

Introduction for Jonathan Safran Foer

By Pieter van den Blink

Given the speed at which this event sold out, there's probably little need for me to introduce Jonathan Safran Foer to you tonight. You know who he is: the author of the two tremendously successful novels *Everything is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (which he discussed at the John Adams Institute in 2005) and one that was much less successful, *Tree of Codes*.



Jonathan Safran Foer for the New York Times

Also from his hand is the beautiful argument against our meat-industry, called *Eating animals*, which he discussed here at the John Adams Institute in 2010.

Foer was born almost 40 years ago in Washington D.C in a Jewish family of Holocaust survivors. He got a degree in philosophy from Princeton, and currently lives in New York, where he also teaches creative writing.

So much for biographical facts, I'll go directly to the new book. *Here I Am*, translated by publishing house Ambo Anthos as *Hier ben ik*.

[Let me see how many of you have had the chance to read it already...]

I think it's a great book. It's as big as a rock, at 570 pages. And it's great in the sense of rich in scope and detail. Its theme is so diverse that it can be approached from many angles.

In fact, the book is so complex that in order to speak about it, one has to overcome a certain hesitation; the fear of not putting the first thing first, of getting the priorities wrong, of not seeing the forest for the trees, or more appropriately maybe: not seeing the tree for its branches.

This fear of making a choice, by the way, is one of the things that the book is about. I have overcome that hesitation by choosing a very personal approach, and introduce this great book to you from the side where I entered it, the memory that I will take away from it.

It made me cry. It made me choke up so hard that I am truly happy to have finished reading *Here I am* early enough so that some time could pass before I had to stand here and talk about it. Not many books make me cry. I am not a man who cries.

That, by the way, is also one of the things the book is about.

So let me tell you about the aspect of the book that hit *me* most, that which brought out the tears. Jacob Bloch, the main character, cannot cry. Although he has reason enough to do so. The story of *Here I Am* is the story of his marriage falling apart. The happy times that he and his wife Julia have had, are described only in flashbacks. At the beginning of the book, their marriage has lasted for sixteen years. Those of you who follow the literary news through the grapevine may know that a marriage falling apart was what has occupied Foer over the last decade, but I'm not overly interested in the auto- or not autobiographical aspect of this book, even though he has put in some references to emphasize the similarity between author and character. They both won the Jewish National Book Award, for example. In the same year.

By the way, the question of how autobiographical one can or should be, is also one of the things the book is about.

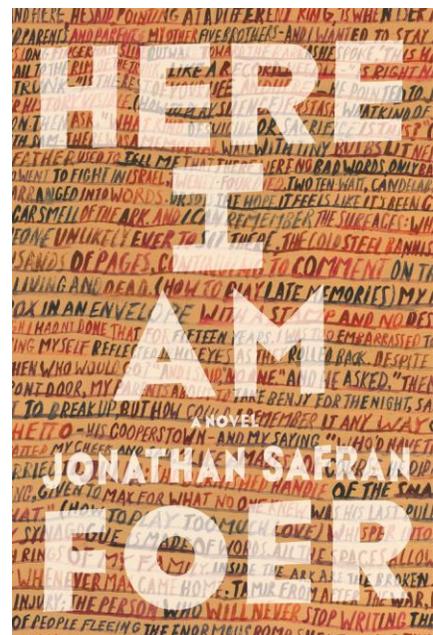
That is because this Jacob, a writer of fiction both in book form and for television, is secretly working on a script for a tv-show based on his own life and that of his family. And he feels the need to add to this script a so-called 'Bible' in which he elaborates on how certain emotions in the script should be interpreted and played by the future actors, were he ever to let the script out of his drawer for anybody to read.

So here's a man who can't cry, nor express his feelings easily, in a marriage that's falling apart. He needs to hustle to meet all his emotional obligations towards three (!) other generations of his family, his grandfather, his parents and his own kids, and, to top it all off: he has to face the fact that the time has come to put the family dog to sleep.

I can hear you think: is this maybe a tearjerking male mid-life crisis book?

The idea that you can know what the person in front of you is thinking, by the way, is also one of the things the book is about.

But you might think that: a midlife-crisis book. Some critics have referred to it as such. And if I tell you that I think that it's *not* a midlife-crisis book, is that just proof of *me* having a midlife crisis at 50?



Well, maybe. But I think the beauty of the book is in the narrow, painfully narrow description and analysis of a type of crisis that, unfortunately, is not restricted to midlife: the miscommunications between loved ones and inside the places that we call 'home'.

And that's where another big branch of this tree comes in sight, one that we shall certainly climb onto in our talk. Home as in homeland. Israel. Zionism.

While Jacob's marriage is breaking down, and his dog is walking its last mile, things turn terribly bad in the Middle East. Israel's prime minister calls upon every Jew in the diaspora to come 'home' and help to defend and rebuild the country. Jacob, who's not much of a gunslinger, is torn between his plights at home and the call from that other 'home'.

How that works out is something that you will *not* hear from this stage tonight, as we will try to give away as little as possible from the story of this great book, while discussing it as profoundly as we can. May I welcome Jonathan Safran Foer.

Pieter van den Blink is an independent journalist. Among others, he has contributed to Trouw and Vrij Nederland. He is an editor for 360, a monthly magazine that selects the best journalism from the international press.



Paradiso,

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