to me," Foer recalled one day in a stirring e-mail message. "There should be a name for those things that one feels one has always known without ever having learned. And a name for those things that are central to one's life without ever being thought about or felt.

"I suppose it was my mother who told me," he continued. "Am I haunted by the story? Of course. The most haunting detail for me is that we don't know the name of the baby that was killed -- my mother's half-sister. Maybe it goes back to Nietzsche's idea that everything we have words for is dead in our hearts. In this case, a dead, nameless child is more alive to me than many living things."

Foer's belief in the power of the unspoken probably helps explain his fascination with blank pages -- of which there are several in his new novel. He wants to offer us not just a reading experience, but a visual experience as well, as if words alone can no longer be trusted to tell our life stories. Full-page photographs, all in arty black-and-white, are woven into the narrative, and typography is at times deployed toward pictorial ends. Page 26, for example, comes with only one tiny word -- "Help" -- marooned in a vast desert of white. At the opposite extreme, Page 284 is so crowded with words printed on top of words that you cannot decipher them, except as a vertical slab of black, a tombstone of type, or perhaps (like the photograph on Page 318) a velvety night sky. The book also includes a dozen or so grainy newslike photographs that risk offense by appropriating the image of a body falling from the towers -- albeit a digitally simulated image -- for artistic gain.

"The moment when I chose to put the photographs in the book," Foer said, "I was browsing around the Internet. I couldn't believe what I was looking at -- beheadings, C-sections, shark attacks, people jumping from planes with broken parachutes. It made me wonder what it must be like to be young right now. Kids are subjected to images that adults aren't because a) their curiosity for the grotesque is greater and b) their ability to access it is greater."

The photographs in the book, much like the other visual material -- the pages that are blank or half-blank, the paragraphs riddled with deliberate errors, as well as corrections made in blood-red ink -- tend to conceal more than they reveal.

"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."

Although Foer has been called a poet of missed connections, the paradox is that it is hard to think of another person who makes such large and heroic efforts to stay in touch. During the weeks I was working on this article, he answered the questions that were put to him and reported on his whereabouts on a nearly daily basis; indeed, sometimes on an hourly basis. A kind of epistolary climax was reached one Sunday earlier this month, when I received a total of 19 e-mail messages from him, all of them uncommonly thoughtful and well written.

At times, he would e-mail to express his regret that he could not e-mail. "I have lots of time to think here," he wrote one morning from San Francisco, "but not too much to write." On a subsequent trip to Italy, where he had gone to deliver a lecture -- it was titled "Imagination Is the Instrument of Compassion," after a line from the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert -- his time was even briefer: "This will be far too short," his message opened, "as I am writing from a public computer in the hotel in Venice. And I am suffering motion sickness. And the inability to use contractions, as I cannot find the apostrophe. . . . "

On other occasions, he wrote to warn of an imminent departure from his desk, with all that implied about the unfortunate likelihood of severed lines of communication. "Off to the park with George for a half an hour or so," he cautioned one day, before walking his dog. Another exit, another e-mail message:

> "hello from the airport.
> the only thing better would be 'hello from the airplane'
> actually, better would be 'hello from the air, without an airplane.'"

To be sure, writing a letter to a journalist and, by implication, to the wide readership of a newspaper, is altogether different from dropping a line to your worried mother. Yet Foer can be surprisingly intimate when he is on the record. His letters, much like his fiction, are conceived "as an end to loneliness," as he once put it in an e-mail message. And while most of the letters in the world -- at least the good ones -- are similarly written to allay our loneliness, Foer seems haunted by an aching awareness of the probability of defeat. What, in the end, can we really know of one another?

"I think it would be nice to meet again," he wrote one day. "It will give me a chance to give you a fuller picture -- even if the fuller picture is not a better picture. . . . It pains me to think that I have not yet given you enough about me, as a person. Two meetings. What if, by chance -- by mood, by weather, by biochemistry -- I grossly misrepresented myself?"

Fair enough. Plans were made to meet outside the main branch of the New York Public Library one Wednesday at noon. That morning, more e-mail messages arrived, the last of which was sent knowingly to an empty desk: "Writing this from the Kinko's across the street from the Public Library," Foer noted. "It's 11:41 and I've done it again: arrived for a rendezvous more than 15 minutes early. Anyway, I'm assuming you won't read this until after we meet, which leaves these words hanging in some nowhere time. . . . See you soon, hours ago."

We wound up spending the afternoon in a dreary, near-empty restaurant on Fifth Avenue, on the ground floor of the Empire State Building. For lunch, he ordered a plate of French fries and a glass of pineapple juice -- in other words, his usual. ("French fries are basically just edible spoons for salt," he said.) When we sat down, he handed me a gift and admonished me to open it with the utmost care and

delicacy. Inside, sandwiched between two stiff pieces of gray cardboard, I found a surprise -- a sheet of typing paper, completely blank and yellowed at the edges. He quickly explained that it had been culled from the desk of the long-dead Isaac Bashevis Singer and was one in a sizable collection of blank papers he has amassed from his fellow writers and artists over the years.

We parted at 4 that afternoon, and the fading daylight lent the moment a veiled, elegiac feeling, an unsettling suggestion of oblivion. Foer had hoped to give me a "fuller picture of himself," as he had written -- and yet here he was, sending me off with a literally blank page.

Perhaps he intended the gesture as a grimly hip postmodern joke, a comment on the futility of texts, on our inevitably doomed efforts to say exactly what we mean and be understood completely. But perhaps he saw the paper as just the opposite: a prayer, an ardent expression of hope, an evocation of all the beautiful ideas and feelings, the compassionate inventions, that remain to be inscribed on that great blank page known as the future. Is that what he intended?

I posed the question by e-mail one morning, and the answer came back within five minutes: "That's a lot to think about," Foer wrote with his usual intensity. "It would take 1,000 letters just to scratch the surface, and I doubt the scratch would be too deep. I'll give it a shot. It's going to have to be in about 45 minutes, though, as George is at my side, whining to go for a walk. The park is a great place to think, and my afternoon is wide open. When I come back I'll get started with letter #1."

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