

Everything Is Illuminated: A Novel Study Guide

Everything Is Illuminated: A Novel by Jonathan Safran Foer

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Plot Summary

Everything is Illuminated is a novel by Jonathan Safran Foer. The novel tells how Jonathan traveled to the Ukraine in order to find the woman whose family helped save his grandfather during the war. Jonathan does not find this woman, but he learns more about his own history and a war that up to this point was nothing more than an abstract notion. Jonathan also meets Alex, who learns more about his own family history than he ever expected to. Everything is Illuminated is a novel of self discovery that will both entertain and illuminate, as Alex might say, readers of all ages.

Alex is a typical young man, interested in girls, cars, and America. Alex lives in the Ukraine. Alex's father is a travel agent who has a client coming from America who needs a translator and a driver. Since Alex did well in his English class at University, his father hires him to be the translator for the American while he hires his own father to drive even though Alex's grandfather has claimed to be blind since the death of his wife. Alex and his father pick up Jonathan, the American, at the train station and drive him to Lutsk, where they take a hotel room for the night before beginning their search the next day for Trachimbrod. Trachimbrod is where Jonathan's grandfather grew up.

Jonathan's great-great-great-great-grandmother was found one day after a wagon crashes into the Brod River. The Rabbi of the shtetl where this accident took place decides to give the child to a local man to raise. The man tells the girl, Brod, stories about her birth, making up a mother who died in childbirth. The woman comes to believe these stories so much that she grieves for the loss of a woman she never knew. Brod is never told the truth about her birth until the day she comes home to find her father dead. Brod is so heartbroken by this news that she asks a young man she has just met to end the life of the man who told her the truth.

Alex, Jonathan, and Grandfather begin their search for Trachimbrod at a local gas station. No one seems to have ever heard of Trachimbrod. They drive into the country, stopping every time they see a person in order to ask for directions. No one seems to know of Trachimbrod. Finally, Alex comes across an old woman sitting alone in front of a small house. Alex shows this woman a picture of the family who rescued Jonathan's grandfather. The woman recognizes Jonathan's grandfather and tells Alex that she is all that is left of Trachimbrod.

Brod marries the boy she met the night her father died. They have three years of marital bliss. However, this comes to an end when Brod's husband, The Kolker, is injured in an accident at the flour mill. The Kolker survives, but his personality is altered. The Kolker becomes violent, often beating Brod. Brod remains by his side, however, giving birth to three sons, the last of whom is the great-great-grandfather of Safran, Jonathan's grandfather. Safran also grew up in Trachimbrod, living a life not unlike Brod's. Safran has many lovers in his short life, eventually marrying a young woman he did not meet until six months before the wedding. On the day the Nazis come, Safran's wife is due to give birth to their first child.



Lista, the woman Alex found, takes Alex, Jonathan, and Grandfather to the place where Trachimbrod once stood. Lista tells them how the Nazis bombed the shtetl and then came to kill the survivors. Lista describes how the men were forced to spit on the Torah or watch their families die. Lista describes the shooting of her sister and how her sister returned to collect the remains of the people of Trachimbrod, to keep it until someone comes to ask for it. Lista gives Jonathan a box that is labeled "In Case." That night, together in the hotel bar, Alex, Jonathan, and Grandfather look through the box. Inside, Grandfather pulls out a picture of himself, his wife, and his best friend, Hershel. This picture prompts Grandfather to tell Jonathan and Alex about his life in the village Kolki and how his actions led to the death of his best friend.

Alex and Jonathan have been corresponding regarding their joint attempts to write about their search for the woman who saved Safran. Alex becomes frustrated with Jonathan's use of poetic license, angry that Jonathan chooses not to tell the truth or to change the truth into something happier, less tragic than reality. In the end, Alex stops corresponding with Jonathan. Jonathan later learns that Alex threw his abusive father out of the house, only to discover later the same night that his grandfather has committed suicide to protect him from the past.



An Overture to the Commencement of a Very Rigid Journey; The Beginning of the World Often Comes; The Lottery, 1791; Letter Dated 20 July 1997; An Overture to Encountering the Hero, and Then Encountering the Hero

An Overture to the Commencement of a Very Rigid Journey; The Beginning of the World Often Comes; The Lottery, 1791; Letter Dated 20 July 1997; An Overture to Encountering the Hero, and Then Encountering the Hero Summary

Alexander Perchov is a young man who is interested in music, girls, and America. Alex lives in the Ukraine, but has learned to speak English in school because of his interest in America. Jonathan Safran Foer is a young man who lives in America and has recently learned that his grandfather was saved from the Nazis during the war by a family whose young daughter Jonathan believes was called Augustine. Jonathan is interested in finding Augustine.

In "An Overture to the Commencement of a Very Rigid Journey," Alex is introduced. Alex likes to think of himself as a lady's man who is well loved by all the girls he has ever met. Alex likes to go out to the local nightclubs to pick up girls and likes to discuss his prowess with these girls, especially with his father. Alex loves everything that has to do with America and hopes to one day move there. Alex took English courses at University and did well. Alex's father works for a travel agency and is in need of someone to work as a translator for a client from America. Alex agrees to do this. Alex's father also needs a driver for his American client, so he hires his own father even though the old man claims to be blind ever since the death of his wife. As a result, Grandfather insists on taking his seeing-eye dog, Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior, with them.

In "The Beginning of the World Often Comes," on March 18, 1791, a wagon crashes into the Brod River outside a nameless shtetl. The twin daughters of the local Rabbi see the crash but claim to not know how it happened or if anyone is in the wagon. A lot of debris floats to the surface of the river in the aftermath of the crash, attracting the attention of several of the shtetl's citizens. A discussion begins, theorizing who might have been driving the wagon. Soon a whole story is created. A man named Trachim was driving the wagon, rushing his wife to get help with the delivery of their child. This wife is Trachim's



second wife, the first having died in childbirth. It is said that the wife died and Trachim drove into the river intentionally in order to die with his love. Someone attempts to find a body, but they cannot find anything among all the debris. Suddenly someone spots a perfectly healthy baby girl floating among the debris. Over the next few days people attempt to remove the debris from the river and to find a body. No body is ever found. However, the search became a game that would soon turn into a festival that would be celebrated for one hundred and fifty years.

In "The Lottery, 1791," the Rabbi takes the baby to the synagogue and trying to decide what to do with her. There is a lot of discussion about what should be done between the various divisions of the shtetl. No woman was consulted, however, because women were not allowed in the synagogue at the time nor were they consulted on matters of importance. Finally the Rabbi decides to write down the names of suitable male guardians and place them on small pieces of paper in the baby's crib. Eventually the baby chose a piece of paper.

In a "Letter dated July 20, 1997," Alex writes to Jonathan to apologize for his poor command of the English language and to thank Jonathan for his suggestions on the first installment of Alex's narration for the book they are writing together about Jonathan's visit to the Ukraine. Alex also mentions that his Grandfather has been depressed since their search, continuing to claim he is blind even though everyone can see that his vision is fine. Alex has also heard his grandfather crying but pretends that he does not notice.

In "An Overture to Encountering the Hero," and "Then Encountering the Hero," Alex and his grandfather begin the trip that will take them to Lvov where they will meet Jonathan's train. When they arrive, they have to wait more than five hours for the delayed train. Jonathan and Alex meet for the first time in the crowded train station. Jonathan finds Alex's misuse of many words confusing and is not impressed with Grandfather, who is asleep when they return to the car. Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior is a surprise to Jonathan, who has a fear of dogs. Jonathan asks that the dog be removed so that he does not have to sit near her, but Grandfather is in a dark mood and refuses to move the dog.

An Overture to the Commencement of a Very Rigid Journey; The Beginning of the World Often Comes; The Lottery, 1791; Letter Dated 20 July 1997; An Overture to Encountering the Hero, and Then Encountering the Hero Analysis

Alex is introduced in a short narrative that is written to set up the story of Jonathan Safran Foer's search for the woman who saved his grandfather from the Nazis. Alex describes himself as a typical young man who likes to date, dance, and anything that has to do with America. Alex also describes himself as a fluent speaker of English, but



later apologizes to Jonathan for his lack of proficiency with English. Alex is a generous young man who is flawed only by his youth, which causes him to attempt to inflate his experiences and his prowess with women. At the same time, Alex's grandfather is introduced. Alex's grandfather is also called Alex, but throughout the narration is simply called Grandfather. Grandfather recently lost his wife of more than fifty years and misses her profoundly. Grandfather's grief is evidenced by his insistence that he is blind. Despite this claim, Grandfather agrees to drive an American client of his son's travel agency around Lutsik. Grandfather is a complicated character, both eager to take on this job driving for the American, but then brisk toward the young man when he arrives. Jonathan is a quiet man who seems a little wimpy. Jonathan does not like dogs and begs to have the dog moved, but in his brisk behavior, Grandfather refuses, setting the tone for their relationship.

In 1791, a wagon crashes into the Brod River near a small, unnamed shtetl. While the citizens of the shtetl discuss the cause of the crash and whether or not anyone died as a result, a baby floats to the surface of the river along with debris from the wagon. The baby is rescued, but no one knows what to do with her from that point. Eventually the Rabbi decides to give the baby the decision of which man with whom she should go to live. The Rabbi places many pieces of paper in the baby's crib with names of men within the shtetl. Eventually, the baby chooses one. This choice is made by the baby, giving the Rabbi an out in case the choice proves to be an unhappy one. The Rabbi's actions seem to define the actions of everyone in shtetl. Everyone seems lukewarm about life, unable to become enthused about anything, including the death of a man. However, they are not afraid of celebrating death. The shtetl creates a game searching for a body at the crash site and then turns this into an annual celebration that is held every year for one hundred and fifty years.



The Book of Recurrent Dreams, 1791; Falling in Love, 1791-1796; Another Lottery, 1791; Letter Dated 23 September 1997; Going Forth to Lutsk

The Book of Recurrent Dreams, 1791; Falling in Love, 1791-1796; Another Lottery, 1791; Letter Dated 23 September 1997; Going Forth to Lutsk Summary

In "The Book of Recurrent Dreams, 1791," the news comes to Yankel D that he has been chosen to raise the baby found in the Brod. Yankel is among a group of congregants who have just completed a service in which they were offering dreams to be written in the Book of Recurrent Dreams. These dreams range between dreams of sex to dreams of becoming one's father. Yankel is grateful for being chosen. In "Falling in Love, 1791-1796," Yankel becomes acquainted with his new child. Yankel, who was once a well-loved accountant but was disgraced for unclear reasons, is a single man whose wife left him for the man who defended Yankel during the scandal that ruined his good name. Yankel, who was known as Safran then, came home to find a note waiting for him on the front steps. The note said: "I had to do it for myself" (pg. 45). Yankel left town for a while but finally came home and made a life for himself even with his shame. Now Yankel has a second chance with this child he has named Brod for the river where she was found. Yankel makes up a past for the child, telling her about a wonderful mother who never really existed. Yankel comes to believe his own stories, grieving for a woman who never existed. In "Another Lottery, 1791," the Rabbi is informed that the shtetl should pick a name for itself to be used on maps and census records. The shtetl cannot pick a name; therefore, the officials assign it the name of Sofiowka. The people of the shtetl do not like this name, so they have a lottery to pick another. The name chosen is Trachimbrod.

In a "Letter dated September 23, 1997," Alex talks about his brother's birthday. Little Igor broke his arm the day before from an accident. Alex claims Little Igor is very accident prone. Their father gave Little Igor a bicycle in an attempt to make him happy on his special day. Alex says he made changes to the previous narratives he sent Jonathan for their jointly-written book but has refused to remove Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior from the narration just because Jonathan does not like him. Finally, Alex praises Jonathan on the narrative Jonathan wrote.

In "Going Forth to Lutsk," Jonathan reluctantly gets into the car with Sammy Davis Junior, Junior, who proceeds to attempt to make love to Jonathan because the dog likes the cologne Jonathan is wearing. The drive to Lutsk is long and complicated because Grandfather becomes lost. Jonathan and Alex talk on the drive, and Jonathan tells Alex



why he has come to the Ukraine. Jonathan's grandmother recently gave his mother a picture of his grandfather taken during World War II. Jonathan's grandmother claims that this photo is of the people who saved her husband's life during the war. On the back is written the name Augustine, whom Jonathan believes is the young woman in the photo. Jonathan wants to go to the village where his grandfather lived and attempt to find Augustine. Alex looks at the photo and shows it to his grandfather. They are both enthusiastic about Jonathan's story and promise to help him find Augustine. When they arrive at the hotel where they will stay for the night, Alex attempts to make Jonathan stay in the car to protect him from the additional charge some unscrupulous hotel clerks attempt to charge foreigners. Jonathan refuses to take Alex's advice, however, and is forced to pay extra. Later, the group goes to a nearby restaurant for dinner. Jonathan announces that he is a vegetarian and does not eat meat. Alex and his grandfather are shocked. Jonathan is unable to order a meal at the restaurant that does not include meat. Over dinner, Jonathan and Alex discuss America, writing, and women. Afterward, they return to the hotel where Alex leaves Jonathan at his room. Sammy Davis Junior, Junior refuses to leave Jonathan's room, so Alex and Grandfather leave the dog outside Jonathan's door. When Alex goes to check on Jonathan later, he accidentally allows the dog into the room.

The Book of Recurrent Dreams, 1791; Falling in Love, 1791-1796; Another Lottery, 1791; Letter Dated 23 September 1997; Going Forth to Lutsk Analysis

Yankel is introduced in these sections. Yankel was once a well respected member of the shtetl but has suffered a fall from grace. Not only did Yankel lose his good name, but he also lost his wife. However, it seems life has come full circle now because he was chosen to raise the baby found in the river the day Trachim's wagon crashed into the water. Yankel devotes himself to the child, proving himself to be a loving father, inventing a wife who never existed in order to protect the child from learning the truth about her birth. The lie seems harmless at the time, but could prove to be dangerous when the girl, Brod, grows up.

Alex writes to Jonathan and talks a little about his home life. Alex talks about his brother with a lot of affection, clearly describing a relationship that is close. Alex also talks about his father with some respect, but the enthusiasm is different when he mentions his father, suggesting some discord in this relationship. When Alex mentions that his brother is clumsy, the reader might just overlook this as a character flaw in the young man. However, when added to Alex's guarded discussion of his father, the astute reader might notice something is not quite right in this relationship.

Jonathan tells Alex the purpose of his trip, explaining how his grandfather survived World War II with the help of a young woman and her family. Alex and Grandfather become excited at the sight of this young woman in a picture Jonathan shows them, promising to help him find the woman. Despite this enthusiasm, however, Grandfather appears to be angry around Jonathan, unwilling to accommodate him in anyway. The

reader is given the impression that Grandfather's reaction is based on the fact that Jonathan is Jewish because he only addresses him as the Jew. The reader is anxious to see if this animosity continues and what it will mean for the remainder of the trip.



Falling in Love, 1791-1803; Recurrent Secrets, 1791-1943; A Parade, A Death, A Proposition, 1804-1969; Letter Dated 28 October 1997; A Very Rigid Search

Falling in Love, 1791-1803; Recurrent Secrets, 1791-1943; A Parade, A Death, A Proposition, 1804-1969; Letter Dated 28 October 1997; A Very Rigid Search Summary

In "Falling in Love, 1791-1803," Brod grows up among a group of people who do not like her because of the strange circumstances of her birth. The women feel Brod is dangerous and warn their children not to spend time with her. The men, although forced to stay away because of their wives, find Brod fascinating. Most of the men are attracted to her. Brod is a very beautiful young woman, but there is only one man she loves, her father. Every year during the Trachimday parade, Brod is the Float Queen because of her appearance in the river that day, but Brod does not know this. Brod still believes Yankel is her father who does nothing to dissuade her from this belief. Brod is very aware of her emotions and has conceived of 613 sadnesses. Yankel does all he can to make her happy and attempts to hide from her the fact that he is so much older than she. Yankel worries about dying before Brod is old enough to care for herself, so he does all he can to keep himself young, including writing his life history on the ceiling of his bedroom so he will not forget who he is. In "Recurrent Secrets, 1791-1943," Yankel worries about the passage of time while Brod keeps him from knowing how lonely she is. Brod imagines she look into the future and see a young man reading to a young woman from the Book of Antecedents, though she is unaware that this is the book they are reading.

In "A Parade, A Death, A Proposition, 1804-1969," Brod is twelve and has gotten a marriage proposal from nearly every man in the shtetl. Brod only has eyes for Yankel. On Trachimday that year, Brod rides on the blue float in a new mermaid costume she made. It is Brod's job to throw the sacks into the river that the men will dive in after, the winner being the one who brings to the surface the bag with gold pieces in it. This year The Kolker wins. Brod walks home as many of her neighbors take advantage of the celebration to enjoy some intimate moments with the ones they love. When Brod enters the house, she cannot find Yankel. Brod calls out to him, finally finding him dead on the study floor. As Brod looks down on the body of her father, she is being watched through the window by The Kolker. Brod tells him to go away, but when he will not, she asks him to do her a favor. More than a hundred years later, Brod's descendant, Jonathan's



mother, will watch the moon landing and hear an astronaut talk about a light he sees from the area of Trachimbrod.

In a "Letter dated October 28, 1997," Alex thanks Jonathan for sending his grandfather a copy of the picture of Augustine. Alex also mentions that his father attempted to pay Grandfather for driving Jonathan around Lutsk, but Grandfather refused payment. Grandfather has acted strangely ever since their return from Lutsk, appearing to obsess over Augustine. Alex also thanks Jonathan for paying him for the narratives he has written so far, expressing a desire to use the money to move himself and Little Igor to America. Alex mentions changes he has made to the last narrative at Jonathan's request and praises Jonathan's narratives, describing how he is concerned about Brod's lack of happiness in her life. Alex also mentions that Jonathan has not told his grandmother about the trip he made to the Ukraine and suggests that he might want to tell her someday to share with her what they learned about Jonathan's grandfather.

In "A Very Rigid Search," Alex and Grandfather begin the day very early, sneaking off to have breakfast without Jonathan because they do not want to eat with a vegetarian. Afterward, Alex goes to wake Jonathan only to find him already awake and annoyed at Sammy Davis Junior, Junior for eating his documents. They begin their day at a gas station where they ask directions to Trachimbrod, but no one seems to know where the village is. They drive in the general direction of the other villages they know surround the shtetl. Every time they pass a group of people, they stop to ask for Trachimbrod, but no one seems to know where it is. Alex becomes frustrated because he is uncomfortable talking to people in the country who might not like his speech, which is a combination of Russian and Ukrainian. As the day wears on, Jonathan falls asleep in the back seat. Grandfather stops the car when they see an old woman sitting on the porch of a very small, run down house. Alex notices lots of clothes lying in the yard, clothes for men, women, and children, and this makes him think the woman must have a large family even though there is no evidence of other people around. Alex asks the woman about Trachimbrod, using both names it might be known by, but she does not know. Before Alex leaves, he remembers the photo. Alex shows the photo to the woman, and she denies knowing anyone in it, but Alex sees something in her reaction that makes him push her. Finally the woman admits she knows someone in the photo and that she is the only thing left of Trachimbrod.

Falling in Love, 1791-1803; Recurrent Secrets, 1791-1943; A Parade, A Death, A Proposition, 1804-1969; Letter Dated 28 October 1997; A Very Rigid Search Analysis

As Brod grows, the people of Trachimbrod treat her with caution because they are unsure what to think about her sudden appearance in the Brod River that strange morning. The men, however, find Brod attractive and many of them propose to her before she is twelve. Despite this affection from the men around her, Brod feels lonely and sad. Yankel is old and will most likely die before Brod is old enough to care for



herself, something that concerns them both. However, it appears that the lie that lays between them is the largest cause of Brod's overwhelming sadness and sense of loneliness. Yankel sees no reason to tell Brod about the nature of her birth, but it seems that this is the only thing that might help Brod feel more secure in herself. The day Yankel dies, Brod meets a young man referred to as The Kolker, a man who will most likely play an important part in her future. Of importance in these sections is Brod's belief that she can see into the future. Brod sees a young man reading to a girl from a book that the reader might recognize as *The Book of Antecedents*. This foray into the future is a theme that will return later in Brod's story, and its mention here opens a line of thought that will prepare the reader for this later suggestion.

In Alex's letter, he talks about his Grandfather and his behavior since the trip to search for Augustine. It seems Grandfather is bothered by something associated with the trip and has become obsessed with Augustine. This behavior on Grandfather's part suggests that something dark happened on the search, but the reader still has no idea what this might be. In Alex's narrative, he describes the beginning of the search and how difficult it was to find someone who had ever heard of Trachimbrod, even as they drew closer to the area where the shtetl should have been located. The difficulty they experience suggests to the reader that Trachimbrod is no longer in existence, or is no longer called Trachimbrod. At the end of the narrative, Alex comes across a woman who recognizes something about the photograph of Augustine and admits to knowing Trachimbrod, but only after denying it. The reader is excited now, hoping that perhaps this woman might be Augustine.



The Dial, 1941-1804-1941; Letter Dated 17 November 1997; Falling in Love

The Dial, 1941-1804-1941; Letter Dated 17 November 1997; Falling in Love Summary

In "The Dial...", Safran is to be married, but first he meets with a young woman who is not his fiancée and she gives him her panties to be used as a hanky. Safran then goes to kneel before the dial before continuing on to the synagogue. More than a hundred years before this day, Brod begs her husband not to go to work at the flour mill. Every year a man dies at the flour mill, and Brod does not want The Kolker to be one of them. They have been married three years and Brod is pregnant with their child. They fell in love the night of Yankel's death when The Kolker refused to leave Brod's side. In fact, The Kolker helped Brod dispose of a man who attempted to tell Brod that same night that Yankel was not her father. Now Brod is blissfully happy in her marriage but afraid this happiness will end. The Kolker is injured at the flour mill but not killed as Brod feared. The Kolker is hit in the head with a saw blade that imbeds itself in his head perpendicular, almost like a sun dial. This blade remains in The Kolker's head until his death, causing a change in his personality. The Kolker becomes violent, often becoming verbally abusive and beating Brod. Brod claims to not love The Kolker but remains with him, even conceiving a third child with him during his confinement prior to his death. On the day he dies, Brod gives birth to a son whose descendants will include Jonathan's grandfather, Safran. Upon his death, The Kolker is bronzed and displayed as a statue in the heart of Trachimbrod. The Kolker becomes a symbol of luck and people come from all over to touch him. After time, the bronze wears off, causing The Kolker to have to be re-bronzed so many times that he stops looking like himself. Soon the statue is given the name the Dial.

In a "Letter dated November 17, 1997," Alex assures Jonathan that Jonathan's grandmother would be proud if Jonathan would tell her about their search for Augustine. Alex believes that Jonathan should tell her despite the risk of causing her to cry. Alex compares Jonathan's dilemma with his own dilemma in which he feels the need to lie to his father about his female conquests. In reality, Alex admits he has never been with a girl. Alex also admits to lying to Little Igor in order to make him believe his brother is a better person than he really is. Alex says that Grandfather asks about Jonathan all the time and that he continues to be sad most every night.

In "Falling in Love," Alex tells how the old woman invited the group into her house and made them a meal. The house is full of boxes, each marked with a strange title, such as Darkness. Grandfather seems to be fascinated by this woman, but the woman looks only at Alex. Alex asks her about the picture and Augustine, assuming that this woman is Augustine. However, the woman does not know anything about Augustine. The woman admits that she recognizes Jonathan's grandfather in the photograph, that he



was a young man with whom she grew up. In fact, the woman says Jonathan's grandfather gave her her first kiss. The woman begins showing Alex objects from one of her many boxes, describing the people in photographs and her relationships with them. When Jonathan pushes for the story about how his grandfather escaped the Germans, Grandfather becomes belligerent and accuses the old woman of being a liar. Finally the old woman asks Jonathan and Alex to leave her alone with Grandfather. Outside, Alex and Jonathan talk about Jonathan's grandmother, a woman who lived in the small village of Kolki and met her husband in a misplaced person's camp. Jonathan talks about how he used to hide under his grandmother's skirts.

The Dial, 1941-1804-1941; Letter Dated 17 November 1997; Falling in Love Analysis

Brod becomes married and has a good marriage until her husband is injured at the flour mill, a place where many people from Trachimbrod have died over the years as a sort of payment on a debt owed to God. Brod's husband does not die, but he becomes a cruel man who often injures her. Brod lives a difficult life, only to have her husband die on the day she gives birth to Jonathan's direct ancestor. Brod's husband becomes a statue that is known for the good luck it is thought to offer, making him just as big a part of the folklore of Trachimbrod as Brod is. Again this marks a connection between Brod and Safran that appears to be greater than blood.

In a letter, Alex continues to talk about his devotion to his little brother and to express concerns about him, leaving the reader wondering what is really going on in that house between the father and the rest of the family. The introduction of domestic abuse to the story makes the reader wonder if Little Igor's injuries have all been accidents. Alex continues to talk to Jonathan about the depression his grandfather has suffered ever since their search for Augustine. When the reader combines this concern with Grandfather's belligerence toward the old woman they find on the porch, it leaves the reader curious what it is about the war that has left Grandfather so angry and frightened. Perhaps Grandfather knows more about the atrocities perpetrated by the German Nazis than he wants to admit. At the same time, the reader learns about Jonathan's close relationship with his grandmother, suggesting a reason why Jonathan has refused to tell his grandmother about the trip to the Ukraine. Perhaps Jonathan simply does not want to remind her of the worst time of her life.



The Wedding Reception Was So Extraordinary or It All Goes Downhill After the Wedding, 1941; The Dupe of Chance, 1941-1924; The Thickness of Blood and Drama, 1934; Letter Dated 12 December 1997; What We Saw When We Saw Trachimbrod or Falling in Love

The Wedding Reception Was So Extraordinary or It All Goes Downhill After the Wedding, 1941; The Dupe of Chance, 1941-1924; The Thickness of Blood and Drama, 1934; Letter Dated 12 December 1997; What We Saw When We Saw Trachimbrod or Falling in Love Summary

In "The Wedding Reception Was So Extraordinary or It All Goes Downhill After the Wedding, 1941," the bride's parents have been planning the wedding since the day their daughter, Zosha, was born. They are wealthy people and have a large house that is complicated because of its design. They are having the reception at the house and everyone who matters is invited. When Safran arrives for the reception, he is met by Maya, Zosha's sister and the owner of the panties Safran wears in his pocket. In "The Dupe of Chance, 1941-1924," Safran makes love to Maya before joining the reception, thinking about the fact he was born with teeth. Being born with teeth caused his mother to stop breastfeeding early, which leaves Safran with the impression that this lack of nutrients caused his right arm to be useless. As a result of this useless limb, Safran becomes an object of fascination to many women who attempt to seduce him. It began at the young age of ten when a widow seduced him. Before his wedding, Safran would have one hundred-thirty-two sexual liaisons, half of whom were widows, but others were virgins. Some were both. In "The Thickness of Blood and Drama, 1934," Safran begins to work for the synagogue, visiting widows. Safran's parents are proud of him, unaware that he is having sexual relations with these women. This is not the only way he meets women, however. Safran meets one woman, Lista, at the theater when she is seated in his chair. Lista considers herself a widow even though her husband died on their wedding day before the ceremony took place. Lista is Safran's first virgin. Another first for Safran took place at the theater as well. Safran meets a Gypsy girl who he seduces, making love to her in a new and exciting position.



In a "Letter dated December 12, 1997," Alex is unhappy with Jonathan's latest collection of narratives because he does not understand why he has women falling in love with Safran's lifeless arm. Alex thinks that if they are going to play with the truth, they should allow Safran to have two arms. Alex also suggests that they might change the end of the story, having them find Augustine rather than admitting the truth that they never did find her.

In "What We Saw When We Saw Trachimbrod or Falling in Love," Grandfather and the old woman come out of the house and Grandfather announces that the old woman has agreed to take them to Trachimbrod. The old woman refuses to ride in the car and insists they follow her as she walks. It takes a long time to reach the spot, so when they arrive it is dark. Trachimbrod no longer exists. The place they have come to is nothing but empty fields. The old woman, at the encouragement of Grandfather, tells them how the Germans came and forced the men to spit on the Torah. If a man refuses, his family is killed. The old woman says her father refused, so the Germans killed her mother and little sister, before shooting her pregnant sister in the vagina. The sister crawled away and survived the shot, but lost her baby. Later the sister moved into a house close to Trachimbrod and began salvaging everything she could find that might remind future generations of the people of Trachimbrod. Before they leave, the old woman tells Alex her name is Lista. Lista gives Jonathan a box marked "In Case."

The Wedding Reception Was So Extraordinary or It All Goes Downhill After the Wedding, 1941; The Dupe of Chance, 1941-1924; The Thickness of Blood and Drama, 1934; Letter Dated 12 December 1997; What We Saw When We Saw Trachimbrod or Falling in Love Analysis

Safran makes love to his sister-in-law immediately after the wedding and before the reception. Safran's behavior paints him as an immoral young man, but the narrative goes on to suggest this is not really true. Safran has an arm that is useless, a result, he believes, from his mother's inability to breastfeed him because he was born with teeth. This dead arm attracts women, makes them feel sorry for him and desire to have sex with him. This is opposite to what happened to Brod, with the women of Trachimbrod making an outcast of her because of the strange circumstances of her birth. The women shun Brod, but love Safran even though both were born under strange circumstances or with a strange anomaly. Again the author has made a connection between these two people that suggests an even stronger connection yet to be revealed later in the novel. At any rate, Safran is apparently quite the lover, a man who has many lovers, but has not experienced love himself.

Alex talks about honesty in his latest letter to Jonathan, asking why Jonathan changes a few facts, or makes up facts he could not possibly know, but does not change reality. Alex implies that they never found Augustine and wonders if Jonathan has considered



changing their story to make it seem they have. Alex appears to be wrestling with the concept of honesty and wants Jonathan to either be completely honest about everything or to lie so completely that a sad story of war turns into a happy story that is almost a fairy tale. Instead, the reader finds that the story is far from a fairy tale. The old woman takes them to Trachimbrod, but it seems that the shtetl was wiped out so completely that it might never have existed. The old woman then tells them how the Nazis made the men spit on the Torah or watch their families be killed. The old woman says that her mother and sister were killed when her father refused and then her sister shot in such a way that she lost the baby she was carrying. The woman says the sister then came back to Trachimbrod and took a home nearby, collecting all the remnants of the people of Trachimbrod like a caretaker of the past. As the woman talks, the reader begins to wonder if this woman is not talking about herself, since it is apparent from the clothes in her yard and the boxes in her home that she is the caretaker, not her sister. When the woman mentions that Safran lost two children that night, even though Jonathan insists it is only one, the reader wonders if this old woman, who the reader discovers is Lista, was one of Safran's lovers, and if the child she carried and lost, was Safran's.



Falling in Love, 1934-1941; Letter Dated 24 December 1997; An Overture to Illumination; Falling in Love, 1934-1941; Letter Dated 26 January 1998

Falling in Love, 1934-1941; Letter Dated 24 December 1997; An Overture to Illumination; Falling in Love, 1934-1941; Letter Dated 26 January 1998 Summary

In "Falling in Love, 1934-1941," Safran grows up like any other boy with the exception of his large number of lovers. Like all the other children of Trachimbrod, Safran studies the Book of Antecedents, which contains all the events that have transpired in Trachimbrod for hundreds of years, including what some of the people had for breakfast. In a "Letter dated December 24, 1997," Alex tells Jonathan how he told his father he was going to a nightclub, but really went to the beach in order to save what little money he has for a move to America. While on the beach, Grandfather finds Alex and asks him for his money so that he might continue the search for Augustine. Grandfather cautions Alex not to answer right away, but Alex tells Jonathan he will most likely give the money to him, not to find Augustine, but to help his Grandfather find some peace. Alex understands that this means he will never move with Little Igor to America but admits he knows this has never really been a possibility.

In "An Overture to Illumination," Alex, Jonathan, and Grandfather return to the hotel where they go to the hotel restaurant. Over Vodka, they decide to see what is inside the box Lista gave them. Alex pulls out a map of the world from 1791. Jonathan encourages him to keep it for Little Igor. Jonathan pulls out a book called The Book of Past Occurrences that includes a passage from the Book of Antecedents. Grandfather removes a photograph that no one really looks at at first. Jonathan, however, takes a closer look and sees a man in the photograph who looks exactly like Alex. When they force Grandfather to look at the photograph, he admits it is a photo of himself, his wife, Alex's father as a baby, and Grandfather's best friend, Hershel. Grandfather says he murdered Hershel.

In "Falling in Love, 1934-1941," Safran is enjoying his final days with the woman he has secretly loved for seven years, the Gypsy girl. The Gypsy girl begs Safran to run away with her rather than marry Zosha, but Safran refuses. Safran must marry Zosha because that is what his parents expect him to do. Safran ends the relationship seven months before the wedding, but the Gypsy girl sneaks into his house to see how he arranges his books. When Safran discovers this, he goes to visit Lista at her mother's house. Safran seeks comfort from Lista, who offers it without expecting anything in return.



In a "Letter dated January 26, 1997," Alex is angry with Jonathan. Alex does not understand why Jonathan will not allow Safran to remain with the girl he loves. At the same time, Alex tells Jonathan that he has forced his father to move out of the house. Alex's father has become an alcoholic who often beats his wife and children, especially Little Igor. Alex has done this to protect Little Igor, but in the process he had to give his father all his money so he is not able to give money to his Grandfather. Grandfather assures Alex that it does not matter, that he is proud of him anyway. That same night, Grandfather killed himself. Alex was angry when he found the body, beating his grandfather in an attempt to wake him up.

Falling in Love, 1934-1941; Letter Dated 24 December 1997; An Overture to Illumination; Falling in Love, 1934-1941; Letter Dated 26 January 1998 Analysis

Safran grows up like any other boy of Trachimbrod, studying the shtetl's history and attempting to remember it so that he could live his life as is expected of a son of Trachimbrod. Safran's life is all about tradition and memory, a world that has set rules and expectations. Therefore, when Safran falls in love with a Gypsy girl and has the opportunity to escape Trachimbrod, he does not take it. At the same time, Alex, who has been struggling with the concept of honesty and happy endings, tells Jonathan how he is not a womanizer as he wants everyone to believe but spends his nights alone on the beach in order to save the money he will need to go to America with Little Igor. Alex's plans always revolve around Little Igor, so it is no surprise to the reader when Alex announces that he has kicked his father out of the house to protect his brother from his abusive father. Alex proves himself to be a strong, respectable man who loves his brother enough to stand up to his darkest fears and conquer them.

The reader also learns that when Jonathan, Alex, and Grandfather began searching through the box Lista gave them, they discover a photograph of a young man who looks just like Alex. Perhaps this explains why Lista addressed all her conversations to Alex. Perhaps Alex reminds her of someone she once knew. Grandfather eventually admits that this person is he. The photograph is a picture of Grandfather, his wife, Alex's father as an infant, and Grandfather's best friend, Hershel, a Jew. This is a surprise to the reader not only because Grandfather has given Alex the impression that he lived in Odessa all his life, but because Grandfather has been outright hostile toward Jonathan because of his Jewish heredity. When Grandfather confesses that he murdered Hershel, the reader imagines Grandfather as a Nazi soldier and everything begins to make sense. The truth, foreshadowed in this section, will be even more shocking as it is revealed in the next section.



Illumination; The Wedding Reception Was So Extraordinary! Or The End of the Moment That Never Ends, 1941; The First Blasts, and Then Love, 1941; The Persnickitiness of Memory, 1941; The Beginning of the World Often Comes, 1942-1791; Letter Dated 22 Januar

Illumination; The Wedding Reception Was So Extraordinary! Or The End of the Moment That Never Ends, 1941; The First Blasts, and Then Love, 1941; The Persnickitiness of Memory, 1941; The Beginning of the World Often Comes, 1942-1791; Letter Dated 22 January 1998 Summary

In *Illumination*, Grandfather tells the story of how he murdered his best friend. Grandfather lived in Kolki, a small village not far from Trachimbrod. Hershel was very close to Grandfather and Grandfather's wife, but he had no other friends. Grandfather is convinced that no one in the village even knew Hershel existed because he was so anti-social. On the night the Nazis came, Grandfather, Hershel, and all the other citizens of Kolki were forced out into the streets. The Nazi general forced each man to point out a Jew or be shot. When all the Jews were accounted for and inside the synagogue, except Hershel, the general continued to ask. When a man would say there were no more Jews, the General would kill him. Finally the General came to Grandfather. Grandfather had to choose between his own life and Hershel. Grandfather points to Hershel. Hershel begs Grandfather to take it back, to say it was a mistake, calling him Eli. Grandfather did not and was forced to watch as all the Jews were burned inside the synagogue.

In "The Wedding Reception Was So Extraordinary! Or The End of the Moment That Never Ends, 1941," Safran returns to the wedding reception. As the bride's father speaks of his overwhelming joy, the Gypsy girl, one of the servants at the wedding, attempts to give Safran a note, but it is lost. In "The First Blasts, and Then Love, 1941," Safran consummates his marriage and experiences his first orgasm, falling in love for the first time soon afterward at the same time the first bombs of the war can be heard. In The "Persnickitiness of Memory, 1941," the people of Trachimbrod have meetings to



try to decide what to do about the raging war. In the end, the urgency of the meetings is lost and life goes back to normal in Trachimbrod. At the same time, Safran visits the Dial to discuss his choices. Safran wants to run away, but has fallen in love with his unborn child. The Dial tells Safran that love is a strange thing, that Brod remained with the Dial in his room despite rumors that she refused to enter his room after his illness became unbearable even though she did not love him. The Dial says that people become accustomed to what is right there in front of them, even if that thing is not what they might have desired.

In "The Beginning of the World Often Comes, 1942-1791," life has gone on as usual in Trachimbrod despite the war. It is Trachimday the day the bombs come. Safran is content in his marriage and anticipating the birth of his daughter. When the bombs come, everyone jumps into the Brod River to escape the devastation. Many drown. Safran tries to save Zosha, who has gone into labor, but is unable to save her. Zosha dies holding her new baby girl. On that same day in 1791, a baby girl floats to the surface of the Brod River among the debris of a crashed wagon. In "The final letter, dated January 22, 1998," Grandfather writes to Jonathan. Grandfather tells how Alex confronted his father and forced him out of the house in order to protect Little Igor and how Little Igor misunderstood this action, becoming angry with Alex. Grandfather professes his pride in Alex and his regret that his own son would turn out so badly. Grandfather claims the father is responsible for the son and that he did a poor job in raising his son. Grandfather says he made the wrong choice that night so long ago. Grandfather says he hopes that Alex and Little Igor will never know war or be faced with such a terrible choice. Grandfather has decided to end his life in order to end what began on that night in Kolki.

Illumination; The Wedding Reception Was So Extraordinary! Or The End of the Moment That Never Ends, 1941; The First Blasts, and Then Love, 1941; The Persnickety of Memory, 1941; The Beginning of the World Often Comes, 1942-1791; Letter Dated 22 January 1998 Analysis

Grandfather tells the story of how he pointed out Hershel as a Jew to the Nazi general who threatens to kill him. When Hershel calls Grandfather Eli, the reader begins to see the bigger picture. Not only was Hershel possibly a Jew and possibly not, it appears that Grandfather is a Jew who survived only because he turned his back on his best friend in order to save his own life. Grandfather then took his wife and child far away from Kolki and changed their names, hiding from a past that has slowly taken his life from the guilt he holds inside. Grandfather did all this for his son, Alex's father, but in light of the man his son has become the Grandfather has begun to think he might have done his son a disservice. It is a sad story that explains a lot about Grandfather and his anger toward Jonathan. Jonathan embraces his history and his religion where Grandfather chose to



turn his back on everything that defined him as a man. In the end, Grandfather kills himself to set right what should have happened that fateful night.

Safran has his first orgasm on the same night Trachimbrod becomes aware of the dangerous of the raging war. Safran's experience suggests to the reader that his history of more than a hundred mistresses might be over exaggerated. Perhaps the lovers were symbolic of something else, of a childhood filled with longings and a need for acceptance. At any rate, Safran and the rest of Trachimbrod are faced with a decision. The town must decide if they should go and escape the coming horror, or stay where they are and not allow danger to change their way of life. They all decide to stay, accepting the danger of the war much like the author's metaphor of people living near a waterfall but unaware of the sound of the falling water. They had so many chances to leave, nine months of chances, but all chose to stay. On the night of the final Trachimday celebration, bombs land on the town and many are killed in the river where they have gone to save themselves. This is where Safran's daughter is born and somehow surfaces in the same river one hundred and fifty years earlier, to be raised by Yankel and called Brod. This is the connection the author has hinted at throughout the novel, suggesting that the future begets the past.



Characters

Jonathan Safran Foer

Jonathan Safran Foer came to the Ukraine in order to search for the woman whose family saved his grandfather during World War II. Jonathan's grandfather died just weeks after arriving in America, so Jonathan never knew him. However, Jonathan's grandmother kept a picture of her husband with this woman and her family for more than fifty years. Recently Jonathan's grandmother gave the picture to his mother. Jonathan is fascinated by this story and decides to try to find the woman in order to express his gratefulness for her role in his grandfather's survival.

Jonathan arranges through a travel agency to have a car, driver, and translator. The travel agent is booked solid, so the travel agent asks his father and his son to act as driver and translator. The grandfather spends most of his time sleeping, the rest complaining. The son, Alex, does not know enough English to translate everything as clearly as Jonathan would like. However, the three make an interesting pair as they travel through the countryside in search of Trachimbrod. When they find the sole surviving citizen of the shtetl of Trachimbrod, they learn about the destruction of an entire village that took place in a matter of minutes. Not only this, but they also learn something about themselves as well.

Once back in America, Jonathan begins communicating with Alex regarding a book he wants to write about their search. Alex writes his narrative about the search itself while Jonathan concentrates on his family history as well as the history of Trachimbrod. Over time, Alex becomes saddened by the liberties Jonathan takes with his story while he is forced to remain true to the truth.

Alex/Sasha

Alex is a twenty-something man who lives in Odessa in the Ukraine. Alex has a little brother to whom he is very close. Alex worries about his little brother and often talks about him in his letters to Jonathan. Alex's father works in a travel agency and when he becomes overbooked, asks Alex to work as a translator for him. Alex's father also enlists his own father to be a driver for this same client. Alex and his grandfather take on the assignment with the assumption that it will be an easy way to earn a few dollars. However, after they find the sole survivor of Trachimbrod, information about his grandfather comes out that leaves Alex feeling as though he was never as brave as his grandfather and that he should do more to protect his little brother.

Alex returns home and begins corresponding with Jonathan, sending him letters and narratives he has written about the search for the woman who helped save Jonathan's grandfather. In the course of these letters, both the reader and Jonathan learn that Alex finally stood up to his cruel, alcoholic father and forced him to leave the house. Alex has



given up the dreams of childhood and become a man who knows that protecting his mother and brother are the most important thing for him to do now.

Grandfather

Alex's grandfather is simply referred to as Grandfather throughout the novel. However, Alex informs the reader that Grandfather's name is also Alex, that all the first male children within their family are named Alex. Later, however, the reader learns that Grandfather's real name is Eli, but he changed his name after surviving the destruction of his home village of Kolki. Grandfather survived this destruction by pointing to his best friend, informing the Nazis that he was a Jew when in fact Grandfather was also a Jew. This betrayal has weighed heavily on Grandfather his entire life.

When Alex, Jonathan, and Grandfather meet Lista, Grandfather becomes belligerent. Grandfather denies the accusations Lista makes about the Nazis. However, Grandfather eventually admits to Alex and Jonathan the truth about his past and the terrible thing he did. Many months later, Grandfather watches as Alex kicks his father out of the house and becomes a man. Grandfather does not want Alex to have to live with the kind of pain and guilt with which he has lived. Grandfather kills himself in order to protect Alex from his shame.

Father

Father is Alex's father, also named Alex. Father is a cruel man who often beats his wife and children, especially after he has been drinking. Grandfather feels responsible for Father's behavior because the father is always responsible for the son. Grandfather believes that by surviving the Nazis and denying his past he caused his son to be cruel. As a result, Grandfather decides to kill himself in order to protect his grandsons from a similar fate.

Little Igor

Little Igor is Alex's little brother. Alex speaks of Little Igor often, both in his letters to Jonathan and his narrative. Alex wants to protect his brother and for his brother to think he is a good person, or a premium person, as Alex says. Alex shares Jonathan's writings with Little Igor and they often discuss the letters, until Alex begins to believe that Jonathan is not being true to the truth. When Alex tells his father to leave, he does it to protect Little Igor. However, Little Igor does not understand Alex's motivations. The only thing Little Igor sees is that Alex has made his dad go away. Now Little Igor is angry with Alex.



Safran

Safran is Jonathan's grandfather. Safran is a direct descendant of Brod. Safran is born with teeth which causes his mother to stop breastfeeding him. Safran thinks that this is the reason one of his arms died and became a useless lump. Safran begins befriending women of all ages at the age of ten, spending time with widows and young women. Jonathan writes about these encounters as though Safran is sexually active, but the reader becomes confused and begins to think that perhaps Safran's relationship with these women is less sexual and more emotional. Safran falls in love with a Gypsy girl with whom he cannot have a public relationship. Safran becomes engaged to a woman he does not know because of the traditions of his religion. The Gypsy girl wants to run away with Safran, but he refuses. Safran goes through with the wedding and his wife becomes pregnant immediately. However, before the child is born, Trachimbrod is bombed and then invaded by Nazis. Safran survives, but his wife and child do not.

Brod

Brod is a baby found in the Brod River on the day Trachim's wagon crashes into the river. Brod is given to a Sloucher to raise, a local man who was disgraced because of irregularities in his accounting business. Brod is never told by her foster father that she is not his child but is instead told stories about a mother who never existed. Brod loves her father very much, but their love is based on a lie. The day her father dies, Brod meets The Kolker, the man she will marry. Their marriage is a happy one for the first three years. After three years, The Kolker is injured in a work accident that causes a change in his behavior. The Kolker becomes violent, often beating his wife and calling her horrible names. Brod remains by his side despite his behavior, giving birth to a third child after this change in his behavior, a child whose direct descendant will be Jonathan.

Yankel

Yankel is Brod's foster father. Yankel was once a well loved accountant who was disgraced by an unnamed offense. The lawyer who came to defend Yankel in his case took off with his wife, who left Yankel a note with only one sentence on it: I did it for myself. Yankel keeps this note for the rest of his life even though it hurts him to think about it. After Brod comes to live with him, Yankel tells her stories about a wife who died giving Brod birth. Yankel's stories are so convincing that he comes to believe them himself. Soon Yankel even believes Brod is his; therefore, it never occurs to him to tell her the truth. However, these lies stand between them until the day he dies.

The Kolker

The Kolker is a boy from the nearby village of Kolki. The Kolker wins the gold pieces at the Trachimday celebrations the day Yankel dies. When Brod finds her father dead in his study, she also finds The Kolker watching her from the window. Several years later,



Brod and The Kolker are married. Three years later, while Brod is pregnant with their child, The Kolker is hit in the head with a saw blade that will remain embedded in his head for the rest of his life. This blade leaves The Kolker permanently changed, causing him to become violent with those around him. The injury also causes The Kolker to die a premature death. Despite his change in personality, Brod remains with The Kolker until his death, giving birth to their third child the day The Kolker dies.

Lista

Lista is the woman Alex finds who claims to be all that is left of Trachimbrod. Lista takes them to Trachimbrod and tells them how the Nazis came and forced the men to spit on the Torah or watch their families die. Lista also talks about Safran, telling them that she had her first kiss with Safran. Lista also claims that Safran gave her Hamlet once. Lista and Safran were friends as children, and Jonathan even suggests they were lovers for a brief time shortly after the death of Lista's husband. Based on some things Lista said, the reader is left with the impression that Lista and Safran were lovers and that Safran might have been married to her sister. Lista has been living near Trachimbrod since the war, collecting all she could find of the people who once lived there on the off chance someone might come looking for Trachimbrod. Lista gives Jonathan a box marked "In Case," inside of which they find a picture of Grandfather with his wife, son, and a friend named Hershel.



Objects/Places

Picture of Augustine

Jonathan brings a picture with him to the Ukraine of his grandfather with a young woman and two older people he believes are the woman's parents. On the back someone has written "me with Augustine." Jonathan believes this photo is of the people who saved Johnathan's grandfather from the Nazis during the war and hopes to find the young woman to thank her.

Jonathan's Papers

Jonathan carries his important papers, such as his passport, in a fanny pack. On the first night in the Ukraine, Jonathan leaves the papers on his bedside table where the dog, Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior, takes them and proceeds to eat them.

Picture of Eli/Grandfather and Hershel

Among the box of things Lista gave to Jonathan is a picture of Eli/Grandfather, his wife and son, and his best friend, Hershel. Upon finding this picture, Grandfather tells the story of how he pointed to Hershel, calling him a Jew when the Germans came to their village. Grandfather has always blamed himself for the fact that Hershel died and he survived.

In Case

In Case is a box full of things recovered from Trachimbrod after the Nazis burned the synagogue. Lista gives the box to Jonathan when he comes looking for the woman who saved his grandfather during the war.

Saw Blade

The Kolker was hit in the head with a saw blade while working at the flour mill. The blade remains embedded in The Kolker's head for the rest of his life, causing a change in his personality.

The Dial

The Dial is a statue that stands in the center of Trachimbrod that is said to give luck to all those who touch it. The Dial was created by bronzing the body of The Kolker upon his death.



Trachimday

Trachimday is a celebration held in Trachimbrod every year in remembrance of the death of a man named Trachim when his wagon crashed into the Brod River.

Book of Recurent Dreams

The people of Trachimbrod keep a record of their recurrent dreams in books that will be passed on to future generations, a page from which will be found the day the Germans burn down the synagogue.

Book of Antecedents

The people of Trachimbrod begin this book to record the important events that occur in Trachimbrod. However, the book soon becomes a record of everything that happens to the citizens of Trachimbrod, including the little things like what they had for breakfast.

Flour Mill

The Flour Mill is one of the largest employers in Trachimbrod. One man dies in the flour mill every year and the people of Trachimbrod put this down to their relationship with God.

Brod River

The Brod River is a river that runs through the small shtetl of Trachimbrod.

Trachimbrod/Sofiowka

Trachimbrod is the name of the shtetl where Brod was saved after she was found floating among the wreckage of a wagon in the Brod River. Sofiowka is the name given the same shtetl by officials requesting a name for their maps.

Kolki

Kolki is the name of the small village where Eli lived before changing his name and moving to Odessa. Kolki is also the village from where Jonathan's grandmother came.



Themes

Memories

Throughout the novel, the hero, Jonathan Safran Foer, attempts to express how deeply ingrained in their religion memories are to Jews. Jonathan tells the story of Brod to show how it directly relates to that of his grandfather. Very little changes in the lives of these people until the war comes. Before the war, the people of Trachimbrod live their lives in quiet contentment, holding tight to their religious beliefs and their way of life. The people of Trachimbrod seem to believe that if they remember the past well enough, they will somehow know the future. Out of this desire to remember everything is born the Book of Antecedents and the Book of Recurrent Dreams. These books are passed down generation after generation and studied in an attempt to live their lives with the same philosophies as their forefathers.

At the same time, Jonathan has come to the Ukraine to unearth some of the memories his grandmother and grandfather attempted to bury. Jonathan's grandfather grew up in Trachimbrod and was still there when the Nazis came despite the many months of warning and opportunities he had to get out of the area. Jonathan's grandfather had to let go of the past and move forward, an effort that caused him to die within weeks of arriving in America. Jonathan has come to the Ukraine to find the woman who saved his grandfather's life during the war and made it possible for him to move on with his life. Instead, Jonathan finds one of his grandfather's many lovers, a woman who has continued to save mementos from Trachimbrod in the hopes that one day someone would arrive who could make use of these memories, holding tightly to the traditions of a past that led an entire village into destruction.

Finally, Alex's grandfather has memories that he has buried so deeply that he no longer knows who he is. Alex's grandfather grew up and lived in Kolki, a small village not far from Trachimbrod. When the Nazis came there, Grandfather found himself forced to point his finger at a friend in order to save himself from death. In truth, it was Grandfather to whom the finger should have been pointed. Grandfather has lived with this memory all of his life, and he believes it is the memory of what he did, his attempts to save his infant son, that caused his son to grow into a cruel, abusive man. Grandfather can no longer bear to live with this memory. In the hopes that his death will allow his grandsons to grow up strong and happy without the fear of war to overshadow their lives as well as the history of their grandfather's actions, he kills himself.

Atrocities of War

Jonathan has come to the Ukraine in order to find the woman who saved his grandfather from being killed by the Nazis. Jonathan's grandfather was a Jew and his simple existence made him a target by the Nazis regime that was sent to extricate all Jews from the world. Somehow Jonathan's father escapes both the bombing of his



shtetl and the methodical execution of all the Jews who survived the bombing. Nearly fifty years after his death, Jonathan would be given a photograph of his grandfather with a young woman and two people assumed to be her parents. Jonathan is told these people are the people who saved his grandfather from the Nazis. Jonathan wants to find the young woman in the photograph and thank her for her family's generosity.

As Jonathan searches for Trachimbrod and this mystery woman, he begins to hear stories about the war. Lista, an old woman they find who lived in Trachimbrod, tells Jonathan and Alex about the night the Nazis came to Trachimbrod and forced all the Jewish men to spit on the Torah or watch their families systematically shot. Later, Grandfather tells how the men in his village were forced to point out Jews among their neighbors and friends. These atrocities allow Jonathan to finally appreciate the darkness of a war he has only read about and to understand what his grandfather and grandmother survived in order to make a life in America. It is this understanding that makes atrocities of war a theme of the novel.

Family

Jonathan's search for the woman who helped save his grandfather from the Nazis during World War II is fueled by his desire to understand a grandfather he never knew. Jonathan's grandfather died within weeks of arriving in America, leaving behind a wife and a daughter. Jonathan's grandmother gave him a picture of his grandfather with the family that saved him only weeks before Jonathan's trip to the Ukraine. Jonathan, a writer, hopes to find the woman and give her some money as well as his gratitude. Jonathan also hopes to write a book about the trip.

At the same time, Jonathan's translator begins to learn about his own family and his own strength as he goes along with Jonathan on his search. Alex has never been close to his grandfather because his grandfather is a silent, distant man and not easy to approach. On this trip, however, Alex learns more about his grandfather than he ever imagined he would. Alex learns why his grandfather is such a quiet, silent man and why he has never been the kind of grandfather Alex imagines other grandfathers to be. Alex's grandfather survived World War II as well, but not before he saw horrible things and was forced to do horrible things. Through his grandfather's story, Alex finds a strength within himself.

Alex's father is abusive and drinks too much. Alex is constantly forced to place himself between his father and his mother or brother. Alex wants to protect his mother and brother but is afraid to stand up to his father. Alex does not know how to tell his father that the father is cruel and should not do the things he does. After meeting Jonathan and learning about his grandfather's past, however, Alex is finally able to stand up to his father. Alex gives his father money and tells him to never return to the house. By doing this, Alex has finally made a stand against the biggest monster in his life and lived to tell the story.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is unusual and changes from chapter to chapter. The novel is written in three sections. The first is in letter form from Alex, the translator, for Jonathan Safran Foer. In these letters, Alex writes in the first person point of view. Second, Alex writes a narrative about the few short days he spent with Jonathan searching for the woman who saved Jonathan's grandfather from the Nazis. These sections are again written in the first person point of view and include many direct comments from Alex to Jonathan in an attempt to make the narration clear to Jonathan. Finally, Jonathan has written his own narration that tells the history of Trachimbrod, with a focus on his own family. These sections are written in the third person point of view, but also include many direct comments from Jonathan, utilizing the authorial voice.

The point of view of this novel is unique and can be confusing. The different sections are clearly marked and there is no confusion when a switch in point of view occurs. However, the changes between points of view can be jarring and occasionally leave the reader wishing the book had been put together in a different format. Alex's narration is difficult to read because of his poor command of the English language and his frequent comments to Jonathan that leave the reader wondering what these comments have to do with the overall plot. It is not until the reader reaches the final sections of the book that the point of view begins to make sense and the reader finds a rhythm that allows the story to finally come to life.

Setting

The novel is set in the Ukraine, particularly in the large city of Odessa and the countryside where Trachimbrod once existed. Jonathan, Alex, and Grandfather spend a lot of time driving around the countryside outside Lutsk. This area is mostly rural and leaves the characters feeling out of place because they are accustomed to the large city. The narratives in which the author tells the story of Trachimbrod also takes place in this rural area. However, during these narratives, the shtetl is populated by an amusing group of people who live their lives with religious fervor and contented leisure.

The setting of this novel is important for several reasons. First, the setting of Trachimbrod is full of history related to Jonathan's family and their past. Trachimbrod is a nice little village in which life has changed very little over the years until World War II comes to them. Modern Trachimbrod is little more than an empty field. The comparison of the two allows the reader to feel the full impact of the atrocities that happened in this place fifty years before. Second, the setting of Odessa at the beginning of the novel is a contrast to Trachimbrod that not only allows the reader to get a sense of who Alex is and the life he leads but is a stark contrast to his grandfather's life in Kolki before the



war. This setting also allows the reader to feel the full impact of the war on the Jews within this country and the impact the war had on the people it touched.

Language and Meaning

Most of the novel is written in simple English. The narrations written by Jonathan Safran Foer about his family's history are filled with precise English and also includes many Yiddish words, as well as other words and phrases associated with the Jewish culture. In stark contrast, the passages written by Alex are filled with improperly used words and phrases. Alex does not speak English fluently; therefore, most of his narration is at best confused and at worst uses completely improper words. For example, Alex often says that he spleens his mother, meaning that he upsets her with his behavior.

The language of the novel works in the fact that it lends authenticity to the plot. When Alex is writing his passages, he uses the words he knows in the style that his native language would require. Alex does not have a clear understanding of the vocabulary associated with English and often misuses words when writing about Jonathan's search for Augustine. In the sections of the novel written by Jonathan, he uses Yiddish words and phrases that are appropriate when the reader considers that Jonathan is writing about a village that is completely inhabited by Jewish people. Jonathan's writing adds authenticity to the story, allowing the reader believe the story being told.

Structure

The novel is divided into three consistent narrations. The first is a letter format in which Alex writes to Jonathan about the book they are writing together regarding Jonathan's trip to the Ukraine to search for the woman who saved his grandfather during the war. The second is the narrations that Alex submits for Jonathan's approval to be included in the book. The third is the narration that Jonathan writes for the book that cover the history of his family and the history of the village his grandfather grew up in, Trachimbrod. All three narrations are set apart by titles or proper greetings, allowing the reader to adjust to the switch in narration.

The novel tells three separate stories. The first is the story of Jonathan Safran Foer and his attempts to find the woman whose family saved his grandfather from dying in World War II. The second tells the story of Jonathan's ancestors and their home of Trachimbrod. This history covers the strange circumstances of his great-great-great-great-grandmother's birth and life, and the early life of his grandfather. Finally, the novel tells Alex's story, his struggles to protect his mother and brother from his cruel father, and the truth about his grandfather's past.



Quotes

"Mother dubs me Alexi-stop-spleening-me!, because I am always spleening her."
An Overture to the Commencement of a Very Rigid Journey, pg. 1

"Grandfather's name is also Alexander. Supplementally is Father's. We are all primogenitory children in our families, which brings us tremendous honor, on the scale of the sport of baseball, which was invented in Ukraine."
An Overture to the Commencement of a Very Rigid Journey, pg. 5

"In the middle of the string and feathers, surrounded by candles and soaked matches, prawns, pawns, and silk tassels that curtsied like jellyfish, was a baby girl, still mucus-glazed, still pink as the inside of a plum." The Beginning of the World Often Comes, pg. 13

"The Well-Regarded Rabbi was exceedingly knowledgeable about the large, extra-large, and extra-extra-large matters of the Jewish faith, and was able to draw upon the most obscure and indecipherable texts to reason seemingly impossible religious quandaries, but he knew hardly anything about life itself, and for this reason, because the baby's birth had no textual precedents, because he couldn't ask for anyone's advice—because how would it look for the very source of all advice to be an advice seeker—because the baby was about life, and was life, he found himself to be quite stuck." The Lottery, 1791, pg. 21

"I hanker for this letter to be good. Like you know, I am not first rate with English. In Russian my ideas are asserted abnormally well, but my second tongue is not so premium."
Letter dated 20 July 1997, pg. 23

"Suddenly Yankel was overcome with a fear of dying, stronger than he felt when his parents passed of natural causes, stronger than when his only brother was killed in the flour mill or when his children died, stronger even than when he was a child and it first occurred to him that he must try to understand what it could mean not to be alive—to be not in darkness, not in unfeeling—to be not being, not to be." The Book of Recurrent Dreams, 1791, pgs. 41-42

"From space, astronauts can see people making love as a tiny speck of light. Not light, exactly, but a glow that could be mistaken for light—a coital radiance that takes generations to pour like honey through the darkness to the astronaut's eyes."
A Parade, A Death, A Proposition, 1804-1969, pg. 95



"Has anyone in this photograph ever witnessed you?"
Another tear descended.
'I have been waiting for you for so long.'
I pointed to the car. 'We are searching for Trachimbrod.'
'Oh,' she said, and she released a river of tears. 'You are here. I am it.'"
The Very Rigid Search, pg. 119

"Everyone performs bad actions. I do. Father does. Even you do. A bad person is someone who does not lament his bad actions. Grandfather is now dying because of his. I beseech you to forgive us, and to make us better than we are. Make us good."
Letter dated 17 November 1997, pg. 145

"I implore myself to paint Trachimbrod, so you will know why we were so overawed. There was nothing. When I utter 'nothing' I do not mean there was nothing except for two houses, and some wood on the ground, and pieces of glass, and children's toys, and photographs. When I utter that there was nothing, what I intend is that there was not any of these things, or any other things." What We Saw When We Saw Trachimbrod, or Falling in Love, pg. 184

"Memory begat memory begat memory." The Persnicketyness of Memory, 1941, pg. 258

"It was like old times. This was celebration, unmitigated by imminent death. This was imminent death, unmitigated by celebration."
The Beginning of the World Often Comes, 1941-1791, pg. 270



Topics for Discussion

Who is Trachim? What is significant about his death? Why do the people of Trachimbrod celebrate his death every year? How does his death impact Jonathan's history? What is the significance of Trachimday? Why do the celebrants throw sacks into the Brod on Trachimday? What do the strings on Trachimday signify?

Who is Yankel? Why has Yankel lost the respect of his friends and neighbors? What is the significance of the note Yankel always carries with him? Why does Yankel write his life history on the ceiling of his room? Is Yankel Brod's father? How did Yankel come to raise Brod on his own?

Who is Brod? What is the significance of her name? Why does Jonathan feel the need to relate Brod's story? How does Brod's story impact Safran's? What does Brod consider her rape? Why does Brod consider this rape? What is the significance of the beads Brod wears around her neck? Why does Brod remain with The Kolker until his death?

Who is Safran? Why does Jonathan relate his story? What impact does Safran's history have on Jonathan? Why does Jonathan talk about all the women Safran was intimate with? What does this intimacy imply? Was Safran really intimate with all these women? Why does Safran not run away with the Gypsy girl? Who does Safran fall in love with at the end of the story? Why does Lista claim Safran lost two daughters to the war?

Who is Alex? Why is he called Sasha in the novel? Who is Little Igor? Why does Alex feel the need to protect Little Igor? Why does Alex worry what Little Igor thinks of him? What does Alex do to protect Little Igor? Does Little Igor understand Alex's behaviors? How does Alex change in the course of the novel?

Who is Grandfather? What is Grandfather's name? What does Hershel call Grandfather? Why? Why did Grandfather move away from Kolki? Why did Grandfather never tell anyone about his past? What is Grandfather trying to hide? Why does Grandfather become so angry when Lista begins to talk about the war and the atrocities the Nazis perpetrated on her friends and neighbors? Why does Grandfather claim he killed Hershel?

What is Trachimbrod? Where is it located? Why does Jonathan want to see it? What does Jonathan find when he goes to Trachimbrod? Who are the people of Trachimbrod? Why are there two names for Trachimbrod? What does this say about the people of Trachimbrod? What happened in Trachimbrod during World War II?