October 2002

Reviews

Ethos Staff

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2003/iss1/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Publications at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ethos by an authorized editor of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
book review by PAUL KIX

EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED BY JONATHAN SAFRON FOER

The fact that I'm getting more words to write my review than the movie, the TV, or the CD review should tell you how good this novel is. And notice the meta-commentary style of writing: talking about the review as I write it. This is intentional. Jonathon Safron Foer is a post-modernist — a savvy young writer who delves fully into his wit — and there's plenty of wit — while commenting obliquely on the novel as it goes along. But unlike some of David Foster Wallace's or Dave Eggers' work (other post-modernists), Safron Foer's debut novel has a deep resonance behind it. There is no shallow feeling, like you've been entertained but ultimately scammed, once the last word of Everything is Illuminated is read. And Safron Foer is only 25. Twenty-freaking-five. It is at once enviable and inspiring.

The novel is actually three novels in one: The protagonist's — also named Jonathon Safran Foer — search of the Ukraine to find the woman whose family saved his grandfather from Nazi Germany; the story of how Safron Foer's family came into being, beginning in a Jewish shtetl in the 1700s; and the correspondence kept between Safron Foer and Alex Perchov, the Ukrainian who critiques — in broken English — Safron Foer's unfolding story about the shtetl and who also leads Safron Foer through the Ukraine in search of the woman who saved his grandfather.

Yet the novel is not at all overbearing. In fact, it helps the pacing of the book, so much so that I found myself saying "One more chapter then I'll go to bed ... One more chapter then I'll go to work ... One more chapter — screw it, I'll finish it today."

In the first third of the book, we meet the man in the shtetl who masturbates in public, Alex and his grandfather's dog, Sammy Davis Jr., Jr. whom Alex calls the "bitch," the "goers" of the Upright Synagogue and the Slouching Synagogue.

The book becomes more tragic as it moves along. Alex's prose — "I dig Negroes, particularly Michael Jackson. I dig to disseminate very much currency at famous nightclubs in Odessa" — becomes an erudite, then profound statement on society as his correspondence with Safron Foer continues. The chilling climax — at least for me, though some chapters thereafter remain — occurs when the Nazis rumble their tanks into the shtetl and demand all Jews step outside. Alex's grandfather tells the story, in prose without punctuation. "The General went to the first line and he said into his microphone you will point out a Jew or you will be considered a Jew ... Who is a Jew the General asked him and Abraham trembled Who is a Jew the General asked again and he put his gun to Abraham's head Aaron is a Jew Aaron and he pointed to Aaron ... he was resisting very much so they shot him in the head and this is when I felt Herschel's hand touch mine." It is from the conclusion of this scene that the novel draws its title.

TheEssential