

## ELEMENTS OF TRAUMA FICTION IN JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER'S *EXTREMELY LOUD & INCREDIBLY CLOSE*

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### Abstract

Trauma fiction was one of the most written types of literature in America in the wake of 9/11. Not a very popular genre due to the sensitive subject matter it can contain, the trauma of 9/11 contributed significantly to its resurgence, especially in New York. Jonathan Safran Foer is one of the youngest and also most talented writers in New York. Known for his daring and innovative style, his novel, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, is unique among other works of its genre. It deals with multiple plotlines and different historical traumas presented against the backdrop of 9/11, concerning itself primarily with the victims of the tragedy and their attempts to reconstruct their lives. Moreover, it explores the ways in which different generations can come together and help each other overcome their respective traumas, emphasizing the importance of unity and solidarity between people of all ages and mindsets.

**Keywords:** *trauma fiction, novel, 9/11, space, American literature, New York*

### Introduction

Trauma literature has been a hotly debated topic in post 9/11 literary circles, especially in New York, where the effects of the attack were felt the strongest. To put it simply, trauma literature "refers to a work of fiction that represents an emotional and/or cognitive response to profound loss, disaster, disruption, or devastations on the individual or collective level" (Zindziuviene 149). Most of these works are elliptical, fragmented, and their plots and characters betray the suffering and confusion present in US in the first years after 9/11. Richard Gray

aply noted that "disorientation is certainly a feature of writing in America after the fall." (14), with many characters being on a constant quest to try to find new meaning in the wake of the cultural and social changes brought about by 9/11. Nothing that had provided comfort in the past has any power to do so now. On a cultural level, it is indirectly inferred that something new is needed. Particularly in the trauma novel, attempts to make sense of things are constantly thwarted, and the characters often seek outside help. An interesting chapter of trauma literature is composed of the works written in and around the center of the tragedy, the city of New York. The reason for this is the importance of the metropolis itself, as a space in which the characters have the opportunity to grow and find a way to cope with their respective tragedies. A large number of discussions on trauma literature have raised this issue related to the importance of New York as a space of rapidly evolving conceptions and meanings that ultimately aid its inhabitants in overcoming hardship. In the post 9/11 world, particularly in the world of the trauma novel, "the metropolises serve as microcosms and testing grounds in which many processes occur faster"(Golimowska 26). These giant spaces, inhabited by millions, set the stage and are ultimately responsible for a large part of their characters' development and eventual coming to terms with their trauma.

Jonathan Foer's novel is perhaps the most interesting 9/11 trauma writing for multiple reasons: choice of characters, narrative structures, the richness of its intertextuality, and the original manner in which it deals with the way victims come to terms with trauma. What is also worth analyzing is the role that the space of New York plays in the development and evolution of its characters. While being an exemplary trauma novel of its own, it is worth mentioning that Jonathan Safran Foer is a young American novelist, and this is not his first successful foray into the writing of trauma literature. At the time, he was seen as a prodigious author, given the overwhelmingly positive reception of his debut novel and his surprising age (a trauma story focused on the Holocaust):

When the Jewish American novelist Jonathan Safran Foer published his sensational debut novel, *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), at the age of 25, it met with rave reviews, instantly casting its author as one of the great hopes for the future of American letters; the *New York Times* waxed ecstatic and celebrated this work of "such brilliance and such brio" with two reviews in two weeks' time. The novel dealt with the Holocaust in a daringly funny and technically innovative way. (Codde 241)

### **Elements of trauma: finding meaning and space**

Although his debut novel is not necessarily related to our discussion, it is important to note that we are dealing with an author that loves innovation. And,

indeed, Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* has perhaps the most complex structure out of most of the 9/11 novels. The novel is mainly about the quest of Oskar Schell, a nine-year-old boy who wants to come to terms with the death of his father, who was one of the victims of the 9/11 attacks. Tragically, his father wasn't even a worker in the towers; he just happened to have a meeting in there on the day of the attacks. In the aftermath of the tragedy, the young boy finds what he thinks is a message that his father left for him, and goes on a long journey throughout all the boroughs of New York in an attempt to solve the mystery and also help himself come to terms with his loss. Some might be tempted to say that this is a Bildungsroman, because young Oskar, as broken as he is by his loss, nevertheless develops his character, grows up and attempts to find closure. However, the book is much more complex than it initially appears, and its exposition of the plot and the unfolding of events are unusual and sometimes hard to follow, as the plot doesn't focus only on Oskar's mission. The novel also has two other narrative lines that make it more complex: Oskar's grandfather and grandmother, both survivors of the bombing of Dresden, constantly have their own chapters interspersed among Oskar's, sometimes taking the reader back all the way to the Second World War. At times, it is difficult for the reader to understand the chronology of the events, as the author likes to switch between characters and timelines. Overall, the text is difficult to categorize as a specific type of novel due to its length, multitude of plotlines and unexpected shifts in time and perspective:

At times it resembles a detective novel [...] at others, it calls to mind the Bildungsroman, with autobiographical looks. Certainly it is the story of a family, but its narrative construction is very different from the traditional family chronicle with its chronological movement from one generation to the next. Because the traumatic events of 9/11 are central to the narrative, it may be considered a tragedy of both individual and collective loss (Ingersoll 54)

In addition to this, the book is filled with pictures of all sorts, from doorknobs to actors playing Hamlet to the famous "falling man" image, each with their own specific purpose, while also being intertextually rich, with numerous references to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and American pop culture. Moreover, it adds two other tragedies to the plot. One is the bombing of Dresden, which his grandparents got to experience firsthand. The other is the bombing of Hiroshima, which Oskar presents in a school project with all its gruesome and horrific details about the effects of radiation and the hell the survivors of the bombing had to go through. One of these tragedies has directly affected the Schell family, but one hasn't. It is our belief that the inclusion of these events is not a mere coincidence, but it rather serves the purpose of equalizing the field, by removing the US from its central

position as the sole victim of a horrific trauma. By exposing multiple tragedies, each on different continents and in different time periods, Foer showcases the complexity of dealing with tragedy and loss, and the way in which they can subtly influence each other, while also de-territorializing America's trauma and bringing it in line with other atrocities that have been committed in the world. Ironically, the U.S. was indeed involved in both the Dresden and Hiroshima disasters. This multiplication of traumas makes the novel an exemplary sample of 9/11 trauma fiction that deals with the transmission of trauma across generations and the potential of different generations to come together and help each other overcome their losses, a concept that is both original and interesting to dissect. Saal put it aptly by noting that "bringing the trauma of 9/11 in conversation with other, older collective traumata suggests an attempt to engage the pain of others and to consider the myriad ways in which global power structures implicate one's own vulnerability in that of others."(455)

The characters all narrate their testimony in the first person. The chapters alternate the perspectives of Oskar and his grandparents, presenting different parts of their stories. The first person-narrative is common in trauma fictions because "it establishes rhetorically the continuity of the experiencing subject" (Haviland 429). In this case, the continuity is further reinforced by the author's decision to follow the narrative lines of multiple generations from the same family, and their attempts to reach some sort of closure with the traumas they've been through. In addition, the chapters are structured in such a way that 9/11 doesn't seem to be more important, or more actual, than the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima. Moreover, moving the plot from continent to continent and across generations, each with their own graphic descriptions of the horrors of war, helps to indirectly remove the U.S. from its hegemonic position and blurs the boundaries between nations and peoples by showing that the Other can suffer from trauma and tragedy just as much as American citizens can. All this is done seamlessly as the novel progresses:

The novel focuses on these accounts in order to destabilize a sense of entitlement and victimization for any single group based on trauma, not because the events of 9/11 fail to merit mourning, but because such sentiments can lead to dangerous attempts to solidify national identity through inflicting more trauma on others. (Mullins 304)

In spite of its complexity and intelligent implementation of multiple plotlines, the book also has a few less believable features, mainly related to the main character, as "the crux of the problem with *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* for reviewers seemed to be the inability or unwillingness to buy Oskar as a nine-year-old" (Mullins 310). Indeed, Oskar's quest is quite huge: he discovers in his father's

closet a blue vase containing an envelope. It contained a key to a lockbox, and had the name Black written on it, which prompts the boy to try to visit every family in New York with this name in the attempt to find out what the key opens. A nine year old wandering the boroughs of New York all day long, even in areas which should be off-limits and very dangerous for him, ends up straining the reader's suspension of disbelief. Moreover, the young boy is incredibly intelligent, his mind races at all times, thinking up inventions, pondering the situation he is in, and obsessing over the death of his father to a degree that sometimes seems implausible for a child of that age, no matter how prodigious he is. His knowledge of things is almost encyclopedic, and his calculations would put some adults to shame. Initially, the boy doesn't notice the word "Black", and decides to do some number crunching in order to estimate how many locks he needs to go through:

For example, there are 319 post offices and 207,352 post office boxes. Each box has a lock, obviously. I also found out that there are about 70,571 hotel rooms, and most rooms have a main lock, a bathroom lock, a closet lock, and a lock to the minibar. [...]There are more than 300,000 cars in New York, which doesn't even count the 12,187 cabs and 4,425 buses. Also, I remembered from when I used to take the subway that the conductors used keys to open and close the doors, so there were those, too. [...]Also there are offices, and art studios, and storage facilities, and banks with safe-deposit boxes, and gates to yards, and parking lots. I figured that if you included everything—from bicycle locks to roof latches to places for cufflinks—there are probably about 18 locks for every person in New York City, which would mean about 162 million locks, which is a crevasse-load of locks. (Foer, Kindle Edition)

While such impressive mathematical and statistical skills may sometimes seem out of place given the age of the main character, they are often mixed with naiveties, daydreaming and wishful thinking, things that are normal for a child. Oskar makes up fantastical and childish inventions in his head, often related to the tragedy, like skyscrapers made of living metal that can re-arrange their structure to avoid planes, or anti-gravitational devices that reverse the falling of the victims in mid-air. Sometimes, his innocence and gaiety make him very lovable, such as when he asks one of the Blacks he visits (a woman) to give him a kiss out of pure childlike curiosity. There are also some very distinct advantages to use a child as the protagonist. His innocence and age allow him to talk about sensitive topics openly, as he sees them with the eyes of a child and is immune to being criticized like a grown adult would be:

Oskar Schell is a young boy who has not yet developed all of the 'us and them' ideas and vocabulary. He talks openly about race and terror throughout the novel and is able to move freely within and through identity borders precisely because

of his youth and lack of exposure to years of reinforced identity markers based on difference. (Mullins 322)

While many other 9/11 novels are criticized for being narrated by and built around American characters who may be biased in showing their opinions due to the trauma they have experienced, Foer's prodigious little character is too innocent and naive to be criticized. Nowhere in the novel does he show allegiance to any sort of authority, nation or ideology. He is, by all means, a citizen of the wide world. While his encyclopedic knowledge of things and unusually bright mind sometimes make him less believable, most of the times he is just a child, and sees the world with different eyes than an adult. Moreover, his suffering comes off as very authentic, especially when the reader is caught in one of Oskar's numerous musings on the nature of his loss and his attempts to recover from it. In spite of their naivety, these inner monologues are touching. Oskar is a traumatized child, who had a very close relationship with his father prior to the tragedy and struggles constantly to live a normal life. He constantly visits a psychologist and tries to get used to the new situation:

Even after a year, I still had an extremely difficult time doing certain things, like taking showers, for some reason, and getting into elevators, obviously. There was a lot of stuff that made me panicky, like suspension bridges, germs, airplanes, fireworks, Arab people on the subway (even though I'm not racist), Arab people in restaurants and coffee shops and other public places, scaffolding, sewers and subway grates, bags without owners, shoes, people with mustaches, smoke, knots, tall buildings, turbans. (Foer, Kindle version)

Oskar's psychological difficulties are representative of someone who has had to go through the trauma of 9/11, and he is involved in a constant process of examining and changing himself. New York in itself, as the center of 9/11, facilitates such endeavors, being a place of change in a new age of turmoil. However, it is also an unknown and sprawling construction, making Oskar's quest all the more difficult. The boy's ability to navigate this massive space in the desire to fulfill his quest has been affected by the way in which his father died. He is very afraid of trains, exhibiting a fear of being buried underground in a lightless place, a grim reminder of how his father probably died on 9/11. Moreover, he also fears skyscrapers, and feels much safer when he is on the ground, preferring to explore New York on foot. The city is seen as a sandbox in which Oskar is free to explore, evolve and leave his mark on the places he visits. Even though the trauma of 9/11 has been transmitted from father to son much like a heritable behavior trait, Oskar is hard at work constructing and unraveling a new identity for himself. The use of New York as a facilitator for the bildungsroman character's evolution is common in 9/11 trauma literature, where "the contemporary metropolis

provides a significant context for rethinking theoretical concerns about narrative, identity, home, and vulnerability [...]” (Wilhite 5). Oskar’s sense of purpose given by his quest leads him on to explore a large amount of the city, integrating its experiences and memories into his new identity. As the continuator of the Schell line and survivor of 9/11, he has to reconcile the traumas of his family while also having to reconstruct himself. By traversing New York, Oskar “creates personal paths within the city and gradually claims it for himself, changing unknown and frightening spaces to places of his own.” (Golimowska 29). Walking the bustling streets of the metropolis, even in the absence of its two towers, Oskar grows and becomes more capable of coping with his fears.

The Schells have quite a long record of loss and suffering, and the boy is not the only family member with an unfinished quest. Oskar's grandparents had suffered grievously during their youth, and both of them exhibit signs of deep trauma: the grandfather was initially in love with the grandmother's sister, Anna, and they were expecting a child. All that was lost in the bombing of Dresden, and the chapter that describes this part is full of apocalyptic imagery, the disaster being presented on an almost biblical scale. It is here that the reader finds the explanation for all the pictures of doorknobs found in between the chapters: while frantically running for his life, the grandfather opens a few doors and the doorknobs are so hot that they burn his hands. Further on, the animals in the zoo are described in their panic, innocent victims of the senseless destruction war brings. In the aftermath of the tragedy, the two elders resolved to move to the U.S. and marry, trying somehow to put the loss of Anna behind. In the aftermath of the tragedy, grandfather Schell loses his ability to speak, and is afraid of conceiving a child ever again, due to the dreaded possibility of losing him again just like in Dresden. When that inevitably happens and Oskar's father is conceived, he leaves his wife and returns to Germany. After 9/11 happens, however, he returns to New York, as a bearer of trauma from the days of World War Two. It is not clear whether his muteness is a sign of severe PTSD, but he can only communicate by writing on a blank notebook, and by showing his tattooed palms, as one of them has the word "yes" tattooed on it, whereas the other has the word "no". He has the same proclivity for walking the streets of New York in a similar manner to Oskar, exploring how much the city has changed after all this time, seeking some sort of meaning for their harrowing experiences. Even though grandfather Schell and Oskar Schell perceive the city’s landmarks very differently, owing to the generational gap between them, their search is fundamentally the same:

These two traumatized individuals, two generations apart who have previously never met, walk the same grid of streets in search of new and old meanings. Each seeks some meaning in the great tragedy they and the city have become parts of. Broadway has a different significance for Thomas Schell, Sr. looking for his lost

past than it holds for Oskar, who discovers the street and many other places for the first time. (Golimowska 31)

The grandmother also has trouble communicating her trauma: she can speak, but she wants to write her story. Unfortunately, she does that on a typewriter without a ribbon, which is the device that helps transfer the ink on the paper. Without that crucial element, despite her best efforts, all she produces are blank pages, indirectly showcasing how much she has been through and how difficult it can be to get a story like that on paper. Indirectly, this shows what most trauma studies have theorized: that the victim of the trauma is unable to transfer his or her experience in a relatable way. Whereas her husband lost his ability to speak, she constantly complains that her eyes are "crummy", a possible explanation for why she doesn't seem to realize that she is writing blank pages. Both of them have lost one or more of their senses, and communicating their experiences directly is out of the question, which makes it clear for the reader that "the inaccessibility of one's own traumatic past becomes one of the important themes of the novel, particularly the failure and inaptness of language for historical reconstruction" (Codde 244). The tragedies and losses of the grandparents, which are ponderously revealed as the plot progresses, are instrumental in making the reader understand the apparently erratic behaviors of the two elders, and are ultimately essential for the completion of Oskar's quest. Every person from the Schell family struggles to communicate their trauma, and closure can only arrive when they come together and communicate with each other. Their traumas seem to have been locked in stasis for decades, with neither of the two grandparents being able to communicate or solve them. Oskar's trauma leads by the same inability to speak or write. Communication is always a difficult endeavor for trauma victims. On the day his father died, the boy was unable to communicate with him at all, while being at the same time aware that something was very wrong:

Eleven times his father asks: "Are you there?" Overwhelmed by his demand for a response, Oskar is helpless; his response-ability is nil. He does not understand what is happening and cannot act. But he knows immediately after the line goes dead that something horrible has happened. He immediately encrypts the the answering machine by hiding it in his closet, preserving the voice of his father [...]. (Haviland 437)

The boy is wracked with guilt at his inability to communicate, something that will haunt him for the rest of the novel, because he constantly blames himself for his inability to answer his father's call during the latter's last moments. He desperately yearns for some sort of closure with his father, and hopes that his quest, in spite of it being almost impossible to complete, will give him solace. He constantly



wonders about how his father died, and decides to do his best to find out. The trope of the son trying to unearth his father's secrets is long-established in Western literature, and one of those writings is found in Oskar's school. The book contains pictures of Laurence Olivier starring as Hamlet in 1948, and Oskar has his part to play in his school's staging of Hamlet. the boy's frustration and desire to make sense of the relationship with his father. This episode is interesting for multiple reasons. Despite being a precocious and dutiful boy, Oskar hates that he has to star in this part, and feels as if the Shakespearian text does not do justice to his trauma, stating that "Shakespeare doesn't make sense." (Foer, Kindle version). The event and loss that he lived through is much more intense and comparing it to other similar situations is simply futile. This aptly illustrates Cathy Caruth's definition of trauma as "the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness and horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge." (Caruth 153). Oskar's only desire on the stage at that point is to punch one of his bullies in the face, a random act of violence that can sometimes be seen as cathartic, but, beyond that, the presence of Hamlet does nothing to aid him, as it is impossible for him to identify with Shakespeare's character. This can be interpreted as Foer's way of telling us that certain events in our recent history resist comparison with previous traumas of humanity and require new structures of thought in order to be understood properly. Oskar's way out of this situation lies not in scrutinizing the past, but in re-exploring New York in the absence of his father, in an era in which its most iconic landmarks are gone. In this situation, the trauma is healed gradually, as the main character re-experiences the city and undertakes an important quest without his father's guidance.

Oskar allows the city, with all its buildings and places that will always carry traces of his father, to approach him. It is the moving force of the constantly changing city that allows him to attach his own impressions, experiences, and associations to places previously known only through their relation to his father. That way, the city, similarly to Oskar's apartment, becomes a stage for inventions and grants him the possibility to make sense out of the changed space without erasing the memory of his father. (Golimowska 31)

As the story progresses and Oskar visits more and more Black families, it seems that the meaning he was looking for keeps eluding him. The people he meets treat him nicely, and some of them offer to help directly, but none of them can provide any conclusive meaning to Oskar's search. Nobody knows anything about the key or about Oskar's father. He still can't make sense of the trauma, of what his father really wanted, or how he died; the truth seems to be always just around the corner, but unable to manifest itself. Oskar gives the best and most obvious example of the belated nature of a trauma in the book. It's as if he is aware and unaware at the

same time of his regrets regarding the loss of his father and the effects on his personality. However, he is not the only Schell family member with this issue, as his grandfather's behavior also show signs of deferral. His belatedness is expressed indirectly, through the plethora of letters he writes to Oskar's father, while only sending one of them: "I'll never be your father, and you will always be my child." (Foer, Kindle version). It is in these kinds of behaviors, which might seem completely senseless to a less attentive reader, that Foer's innovative genius is being shown: the grandfather's *Nachträglichkeit* is evinced by his inability to separate himself from his dead wife Anna and her son, lost in the fires of Dresden. In spite of him marrying again, moving to a different continent, and living for years in a different environment, he cannot separate himself from his loss. When his new wife becomes pregnant, thus breaking the only rule he imposed on their marriage, he leaves her and returns to Germany, which signifies that the trauma he lived there is far from being resolved. Although the second part of his "letter" shows the love of a father and his desire to be there for his son, the first part (the recipient of the unresolved trauma) cancels it out. Moreover, the fact that the letters were able to be written, but unable to be sent, further "stages the belated arrival of meaning to the experience of shock or fright that curtails the making of meaning" (Haviland 439). It becomes more and more apparent that Oskar and his grandfather, although being victims of different traumas, struggle with belatedness in a similar manner. The boy visits place after place in pursuit of his quest, but never finds anything that gives meaning and his guilt towards his father is not resolved. Similarly, the grandfather writes letter after letter, but is unable to send them, and his guilt towards his son is also unresolved. Both are unable to solve their traumas on their own, but they do have the possibility of coming together and helping each other, as both of them seek closure with the same person. The idea that persons from different generations, who have experienced different traumas, can come together and help each other overcome their loss by playing parts in each others' stories is unique to Foer's book and one of the more interesting innovations in trauma literature. However, what binds their different stories and quests together is the space in which they meet and reconcile. As Wilhite put it, "the chronotope of post-9/11 urban texts is a paradoxical space of permanence and vulnerability—a convergence point for anxieties about globalization, economic inequality, imperial history, postmodern virtuality, and future terror."(6). In the case of the Schell family, their convergence in the city of New York was related to a matter that some consider to be mundane on the grander scale of things, but which is actually important for most people: coming together as a family and overcoming past tragedies.

Although grandfather Schell and Oskar Schell are very different in their motivations and worldview, they are united in their quest to find meaning, and their coming together is what allows both to fulfill their quests. The old man steps

in to play a part in Oskar's quest, which in the end helps him solve his own trauma. After seeing each other a few times, they secretly dig up the empty casket of Mr. Schell, the father, and fill it with the unsent letters of Schell Senior, symbolically filling two voids: the communication void of the grandfather who couldn't assume his role as a parent, and Oskar's uncertainty about the manner of his father's death, due to the lack of a body. It is at this point that the belatedness of meaning is finally solved and overcome for Schell Senior, and the old man comes back to life symbolically and assumes his role in the family by forming a bond with his grandson, his trauma from the past finally resolved. It is a unique way of showcasing the process of transgenerational trauma, and how it can be resolved by members of different generations coming together. None of this would have been possible, however, without the effervescent metropolis of New York to act as a place in which the young Schell boy can grow, discover and find meaning. Oskar also overcomes his trauma and solves the enigma of the key by helping someone else complete his own search. Ironically, this person was also on a quest related to a deceased father figure. In short, Oskar's father bought the blue vase at an estate sale, with nobody knowing that it contained the key belonging to William Black's father (the Black Oskar was meant to find). The key opens a safe containing an encrypted letter addressed to his son. By pure coincidence, Oskar manages to meet this man and, together, they solve the enigma. This brings the boy's quest to a completion as he helps another man solve his own trauma related to a lost parent, in the same way the grandfather helped him. Moreover, he finally finds a person who can help him come to terms with his own guilt:

Thus Oskar has assumed a role by filling a gap in William Black's story, just as Grandpa has stepped in to fill a gap in Oskar's story. [...] He can begin to let go of his identification with his lost object and identify with this other son who has lost his father. [...] Oskar tells William Black about his own father's last message, something he has not told anyone, including the reader. (Havisham 442)

By moving the solving of trauma outside the circle of the Schell family, Foer emphasizes the fact that compassion and communal mourning can be achieved even with strangers who have lived through the same tragedies. By opening his heart to William Black, Oskar is able to solve his inner struggles and to come to terms with the decisions he made. In any case, it becomes clear to the reader that all of these people needed each other in order to properly overcome their losses. It is impossible to come full circle without helping each other. The grandfather struggled with his loss for over forty years without managing to make any progress, until he met Oskar. Similarly, the boy spent months running through the boroughs of New York with no end in sight, until he met someone who had experienced a similar loss. And William Black's quest would have been ultimately

impossible without help from Oskar. These uneven exchanges between people of different ages and mentalities make the reader understand that nobody is beyond trauma and nobody should be judged at face value: the grandfather, despite being an intelligent man, can occasionally be seen as contemptible and weird by people who don't know his story. Oskar's relentless questions and inquiries may seem annoying and disrespectful to some. Foer's manner of depicting events evens everything out: all the tragedies described in the novel come off as equally terrifying, with the theme of loss at their centre. The characters' suffering is authentic, and none of them appear worthier of compassion than the other. He describes traumatic incidents not as something that happens only to the poor, or the old, or to the less privileged: it is rather something that can happen to anyone, and one ought to show compassion equally to every victim, no matter his or her age, demeanor or personality, because collaboration is what ultimately helps them find meaning and reconcile their trauma.

## Conclusions

Jonathan Safran Foer's novel is important for the study of trauma literature, With New York as the giant metropolis in which characters are inexorably changed and remodeled. Oskar's struggle to come to terms with the tragedy and his inability to cope fits in well with Caruth's definition of trauma. The grandfather's plotline adds another layer of complexity, with a war trauma from a different time, but marked by the same grievous losses. His struggles are similar to Oskar, and they internalize the trauma by working together. By choosing to represent the world through the eyes of a child, Foer manages to craft an unblemished character whose gradual evolution into adolescence is marked by a loss that at first seems impossible to recover from. Moreover, the character's young age removes him from the more adult issues, such as finding a life partner, coping with financial loss, trying to integrate in a racist and changing America, and other tropes that can be found in different trauma novels. Oskar Schell's story is more simple and intimate, but no less harrowing and difficult, and with plenty of challenges, from psychological blockages to the massive distances involved in traversing New York by foot. Nevertheless, as he travels the width and breath of the city, Oskar not only makes new friends, but slowly manages to internalize the trauma he went through and re-experience a post 9/11 world in which he, as a child, is a symbol of both the future and its reconstruction. Through his help, the older generation, represented by grandfather Schell, is reconciled after decades of inability to find meaning, as he is also reunited with his grandson. This is one of the works in which trauma is overcome through constant re-experiencing of the space in which everything happened, as it is now changed and demands change in the characters. Oskar is a brilliant example of a character whose trauma and loss ultimately help

him to become a smarter, more sociable person. Overall, this novel is one of the best-written examples of trauma fiction, containing all the cornerstone elements of the genre, as well as a unique choice of characters and subject matter.

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