

FICTION IN
REVIEW



G R E G J O H N S O N

“If it looks funny on the page, I don’t read it,” said Flannery O’Connor of experimental fiction. This somewhat reactionary observation is in line with her aspersions on such authors as Virginia Woolf, whom she called “nuts” (though admitting this was an unfair characterization); and yet according to her biographer, Brad Gooch, she did admire such modernist works as James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914) and Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (1915), masterpieces that “made it new” in terms of subject matter if not of literary form. Had O’Connor lived into the 1970s (she died in 1964, at age thirty-nine), it’s doubtful she would have cared for the self-reflexive fictions of John Barth, the poetic riffs of Donald Barthelme, or any of the other myriad postmodernist works that have tested the boundaries of contemporary fictional practice.

Though a staunch Roman Catholic, O’Connor in her correspondence did recommend some of the up-and-coming Jewish writers of her day, including the young Norman Mailer (whose work she called “very fine”) and especially the relatively conventional Ber-

Here I Am, by Jonathan Safran Foer (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 571 pp., \$28)

nard Malamud. Upon first reading Malamud's *The Magic Barrel* (1958), she wrote, "I have discovered a short-story writer who is better than any of them, including myself." In another letter, she amplified: "The stories deal with Jews and they are the real thing. Really spiritual and very funny. Somebody was telling me yesterday that the reason Jews are ahead of Catholics in every intellectual pursuit is very simple: they have more brains. I believe it." But O'Connor could get cranky after reading books with either extreme subject matter or what she saw as too much sexual frankness. Had she survived long enough to witness the sexual revolution and to encounter such a novel as Philip Roth's star-making *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), no doubt she would have blown a gasket.

Certainly it's fanciful to imagine her reading the highly experimental yet ethically grounded books Jonathan Safran Foer has published so far – the novels *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), along with the non-fiction work *Eating Animals* (2009) – but it seems likely that she would have appreciated Foer's work for the same reason she did Malamud's, even if Foer's prose sometimes "looks funny on the page." For his writing also evokes the spirituality and humor O'Connor liked in Malamud's fiction. Foer's obsession with Judaism, Israel, and Jewish identity are far removed from O'Connor's abiding devotion to Catholicism, but she would no doubt have admired Foer's interests in family tradition and religious principles, even if she did not share them.

In his first novel, *Everything Is Illuminated*, Foer produced a double-stranded narrative in alternating chapters featuring a young man named Jonathan Safran Foer and his guide, Alex, who helps Foer (usually called "the hero") travel to Ukraine in order to find the young girl who saved his grandfather from the Nazi death camps. More serious subject matter it's difficult to imagine, but the novel is also uproariously funny. For Alex is the most delightful and original mangler of the English language since Mrs. Malaprop, and he shows on almost every page that he is idiomatically challenged, to say the least: "When his train finally arrived, both of my legs were needles and nails from being an upright person for such a duration." As he admits when he and Foer meet face to face,

“I implore you to forgive my speaking of English. I am not so premium with it.”

Foer’s second novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, displayed the kind of technical razzmatazz that O’Connor scorned, including experimental typography, blank pages, and oddly placed photographs. Yet this novel, too, was marked by an underlying seriousness of theme and purpose, centered upon nothing less than the 9/11 attacks. It’s no accident that the boy’s last name is “Schell.”

Foer’s massive new novel, *Here I Am*, tells the story of the upper-middle-class Bloch family, who live in Washington, D.C. Jacob is a writer, his wife, Julia, an architect; they have three sons close in age, the oldest of whom, Sam, has just entered puberty with the kind of masturbatory brio one finds in *Portnoy’s Complaint*. The Bloch parents’ marriage is at a crossroads, and much of the novel’s first half is concerned with their discussing and ultimately finalizing a divorce; Foer explores the effect of this family turmoil on the boys, and even on the aging family dog, Argus. (Foer, a passionate advocate for animals, as his book *Eating Animals* demonstrates, featured in his first novel a dog named Sammy Davis Jr., Jr.) Various minor characters also make significant appearances throughout the book, such as Jacob’s irascible father, Irv, and his mother, Deborah; some visiting cousins from Israel, especially a brother-figure, Tamir; and Jacob’s dying grandfather, Isaac. The first half of the novel expertly conveys the Blochs’ family life in its prelapsarian state as well as in its new aura of anxiety surrounding Jacob and Julia’s minefield of a relationship.

Much of this material, it should be said, is extremely well written, and since this is such a long novel – at nearly six hundred closely printed pages – extensive quotation is both required and well deserved. Here is a passage early in the book that captures the Blochs’ marital squabbles deftly, and one that any reader ever involved in an unraveling marriage will appreciate. During one of their arguments, they come to an impasse:

He didn’t say anything, and neither did she. Not because the words were deliberately withheld, but because the pipeline between them was too occluded for such bravery. Too many small accumulations, wrong words, absences of words, imposed quiet, plausibly deniable attacks on known vulnerabil-

ities, mentions of things that needn't be mentioned, misunderstandings and accidents, moments of weakness, tiny acts of shitty retribution for tiny acts of shitty retribution for tiny acts of shitty retribution for an original offense that no one could remember. All communication had become subterranean: shifting tectonics, felt on the surface, but not known.

The phrase "shifting tectonics" adumbrates later events in the story, but here it perfectly describes a marriage in peril. As it turns out, Jacob is having a meaningless, rather sordid affair, and in retaliation Julia has one of her own. All this conflict and chaos obviously affect the children, who, like Oskar Schell in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, are the real "heroes" of the novel. Foer excels in making us care about this family and its painful conflicts, and in many ways this is a domestic novel, reminiscent of Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940) or Alison Lurie's *The War Between the Tates* (1974) or any number of other novels about battling spouses and caught-in-the-crossfire children.

Foer has much more on his mind, however, for it's the Blochs' Jewishness that comes to interest him almost more than the characters and their various dilemmas. About halfway through the novel, a major earthquake takes place in Israel, serving as a catalyst to large-scale war in the Middle East: "The news that reached America was scattershot, unreliable, and alarmist. The Blochs did what they did best: balanced overreaction with repression. If in their hearts they believed they were safe, they overworried, talked and talked, whipped themselves, and one another, into foams of anguish. From the comfort of the living room, they followed the unfolding news like a sporting event, and at times caught themselves rooting for drama." Clearly, the Blochs project their own family crisis onto the larger upheaval, and soon enough Jacob decides he will fly to Israel and fight in the war defending his "home country." He even seems to understand that his projections are keeping him sane: "The kids' lives would be ruined. Tens of thousands of people would die. Israel would be destroyed. He wanted all of that, not because he craved horror, but because imagining the worst kept him safe from it – focusing on doomsday allowed for the day to day." Ultimately Jacob faces the ontological question of his human purpose, identity, and being: "He was a

father to his boys, a son to his father, a husband to his wife, a friend to his friend, but to whom was he himself?"

Despite its serious themes and graceful writing, *Here I Am* often gets bogged down by this kind of philosophical weightiness. At times, entranced by his formal pyrotechnics (unnecessary structural ploys, eccentrically presented dialogue) and by the question of Jewish identity and family, Foer seems to forget that he is telling a story. Like many almost six-hundred-page novels, this one could have been a hundred pages shorter and achieved its goal with greater economy and less self-conscious "style." Some material – for instance, the narrative longueurs regarding Jacob's "Israeli cousins" and a half-page of bickering back-and-forth between Jacob and Julia on how best to clean the living room – could simply have been excised.

Many readers will excuse these flaws, however, simply because Foer writes so beautifully. He is equally adept at conveying his characters' emotional states, at suggesting both the profundity and pettiness of their inner lives, and at humanely and convincingly making them alive on the page. Here, for instance, is Jacob as he observes his wife: "When they got to the house, Julia was on the stoop, her arms holding her bent knees to her chest. The sun settled on her hair like chalk dust, shaking free with the tiniest movement. Seeing her there, as she was then, in that moment, Jacob spontaneously shook free the resentment that had settled in his heart like gravel. She wasn't his wife, not right then, she was the woman he married – a person rather than a dynamic." And here he reflects upon their differences as parents: "Jacob felt that most problems weren't problems, and those that were could be resolved with distraction, food, physical activity, or the passage of time. Julia always wanted to give the kids a life of gravity: museums, trips abroad, black-and-white movies. Jacob saw no problem with – saw the great good in – bubblier, dumber activities: water parks, baseball games, terrible superhero movies that brought great pleasure. She understood childhood as the period of soul formation. He understood it as life's only opportunity to feel safe and happy."

What Flannery O'Connor would have admired about *Here I Am*, surely, is its enormous ambition, its attempt to get the whole world – personal, familial, cultural, political – into a single book.

As the novel trundles along to its moving if not unexpected conclusion, the reader feels gratified in the same way original readers of Charles Dickens or George Eliot must have felt when closing one of those authors' "maximalist" masterpieces. If some of its narrative experimentation seems unnecessary, a mere holdover from his previous, shorter books, this can be overlooked in light of this still-young writer's splendid achievement here, his fine execution of a book that is, in O'Connor's words, "really spiritual and very funny." For *Here I Am* is surely one of the most impressive novels published this year, cementing Foer's reputation as one of our most significant and intriguing novelists.