

A short piece between 1,000 and 1,500 words about a book that has had a particular influence on you or been in some way significant to you.

I was eleven years old the day that the World Trade Centre towers fell. On September 11th I got out of bed and walked downstairs to get ready for school, as usual. My parents liked to watch the morning news as my sister and I ate breakfast. That morning, footage of the terrorist attacks in New York played on a loop. The phrases ‘once we know more’ and ‘as the story unfolds’ were endlessly repeated by reporters on the ground. Any other news stories were sandwiched between breakaways for more developments as rescue crews searched the rubble. I don’t remember being scared or sad or anything. When I got to school, all the usual classes were cancelled. Every classroom had a TV on the wall, usually reserved for morning notices. That day, we watched more footage of the attacks. The teacher was silent, and I don’t remember how long it went on for. I started to cry, and when my friends asked if I had family in New York, I said that no, I didn’t. We were in New Zealand, far away from any danger. But I cried anyway.

It wasn’t until a long time later, during my first year of university, that I remembered that sadness so vividly, when I read *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer for a class on contemporary literature. As many university students will tell you, it’s not often that you find a mandatory reading that you not only enjoy, but that stays with you long after the exams and assessments are done.

Foer’s 2005 novel follows nine-year-old Oskar Schell – inventor, aspiring scientist and avid letter writer to Stephen Hawking – who discovers a key in a vase left behind by his deceased father, Thomas Schell. Although Thomas was a jeweller by day, he happened to be in one of the towers for a meeting when the attacks occurred and died at an unknown point during its collapse. Oskar begins a journey across New York to discover the missing lock for this key, meeting strangers on the way with their own stories of love and loss. Throughout, the book also interweaves the narrative of Oskar’s grandmother, who survived the 1945 Dresden bombings, and his grandfather, who left the family before Oskar’s father was born.

These narratives are told through different mediums – a sheet of doodles in an art shop is re-created in full colour, and Oskar’s photographs (taken during his explorations) occasionally interrupt the text of the story. Oskar’s grandmother writes letters to him to tell her memoirs, while Oskar’s grandfather has lost the ability to speak, so uses words written in notebooks or tattooed on his hands to communicate. I remember being enchanted by this blending of styles, each telling a unique perspective of events. I especially loved the way text is manipulated on some of the pages. In one chapter, intentional text errors are circled in red, invoking the way Thomas Schell used to circle mistakes in the New York Times, an activity of bonding between Oskar and his father. In another, the spaces between lines gets smaller and smaller until the whole page is black, to show how Oskar’s grandfather runs out of room in one of the many notebooks he uses to communicate with.

In my other English class during that university year we focused on structured, formal writing from the English greats – Brontë, Shelley, Dickens. There, writing had rules, limitations and hard structures. *Extremely Loud* was so different in its presentation and in its deliberate breaking of all the rules of traditional prose writing. In *Extremely Loud*, words aren’t just still and structured on the page. They come alive, spilling over chapters, sitting in single sentences surrounded by blank space, crowding in on each other without line breaks between dialogue or consistent spacing. The novel showed me that words didn’t just have to be a medium of communicating – they can become a

character themselves, and the way they are presented holds almost as much importance as what they mean. The book treats every word as precious, placing it with care and thoughtful attention. Because of this amazing treatment of words, when we were asked during my postgraduate course at Whitireia to bring in a book that did something interesting with design, my first thought was for *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*.

But *Extremely Loud* didn't just surprise and inspire me in the way it physically treated words on the page. Throughout the book, the reader explores the different narratives of all the characters and how they intersect. The characters are unusual and frequently absurd – Mr Black writes a one-word summary of people on a piece of card and stores it, Ruth lives in a storage room at the top of the Empire State Building, Abby keeps a photo of a crying elephant on her wall. But they're also intimately human – flawed and afraid, always moving forward but frequently living in the past. Many we meet only briefly as Oskar investigates the key as, after all, New York is a big city. I loved the way that the book showed me beauty in these fleeting moments into everyday lives. Every character feels real, like you could open your own front door and find them standing there, but they're also never lingered upon longer than needed. They're transient, living in that place between the Something and Nothing that drives the end of Oskar's grandparents' relationship, or existing in the space between New York and the mythical Sixth Borough Thomas Schell tells Oskar about the night before he dies.

At the end of the novel, Oskar finally finds the rightful owner of the key. It belongs to William Black, who accidentally left it in the vase that was sold to Thomas Schell. It opens a safety deposit box left to him by his father. But we never find out what is in the box, and neither does Oskar. The key has nothing to do with Oskar's father – he probably never even knew it was there. There's no great secret he's been hiding from Oskar, no final message of "I love you" hidden somewhere behind one of the 162 million locks in New York. It's a fitting end, and I remember at the time feeling a sense of calm satisfaction with it. It shows us that grief can't be solved with the turn of a key – that it is a process of growing and struggling to come to terms with loss. It also shows us what Oskar has been struggling to accept all along: that sometimes things that happen have no great reasoning, no divine fate. That sometimes marriages fall apart, that sometimes we lose the things we value, that sometimes the wrong person can simply be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I've never been to New York. I've never seen Ground Zero, or the newer One World Trade Centre built just across from the site. I have no friends or family living there. But in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Oskar's struggle to find a meaning to his father's death, his memory of the 'worst day' and his deep sense of loss is so potent, it brings back those memories of when I was eleven years old, watching the world fall down.