

FREE

HERE COME THE MARRIAGE DEFENDERS!

See Editorial, page 7.



FIGHT THE EVIL STRONG BAD

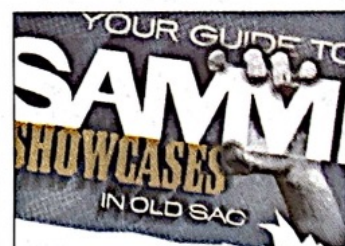
See In the Mix, page 54.

APARTHEID ONSTAGE

See Theater, page 34.

BUSINESSWOMAN HAS OAK PARK KIDS IN STITCHES

See 15 minutes, page 71.



THE SAMMIES REV UP IN OLD SACRAMENTO

See insert.

WILL ARNOLD SMASH STATE EMPLOYEES' piggy bank?

The most influential public pension system in the country is now the target of Republicans. The fund's Democratic allies aren't taking it lying down.

BY RON RUSSELL

18



About a boy

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

Jonathan Safran Foer
Houghton Mifflin

Jonathan Safran Foer's latest novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, is like a woman so beautiful and charming that her faults—whatever they may be—are quickly forgiven. In fact, the faults aren't even recognized as such. Rather, they're written off as quirks, even if they're not especially endearing ones.

Foer—whose first novel, *Everything Is Illuminated*, was a resounding success—has written a touching, funny and clever book about a boy's struggle and subsequent quest in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks that

claimed his father's life. Foer, 28, felt compelled for reasons unknown to imbue his novel with a great deal of gimmickry, such as pictures of turtles mating, typographic tomfoolery, pages with nothing but numbers and passages marked with red pen indicating errors. But the quirks of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* do not take anything away from what is, on the whole, an outstanding novel.

So, on to the important part.

Oskar Schell is a precocious 9-year-old from New York City whose father was at the top of

the World Trade Center at Windows on the World when it was struck by terrorists. Only Oskar heard the phone messages—at first reassuring and then frantic—that his father left between the impact of the planes and the building's collapse.

Eccentric and clever as Oskar may be, he is understandably bereft, and his penchant for invention won't let him rest. His unique knowledge about some of the particulars of his father's death merely puts Oskar in a privileged position of guilt at hiding the phone messages from his mother and grandmother. And he still doesn't know enough about how his father died to still his mind. So, he invents.

"I want to stop inventing," Oskar says. "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 (Web) site, or trying to use a tablecloth as a parachute. ... There were so many different ways to die, and I just need know which was his."

Oskar is given a key—literally—to the answer when he accidentally breaks a vase containing an envelope with the word "Black" on it and a key. Oskar reasons that the key must belong to someone with the last name Black living in New York City. So, he sets off to meet each Black—starting at the beginning of the alphabet—until he gets some answers about his father, though even Oskar isn't sure what he's looking for, much less what he'll find.

A good deal of the enjoyment of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is in the depiction of his mostly indomitable spirit as he traipses around the five boroughs despite the many fears that have risen up and swallowed his sense of security. The mixture of naiveté and worldliness Foer has infused his 9-year-old protagonist with is endearing and memorable.

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Foer has produced a novel that is artfully written without being showy. It is funny without dismissing a young boy's suffering or the gravity of September 11. And the plot—which also involves extensive sections narrated by Oskar's grandmother and mute grandfather—keeps the reader engaged without resorting to trickery or sleight of hand.

Given this literary bounty, a picture of a pair of turtles in coitus is a small price to pay. □

POET'S CORNER

Doll

Kiss me kill me shoot me pill me
destroy me create me
I'm your Barbie doll
porcelain skin
on a figured frame
I'm your china doll
paint me dress me and hold me
like a prize
lose me abuse me hate and criticize
fill me with stuffing plastic and lles
brown and glossy mascara
running eyes
beat me love me punish me
stand above me
I'm your broken doll

—Brittany Byington
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