

**PREASSIGNMENT FOR ENG 278: L7—THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW
IT: FICTION AFTER 9/11**

Consult the Reader's Guide (included in this packet) and begin reading the novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer. A quiz on the novel will open on Thursday, May 21st and must be completed by the end of the day on Friday, May 22nd.

Also, read the packet of poem attached from the collection, Poetry After 9/11. As you read the poems, think about how each poem has been inspired by the same event and how, even so, the poems also happen to be so different. Is there anything, besides the subject matter, that holds the poems together: features, facets, techniques, images that crop up again and again? Be ready to respond to the poems on Blackboard the day that the class opens, Tuesday, May 19th, 10:30am.

READER'S GUIDE—*EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE*
ENG 278—THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT: FICTION AFTER 9/11

INTRODUCTION:

As I explained on the syllabus for this course, prior to reading any of the texts you'll be assigned to read this semester, I will provide you with reading questions to help guide you as a reader and as a scholar. These questions are not only devised to help you to think critically about the texts we read as a class, but help you prepare for the quizzes, to help you prepare for class discussions, to help focus your attention on significant ideas so that you're prepared to write the final paper. I encourage you to mark up your texts: highlight passages that help you answer the questions I provide before you embark upon reading a text or even highlight passages that strike you as important, fresh, interesting, beautiful, or profound. Dovetail pages and use flags or post-it notes to mark important moments in the text. Take notes. At the very least, read through the questions below before turning to the first page of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Think about these questions as you read and think about how you'd respond. Rest assured that, if you read each novel *actively*, you'll find yourself feeling more prepared for class discussions and more prepared when it's time to sit down and take the midterm or write an essay.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* was published in 2005; many reviewers thought of it as the first major 9/11 novel. What does it mean for a book to be a "9/11 novel"?
2. Did reading the book bring back memories of 9/11 for you? Do you remember how you felt in the days and weeks that followed that event? Do you remember what scared you? What you were grateful for?
3. *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* could also be called a New York novel. In what ways is the book's sense of place integral to the story being told? In what ways is the setting universal?
4. Nine-year-old Oskar Schell is the central figure of the book. Did you find him believable? Compelling? Did you empathize with him? Do you find him sympathetic or annoying? Or both?
5. When the book opens, Oskar is describing some of his "inventions." What do Oskar's inventions have in common? Which of his inventions resonated the most with you?
6. Oskar writes letters to famous people—Stephen Hawking, Ringo Starr. Why does he write these letters? Oskar's letters to celebrities are only a few of the letters in the book. Who else writes letters? Do you consider this an epistolary novel [a novel made up of letters]? Why or why not?
7. On p. 99, we see an image of one of Oskar's "business cards," on which he defines himself with over a dozen titles. On pp. 157–158, we are introduced to his neighbor's card catalog, by which Mr. Black describes everyone he's ever met using one word.

Which method of defining a person is more accurate? Which is more revealing? How does Oskar change how he defines himself over the course of the book? What about the other characters' self-definitions?

8. What is the relationship in the book between writing and memory? How do characters use writing to remember things? How does writing obscure or impair or alter (perceived?) memory? How is writing manipulated—or manipulating? (Think about the Grandmother writing her life story, and the Grandfather reading it.) What is the relationship between writing and reality?
9. The two central traumas in the book occur in the lives of Oskar Schell and his grandfather, Thomas Schell. Does Foer encourage a kind of historical or moral equivalence between the two precipitating events—the attacks on 9/11 and the American bombing of Dresden? What is the author saying about the individual's role in history?
10. The book is full of typographical oddities, some playful, some sad. Some of the many photographs in the book are part of Oskar's compilation of "Stuff that Happened to Me"—yet most of the images he collects there (like images of a shark attack) didn't happen to him. What is Oskar's relationship to this material? How did it make you feel, as the reader, to encounter these images while you read the book?
11. Characters throughout the book conflate the physical and the emotional; many of the characters make material totems of their emotional states—from the ball of his grandmother's yarn that Oskar tugs to indicate that he is okay, to the bracelet that Oskar's grandmother's grandmother said she would measure her wrist twice for, to make sure she could wear this symbol of her love. Why do you feel the characters use physical embodiments of their feelings in this way? In Oskar's imagining of the last moments at the World Trade Center, he says, "I read that it was the paper that kept the towers burning. All of those notepads, and Xeroxes, and printed e-mails, and photographs of kids, and books, and dollar bills in wallets, and documents in files... all of them were fuel" (p.325). What is the author saying about the ways we express ourselves?
12. The book is filled with liminal areas, borders between opposites. Many of the characters of the book seem to struggle with uniting these opposites (between Yes and No, between Something and Nothing, between Manhattan and the Sixth Borough). What is Foer saying about these efforts to unite opposites? Is it a longing to connect, to make something divided whole? Or is he advocating a rejection of the idea of opposites? Jonathan Safran Foer has said that he writes about characters and their miscommunications: some characters think they're saying a lot but say nothing; others say nothing but end up saying a lot. Which characters fall into which category in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*? What might Foer be saying about our ability to communicate deep-seated emotions?
13. Oskar's narrative is structured by his quest to find the lock that his key will open. What other purpose does the quest provide? What is the result of the quest?

14. What is the importance of last words? Do they mean more than other words? Think about the last words you've said to someone, or they've said to you. Do they feel more meaningful than other conversations?
15. What did you make of the novel's closing sequence, with the flip-book images? Did you find them moving? Trivializing? Helpful? Hopeful?

David Lehman
From Poetry After 9/11

THE WORLD TRADE CENTER

I never liked the World Trade Center.
When it went up I talked it down
As did many other New Yorkers.
The twin towers were ugly monoliths
That lacked the details the ornament the character
Of the Empire State Building and especially
The Chrysler Building, everyone's favorite,
With its scalloped top, so noble.
The World Trade Center was an example of what was wrong
With American architecture,
And it stayed that way for twenty-five years
Until that Friday afternoon in February
When the bomb went off and the buildings became
A great symbol of America, like the Statue
Of Liberty at the end of Hitchcock's *Saboteur*.
My whole attitude toward the World Trade Center
Changed overnight. I began to like the way
It comes into view as you reach Sixth Avenue
From any side street, the way the tops
Of the towers dissolve into the white skies
In the east when you cross the Hudson
Into the city across the George Washington Bridge.

David Lehman, from *Valentine Place*, 1996

Ross Martin

THIS MESSAGE WILL SELF-DESTRUCT IN
SIXTY SECONDS

If I've done this right
you're leaning up against
a granite wall at the abandoned
warehouse wherethefuckknowswhere
wearing inappropriate shoes and a sweat-
soaked wife-beater your hair
looks fine stop worrying the bullet
hole in your shoulder is just cosmetic
you've caught your breath by now
haven't you forgotten about being
so hungry (sorry to remind you) now
that you're hungry again chew
the Bubblicious we stuck in
your pocket (but quietly!) and listen
carefully to what I'm about to say:

There's a microchip in you somewhere
but we don't know where it is
there's something evil in you but
we don't know where there's something
benignly homosexual in you but we don't
know where and hopefully we will come
to find there's something more than vaguely
heroic in you but we don't know when
what we're saying is there's a whole new
you in you so hurry up before it's too late
man listen to me I'm telling it to you
like it is it's your only chance they are

Ross Martin
From Poetry After 9/11

coming man they're right behind you
they are right on your freakin' tail.
Go.

Bill Kushner

IN THE HAIRY ARMS OF WHITMAN

I am walking reading Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass & I
stop in traffic look around
I am Whitman dying thinking of a good last poem
I am Whitman on death's bed sobbing for Lincoln for
Kennedy for King I am
Whitman scattering lilacs sobbing I am at once myself & Whitman
we 2 ghosts
I am my mother Fannie my father Max as we ghosts step
immigrants on America's shores
I am Whitman sobbing for us the tired the poor the wretched refuse
I am
Whitman sobbing for all victims of discrimination regardless of race
sex age color creed
I am Whitman sobbing for Matthew Shephard for Mahatma Gandhi for
Joan of Arc
O so many martyrs
September 11th
I am walking beside you Whitman we stop for a moment
On the corner of 14th where we wait for a light light to hit us & change
& stroking your white beard as you look at me & I stroking too
this is for forever
Where & when forever ends I slurp a good hot soup with Whitman
In a good hot soup kitchen a bunch of us hairy bums we are
But a bunch of us slurping hairy bums & Whitman & I
Whitman walking with a hardon in the heart of gay Chelsea I am
Whitman digging at the site of the World Trade Center
O as all the buildings do explode around about us

Bill Kushner
From Poetry After 9/11

I am angry poet Whitman flying at the fragments flying
papers ash flesh
Whitman screaming into air for only Whitman he shall
put us together
Whitman screaming freedom Whitman long-haired hippie
crying Love
Love love I say to you I am all in a moment
I am gorgeous Whitman in drag I am Whitman the solemn President
In the White House calling all the armies Come back
Come back! calling all the hatemongers Stand back Stand back
O hear me! hear me! we are all leaves of grass
I am end of the day I am all that remains of you O Walt Whitman at
The end of the day & I naked & Whitman naked & I in
Whitman's hairy arms
& all we yes in his dreamy hairy arms O the dreamy hairy arms
of Whitman
O see Whitman as he dreams he is restless stirring O as he Whitman
dreams

Stephen Dunn
From Poetry After 9/11

Stephen Dunn

GRUDGES

Easy for almost anything to occur.
Even if we've scraped the sky, we can be rubble.
For years those men felt one way, acted another.

Ground zero, is it possible to get lower?
Now we had a new definition of the personal,
knew almost anything could occur.

It just takes a little training, to blur
a motive, lie low while planning the terrible,
get good at acting one way, feeling another.

Yet who among us doesn't harbor
a grudge or secret? So much isn't erasable;
it follows that almost anything can occur,

like men ascending into the democracy of air
without intending to land, the useful veil
of having said one thing, meaning another.

Before you know it something's over.
Suddenly someone's missing at the table.
It's easy (I know it) for anything to occur
when men feel one way, act another.

Geoffrey O'Brien
From Poetry After 9/11

Geoffrey O'Brien

TECHNIQUES OF MASS PERSUASION

Freedom is the ability to admit you were wrong.
Sorry, kids, I sold the farm so we can move to a suburb
of Antioch. I'm so glad I didn't. There are second acts
in American lives, and third and fourth ones.
After his release from prison he became a food taster
for a large department store. He had already written
the book on which his own letters home were based.
Freedom is the capacity to remember that it's a movie
even when the mansion starts burning in the last reel.
To unsettle without disturbing, to shift the candle
in the window to produce a will-o'-the-wisp effect
even from a great distance, these are techniques
calculated to persuade no one of anything.
As they leave the theater they savor their freedom.

Miranda Beeson
From Poetry After 9/11

Miranda Beeson

FLIGHT

An iridescent exhausted finch
found its way to your home
in the aftermath.

Trapped between screen and pane
you palmed him, brought him in,
built him a cage that was not a cage.
A hidden perch for the nights.
An aviary filled with light and seed
for the days.

Where had he come from?

A pet store in the shadow of the towers?

A tiny door unlatched by the blasts?

We pondered dark scenarios.

The survival of this slight speck
of feathered perfection seemed

more important than anything else
we could think of those first few weeks:

more important than the planes,
the slow motion tumble,

the man in his business suit

who fell through the air without
the benefit of wings.

Douglas Goetsch
From Poetry After 9/11

Douglas Goetsch

WHAT KEEPS ANIMALS SANE?

Curled here, my cat is riding this couch
the way the men and women of Star Trek
rode the Enterprise, watching galaxies approach.
If I were my cat I think I'd kill myself —
waking and dozing all day like a drunk
without even a thought for where his mother is.
The most frequently reported hallucination
under *Delirium Tremens*: spiders crawling all over.
That's beer, not heroin. We forget
household vices can be that worldly serious,
just as we forget how foreign America really is,
so strange and national. We drive by
the Seven-Eleven and think of nothing.
I don't know where my mother is.
Probably in a foreign land called Virginia.
I assume they're treating her poorly
or indifferently. A woman
overweight, wearing sweatpants.
In the last years I knew her she drove
a stick shift. She wasn't good at it,
but it was what she liked now.
My cat meows more since the death
of the other cat, who he hated,
just as we in New York City
sometimes get attached to droning alarms,
which we hate, then miss.

Nancy Mercado
From Poetry After 9/11

Nancy Mercado

GOING TO WORK

On their daily trips
Commuters shed tears now
Use American flags
Like veiled women
To hide their sorrows
Rush to buy throwaway cameras
To capture your twin ghosts

Frantically I too
Purchase your memory
On post cards & coffee mugs
In New York City souvenir shops
Afraid I'll forget your façade
Forget my hallowed Sunday
Morning Path Train rides
My subway travels through
The center of your belly
Day after day

Afraid I'll forget your powers
To transform helicopters
Into ladybugs gliding in the air
To turn New York City
Into a breathing map
To display the curvature
Of our world

Eileen Myles
From Poetry After 9/11

Eileen Myles

FLOWERS

Flowers
are out
all over
New York.
Every deli
tonight is
lit with
mad daffodils
jonquils
baby's
breath
eucalyptus
pussy willow
blasts of
cox comb
roses,
irises. It's
Spring. I pick
pink gerber
daisies. I pick
two then begin
veering off
into hotter
pink-orange
flowers
then white,
no red.

The mix is
a mess. I
throw back
the difference
& slip in another
daisy — fully
pink then
another one. A big
pink group —
surefire same-
ness is good.
It's strong.
In the car
they look yellow
you said.
No pink.
Really? I'm
freaking out.
We turn on
the light.
You won.
They're pretty.
Later we're
parked at
another
brightly-lit store.
Same spring.
Hundreds

of flowers
outside as
the world
continues
its impossible
turning. We
miss you.

Harvey Shapiro
From Poetry After 9/11

Harvey Shapiro

BAD DAYS

If you can't say what you mean
then you might as well jump ship.
Like yesterday, even after
I had climbed the mountain,
I could not put Vermont together.
Spiritual heights are a downer
these days when what I need
is a jolt of real blue, and what I get
are piles of brown leaves
sliding by at a walker's pace.
Incremental evidence that something
is changing or is spooked and fleeing.

Nikki Moustaki
From Poetry After 9/11

Nikki Moustaki

HOW TO WRITE A POEM AFTER
SEPTEMBER 11TH

First: Don't use the word *souls*. Don't use the word *fire*.
You can use the word *tragic* if you end it with a k.
The rules have changed. The word *building* may precede
The word *fall*, but only in the context of the buildings falling
Before the fall, the season we didn't have in Manhattan
Because the weather refused, the air refused. . . .
Don't say the air smelled like smoldering desks and drywall,
Ground gypsum, and something terribly organic,
Don't make a metaphor about the smell, because it wasn't
A smell at all, but the air washed with working souls,
Piling bricks, one by one, spreading mortar.
Don't compare the planes to birds. Please.
Don't call the windows eyes. We know they saw it coming.
We know they didn't blink. Don't say they were sentinels.
Say: we hated them then we loved them then they were gone.
Say: we miss them. Say: there's a gape. Then, say something
About love. It's always good in a poem to mention love.
Say: If a man walks down stairs, somewhere
Another man is walking up. Say: He sits at his desk
And the other stands. He answers the phone and the other
Ends a call with a kiss. So, on a rainy dusk in some other
City of Commerce and Art, a mayor cuts a ribbon
With giant silver scissors. Are you writing this down?
Make the executives parade through the concourse,
Up the elevators, to the top, where the restaurant,
Open now for the first time, sets out a dinner buffet.
Press hard. Remember, you're writing with ashes.

Say: the phone didn't work. Say: the bakery was out of cake,
The dogs in the pound howled. Say: the world hadn't
Asked your permission to change. But you were asleep.
If you had only written more poems. If only you had written
More poems about love, about peace, about how abstractions
Become important outside the poem, outside. Then, then,
You could have squinted into the sky on September 11th
And said: thank you, thank you, nothing was broken today.