

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close Study Guide

**Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close by Jonathan
Safran Foer**

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Plot Summary

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close by Jonathan Foer looks at a precocious, psychologically scarred boy's quest to learn how his Dad died on 11 Sep. 2001 in the World Trade Center.

Nine-year old Oskar Schell lives in Manhattan with his protective Mom. Grandma across the street is his usual caretaker and confidant. Grandpa is gone and not to be discussed. Oskar's beloved Dad perished on September 11, 2001, but lives in Oskar's memory, tucking him in, telling stories, and challenging him to searches. When Oskar finds a mysterious key in Dad's closet, he begins a quixotic quest for the lock it opens, owned, he believes, by someone surnamed Black. Oskar learns many things and commits youthful faux pas, but discovers nothing about the key. He wonders why Mom lets him wander so freely, how people know his name before he gives it, and how he recruits his elderly sidekick, Mr. Black upstairs with such ease. Oskar is fascinated by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and worries his psychiatrist may hospitalize him. Over six months, Oskar learns only that one of his Blacks also perished on 9/11, and Oskar is conflicted that the strange woman might have held hands with Dad at the end.

Oskar unknowingly meets his Grandpa Thomas, who has been Grandma's "renter" since the "worst day." Desperate to talk about old Mr. Black dropping out of the search, Oskar tells Grandpa his full story and plays for him Dad's final phone messages, which no one else has heard. Over the decades, Thomas, writes three letters to his son. In 1963, he explains his abandonment, having lost the ability to speak and interest in sculpting, marrying a frenetic woman whom he encourages to write her life's story, which turns out to be blank. Learning she has broken her promise and is pregnant, Thomas returns to Germany, expecting no forgiveness, but professing love for his unborn son. In 1978, Thomas writes his teenage son about the Allied bombing of Dresden on February 13, 1945, in which he is badly injured and loses his parents and pregnant lover Anna, Grandma's sister. Finally, in 2003, Thomas fills his last daybook with how he learns about 9/11, returns to New York, moves in awkwardly with Grandma, tails Oskar and Mr. Black around the city, and needs again to flee.

Grandma writes Oskar a letter about her life, beginning with her childhood in Dresden with her sister Anna and Anna's boyfriend, Thomas, whom Grandma later marries in America. He sculpts Anna while looking at Grandma. Their sex life is sorrowful and life together destroyed by rules. She follows Grandpa to the airport to keep him from leaving when she announces she has broken the rule and become pregnant. Her mind returns to her childhood in wartime Dresden. Grandma cares for Oskar on the day she loses her only son, and considers her family's suffering in Dresden necessary to produce Oskar. Grandpa runs away again after helping Oskar dig up his Dad's grave, but Grandma follows him to the airport and talks him into living together there with her. All of her dreams run backwards. She reminds her grandson that one must always express love when it is there, rather than waiting for a supposed better time.



Oskar loses interest in his quest after losing Mr. Black, but learns that one of his first visits could have solved his mystery. The vase is an anniversary gift for his Mom, bought at an estate sale by his Dad. It has nothing to do with 9/11. This discovery makes Oskar go forward with plans to dig up Dad's empty coffin with Grandma's renter, who wants to bury many letters to his lost son. Unable to sleep that night, Oskar thinks about all the events of September 8 & 9, 2001 running backwards, leaving him safe.



What The?

What The? Summary

Oskar Schell thinks about inventing a number of useless objects. As a pacifist, he fails his only jujitsu class. Mom's friend Ron tries to buy Oskar's love, but will never be his dad. There are more people now alive than have ever died. He asks himself several what ifs...all that would have saved his dad. Oskar has been in a limo twice—once to buy an empty casket. At that time, he sat up front and tried to entertain the drive, but had limited success, so he gives up and crawls back to sit with his mom, who he thinks is beautiful and is his *raison d'être*.

During the second limo ride to dig up the empty coffin, Oskar remembers he used to dream of taking over the family jewelry business, although Dad said he is too smart for retail. He remembers little things about his dad, such as how he shrugged his shoulders. Oskar's mom pre-approves documentaries, but he can read any book he wants—his favorite is Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. Oskar recalls more details about his dad, such as whistling "I Am the Walrus," and finding mistakes in the *Times*. The night before the "worst day," his dad kisses his forehead and Oskar starts to say something, but decides, "Nothing."

The next time Oskar hears Dad's voice is after being let out of school early. Although Mom and Dad work in midtown, Oskar is sure they are safe. Oskar checks the phone for messages. Dad has called at 8:52 AM, saying something has happened but he is OK. They are waiting for the firemen. Four more messages follow, at 9:12, 9:31, 9:46, and 10:04. Oskar listens repeatedly, wondering what to do, think, or feel. At 10:26:47, the phone rings again and caller ID says it is Dad.

What The? Analysis

The first chapter takes its name from a favorite response by the novel's primary narrator, Oskar, a precocious fellow at least nine years old, who lives in New York City with his Mom and Grandma. Grandpa has left, Oskar's beloved Dad is dead and badly missed, and a new man in their life, Ron, is a nemesis. Without explaining himself, Oskar talks about wearing "heavy boots." As it recurs throughout the novel, it appears to be Oskar's image for depression. Another psychological image he uses is zipping the "sleeping bag of myself." Later Oskar is seen visiting an analyst. Oskar speaks of many "*raison d'être*" and is clearly a Francophile. "Obviously," "extremely," and "weird" are favorite adjectives. The family expresses appreciation for things by describing them as \$100. Beatles tunes run through the novel, as do references to astrophysicist Stephen Hawking and retardation. Only at the end of the chapter is it made clear that "the worst day" is September 11, 2001, and that Dad has died in the World Trade Center bombing.



Why I'm Not Where You Are (5/21/63)

Why I'm Not Where You Are (5/21/63) Summary

Thomas Schell writes to his unborn child about how silence overtakes him when he first arrives in America and tries to pronounce Anna's name. He loses all his words, the last one "I." He writes his communications in blank books and carries them around to show others. He burns the book that has "ha, ha, ha" in it.

Thomas cannot speak by the time he meets the unborn child's mother, who sits at his booth and chatters. Thomas writes that he does not speak. She writes back, "Please marry me." He flips back to "Ha ha ha!", and she flips forward to her request. They flip back-and-forth until she points at "please." Thomas thinks about losing the one person he could have lived with and the tons of marble he has abandoned. Feeling pathetic, worthless, and helpless, he points to "Help."

Why I'm Not Where You Are (5/21/63) Analysis

The second chapter begins a series of unmailed letters from Oskar's as yet unnamed Grandpa to the son, Oskar's late father, whom he abandons before he is born. This letter looks back four decades to how a mute immigrant comes to marry and later abandon a rather frenetic woman whom he meets in a New York bakery. His loss of language (aphasia) is told with many flourishes, suggesting the added pain of being intelligent and creative. Thomas' left and right hands come to take the place of yes and no and various movements of his hands create complex meanings. Later, Grandma writes to Oskar, describing the event from her point of view.



Googolplex

Googolplex Summary

The bracelet Mom wears to the funeral is Dad's last voice message coded in colored beads by Oskar. Oskar asks if his mom is sleeping with Ron; she says he is a friend. Oskar becomes phobic about an array of things. He looks over stuff in his dad's closet and is comforted. He finds a key for which he can't find the lock. He invents in his head a drain to carry tears away for New Yorkers. Next morning, he skips school and goes to a locksmith, who gives him ideas about what the key might fit. He receives a reply from Ringo Starr and laminates a tee shirt, since it's not white and he only wears white. He researches possible ways to find what the key belongs to. Next morning, Oskar still claims illness and wants to miss school again. He goes to an art supply store to search for clues about the key. For eight months, he takes forays into the city to check out all the surname "Black" in the phonebook because that is written on the key. He feels closer to his dad during these outings, but far away from his mom.

Oskar replaces the phone that has the messages from his dad with another phone and keeps the old phone under his bed, where he pulls it out and listens to one of his dad's messages when he wants the sound of his dad's voice. His mom thinks his grandma is inventing a friend that lives there, and Oskar asks if his mom is inventing Ron. She asks Oskar if his dad would want her to have friends.

Grandma lives in the building across the street and Oskar reads notes she writes using binoculars. The one after Dad dies reads, "Don't go away." They talk about silly things and Grandma asks what is wrong, but he cannot reveal hiding the phone message that is burning a hole in his middle. Grandma talks about grandpa and Oskar asks why he left; she says he had to. She hopes Oskar never loves anything as much as she loves him. Oskar puts the key on the same string as his apartment key.

Googolplex Analysis

This chapter, told by Oskar, sets him on his quixotic quest for the lock that a mysterious key will open. The quest takes up the bulk of the novel. Oskar has learned to lie and is bruising himself; later in the novel, it grows clear that Oskar has a serious problem with self-inflicted violence (SIV), a common means of temporarily making life more tolerable. He thinks he has found his Dad's name written on pads all over an art store and learns tidbits about his missing Grandpa, about whom Mom has forbidden him to question Grandma. Oskar clearly has a close relationship with Grandma, who ranks above Mom in his list of favorite people. Grandma appears to be growing senile and her daughter-in-law condescends to her. The end of the novel reveals that none of these apparent facts are as they first appear.



My Feelings

My Feelings Summary

On September 12, 2003, Grandma writes a letter about her life. She talks first about wanting to write a Turkish prisoner in a labor camp in 1921. She asks her father to write a letter to him for her. He does not understand why, but does so. It is Grandma's only memento of her father. Grandma visits a prison to get writing samples of a murderer. Then she collects samples from a number of other people. She obtains a letter from everyone she knows, organizes them, and tries to make connections.

Grandma meets Thomas, a childhood friend, in America. He wants to marry Grandma's older sister, Anna. She meets him at a bakery and he writes that he cannot speak. He asks her to model for his sculpting. She does, naked. He is forming Anna, not her, but he has sex with her. A week later, she proposes and he says "yes," but no children. They never speak German again.

My Feelings Analysis

Grandma begins writing to Oskar a letter about her life, which is inserted in several parts throughout the novel. She begins with her childhood, her sister Anna and Anna's boyfriend, whom she meets seven years later in America. He has failed as a sculptor but asks Grandma to pose. Their sex life begins joylessly and becomes a motif. He sculpts Anna while looking at Grandma. She proposes marriage and he accepts, provided they avoid children. Going forward, it will be seen how a plethora of rules destroys their marriage. The destruction of their old world, including the burning of Grandma's childhood house, is suggested, but there is no hint yet of the magnitude of what they go through, or how it prefigures 9/11. Like Oskar, Grandma has a hole in her middle and as a girl writes letters to many people. Another dying man later in the book also writes letters, which lead Oskar to the truth about the mysterious key and his Dad's fate.

The Only Animal

The Only Animal Summary

When Oskar reads the first chapter of *A Brief History of Time*, he is struck by how insignificant life is compared with the universe and time. Dad suggest that if Oskar moved one grain of sand one millimeter in the Sahara Desert, he would change history. That is how Oskar feels as he sets off to meet every New Yorker named Black. Oskar is reduced to anger and tears when the first Black claims not to know Dad. The next, Abby Black is a beautiful, unsmiling woman and Oskar wants to invent something to make her like him. Oskar manipulates his way and explains the key, asks about Dad and asks if they can kiss. Abby declines, but Oskar takes her picture and gives her his card.

Oskar goes to Grandma's, who looks like she has been crying. Grandma does everything for Oskar until he begins to need privacy. When Oskar walks off during the worst day, she is angry and hangs out a sign "Don't go away." Ever since, any time she calls his name, Oskar answers, "I'm OK"—it is a game like Marco Polo. A few months after Dad dies, Oscar and Mom drive to New Jersey to clean out Dad's storage facility, but Oskar cannot part with anything. Although Oskar spends more time with Grandma than anyone else, Oskar knows little about her.

The Only Animal Analysis

This chapter shows Oskar's first forays to meet the Blacks of New York. As will be seen at the end of the novel, his intuitions that Abby Black is not telling the whole truth are borne out. Why he says, "I'm OK" every time his name is pronounced is explained, and the breadth of his knowledge further illustrated. He is wondering about his paternal grandparents' broken marriage in time for the various strands to be interwoven through letters to him and his Dad.



Why I'm Not Where You Are (5/21/63)

Why I'm Not Where You Are (5/21/63) Summary

Thomas' letter to his son (Oskar's dad) resumes saying he and his wife have many minute rules. He helps her learn slang and is filled with other people's joy. The two have "nothing places," which allow one complete privacy. They hang a blueprint of the apartment, marked off in Somethings and Nothings. Thomas feels the weight of the many lives he is not living. He would give anything not to think of Anna. Their fathers are friends. One day, in the middle of Europe, on the brink of losing everything, Thomas literally runs into Anna. Helping one another up, they see they have been walking past one another for six days, and Thomas asks if Anna likes him.

Thomas wonders how many doppelgangers he has and if they have made the same mistakes. His wife is writing her life story at his suggestion and one day hands him a stack of papers. Expecting to learn about her—and Anna—he sees only blank pages; Thomas proclaims the writing wonderful.

The first time Anna and Thomas make love is behind her father's shed. Anna admits the sex hurt. Every morning before he goes to the airport, Thomas thumbs through blank pages and pretends to be moved, wondering if his wife is testing his love. Thomas advises she keep the memoir a secret. Thomas has much to tell his son, but his book is filling up. He wants to tell his son that he is sorry for everything. Thomas realizes he and his wife are alike—both writing Nothing. Thomas goes out on an errand and walks away and does not look back. Now he writes to the baby to whom he will never be a father, but who will always be his child. He closes with love.

Why I'm Not Where You Are (5/21/63) Analysis

Thomas' continuing letter explains his relationship with Anna and how he encourages his wife to write her life's story, which turns out to be blank. It ends with a statement that he cannot live with them, expects no forgiveness, and professes love. Note how requests for time form, isolated on an otherwise empty page, marking sharp caesurae in the narrative. Typographical layout becomes increasingly important as the novel goes on. The daybook entries that follow the letter will be explained later (they represent Grandma following Thomas to the airport.)



Heavy Boots - Heavier Boots

Heavy Boots - Heavier Boots Summary

Oskar plays Yorick in a Hamlet tailored to kids with ADD. Many of the Blacks he has met attend, sitting together without knowing their connection. Only Grandma attends every performance, crying. Backstage on closing night, Jimmy mimics Grandma accurately, making everyone laugh. Oskar does so as well, but is really just pretending to laugh. In the last performance, Oskar daydreams of smashing Jimmy's head, drawing blood and getting a standing ovation from the audience. However, Oskar settles for making eye contact with Abe Black, whom he met twelve weeks earlier in Coney Island. After Oskar met Abe, Abe takes him to the next Black on the list, Ada, who is no help. Ada serves him a snack and Oskar thanks her black maid. Ada likes Oskar and sends him home in a cab. Oskar discovers Mr. Black living upstairs in 6A, born 1 Jan. 1900. Mr. Black regales Oskar with stories of his life, at least the details he can remember. His apartment is filled with every imaginable item. Mr. Black keeps index cards with people's names written on them, as well as one word that describes that person. Mr. Black's card used to read "A.R. Black: War", but Mr. Black since crossed out the word "War" and added the word "Husband". Oskar asks if he has a card for Dad, but there is no card for Thomas Schell. Oskar wonders how to boil down Dad to one word: jeweler, atheist, copyeditor? Not wanting to cry in front of Mr. Black, Oskar goes to the bathroom and snoops, trying to figure out what the key his dad gave him opens. He ends up in Mr. Black's bedroom and Mr. Black finds him there. Mr. Black points out that there are a lot of nails pounded into the wooden bed frame and explains that every day since his wife died, he has hammered a nail into the bed frame - he's up to 8,629. Oskar realizes his keys are tugging in the bed's direction.

Mr. Black has not left his apartment in 24 years. Oskar gets an idea: Mr. Black could help in his quest. He is smart and knowledgeable, and would gain companionship. Mr. Black says he is deaf, but does not use his hearing aids. Oskar fiddles with the aids and hands them to Mr. Black. When a flock of birds fly past the window, Mr. Black hears them, cries, and walks around the room, listening to things. The sound of his own voice makes him cry the most. That night, Mom knows something is on Oskar's mind, but then he asks not to be buried when he dies; he wants a mausoleum. Mother argues he will live a long time, to which Oskar counters: Dad had not expected to die that day. Oskar demands to know where she was that day and she begins crying. Oskar declares he misses Dad more than she, because she laughs with Ron. Mom claims to cry in private and that Dad would want them happy. She says she will never stop loving Oskar. Oskar declares that if he could have chosen, he would have chosen her to die. Oskar calls her, trying to take it back; Mom says she is hurt. Some of this is her fault, but Oskar wants her not to die and leave him alone.

Heavy Boots - Heavier Boots Analysis

The novel returns focus to Oskar and shows him in two psychologically troubling situations. The first comes during Hamlet. The shrinking audience makes Oskar resentful, except Ron, whom he does not want around. Oskar pretends to join the laughter at a classmate's skillful mimicry of Grandma, but then imagines beating him to a bloody pulp. The second incident is a confrontation with Mom, which brings out Oskar's resentment at her surviving rather than Dad and failure to pick him up like other mothers. That Oskar is keeping a "feelings book" suggests he is currently seeing an analyst and his knowing he has 41 SIV marks indicates the severity of his affliction. Between the two crises, Oskar visits the first few Blacks, learning things other than what the key is for, making youthful faux pas, and wondering how people know his name. He recruits his elderly sidekick with surprising ease. Both oddities are explained at the end of the novel.



My Feelings

My Feelings Summary

Grandma continues writing: she already misses Oskar. She is relieved to see Grandpa's face and he still wears his wedding ring. Their marriage is filled with rules and compromises. Grandpa starts in a jewelry store, rises to manager, and keeps their own store open from 11 AM until 6 PM. She pretends to type when Grandpa comes home. Her life story has been spaces. Grandma needs a child and one night writes, "I am pregnant." She admits breaking the rule. Next morning the weight of his suitcase tells her he is leaving her. She writes shyly that she knows he is leaving and refuses to go home. Thomas weeps, whether for Anna, his parents, Grandma, or himself she cannot tell. She is not angry because she has broken the rule. He objects it is his rule.

Grandpa claims not to know how to live as she does. She has much to say but, knowing it will hurt Thomas, buries it so it hurts her alone. She tells Oskar more thoughts about childhood. In the airport, Grandma asks to stay and promises to try harder. She thinks about her childhood and a family, not rich, but wanting nothing either. In New York, the airport is full of people, but Grandma and Grandpa feel alone. Grandma tells Oskar she would change things if she had her life to live over. Grandpa leaves in the morning. She waits for him, believing him, without eating.

My Feelings Analysis

Grandma's letter to Oskar continues, describing her odd but not unhappy marriage and the one-night reprieve she earns from Grandpa's leaving as her pregnancy cannot be hidden. Her mind returns to her childhood in wartime Dresden, making it clearer that her family perishes in the firebombing. Pebbles tossed at windows and dreams-in-reverse continue through the novel's end. The reader has to read fairly carefully to find the jumps between the present and past; Grandma's life as a child, as a wife, and then as a Grandma to Oskar.



Happiness, Happiness

Happiness, Happiness Summary

When an Interviewer asks Tomoyasu to describe the morning's events. He describes the horror of the bomb that fell on Hiroshima; blackened flesh, his mother dying in his arms, the black rain. Tomoyasu gives the interview to tell why there can never be war again. As Oskar presses the Stop button, girls cry, boys make funny barfing noises, and Mr. Keegan sweats. Oskar explains the technicalities of an atom bomb exploding. Jimmy taunts Oskar and other children laugh. Next day in the playground, Jimmy pushes Oskar to use sexually explicit words, most of which Oskar understands from his internet usage.

Oskar and Mr. Black ride the subway to the next Black, Agnes, Stan pushing Oskar to overcome his fears. Agnes Black's apartment is on the third floor. Oskar wheels her in her wheelchair to the top of the stairs so she and Mr. Black can yell up and down in Spanish. Agnes had been a waitress at Windows on the World, causing Oskar to wonder if she served Dad that morning - or died with him, together, holding hands, or talking about him. Oskar insists they return to learn if she has kids. Hearing laughter and too many words for a simple "no," Oskar perceives another lie.

Next stop is Albert Black of Montana, a would-be actor, then Alice Black, nervous, living in a building zoned for industry, who has charcoal drawings everywhere of one man. Oskar asks to kiss her. Allen Black, an engineer in Russia, lives on the Lower East Side but works as a doorman on Central Park South. Oskar sets up an email account for him on his portable TV. Allen's son will be a brain surgeon or lawyer before the Supreme Court. A teary Arnold Black says he cannot help Oskar even before hearing what he needs. Oskar gets several responses from people he writes, Jane Goodall and a form letter from Hawkings. Because his allowance depends on it, Oskar goes to Dr. Fein on Tuesday. Oskar rejects friendly overtures. Fein thinks maybe Oskar's emotional roller coaster may be hormonal, but Oskar figures his Dad's horrible death explains things. When Fein asks if any good can come of Dad's death, Oskar wants to kick over the chair, scatter papers, and call him a "fucking asshole," but settles for a shrug. After dinner, he listens to Message 4—Dad under a table with a wet napkin over his face, begging them to pick up and hoping for a helicopter rescue. Oskar wonders why Dad does not say goodbye or I love you, and gives himself a bruise.

Happiness, Happiness Analysis

Oskar plays for his class a harrowing interview with a survivor of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Japan, August 6, 1945 and explains other "fascinating" facts about the event. He banters with classmates who want to force him to call his mother a whore and with his psychiatrist, getting the best of both. Note how Oskar again wants to lash out at Fein, but settles for a Dad-like shrug. Learning that someone on his list works in

Windows on the World, the elegant restaurant on the top floors of the North Tower of the World Trade Center, Oskar is conflicted over her perhaps holding hands with Dad at the end. This parallels his attitude towards Ron. Celebrities answering Oskar's letter and Beatles songs are ongoing motifs.



Why I'm Not Where You Are (4/12/78)

Why I'm Not Where You Are (4/12/78) Summary

Thomas Schell, Sr., writes his 15-year-old son again. The night before the bombing he writes about living in the Alps. Taking the letter to Anna in the morning, Thomas runs into Goldberg and Anna's despondent father. Anna tells him her father does not want to be part of it anymore. Thomas tries to comfort her over the coming end of the war and Anna cries and announces she is pregnant, and wants him to be overjoyed. He kisses her stomach as the air-raid siren sounds at 9:30. A horrible noise and the walls lift and drop. Thomas needs to find Anna, burning his hands on the doorknob. He never sees his parents again. At the zoo, Thomas is ordered to kill the carnivores, but, unable to distinguish them, he shoots everything. He thinks about every animal he kills. He is one of four survivors recovered by soldiers as their truck is forced off the road by strafing and bombing.

Thomas regains consciousness in a hospital unable to move his arms or legs. He joins the futile search for loved ones but only retrieves the typewriter. Thomas wants to tell Grandma all of this—and that her father survives but later kills himself—in the bakery, but cannot. Had he, their lives might have been different. He buries too much inside and writes letters he cannot mail.

Why I'm Not Where You Are (4/12/78) Analysis

This chapter, a letter from Grandpa to his now teenage son, is proofread in red felt-tip pen, like articles in the Times in later years. The ending of the chapter suggests it is never sent, so proofing may be a habit Grandpa shares with his son. Like Oskar, he buries his emotions. Introducing the anticipated description of the Allied bombing of Dresden on February 13, 1945, Foer shows Herr Schmidt, a "Righteous among the Nations," holding a volume of the Roman poet Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, meaning change. Telling of transformations is a popular genre in antiquity, and the metamorphosis of Dresden is nearly instantaneous. Foer summarizes in dramatic form the facts about the first attack and the outcome: the horrible deaths of tens of thousands of people. The scenes in the zoo hold a particular pathos.

The Sixth Borough

The Sixth Borough Summary

Once upon a time, New York City has a Sixth Borough. Following is a description of the fantasy of how that borough became separated from Manhattan. Oskar asks Dad if the story about the sixth borough is objectively true. Oskar declares himself optimistic, which pleases Dad, and chooses to believe the "evidence" that proves the story. With a gigantic hole in its center, the Sixth Borough moves across the planet, ending up in Antarctica. Oskar declares the story awesome. Dad shrugs when Oskar asks if the items he has dug up in the park come from the Sixth Borough. Oskar begins to say something to his Dad, but stops.

The Sixth Borough Analysis

The fairy tale that Oskar's Dad tells him on the last night of his life, mentioned in the first chapter to characterize their relationship, is finally told. It illustrates the kind of separation Thomas Schell describes. Note the descending sparks of fireworks, contrasting with those over Dresden, and the borough having a hole in its center like Oskar and his grandparents.



My Feelings

My Feelings Summary

Grandma is in the guest room knitting, half-watching TV, and missing Oskar, who has left for school. The station shifts to scenes from New York: a building vomiting black smoke. When the second plane hits, the reporter screams, and a fireball rolls out and upward. Oskar's mom calls, worried about her husband, who is not safe at the store but at a meeting in the World Trade Center. Mom wants Grandma to watch Oskar, not let him see the news, and tell Oskar everything is OK. For the first time in the 15 years, Mom tells Grandma "I love you," meaning Mom knows the truth. Grandma finds Oskar under his bed, and she squeezes under with him feelin space collapsing, recalling Mary jumping on a bed, Dad sleeping, Anna kissing her, and her father pinching her cheeks. When Mom arrives, she hugs Oskar so fiercely that Grandma thinks of protecting him. Dad has not called and there are no messages. When she assures Oskar that Dad was not at that building, Grandma knows that Oskar knows. Mom makes posters and goes out to hang them. When Oskar falls asleep in her lap, Grandma turns on the TV with no sound, seeing planes go into buildings, bodies fall, people wave from high windows, buildings fall. Grandma knows there are thousands of casualties and thousands of bodies. Grandma wants to feel empty, but is full of stone. She wishes she could take her son's place under the rubble.

Looking at Oskar gives meaning to Grandma's life. Grandma cannot object to a funeral for a non-existent body. When they lower the casket, Oskar makes a noise like a wounded animal and Mom takes him aside to hold him. Grandma's sounds are locked inside. At home, the doorman gives her a letter, and Oskar reads it for her, since her eyes are crummy: "I'm sorry." She recognizes Thomas' handwriting. On the day of her son's funeral, he sends two words. He is back.

My Feelings Analysis

Grandma's reflections on 9/11 continue, describing how caring for Oskar on the day she loses her only son brings back memories and makes her consider how her family's suffering is necessary to produce Oskar. The limo ride is retold from her perspective, concentrating on Oskar's grief, which manifests in jokes. Grandma portrays the shift in dynamics with a daughter-in-law who has been aloof. The lawyer crumbles and needs support. Grandma forbids herself to vomit on the rug or lie in her own filth as she wishes, showing involuntary character.



Alive and Alone

Alive and Alone Summary

After six months of searching, Mr. Black announces he is finished. Running up Grandma's stairs, Grandma does not answer, Oskar invents many horrible deaths for her. He searches the apartment, and finds hundreds of letters tied in bundles, postmarked chronologically from May 31, 1963 to the worst day, all from Dresden and addressed "To my unborn child" or "To my child." The envelopes are empty. He says aloud that he needs Grandma and the "renter" opens his door. The man resembles Oskar's dad in many ways. Oskar pretends Thomas is Grandma and tells his story from the tuxedo, broken vase, key, locksmith, envelope, art supply story, and all the various Blacks. Oddly, Ruth Black's address is on the 86th floor of the Empire State Building, which makes Oskar panicky, but he goes up, inventing things to rescue him during an elevator crash. The view from the observation deck would be beautiful if Oskar could avoid picturing the same type of scenario as when his dad dies. Oskar wonders if he would choose to burn or jump. Is pain better than not feeling? Whom would he call in his last seconds? What would he say? It is lonely and scary because there are so many ways to die. Oskar meets Ruth, who offers a special tour, which Mr. Black accepts. She recites facts about the building's construction, including the bomber that crashed into the 79th floor in 1945. Mr. Black squeezes his hand. Ruth finishes and then continues, talking about lightning strikes, St. Elmo's fire, and geographical location and explains she has lived up here for years, since her husband's death. When they get home, Mr. Black announces he is finished and hopes Oskar understands. Oskar wants to yell, "Fuck you!" in his ear, but shakes his hand, and goes to Grandma's, not knowing what to do.

As Oskar tells his story, Thomas nods and stares, searching for an underlying truth. Oskar fetches the hidden phone, plays the five messages, and says no one—especially not Mom—has heard them. Oskar describes Dad and a little about his dad's dad. Oskar replays the messages and Thomas remarks that Dad sounds calm, perhaps wanting not to worry them, and not saying he loves them because he does love them. Oskar wants to know how Dad dies so he can stop inventing ways. There are so many ways to die; Oskar needs to know which is Dad's.

Thomas says he has been silent a long time, his last word is "I," and he cannot make a sound when he tries to say, "I'm sorry" to Oskar. Thomas asks Oskar not to tell Grandma they have met and offers to meet him any time Oskar ever needs. Oskar can't sleep thinking of things that kill and save you. Suddenly, an idea opens—Oskar must dig up Dad's coffin.



Alive and Alone Analysis

This chapter summarizes six months of meeting Blacks and unknowingly meeting his Grandpa, who is Grandma's secret renter. Desperate to talk about old Mr. Black dropping out of the search—note again how Oskar draws back from acting out when angry—Oskar tells Grandpa his full story and plays for him Dad's final words. The stage is set for the novel's final revelations.



Why I'm Not Where You Are (9/11/03)

Why I'm Not Where You Are (9/11/03) Summary

Thomas writes to his dead child, Oskar's Dad, as he waits to go with Oskar to the cemetery. He had not expected to write after the day his son dies, but needs to tell him about recent events and how wrong he has been about many assumptions. Watching Grandma exit the limo after the funeral, he passes a note asking if he should go away. They exchange notes. The doorman gives him the apartment key. Grandma restricts him to the guestroom as their second life together begins. When arriving, Thomas has many suitcases. He calls Grandma and tries repeatedly to communicate. As to why he left, where he went, how he learns about their son's death, why he has returned, what he needs to do with the rest of his life, and how he wants her to believe and understand him. Once she asks if it is a joke and another time if it is Oskar—the first time Thomas hears his grandson's name.

In Dresden, having lost everything a second time, Thomas writes letters to his son, knowing he will not mail them. People gather around televisions; Thomas searches obituaries, looking for Thomas Schell. Realizing he has a grandson, Thomas flies to New York. He takes a baggage cart and pushes it down the highway. As it gets hot, he opens a suitcase and considers throwing out a stack of letters to lighten his load, creating a trail of things he has been unable to tell his son.

Thomas moves into Grandma's guest room, eating meals she leaves at his door. Grandma pays short visits to tidy up, claiming she can forgive him for leaving but not for coming back. She refuses to share her grief with him. As her visits grow longer, Thomas asks her to pose. She demands he look at her or leave. Grandma questions Thomas about his relationships and if they involved sex. He admitted to prostitutes. Fearing he will run out of space, Thomas writes smaller and overwrites his words.

Every afternoon, he hears Oskar's voice. They try sex again, and when Thomas asks to see Oskar, she rolls over dumping him. She will not share him. She allows Thomas to watch them through the keyhole. Thomas must talk to Oskar and let him read the things intended for his Dad's eyes. Grandma will never allow this but talks about her son and how he takes over the family business he hates, wanting to be like his father. Thomas says their son showed up once pretending to want to interview Dresden survivors. Thomas doesn't say who he is.

Thomas rediscovers the city and learns follows Oskar, though Oskar never knows. Thomas wonders about Oskar's trips. For eight months, Thomas talks to people, trying to learn about Oskar as Oskar tries to learn about his Dad. At the Empire State Building, the old man grabs Thomas' shirt, demands he stop following them. Thomas retrieves his book and writes he is Oskar's grandfather and unable to speak. Oskar does not know he exists. As Thomas sits depressed, he hears Oskar enter, crying for Grandma. Oskar



takes him for the renter and pours out his heart to him. Oskar is not suspicious when Thomas asks to keep their meeting secret.

Thomas and Grandma make love for the first and last time since his return. Grandma thinks about all the babies that will never be born because of 9/11. Thomas is not sure it is sad. When Grandma declares life precious, Thomas kisses her, feeling his mother's lips, Anna's, his son's. She unbuttons her shirt and removes her pants. Thomas does likewise. Talking about worrying too much, they make love for the last time. In the morning, Oskar tosses pebbles at the window, and Thomas goes out to meet him, unquestioned by Grandma. Oskar announces he wants to dig up his Dad's grave.

Why I'm Not Where You Are (9/11/03) Analysis

Grandpa fills his last daybook with his version of learning about 9/11 and following Oskar and old Mr. Black around New York. His relationship with his estranged wife is awkward, as she refuses to share her son or grandson with him; she has earned their love and he has not. Repeatedly, Grandpa offers asides to his dead son about running out of walking space. In the last four pages, the leading between lines and type size reduce until the text becomes illegible.



A Simple Solution to an Impossible Problem

A Simple Solution to an Impossible Problem Summary

The day after Oskar and the renter dig up Dad's grave, Oskar goes to Mr. Black's door, but finds he has moved out. Oskar regrets how they part, hopes Mr. Black is on the observation deck of the Empire State Building, but will not check. Oskar is losing interest in the lock. Oskar meets Peter Black in Sugar Hill and returns home exhausted, frustrated, pessimistic, and wanting to do nothing, Oskar presses the Message Play button on the phone he usually ignores. Abby Black says she has not been completely honest and thinks she can help, so Oskar heads out in the dark to the house he visited eight months earlier. Abby explains that her ex-husband can help him with the key. Oskar learns that Abby has talked with his mom. It has been a play all along.

Oskar visits William Black, Abby's ex-husband. When Oskar pulls out the key, William asks if he found it in a blue vase. Oskar learns that the key opens a safe-deposit box belonging to William's father, Edmund, who died two years ago. In his last two months before he dies of cancer, Edmund writes good-bye letters to everyone he knows. William in his letter, learns that the key to the safe-deposit box is in a blue vase, which he has sold it to someone he talks to only briefly during the estate sale—Oskar's Dad. Under interrogation, William recalls everything he can about Dad's appearance, his laugh, discerning eye, thoughtfulness, and how the vase as an anniversary surprise, to be presented at a favorite restaurant (that explains the tuxedo) on September 12.

Oskar is curious about the safe-deposit box but declines an offer to go to the bank. Oskar breaks into tears and tells William all about the worst day, including finding the answering machine blinking. Dad keeps saying things are fine and not to worry. Oskar confesses that he has never told anyone about the final call that he cannot bear to pick up. He hears his own voice making a smart-alec remark and asking for a recorded message, and then for one minute and 27 seconds, Dad repeats, "Is anyone there." Oskar asks him to forgive him for being unable to pick up or to tell anyone. William does, and Oskar hangs the keys around his neck.

The renter is waiting under the streetlamp when Oskar gets home. Having learned that the key has nothing to do with Dad, Oskar will wear heavy boots the rest of his life and drift away from Dad. They agree to move Thursday night, the second anniversary of Dad's death. Oskar receives a personal letter from Hawking, acknowledging Oskar's persistence and inviting him to come to Cambridge for a few days to see how boring it is to be an astrophysicist. Hawking confesses that he wishes he were a poet, despite his rewarding life in science. The universe is filled with mysterious questions. He is glad they are sharing a beautiful morning on separate continents.



A Simple Solution to an Impossible Problem Analysis

The chapter title comes from Hawking's letter to Oskar, which closes the chapter. The astrophysicist declares that he has moped enough and sees the simple solution to an impossible problem lies in accepting that "today is the day I've been waiting for." Oskar has reached that day but takes no joy in it. Losing interest in his quest after losing Mr. Black, Oskar listens to the answering machine for the first time since the worst day and finds he has for eight months been ignoring a call from Abby Black, who has information. Talking to her, he discovers that Mom has been orchestrating everything. William's cool relationship with his late father contrasts sharply with Oskar's with his Dad, and the man, already shaken by the breakup of his marriage with Abby, is touched by Oskar's tale. Oskar finally gets off his chest what happens in Dad's final call and William gives Oskar absolution for failing to do what he could not. The second limo trip, to which Oskar has alluded, is about to happen.



My Feelings

My Feelings Summary

Knocking at Grandma's door wakes her up. Grandpa is outside, his cuffs muddy, but unhurt. They sit side-by-side, touching. As he writes on her palm that he is going to get her some magazines, her dreams go into reverse: Dresden doesn't happen and Thomas doesn't leave her. Grandma packs the typewriter and paper in a suitcase, tapes a note in her window, and catches a cab. Grandma cannot undo her mistakes. She finds Grandpa in the international terminal and watches him ask people the time. She is an expert at watching him and wants to be with him. He averts his face when she touches his shoulder and asks how he can do this. Grandma surprises him by saying Anna shares the secret of her pregnancy. Grandpa admits to seeing Oskar, which Grandma knows. Grandma suggests that they live in the airport, which has all the amenities. Grandma dreams back to the beginning, as animals descend the ramp two-by-two after the rain rises and the rainbow shines. Grandma types this to Oskar at a table big enough to fit them both. Grandma tells Oskar about the night she loses everything. She and Anna stay up late, thinking they have the rest of their lives together. They get tired and Anna tells her to continue in the morning. Grandma never tells her sister that she loves her. She tells Oskar: it is always necessary to tell someone when you love him or her and ends, "I love you, Grandma."

My Feelings Analysis

Grandma's reflections conclude, describing the second time Grandpa tries to run away, after helping Oskar dig up his Dad's grave. Grandma again follows Grandpa to the airport and talks him into living together there. In her dreams, everything runs in reverse, allowing the mistakes and crimes to disappear. She reminds her grandson that one must always express love when it is there, rather than waiting for a supposed better time. Her running backwards of the sequence of Creation and Fall in the Bible will be repeated by Oskar at the novel's conclusion with Dad's final day.



Beautiful and True

Beautiful and True Summary

Mom makes spaghetti and Ron joins them. He has lost his wife and daughter in a car accident and met Oskar's Mom at a group for people who have lost family. He cannot recall why he was not in the car and cries all the time. Mom tucks Oskar in at 9:36, but he gets up quietly and meets the renter. They pull up next to the cemetery and hop the fence and look for Dad's tombstone and take turns digging. Oskar thinks about how many things have died since the first creature is born. Gerald sees they have made little progress and takes over. The coffin is wet, cracked, and not sealed. Oskar is glad that Dad is not in there. Oskar's idea of digging up the coffin originally surprises the renter. Oskar wants to do it because Dad loves the truth and the truth is: he is not there. The renter asks what they will do after digging up the coffin. The renter has an idea, which he promises to reveal next day. The renter carries two suitcases; Oskar does not make the connection between Grandma's empty envelopes and these envelope-less letters.

When Oskar gets home at 4:22 AM, Mom is on the sofa, not angry, not curious, and not interested in tucking him in. He begs not to be hospitalized. He wants to tell her about the phone, but she tells him about Dad calling her cell phone to say he has gotten out and is on his way home. Oskar holds Mom's neck.

Oskar realizes this is his only life; she is his Mom, and he is her son. He tells her it is OK to fall in love again, but she is sure she never will. She loves Oskar. He looks at his Stuff That Happened to Me and believe he should not start another. He studies items, including pictures of the falling body. He tears them out of the book, reverses them, and flips through. The man floats upward. If Oskar had more pictures, the man would reenter the building, smoke would pour in, the plane would back out, and fly that way to Boston. Dad would take the elevator down, walk backwards to the subway and to their stop, back through the turnstile, walk home backward, and read the Times right-to-left. He would spit out his coffee, unbrush his teeth, unshave, dream backwards, get up during the night before the worst day, whistle "I Am the Walrus" backwards, get into bed with Oskar, and tell about the Sixth Borough from "I love you" to "Once upon a time." They would be safe.

Beautiful and True Analysis

Oskar narrates the story of his second limo ride, again featuring Gerald. Admitting that he does not put together the renter's letters and Grandma's empty envelopes, Oskar finds it odd that he does not recognize his grandfather in a man he instinctively trusts. The motif of backwards dreams begun by Grandma concludes the novel, touchingly bringing tormented Oskar to safety. The sequence of the man falling are included as a flip-book, showing him float upwards to safety.



Characters

Oskar Schell

The novel's principal narrator and protagonist, Oskar is a precocious, psychologically troubled nine-year-old, who occasionally claims he is older or younger to get sympathy or respect. His business card describes him comprehensively as an "inventor, jewelry designer, jewelry fabricator, amateur entomologist, Francophile, vegan, origamist, pacifist, percussionist, amateur astronomer, computer consultant, amateur archeologist," and collector of various things. He keeps a thick scrapbook entitled *Stuff That Happened to Me*. His favorite book, astrophysicist Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, is far beyond his reading level.

Oskar lives in a fifth floor apartment with his lawyer mother, who forbids him to watch television but allows him to view videos she has authorized and to read anything. He is an avid user of the Internet and fellow students consider him a nerd. Oskar appears to have had emotional problems even before his beloved Dad, Thomas Schell, Jr., a jewelry store owner, dies on 11 Sep. 2001, in the collapse of the North Tower of the World Trade Center. The problems are now amplified; he no longer uses elevators or mass transit and when he cannot fall asleep, invents things that will make humans more secure in a scary world. His Grandma who lives across the street is his closest confidant.

When Oskar discovers a strange key hidden in his late Dad's closet, he begins a quest to visit everyone in the New York City phonebook surnamed Black (472 names), most of the time accompanied by an aged upstairs neighbor, a long-time recluse, Mr. A. R. Black, who urges him to overcome his phobias.

Over six months, Oskar learns many things but not what the key represents, until he meets William Black, who sells the vase in which Oskar finds the key to Oskar's Dad just before 9/11. Learning that there is no more to the mystery than this, Oskar undertakes a project to dig up his Dad's empty coffin, to proclaim the truth that Dad is dead. Oskar's companion in this adventure is, he learns only later through letters from Grandma, his long-lost paternal grandfather, who flees his marriage before the birth of his son. He has been living with Grandma as a hidden renter since 9/11. Oskar shares his story with this stranger when he cannot find his Grandma one day, and confesses to William Black his guilty secret: that on 9/11 he is too petrified to pick up the phone to answer Dad's final phone call before the building collapses. Oskar dreams of everything on 10-11 Sep. 2001 running in reverse, so he can feel safe.

Mom

Oskar Schell's protective Mom is a hard-working lawyer, including Saturdays and some Sundays. She and Oskar's Dad are married 12 years before she is widowed in the



collapse of the World Trade Center on 11 Sep. 2001. Ever since, she has been more protective, panicky if Oskar is alone, so her mother-in-law across the street watches Oskar after school. On 9/11, Mom receives a phone call from her husband, claiming he has gotten out of the building and is safe. She intuits the truth, calls Grandma to watch Oskar, and walks home to avoid the clogged subways. She hugs Oskar when she gets home, calls everyone she can think of for information, and prepares posters with her husband's picture to try to locate him. She insists on a funeral with an empty coffin, and the mother-in-law whom she grows closer to does not argue.

Oskar believes Mom resents his living while her husband perishes, but she assures him she loves him. She forces Oskar to see a psychiatrist but overlooks evidence that he is bruising himself. She has met a man, Ron, at a group for people who have lost family, and his frequent presence in the household is a sore spot with her jealous son. Early in Oskar's search for the owner of a lock for which he has found a key, Mom talks to someone whom he has met, phones the rest of the Blacks in the New York City phonebook, and gives Oskar amazing carte blanche in going out on weekends. She arranges for an upstairs neighbor named Black to accompany Oskar and knows everything that is happening.

Grandma Schmidt

One of the novel's secondary narrators, Oskar Schell's paternal grandmother is early on portrayed as slightly senile and smotheringly touchy. She knits white mittens and scarves for Oskar, gives him a subscription to National Geographic and his Grandpa's abandoned camera. She lives under her maiden name on the third floor of the building across the street from Oscar and his widowed Mom, a lawyer who often works Saturdays and Sundays. As a result, Grandma has taken care of Oskar since early childhood and is his closest confidant since his Dad's death. Since 9/11, she has had a "renter" living with her whom no one has seen, and Mom believes he is an imaginary friend her own age. The renter is her estranged husband, missing 40 years, whom she allows to live in the guest room but forbids to have contact with Oskar or act as though he is their late son's father.

Self-deprecating and wishing she could live her life differently, Grandma is a survivor of the Allied firebombing of her native Dresden, Germany, during World War II. She loses her parents and beloved sister, Anna, who is pregnant with Thomas Schell's baby. She meets Thomas in New York City seven years later, proposes marriage to him, and promises not to become pregnant. Their marriage is based on rules that eventually destroy it. When she unilaterally decides she needs a baby, she gets pregnant, hides it as long as possible, and then tells her husband. At his instigation, she is supposedly writing her life's story, but produces only blank pages. Thomas runs away to Dresden, and sends only one letter to his unborn son. Every day, however, he is writing letters he cannot send, and Grandma collects the empty envelopes. When he leaves a second time, she follows him to the airport and convinces him to live with her there. She writes Oskar a letter explaining her life, ending with reverse dreams in which everything bad since the dawn of creation is undone.



Thomas Schell, Sr.

One of the novel's secondary narrators, Thomas is Oskar Schell's missing paternal grandfather, a native of Dresden, Germany, who speaks German, Greek, Latin, and English. In his youth, he believes himself already to be an accomplished sculptor. He loses everything in the Allied firebombing of Dresden at the close of World War II, including his parents and pregnant girlfriend, Anna Schmidt. Seven years later, having suffered extreme aphasia (loss of language), he meets Anna's sister in a New York bakery and accepts her proposal of marriage. To make life manageable, Thomas tattoos his hands YES and NO and constantly carries a daybook in which to write questions and responses. Thomas and his neurotic wife live a life of strict rules, haunted by his love of Anna.

When his wife breaks the cardinal rule and gets pregnant, Thomas cannot bear to live with her and the child for whom he fears, because life is harder than death. He tells his wife he is going to the airport as always to gather magazines and newspapers to help her learn English, but intends to flee. She brings him home for one night, but he slips away again and returns to Dresden, where he cannot sculpt, and agonizes over his mistakes. He sees his son once, when Thomas Jr. comes looking for him, claiming to be a reporter interviewing survivors of the bombing.

Learning that the son has perished on 9/11, Thomas returns to New York, looks up his estranged wife, who allows him to become a hidden renter, and begins following Oskar in his adventures around the city. Thomas does not break his promise to Grandma never to reveal his identity to Oskar, but meets him regularly and accompanies him to dig up Dad's empty coffin. Thomas buries all the unmailed letters he writes to his son over the decades and prepares to return to Germany, but Grandma intercepts him and convinces him to live with her at the airport.

Mr. A. R. Black

Oskar Schell's upstairs neighbor, Mr. Black claims to be a 103-year old descendant of Mayflower immigrants, and more convincingly is a half-blinded, deaf, widowed journalist who has covered both world wars and conflicts around the world. He retires when his late wife begs him to spend more time with her. He does and cuts down a tree over which she trips during their courtship and builds a bed from the pieces. Every morning he drives a new nail into it to keep himself going. Oskar comes upon Mr. Black early in his quest to talk with everyone surnamed Black in the New York City phonebook, convinced that one of them will be the owner of a mysterious key Oskar has found hidden in a vase in his late Dad's closet. Mr. Black keeps a card catalog of everyone he has interviewed, written about, or thought might someday be important. Oskar is upset that his Dad's name is not among them. Mr. Black has been a recluse since his wife's death and for years has been deaf, turning off his hearing aids to save on batteries. He accepts with surprising ease Oskar's proposal that he accompany him on his adventures, and has the world reopened to him. Along the way, he helps Oskar deal



with debilitating phobias. After a visit to the Empire State Building, Mr. Black is accosted by Oskar's supposedly lost paternal grandfather, who has been tailing them for weeks. Mr. Black explains the situation and then backs out of the relationship, angering Oskar, but casting him into Grandpa's sphere. When Oskar goes to check on Mr. Black, he has moved out. Oskar claims two cards from his file: Mr. Black's and his own.

Aaron Black

The first of the 472 people surnamed Black in New York that Oskar Schell plans on visiting for information about the key he has found and connected to his Dad, Aaron is hooked up to machines and cannot come down to talk. Oskar leaves his card and hurries away.

Abby and William Black

The second of the Blacks that Oskar Schell interviews, Abby is a 48-year-old epidemiologist living in a townhouse of Bedford St. She is a beautiful, large-breasted, unsmiling woman for whom Oskar wants to invent something to make her like him. She laughs at his corny joke about her beauty and says she does not know his Dad. Something about the way she says it makes Oskar suspect she is withholding something. Claiming thirst and diabetes, Oskar gets in the door, talks about a variety of subjects, and is turned down for a kiss. Remembering something that could help Oskar on his quest, Abby phones his house after he leaves and talks to his Mom, alerting her to the quest. This allows Mom to contact all the Blacks and arrange for Oskar's safety. Oskar discovers this months later, when for the first time since 9/11 he listens to the answering machine. Abby puts Oskar in touch with her ex-husband, William, who has been trying to find whoever bought a blue vase from him at an estate sale just before 9/11. On the second visit, Abby offers to kiss Oskar, but he declines and breaks into tears because his quest is failing.

Abe Black

Oskar Schell's interviewee on Coney Island, Abe takes him to ride the Cyclone, knows nothing about the key or Dad, and drives him back to Manhattan.

Ada Black

Oskar Schell's interviewee in Manhattan who owns two Picasso paintings, but knows nothing about the key. They debate the ethics of wealth. Oskar wonders how Ada knows his name, not recalling having given told her it. She allows him to snoop around the apartment and decides she likes him, wishes him luck, and sends him home in a cab.



Agnes Black

Oskar Schell's interviewee in the Bronx, Agnes dies on 9/11 in the Windows on the World restaurant where she is a waitress. Oskar contemplates her perhaps serving Dad or even dying together with him.

Ruth Black

A recluse who lives at the top of the Empire State Building since being widowed, Ruth shares her encyclopedic knowledge about the landmark with Oskar Schell, and Mr. Black wants to see her again, but she cannot bring herself to leave the building.

Dr. Fein

Oskar Schell's psychiatrist whom Oskar sees only because his allowance depends on it, Dr. Fein annoys his young patient with condescension and trying to be a buddy. Oskar amusingly twists a word association game until it makes him self-conscious. Using a stethoscope, Oskar hears Fein through the door mention "hospitalization," and panics. During the performance of Hamlet, as he pictures beating Jimmy Snyder to a bloody pulp, Oskar also pictures doing it to Fein, and yearns to tell the doctor "fuck you," but settles for a Dad-like shrug of his shoulders.

Simon Goldberg

Introduced to Thomas Schell, Sr. (Grandpa) while he is anxious to find Anna Schmidt, Goldberg is introduced by her father as "one of the great minds of our age," while he claims to be simply "trying to be." He is curly-haired and disheveled, with charcoal handprints on his white shirt. Herr Schmidt grants Goldberg asylum for as long as he needs. Goldberg declares angrily that humans will kill humans until there is no one left to fight. Later Thomas learns Goldberg is interred in a Nazi labor camp. In New York after 9/11, Thomas thinks he meets Goldberg in a bookstore, but then believes not. Goldberg had passed a note to Thomas, saying he is impressed with the young man and hopes their paths cross again.

Stephen Hawking

The real-life eminent astrophysicist, long confined to a wheelchair with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, Hawking appears throughout the novel. Oskar imitates his computer-synthesized voice, reads his *A Brief History of Time*, which is far beyond his reading level, and repeatedly writes him in Cambridge, England, asking to be his protégé. Hawking sends form letters regretting he cannot keep up with the volume of his mail, but finally after a health crisis responds personally, inviting him to visit and see how boring it is to be an astrophysicist. Hawking wishes he were a poet.



Thomas Schell, Jr.

Oskar Schell's late Dad, born in 1963, after his father, Thomas Schell, Sr., cannot cope with life and abandons him and his mother. Thomas Jr. studies law in California but takes over his father's jewelry store, against his mother's wishes. He hates retail sales and hopes his only son, Oskar, will choose another path. He receives one letter from his father in Germany, and finds him in Dresden. Neither admits that he recognizes the other. Thomas Jr. dies in the collapse of the North Tower of the World Trade Center on 11 Sep. 2001. He goes that morning for a business meeting, and during the crisis calls home five times, leaving calming messages. He also calls his wife to say he has escaped, hoping to calm her. Oskar cherishes every memory of his Dad, particularly the way he shrugs. He is a caring father for nine years, tucking his son in at night, telling him stories, sparking his investigative powers, and proofreading the Times. His purchase of a blue vase at an estate sale just before his death leads Oskar to his quest to find the specific way in which Dad dies.

Anna Schmidt

Grandma's late sister, Anna is the object of Grandpa Thomas Schell's love, but perishes in the Allied firebombing of Dresden Germany, just after learning that she is pregnant with Thomas' baby and confiding the news to her sister. When Thomas and Grandma marry seven years later in New York, Anna's memory haunts the marriage.

Jimmy Snyder

Oskar Schell's classmate who plays Hamlet in the abbreviated presentation of the Shakespearean play, Jimmy is a bully. Oskar pictures beating him to a bloody pulp during the final night's performance, after verbally abusing him. Jimmy is sent to the principal's office for calling Oskar weird during his Hiroshima presentation, and on the playground threatens to beat Oskar up unless he admits his Mom is a whore.

Stan the Doorman

Stan watches the apartment building in which Oskar and his Mom live and tells Oskar when he has mail, using the AOL voice Oskar has taught him. Stan is the intermediary for Grandpa's notes to Grandma after he returns to New York, post 9/11.

Gerald Thompson

The Sunshine Limousine driver who takes Oskar and his family to Oskar's father's funeral and later Oskar and his Grandpa—"the renter"—back to the cemetery to dig up Dad's grave, Gerald is the father of two girls whom he cherishes.

Tomoyasu

A survivor of the U.S. atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Japan, 15 Aug. 1945, Tomoyasu talks on tape of searching for his daughter, Masako, and having her die in his arms. Tomoyasu makes the tape so people will realize there can be no more war. Oskar Schell plays the tape on his boom box for his class in school.



Objects/Places

Central Park

New York City's Central Park is near the Schell home, and a favorite family haunt. Oskar plays there with his Grandma, once hiding from her, causing her great consternation, after which she insists that any time she calls his name, he must answer "I'm OK." On weekends, Oskar's late Dad sometimes organizes "Reconnaissance Expeditions" for Oskar to follow clues through the park. On the last evening of his life, Dad tells Oskar a story about New York's drifting Sixth Borough and how residents of Manhattan refuse to relinquish the park and drag it to its present position with gigantic hooks. Fossils, the reservoir's pH, the odd position of some cages in the zoo, and two names carved into trees in the park provide circumstantial evidence for the myth.

Columbian Bakery

The coffee shop on Broadway in New York where Thomas Schell, Sr., and Grandma first meet, both new to the city, lonely, broken, and confused. Later, Grandma proposes marriage in the bakery and Thomas agrees, provided they have no children. Forty years alter, Thomas returns to New York and finds the bakery no longer exists.

Cyclone

The famous roller coaster at Coney Island, NY, that Abe Black says one cannot die without experiencing, the Cyclone panics Oskar Schell. During the ride, he calculates the forces keeping the car on the track and him in the car, using knowledge taught him by Dad as they wait for pancakes.

Dresden, Germany

The cultural city in eastern Germany firebombed by the Allies, 13-15 Feb. 1945, Dresden is home to Oskar Schell's four great-grandparents, all of whom perish in the fires, while his paternal grandparents emigrate and marry in New York. Thomas Schell, Sr., loses the love of his life and the baby forming inside her, and the grief renders him unable to cope with life. After learning Grandma is pregnant, Thomas flies home to Dresden and reads and writes letters in a library built on the site of their former house.

Empire State Building

Ruth Black, one of the 472 New Yorkers surnamed Black whom Oskar Schell seeks to interview about a mysterious key, lives as a recluse atop the Empire State Building since being widowed, and shares her encyclopedic knowledge about the landmark with



the public. Oskar Schell and Mr. Black take her informative tour of the Observation Deck, learning many facts, including the near-disaster of a blimp mooring and the crash of a World War II bomber into the 79th floor, which irritate Oskar's phobias. Ruth believes the Empire State Building is the soul of New York City.

Frazer and Sons

The locksmith's store on 79th St., where Oskar Schell gets his duplicate apartment keys made. Walt, the grandson of the founder, looks at the thick key Oskar finds in a vase in his Dad's closet and declares it is probably for a lockbox 20-30 years old, and suggests Oskar try every lock he finds.

Ground Zero

The footprint of the twin towers of the World Trade Center destroyed by terrorists on 11 Sep. 2001. Oskar has apparently made many pilgrimages to the sacred site and thinks about inhaling his Dad's cells there.

Hamlet

William Shakespeare's great tragedy, Hamlet is reduced to a modern rendition aimed at elementary school students with ADD. Bully Jimmy Snyder plays the tormented Prince of Denmark, while Oskar Schell is dressed in black and wears a papier-mâché mask to look like the skull of Yorick, Hamlet's late jester. Oskar cannot believe that relatives have anything better to do than attend the world's greatest drama multiple times, and imagines himself getting even with Jimmy by ad libbing dialog denouncing him and beating him to a pulp with the mask.

Hiroshima, Japan

Oskar Schell brings to school a tape recording of reminiscences of a survivor of the first use of a nuclear bomb in Hiroshima, Japan, on 6 Aug. 1945. Tomoyasu talks of searching for his daughter, Masako, and having her die in his arms, her flesh melting and filled with maggots. Tomoyasu makes the tape so people will realize there can be no more war.

Sixth Borough

An imaginary island, once within long-jump reach of Manhattan, joined by six bridges and tunnels, which mysteriously begins drifting away, despite attempts to anchor it. Oskar Schell's Dad tells him this story on the last night of his life.



Themes

Death

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close is filled with death, because the primary narrator, precocious nine-year-old Oskar Schell, is obsessed with it since his Dad perishes in the collapse of the World Trade Center, 11 Sep. 2001. Oskar needs to know which of the many forms of death is Dad's and accepts that death is inevitable for every living creature. When he cannot sleep or is anxious, Oskar invents protective devices to ward off violent death and scrupulously avoids "obvious targets." Oskar asks Mom to bury him in a mausoleum rather than in the ground, and refuses her argument that he has a long time to live, saying Dad had not expected to die that day. He demands the right to tell the truth: Dad's cells are scattered on rooftops and being inhaled; his coffin is empty. Mom angers Oskar enough for him to declare that he wishes she had died rather than Dad, but then hopes she will not die and leave him alone.

Oskar's paternal grandparents, postwar immigrants from Germany, lose their families in the Allied bombing of Dresden in the closing days of World War II and share this preoccupation with death. They split up before their son, Oskar's Dad, is born, because Thomas, Sr., cannot bear to be with them. In Dresden, Thomas is her sister Anna's lover and the father of her just-conceived child. The Allies begin their attack with two raids. During the second, Thomas races cellar-to-cellar to find Anna, ahead of the destruction, trampling the dead and dying, seeing people melt into pools or char, and buildings collapse. At the zoo, Thomas is ordered to shoot animals. He forces himself to think, although he finds life scarier than death. Not having heard these stories, Oskar brings to school a harrowing tape recording in which a Mr. Tomoyasu recalls the atrocious U.S. bombing of Hiroshima at the end of World War II.

Grandma learns about the World Trade Center while knitting and half-watching TV. She cares for Oskar when schools let out and keeps him from seeing coverage. Mom lies to Oskar that Dad is not there, showing she knows he is dead. Alone, Grandma watches continually repeating images of planes going into buildings, bodies falling, people waving from high windows, and buildings falling. Grandma knows from experience that there are thousands of casualties and thousands of bodies, but looking at Oskar gives meaning to her life—even the bad things, which make him possible. Grandma grieves being unable to remember her father's last words to her as he lies trapped beneath a fallen ceiling, paralyzed. In Dresden on 11 Sep. 2001, Grandpa sees the same images, reads his son's obituary, and flies back to New York to say goodbye, carrying the thousands of letters he has written to him but been unable to mail.

Writing

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close is filled with writing. A few weeks after the "worst day," narrator Oskar Schell begins writing letters to people to "lighten his boots" (make



himself feel better), including astrophysicist Stephen Hawking, Beatles drummer Ringo Starr, and researchers Kaley and Goodall. He receives responses from them, surprisingly, regretting they cannot accept him as a protégé without more information. On the second anniversary of the collapse of the World Trade Center, Oskar's Grandma writes to him about her life, beginning with finding herself in the position of needing to figure out how to write to a prisoner in a Turkish Labor Camp who writes people at random asking for a reply, a picture, and a name. She collects writing samples from her father, who trusts she has a good reason for asking, and hopes some day she will do something she does not understand for someone she loves. She tricks a murderer into writing a request for an early release, and gets samples from a piano teacher, an aunt, a schoolmate, and her maternal grandmother about whom she cares nothing but receives a revealing 67-page life story. Early in her married life in America, Grandma is encouraged by her husband to type her life's story, but produces only blank pages.

Grandpa, who returns to Germany before their son, Thomas, Jr., is born, is reduced to writing everything when he traumatically loses the ability to speak. He has "YES" tattooed on his left palm and "NO" on the right. These make life possible. The last word he loses is "I." He carries blank daybooks to write requests, responses, and song lyrics, and at the end of each day reviews the pages of his life. He often runs out of blank pages and must flip back to the most fitting response. He writes on walls, mirrors, floors, windows, wine bottles, sleeves, and arms. He wants to tell his son that he is sorry for everything: for not saving Anna or dying with her, for being unable to let unimportant things go and hold onto important things, for the mother and son he will never see, for never getting to feed him or tell him bedtime stories. Thomas realizes he and his wife are alike—both writing Nothing. When he returns to Germany, he writes daily letters to his son, but can bear to mail only one, otherwise sending empty envelopes. When he returns to New York after 9/11, Thomas, Sr., tries to resurrect his sculpting and visits an art store, writing his name in many media on scratch pads. Oskar finds them, assumes they are his Dad's writing, and begins a quest to meet all New Yorkers surnamed Black. Notes Grandma leaves her estranged husband in the window Oskar believes to be for him, asking him not to go away. Preparing to leave again, Thomas writes a third letter to his dead son.

A third literary character is ancient Mr. A. R. Black, a foreign correspondent in both world wars and conflicts around the world. Mr. Black keeps a biographical index that contains a card on everyone he has written about, talked to, read about, or thought might prove significant. Each holds a name and a one-word description. Most are "war" or "money." When he finds nothing on Thomas Schell but one for "Mohammed Atta: War," Oskar protests the unfairness of the man who murdered his good Dad being biographically significant. Finally, at the end of his sixth-month quest for the owner of a key he finds hidden in his Dad's closet, Oskar meets William Black, whose father, Edmund died two years before. In his last two months before dying of cancer, Edmund writes good-bye letters to everyone he knows, a man who tells William about the amazing 10-page he receives, mentioning William. William calls everyone in his father's Rolodex, asking to read letters. William's letter contains unemotional "end-of-life stuff" and business arrangements, including the fact that the key to the safe-deposit box is in a blue vase, which William sells by chance to Oskar's Dad just before 9/11.



Love

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close deals with love in a number of ways, but all are tempered and conditioned by loss. Thomas Schell is a loving husband and father, who runs the jewelry business he hates because he loves the father he has never seen. When Thomas dies in the collapse of the World Trade Center, 11 Sep. 2001, his widow and his mother are drawn closer together and become more protective of nine-year-old Oskar. Riding to the empty-coffin funeral, Oskar is convinced Mom does not love him and wishes it were he being buried. Over the next two years, Mom meets Ron, whose wife and daughter perish in a car accident, and Oskar is convinced Ron is "humping" Mom. He sees Mom using excuses to talk about the relationship, and she resents his tone. She asks whether Dad would want her to have friends. Oskar digs up Dad's empty coffin because Dad loves the truth and the truth is: he is not there. That night Oskar realizes that this is his only life, she is his Mom, and he is her son. He tells her it is OK to fall in love again, but she is sure she never will. She loves Oskar.

A secondary love story involves Oskar's paternal grandparents. Grandma is at the top of Oskar's list of loved ones, while Grandpa is just a legend to him. Thomas Schell, Sr. (Grandpa) falls in love in his youth with Anna Schmidt in Dresden, Germany, in the closing days of World War II. They make love awkwardly, hurriedly, and for Anna painfully. On the day before their world ends, she announces she is pregnant. Anna and the baby perish in the Allied firebombing of the city, and seven years later, Thomas meets Anna's younger sister in New York. Frustrated to the point of losing the ability to speak, Thomas accepts her proposal of marriage, provided they never have children. Grandma (never named) finds sex, always from the rear and in the dark, to be like crying and cannot understand why anyone bothers to do it. When she decides she needs a baby and becomes pregnant, Thomas cannot cope and returns to Dresden, claiming he loves her, but knowing he does not. When they debate his leaving at the airport by pointing at phrases in his daybook, neither points to "I love you." Thomas briefly relents. They go home, hold one another, he kisses her all over, she believes him—without being stupid—and in the morning, he leaves for 40 years, writing letters to his beloved son which he cannot bear to mail. Learning of the son's fate on 9/11, Thomas returns to New York and Grandma takes him in as a renter, refusing to share her grief or her grandson with him. Grandma poses for Thomas, however, and he produces a sculpture of Anna. Grandma leads him to her son's bedroom and talks about all the babies that will never be born because of 9/11. Thomas is not sure it is sad. When Thomas kisses her, he feels his mother's lips, Anna's, and his son's. Talking about worrying too much, they make love for the last time.



Style

Point of View

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close by Jonathan Foer is told through three perspectives, all in the first person singular. The primary narrator is precocious, emotionally troubled nine-year-old Oskar Schell, half-orphaned in the 11 Sep. 2001 destruction of the World Trade Center. Oskar's existing phobias are intensified, leaving him obsessed with security. He tells his tale of finding a key hidden in a vase in his late Dad's closet with complete candor, admitting ignorance when he knows he does not know things (like the pronunciation of Greenwich) and sometimes bragging of things he thinks he understands but has slightly off (like sex). He seems to know he is an odd little fellow, but not care.

The second narrator is Oskar's Grandma, who writes him a letter explaining her life, which has remained a mystery to him his whole life, even though she is the person closest to him after his late Dad. Grandma writes the day after Oskar and her estranged husband dig up Dad's empty coffin and bury Grandpa's unmailed letters that he brings back to New York from Germany. Grandma is brutally honest about the tragedies of her life, which she tries to view as prerequisites to Oskar's existence. She dreams of history running backwards until all evil is eliminated.

The third narrator is Oskar's Grandpa, Thomas Schell, Sr., writing three letters to the son he never meets, explaining why he is not there with him. The first is written from Thomas' native Dresden soon after his abandonment of his pregnant wife. He does not expect to be forgiven, but wants his son to realize he could not do otherwise and does love him. The second letter is written when Thomas, Jr., is fifteen. The third is written after Thomas, Jr., perishes on 9/11. Grandpa tells a story of futility and frustration.

Setting

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close by Jonathan Foer is primarily set in New York City in the two years following the destruction of the World Trade Center on 11 Sep. 2001. Nine-year-old Oskar Schell, who narrates the primary story line, lives with his attorney Mom in an apartment near the 86th St. entrance to Central Park. His Grandma lives across the street. Oskar's discovery of a mysterious key in a vase in his late Dad's closet leads him on a quixotic quest to find the lock it opens. He believes it is owned by one of the 472 New Yorkers surnamed Black in the phone book. Thus, he finds himself all over Manhattan, on Staten Island, and at Coney Island. A most memorable setting is the Observation Deck of the Empire State Building, where Oskar and his companion, Mr. Black, get a brief history of the landmark.

A secondary setting for the novel is Dresden, Germany, in the weeks leading up to the Allied firebombing of the city, 13-15 Feb. 1945. Both of Oskar's paternal grandparents,



natives of the city and survivors of the tragedy, describe life there in their youth in intellectual and economically comfortable families and how sudden, flaming tragedy strikes. The harrowing description, including Thomas' mission to kill escaped carnivores in the zoo, closely matches historical facts about the first two bombing runs.

A third setting is Hiroshima, Japan, thanks to a tape recording made with survivors of the U.S. atomic bombing on 6 Aug. 1945. A Mr. Tomoyasu talks on tape about searching for his daughter, Masako, and having her die in his arms, her flesh melting and filled with maggots. Tomoyasu makes the tape so people will realize there can be no more war. Oskar plays the tape for his classmates and goes on to talk about other "fascinating" aspects of the bombing. This allows 9/11 to be placed in the context of two controversial events at the conclusion of World War II.

Language and Meaning

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close by Jonathan Foer seeks to capture the trauma of the terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City on 11 Sep. 2001. The primary narrator is a precocious nine-year old boy, Oskar Schell, whose existing emotional problems turn to obsession due to the event, whose second anniversary has just passed. Oskar is picked on in school as "weird," but does not care. He lives in a world of experiments, inventions, Internet research, and the astrophysics of Dr. Stephen Hawking. He loves the Beatles, because his late Dad, born in 1963 loves the Beatles and whistles their tunes. Oskar describes his overturned life with a kind of clinical precision, no doubt partly thanks to the fact he is in analysis. Curious and honest, he asks the meaning of words he does not understand and makes them part of his active vocabulary. He admits he knows about birds and bees but not about the birds and the bees and gets some of what he "knows" about sex backwards. He admits that many things he knows he wishes he did not. He has a few verbal tics, including "I'm OK" every time Grandma calls his name, and "What the?" to anything at all puzzling, and characterizes his psychological problems as "heavy boots" and zipping up the sleeping bag of himself.

Letters written by Oskar's paternal grandparents explaining the mistakes of a lifetime to child or grandchild have a heartbreaking intensity. Writing after abandoning her apartment across the street from Oskar to live with Grandpa at the airport, Grandma goes in and out of memories of her childhood and their early married life together, and begins dreaming of things running backwards, eliminating all evil. Grandpa writes three letters to his son, Oskar's Dad, once before he is born, next when he is 15, and finally after he has died, explaining why he cannot bear to live a life of rules with Grandma. He is a crushed spirit, unable to speak, unable to sculpt, and unable to get his dead first love, Grandma's sister, out of his head. He writes in paragraph-length run-on sentences, showing the depth of his anguish.



Structure

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close by Jonathan Foer consists of 17 unnumbered but titled chapters. Precocious nine-year-old Oskar Schell talks about his life after being half-orphaned in the attack on the World Trade Center, 11 Sep. 2001. His adventures, searching New York City for people surnamed Black, trying to learn about a mysterious key he finds in his Dad's closet, are interspersed with letters from his paternal grandparents. While they break up the primary narrative, they provide information that Oskar does not yet know about them and the father he misses terribly.

Grandpa's "Why I'm Not Where You Are" is told in four parts (chapters 2 and 6 dating from 1963, 10 from 1978, and 14 from 2003); it is the apologia of a troubled soul. Grandma's letter to Oskar, written from the airport after he and Grandpa (whom Oskar considers just a renter) dig up Dad's empty coffin, is delivered in four parts (chapters 4, 8, 12, and 16). Entitled, "My Feelings," it tells her version of the events of their rocky marriage and 9/11.

The remaining chapters are Oskar's lively chronicle, with topical titles: 1) "What The?", 3) "Googolplex", 5) "The Only Animal", 7) "Heavy Boots - Heavier Boots", 9) "Happiness, Happiness", 11) "The Sixth Borough" (Dad's telling of a myth about the creation of Central Park), 13) "Alive and Alone", 15) "A Simple Solution to an Impossible Problem", and 17) "Beautiful and True."

Integral to the book is the use of illustrations and special typography. Oskar's adventures are shown in the many photographs he takes with Grandpa's camera, with a worn doorknob appearing more frequently than any other. The book ends with a flipbook illustration of a victim of 9/11 seeming to float upwards because Oskar has arranged the pictures in reverse order to allow him to feel safe. The most dramatic typographical oddity illustrates Grandpa's concern that he is running out of space in his daybook to tell his late son all he needs to. In the last four pages, the leading between lines and type size progressively reduce until the text becomes illegible and finally nearly black. Key passages are highlighted in light blue marker or ink, providing the author a remarkable way to get his point across.



Quotes

"I moved over to Grandma's side of the limousine and told Mom, 'Why would I need a key to her apartment?' She could tell that I was zipping up the sleeping bag of myself, and I could tell that she didn't really love me. I knew the truth, which was that if she could have chosen, it would have been my funeral we were driving to. I looked up at the limousine's sunroof, and I imagined the world before there were ceilings, which made me wonder: Does a cave have no ceiling, or is a cave all ceiling? 'Maybe you could check with me next time, OK?' 'Don't be mad at me,' I said, and I reached over Grandma and opened and closed the door's lock a couple of times. 'I'm not mad at you,' she said. 'Not even a little?' 'No.' 'Do you still love me?' It didn't seem like the perfect time to mention that I had already made copies of the key for the deliverer from Pizza Hut, and the UPS person, and also the nice guys from Greenpeace, so they could leave me articles on manatees and other animals that are going extinct when Stan is getting coffee. 'I've never loved you more.'" What the?, pp. 6-7.

"I started bringing a knapsack, which I would stuff with as much as would fit, it got heavy, my shoulders burned with English, she wanted more English, so I brought a suitcase, I filled it until I could barely zip the zipper, the suitcase sagged with English, my arms burned with English, my hands did, my knuckles, people must have thought I was actually going somewhere, the next morning my back ached with English, I found myself sticking around, spending more time than was necessary, watching the planes bring people and take people away, I started coming twice a week and staying for several hours, when it was time to go home, I didn't want to leave, and when I wasn't here, I wanted to be here, not I come every morning before we open the store, and every evening after dinner, so what is it, am I hoping to see someone I know get off one of the planes, am I waiting for a relative who never will come, do I expect Anna?" Why I'm Not Where You Are (5/21/63), pp. 108-109.

"I wanted to cry but I didn't cry, I probably should have cried, I should have drowned us there in the room, ended our suffering, they would have found us floating face-down in two thousand white pages, or buried under the salt of my evaporated tears," Why I'm Not Where You Are (5/21/63), p. 124.

"ME. Alas, poor Hamlet [I take JIMMY SYNDER's face into my hand]; I knew him, Horatio.

"JIMMY SYNDER. But Yorick ... you're only ... a skull.

"ME. So what? I don't care. Screw you.

"JIMMY SYNDER. [whispers] This is not in the play. [He looks for help from MRS. RIGLEY, who is in the front row, flipping through the script. She draws circles in the air with her right hand, which is the universal sign for 'improvise.']

ME. I knew him, Horatio; a jerk of infinite stupidity, a most excellent masturbator in the second-floor boys' bathroom—I have proof. Also he's dyslexic.

"JIMMY SYNDER. [Can't think of anything to say]

"ME. Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs?

"JIMMY SYNDER. What are you talking about?



"ME. [Raises hand to scoreboard] Succotash my cocker spaniel, you fudging crevasse-hold dipshitake!" Heavy Boots, Heavier Boots, p. 145.

"Mom said, 'His spirit is there,' and that made me really angry. I told her, 'Dad didn't have a spirit! He had cells!' 'His memory is there.' 'His memory is here,' I said, pointing at my head. 'Dad had a spirit, she said, like she was rewinding a bit in our conversation. I told her, 'He had cells, and now they're on rooftops, and in the river, and in the lungs of millions of people around New York, who breathe him every time they speak!' 'You shouldn't say things like that.' 'But it's the truth! Why can't I say the truth!' 'You're getting out of control.' 'Just because Dad died, it doesn't mean you can be illogical, Mom.' 'Yes it does.' 'No it doesn't' 'Get a hold of yourself, Oskar.' 'Fuck you!' 'Excuse me!' 'Sorry. I mean, screw you.' 'You need a time-out!' 'I need a mausoleum!' 'Oskar!'" Heavy Boots, Heavier Boots, p. 169.

"I put my shoes on and took my air-raid hood with me. I made my way to the train station. So many people were marching toward me, away from the city. I smelled something similar to grilled squid. I must have been in shock, because the people looked like squid washing up on the shore.

"I saw a young girl coming toward me. Her skin was melting down her. It was like wax. She was muttering, 'Mother. Water. Mother. Water.' I thought she might be Masako. But she wasn't. I didn't give her any water. I am sorry that I didn't. But I was trying to find my Masako," Happiness, Happiness, pp. 187-188.

"We were quiet on the car ride home. I turned on the radio and found a station playing 'Hey Jude.' It was true, I didn't want to make it bad. I wanted to take the sad song and make it better. It's just that I didn't know how.

"After dinner, I went up to my room. I took the box out of the closet, and the box out of the box, and the bag, and the unfinished scarf, and the phone.

"Message four. 9:45 A.M. It's Dad. Thomas Schell. It's Thomas Schell. Hello? Can you hear me? Are you there? Pick up Please! Pick up. I'm underneath a table. Hello? Sorry. I have a wet napkin wrapped around my face. Hello? No. Try the other. Hello? Sorry. People are getting crazy. There's a helicopter circling around, and. I think we're going to go up and onto the roof. They say there's going to be some. Sort of evacuation—I don't know, try that one—they say there's going to be some sort of evacuation from up there, which makes sense if. The helicopters can get close enough. It makes sense. Please pick up. I don't know. Yeah, that one. Are your there? Try that one," Happiness, Happiness, p. 207.

"When your grandfather left me forty years ago, I erased all of his writing. I washed the words from the mirrors and the floors. I painted over the walls. I cleaned the shower curtains. I even refinished the floors. It took me as long as I had known him to get rid of all of his words. Like turning an hourglass over.

"I thought he had to look for what he was looking for, and realize it no longer existed, or never existed. I thought he would write. Or send money. Or ask for pictures of the baby,



if not me.

"For forty years not a word.

"Only empty envelopes.

"And then, on the day of my sons funeral, two words.

"I'm sorry.

"He had come back," My Feelings, p. 233.

"It would be getting so hot that my skin would start to get blisters. It would feel so good to get away from the heat, but on the other hand, when I hit the sidewalk I would die, obviously. Which would I choose? Would I jump or would I burn? I guess I would jump, because then I wouldn't have to feel pain. On the other hand, maybe I would burn, because then I'd at least have a chance to somehow escape, and even if I couldn't feeling pain is still better than not feeling, isn't it?

"I remembered my cell phone.

"Who should I call?

"What should I say?

"I thought about all of the things that everyone ever says to each other, and how everyone is going to die, whether it's in a millisecond, or days, or months, or 76.5 years, if you were just born. Everything that's born has to die, which means our lives are like skyscrapers. The smoke rises at different speeds, but they're all on fire, and we're all trapped," Alive and Alone, pp. 244-245.

" 'I printed out the frames from the Portuguese videos and examined them extremely closely. There's one body that could be him. It's dressed like he was, and when I magnify it until the pixels are so big that it stops looking like a person, sometimes I can see glasses. Or I think I can. But I know I probably can't. It's just me wanting it to be him.'

" 'You want him to have jumped?'

" 'I want to stop inventing. If I could know how he died, exactly how he died, I wouldn't have to invent him dying inside an elevator that was stuck between floors, which happened to some people, and I wouldn't have to imagine him trying to crawl down the outside of the building, which I saw a video of one person doing on a Polish site, or trying to use a tablecloth as a parachute, like some of the people who were in Windows on the World actually did. There were so many different ways to die, and I just need to know which was his,' Alive and Alone, p. 257.

" 'I couldn't pick up the phone. I just couldn't do it. It rang and rang, and I couldn't move. I wanted to pick it up, but I couldn't.

" 'The answering machine went on, and I heard my own voice'

"Hi, you've reached the Schell residence. Here is today's fact of the day: It's so cold in Yukatia, which is Siberia, that breath instantly freezes with a crackling noise that they call the whispering of the stars. On extremely cold days, the towns are covered in a fog caused by the breath of humans and animals. Please leave a message.

" 'There was a beep.

" 'Then I heard Dad's voice.'



"Are you there? Are you there? Are you there?" A Simple Solution to an Impossible Situation, p. 301.

"Then he would've gotten back into bed, the alarm would've rung backward, he would've dreamt backward.

"Then he would've gotten up again at the end of the night before the worst day.

"He would've walked backward to my room, whistling 'I am the Walrus' backward.

"He would've gotten into bed with me.

"He would've look at the stars on my ceiling, which would've pulled back their light from our eyes.

"I'd have said "Nothing" backward.

"He'd have said 'Yeah, buddy?' backward.

"I'd have said 'Dad?' backward, which would have sounded the same as 'Dad' forward.

"He would have told me the story of the Sixth Borough, from the voice in the can at the end to the beginning, from 'I love you' to 'Once upon a time...'

"We would have been safe," Beauty and Truth, p. 326.

Topics for Discussion

Describe Dr. Stephen Hawking's role in the novel.

Which Beatles reference makes the greatest impact in the novel? How would you explain their centrality in the Schell household?

How does Mr. A. R. Black's deafness contribute to the storyline?

Which of Oskar Schell's inventions would you most like to see implemented and how would it work?

Which of Oskar Schell's phobias seems the most debilitating and how?

What function does letter writing play in the novel? Do the various writing campaigns share a motivation?

What do Dresden, Hiroshima, and 9/11 share in common? How do they differ?