

Public Abstract

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Graduation Term:WS 2007

Department:English

Degree:MA

Title:Swaddled in White String: Breaking Loose from the Ties of Family Memory in Everything is Illuminated

After traveling to the Ukraine in search of the woman who saved his grandfather from the Nazis, Jonathan Safran Foer intended to write a nonfictional account of his journey and findings. Though having found nothing during his journey, Foer had to replace the missing information with an imagined personal history. From inventions was born his novel, Everything is Illuminated.

This (re)creation process is characteristic of postmemory, a concept developed by Marianne Hirsch. Postmemory defines the experience of children of exiled Holocaust survivors. Because these children were not present to experience their families' Holocaust trauma, they cannot adopt the memories of their parents but must instead invent their own memories. This essay explores how the novel's narrative structure, mythical elements, and resolution (or lack thereof) serve as solutions to allay the problems of postmemory.

Using fiction as a way to consign to his characters the mourning that is characteristic of postmemory, the Author admits a remorseful obligation to dissociate himself from the text as he composes it. He employs particular magical realist devices and elevated language, which counterbalance the contemporary language and atmosphere in the rest of the novel. This whimsical style embodies Foer's attempts to romanticize a past that he will never truly own and to amplify the distance that separates the broken post-Holocaust world he knows and the pre-Holocaust utopia he imagines. Ultimately, Foer proves that one must go back in history to go forward in the present by highlighting the constant refiguring, recreating, and recontextualizing of postmemory that defines the Jewish experience.