

Fall 2013

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Recommended Citation

Hyzy, Elizabeth '14, "The Fantastic in Jonathan Safran Foer's "Everything Is Illuminated" to Solve Holocaust Dilemmas" (2013). *All-College Writing Contest*.

https://publications.lakeforest.edu/allcollege_writing_contest/84

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The Fantastic in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* to Solve
Holocaust Dilemmas

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Jewish American Literature

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November 18, 2013

In Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*, the protagonist (whose name also happens to be Jonathan Safran Foer—I will distinguish the two by referring to the author as Foer and the character as Jonathan) scours Ukraine for a town called Trachimbrod and the woman who saved his grandfather during the Holocaust. Foer divides the book into three storylines: in the first, the Ukrainian guide, Alex, tells his version of Jonathan's topsy-turvy visit; in the second, Jonathan imagines how his ancestors lived in Trachimbrod; in the third, Alex writes letters to Jonathan, often opining about the Trachimbrod novel. The second story differs from the other two in that it is written by Jonathan, not Alex, and because it has elements of the fantastic. When "magic" appears in a story, it can fall into one of three categories: the marvelous (where magic is treated as one with reality), the uncanny (when the "magic" can be explained through other means), or the fantastic (where there is no proof as to whether it is really magic or not). The story of Trachimbrod is fantastic because, although many odd and seemingly impossible situations happen, we do not know whether or not magic is a real element of the story.

The Trachimbrod story is split into two sub-plots. The first focuses on Brod, Safran's great-great-great-great-great-grandmother. Rescued as an infant from a river, Brod grows into a hyper-intelligent, hyper-attractive young woman. After her adopted father dies, she marries "the Kolker." A saw disc sticks in his head during a work accident, but he does not die until a year later, after which the town casts his body in bronze. The statue ends up being a town sundial since the disc in his head is perpendicular to the ground. Jonathan then glosses over the rest of Brod's life and skips to his grandfather's story. Safran is born with teeth and grows up with a dead arm, which makes him irresistible to women. Although he has sex with almost all of the local women, he only experiences his first orgasm when he copulates with his wife, which happens to be when the Germans bomb Trachimbrod. The Nazis either drown the Jews or burn

them in a synagogue. Safran, Jonathan's grandfather, survives the river, but his wife and child perish.

At first, the Trachimbrod portion of *Everything Is Illuminated* does not seem like a Holocaust tale since only the end focuses on the Nazi invasion. However, Jonathan uses the fantastic to solve the issues of fragmentation and believability brought on by the Holocaust. Jonathan's fantastical telling of pre-Holocaust history is a reflection of the Holocaust itself. Since the Holocaust scattered his ancestors' history, he replaces what he does not know with magic-like moments. Also, because the tragedy of the Holocaust is so unbelievable, he can only explain the past by using the fantastic. Magical elements allow him to relive the past at a safe distance; he makes sense of a seemingly impossible situation (the Holocaust) with the impossible (magic). Only in Trachimbrod's final chapter does Jonathan forgo the fantastic. Since Jonathan contrasts his fantastical scenes with this magic-less, Nazi one, he emphasizes the reality of this horror. Jonathan solves Holocaust dilemmas by reinventing his past with the fantastic.

Foer's use of magic to explain the Holocaust is not a new technique. Since the Holocaust is a dense subject—both because of its emotional weight and because it seems unbelievable—the tactics writers use to talk about it covers a wide spectrum. Edward Alexander takes a bleak stance on Jewish American literature's presence after World War II. In his collection of essays, *The Resonance of Dust: Essays on Holocaust Literature and Jewish Fate*, he says most post-war American writing completely neglected Jewish culture. According to Alexander, the American Jews cut themselves off from the Holocaust and their European family history, and their writing suffered because of this severance (126). The Holocaust was too disturbing for most writers, which is why they evaded it. Whereas Alexander talks about why and how Jews avoided writing about the Holocaust, in *Reflections on the Holocaust*, Alvin H. Rosenfeld notes how they did. He

says Jews have tried a variety of literary devices—especially biblical allusions—to describe the Holocaust, but they still fail at truly relating its horror. Rosenfeld concludes this passage with, “it would seem that we must qualify the notion that the Holocaust was altogether without parallels” (21). The Holocaust is an un-relatable topic; whether or not people want to read about the Holocaust, writers have no means of connecting them to it. Contradictory as Alexander and Rosenfeld’s analysis on Jewish American literature may seem, they both hold a common thread. Both bring up the main problem with Holocaust literature: it is too big and too difficult for people to write and read about. This is why some writers—Jewish or not—avoid the subject while others search for an appropriate way to depict it. However, try as they might to accurately convey the horror, no one really can. Thus, the tradition of associating the Holocaust with magic was born from these literary experiments.

Quasi-magical moments often appear in post-war, Jewish American fiction. The protagonist of Bernard Malamud’s “The Jewbird” is a talking bird. Although this short story is not directly about the Holocaust, Malamud wrote it after World War II. Thus, as with everyone, the Holocaust was probably preying on his mind and influenced his work. “The Jewbird” is an example of the marvelous. Readers accept magic as part of the story’s reality when they accept the idea that a bird can talk. In another post-war story, Cynthia Ozick’s “The Shawl” gives a snapshot into the tragic life of a mother and her two daughters in an internment camp. In it, the baby has a blanket that seems to have magical properties. The shawl protects, hides, and feeds the baby. Only when the older sister take it away do the Nazis notice the rogue child and execute her. “The Shawl,” like Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated*, is fantastic. No proof exists in the story as to whether the shawl is actually magical or not. In the same way confusion surrounds Jewish history, ambiguity also shrouds some Jewish stories. Thus, these writers use magic to solve the

dilemma about Holocaust literature. They use magic—something unreachable—to convey how distant or unreal the Holocaust feels to them. This method, according to Anne Hunter, comes with drawbacks. In "Tales from Over There: The Uses and Meanings of Fairy-Tales in Contemporary Holocaust Literature," she says that fairy-tale norms—such as symbolism, themes, and structure—“permeate contemporary fictional texts. This tendency suggests that, within cultural memory of the twentieth century, the Holocaust itself may have become a form of a dark fairy-tale” (Hunter 59- 60). Magic populates Holocaust literature to the point that it changes how people view the Holocaust. Writers have wrangled with how to write about it for so long that their attempts have changed the common view of it. As distant and as unreal as the Holocaust already seemed, it now definitely is because of this new mindset. Even though people treat the Holocaust like a myth because of Ozick, Malamud, and Foer, these three and writers like them need an external force—magic—as outlet to relate their stories.

One of the many issues that Holocaust writers combat is fragmentation. Since the Holocaust ruined families and records, today’s writers have to gather remains and form stories out of them. Rosenfeld calls Jewish literature the “literature of fragments” (33). To Rosenfeld, fragmentation is not just an issue Holocaust writers have to rectify; it is the sole purpose of their writing. Likewise, Menachem Feuer, in "Almost Friends: Post-Holocaust Comedy, Tragedy, and Friendship in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*," calls it, “...the construction of meaning out of fragments or the gathering of fragments” (37). Feuer believes writers should make stories by combining the parts they know instead of focusing on one piece or making everything up. Fragmentation became a recognizable feature of Jewish literature because the Holocaust almost eradicated an entire culture. No one—not even the survivors—really knows the whole story of the Holocaust because too many of its participants died. Their stories are gone—

links that could have chained the whole truth together—leaving us with scraps littered about the floor. Writers and historians are stuck arranging the puzzle of the Holocaust, but they cannot finish it, not with some pieces lost forever. Even so, writers like Foer and characters like Jonathan believe that attempting to solve the past is worthwhile, even if they know they will never explain everything fully.

Everything Is Illuminated reveals Jonathan's struggle with fragmentation both through Alex's description of Jonathan and Jonathan's description of Trachimbrod. Jonathan takes history's leftovers to the Ukraine. According to Alex, Jonathan carries copies of Augustine's picture, the savior they are searching for, and a map of Trachimbrod (Foer 59-60). Jonathan's compulsion to copy the picture reveals how fragmented his past is. The picture is the source of his journey, a rare, concrete object that verifies his ancestors' stories about Augustine and his grandfather. To compensate for his minimal evidence and fearing he will lose his only tangible piece of his past, Jonathan makes tens of copies of it. The map, which at first seems like a straightforward way to find Trachimbrod, also shows another way in which fragmentation encumbers Jonathan's journey. He, Alex, and Alex's grandfather later learn that Trachimbrod—the town they are searching for and the setting of Jonathan's story—no longer exists in the Ukraine. No one knows where it used to be. Thus, even the map, something that seems whole and full of information at first, is simply another incomplete part of the puzzle. Eventually, Alex and Jonathan find other means—mainly talking to the locals—to find the town formerly known as Trachimbrod, but this issue of fragmentation is a direct consequence of the Holocaust. If that generation of Jews survived—as well as their homes and belongings—Jonathan would have resources with concrete information about his family. Instead, he only has two objects—one which becomes useless—and his own imagination to guide him.

Readers realize that, even after Jonathan's journey in the Ukraine, his novel-in-progress is only a taped-together mess of his family's history. He tries to cloak the fragmented past in magic, but the cracks still shine through. In the first sentences of the Trachimbrod story, Jonathan writes, "It was March 18, 1791, when Trachim B's double axle wagon either did or did not pin him against the bottom of the Brod river" (Foer 8). Although Jonathan knows that Trachim B died in the river, he says "did or did not" because he does not know the details of the death. Jonathan blurs specifics and uses hesitant language because his information is incomplete. Also, Jonathan calls the river the "Brod river." The villagers named the river Brod only after this incident; they honored the river's victim by naming it after him. Therefore, no one would have actually called it the Brod river at this point in the narrative. However, Jonathan does not know what it was originally called, so he bases the name off the little he does know. In this, Jonathan reveals his lack of knowledge about the past through his writing style, but he also address his partial information thematically. Later in the scene, two girls swim among the flotsam from the wagon's watery wreckage before they find baby Brod. They pick up a doll, a clock, an umbrella, a key, a mirror, petals, cards, and more. This collection of obscure items resembles the random bits and pieces Jonathan owns from his past. In the same way Jonathan has to solve his family history with only a copied photograph and an outdated map, the townspeople need to figure out how the accident happened by studying the floating trinkets.

Fragmentation saturates the Trachimbrod storyline. Even when Brod grows older and records her thoughts in a journal, Jonathan still has little information on her. The only things he knows about her husband, for example, is that he was not bright and that he was a Kolker. This limited knowledge is most apparent in the scene where he almost dies. After the saw disc lodges itself in the Kolker's head, a doctor asks if he who he is, to which he replies, "The Kolker"

(Foer 126). He does not say his real name because Jonathan, the writer, does not know it. A reader might see this reply as a manifestation of the character's brain damage since he refers to himself by his job instead of by his name. Although this interpretation would make sense in another story, it does not fit Jonathan's. Jonathan *always* refers to the Kolker as such because he does not know any better. This scene inverts itself. The whole purpose of it is to reveal that the Kolker is mentally stable (at least partially) since he can state his name. The readers, however, do not get to experience that effect because Jonathan does not know much about his great-great-great-great-grandfather. Although this part of the story occurs ages before the Holocaust, it is still a reflection of its damaging consequences. Because the Holocaust silenced the ancestors, friends, or documents that might have had information on Jonathan's distant ancestors, he will never truly know the details of his past.

Fragmentation may explain why Jonathan split his story into two parts and shoved a four generation gap in between. This rift parallels his struggle with the divided past, and it reflects the difficulties he faces while extracting two stories. Because of the Holocaust, Jonathan has an incomplete history of his grandfather. Because he has no access to what his grandfather knew, he also has no access to the interesting life story of Brod that his ancestors probably would have known about or at least had evidence of. Now, all that is gone, and Jonathan is left to his own stipulations. At some points, he fills in the missing information with what he knows—like how he uses “the Kolker” instead of making up a name—but at other points, he uses the fantastic.

Although nothing but a historical epiphany could really solve the issue of fragmentation, Jonathan uses the fantastic to meld the few parts he does know. The fantastic—a prominent feature in most fairy-tales and children's fables—has become a popular form of Holocaust structure. While citing other scholars, Hunters says that the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors

frame their stories like fairy-tales to make the unknown more narratable (60). Once they know the basics of the story, they frame it as a myth. After they fit what they know into a tight structure, they realize what information is missing and then sprinkle those gaps with fairy dust. Children's stories allow writers to mold the Holocaust into something recognizable and helps them discover what storytelling elements are missing. Adams says Foer uses magic to distinguish Alex's story from Jonathan's; parts of the past (Alex's story) are accessible through objects and memories, but others (Jonathan's story) can only be accessed through the imagination (62). Jonathan gets the beginnings of his story from the truth—like the information he picks up with traveling with Alex—but then he needs to finish out what he does not know on his own. Jonathan paints the unknown with the fantastic, but this tactic—since the fantastic is magic that may or may not be real—does not actually clarify his past. By glazing his story with magical moments that could be reality or fantasy, Jonathan leaves his readers as confused about his story as *he* is about his past. Magic partially solves the issue of fragmentation by filling in the gaps, but it also heightens it by confusing readers.

Safran's past is riddled with confusion, so Jonathan explains it using the impossible. His grandfather's character is more like a mythical creature than a human. When speaking of Safran as an infant, Jonathan says, "His teeth. It's the first thing I notice whenever I examine his baby portrait. It's not my dandruff. It's not a smudge of gesso or white paint. Between my grandfather's thin lips, planted like albino pits in those plum-purple gums, is a full set of teeth" (165). Jonathan, however, is an unreliable narrator, and we know these pictures of Safran are probably old and worn and, thus, hard to examine. The readers wonder whether Safran really was born with teeth—which is fantastic because it seems impossible—or if Jonathan is just imagining teeth when he looks at the pictures. In this passage, he sounds objective about the issue.

However, the readers later realize that he is actually a subjective writer. As his stories become more ridiculous, his readers doubt what they had once taken to be truth. Jonathan says that Safran's mother refused to breastfeed a baby with teeth, and the lack of milk is what killed his left arm (166). Again, though odd, this seems plausible, but the readers question Jonathan when he implies that he does not *know* if Safran had a dead arm. We later discover that he came to this conclusion while glancing at Safran's photographs. Safran never holds anything in one of his arms, which leads Jonathan to believe that he could not move it. Like the baby teeth, he is guessing this as the truth from the photographs' erroneous details. From these, Jonathan constructs a whole history around his grandfather's teeth and dead arm. For reasons unknown to the reader, Jonathan is under the impression that his grandfather made love to countless numbers of women. Throughout the entire Safran storyline, Jonathan describes how obsessive women are about Safran's dead arm and how they use it to please themselves sexually. Though never overtly stated, the readers infer that the hand has magical properties. Only that could explain everyone's behavior toward him. Jonathan only has a few objects to work with, and—since Safran's story is shrouded in so much ambiguity—he decides to solve the mystery by making up obscure, magic-like “truths.”

Jonathan's depiction of Safran's life seems rich, full of information, and based off his photographic evidence, but the readers know it is fragmented because it is inconsistent with Jonathan's other resources. He owns Safran's diary, a shard of the past, but his telling of Safran's life does not match Safran's day-by-day recollections. In one section, Jonathan starts with his commentary about what Safran “actually” did on a particular day and then follows it with a transcription of Safran's real-life diary: “The day he had sex with his first virgin: *Went to the theater today. Too bored to stay through the first act. Drank eight cups of coffee. I thought I was*

going to burst. Didn't burst" (170). Jonathan contrasts his own notions in direct contrast with the diary entries, taking what he knows from a first-hand source and then previewing it with his own fantasies. Through this contradictory structure, Jonathan implies that Safran lied in his diaries. In actuality, Jonathan might be the one lying since he has no proof to back up his theory of Safran's past. Nothing about this seems rooted in magic, but, as previously stated, Safran's unrelenting sex life caused by his dead arm seems magical in itself. Thus, any section about is fantastical.

Since Jonathan's family history has so many gaps, he constantly fills them in with surreal experiences. At one point in the Trachimbrod narrative, Safran goes to the Kolker (his ancestor) sundial statue for advice. What emerges is a scene wherein Safran and the statue have a coherent conversation (263-266). Oftentimes in it, Safran makes wishes, hoping that the bronze ancestor can grant them like a god. This moment epitomizes the fantastic because we, the readers, do not know if they are really having a conversation or whether this just takes place in Safran's mind. He needs advice, so he might be playing out an ancestor-to-descendant scenario to himself. The two voices are distinct, however, so it feels like a real conversation. Also, the Kolker divulges information and thoughts that Safran does not know. Jonathan sets up the scene as real but veils it in enough ambiguity to leave the readers wondering if this conversation happened in real life or in Safran's mind. Jonathan probably could not explain why Safran changed from promiscuous man to a one-woman man. The divine inspiration in this scene allows him to solve that character contradiction quickly and easily.

Although Jonathan fills in his past with the fantastic to better understand what happened, it also allows him to distance himself from his ancestors that he yearns to know. His solution, magic, comes with its own obstacles; he wants knowledge about his past, but with that knowledge comes the pain of knowing how tragically his family lived and died. Magic allows

him to explore the past while keeping a safe distance from it. Hunter says many authors—Foer included in her list—use “fantasy and folklore acts as a means of negotiating the complex restriction imposed upon representation by an event as extreme as the Holocaust” (67). They feel distant from the Holocaust and think it is their duty to feel closer to it. However, when they try to get close, it hurts too much. The fantastic shields their emotions as they discover the truth. Associating characters with the impossible is Jonathan’s way of coping with their deaths; he cannot fully feel their loss if he does not believe they really existed. This mindset also explains why the first part of the Trachimbrod narrative delves into the deep past. In the same way Jonathan feels more comfortable writing about the impossible than the possible, he writes about the deep past (Brod) because it feels safer than the near one (Safran).

Even though Brod is a likeable character, her perfection prevents the readers from fully empathizing with her. We do not connect to her as much as we do to the realistic characters in Alex’s chronicles. Brod’s open-minded and loving adopted father bathes her in books and raises her so that she sees no difference between him and her. As a result, teenage Brod is clever, confident, and rational. Jonathan says, “The boys, young men, men, and elderly of the shtetl would sit vigil outside her window at all hours of the day and night, asking if they could assist her with her studies (with which she needed no help, of course, with which they couldn’t possibly help her even if she let them try)” (80). This passage highlights just how perfect Brod is. She is too smart to need help with her education. She is too independent to rely on men, or any other person for that manner. The cocky voice through which Jonathan focalizes the story parallels Brod’s confidence. Since these qualities are admirable, the readers root for her happiness. However, they can only get so invested in her since she is too perfect to really visualize. Brod, though wonderful, seems unnatural. We eventually see her as more divine than

mortal, which is why we cannot connect with her. The magical aura surrounding Brod distances her from the reader, but it also makes it easier for us emotionally when she is hurt.

One way Jonathan uses magic to distance himself—and the readers—from the characters is by making the fantastic situations funny. We laugh at the ridiculousness of a moment rather than care for the characters. After the disc lodges itself into the Kolker's skull, Jonathan says, "In fact, the Kolker was barely hurt at all. He had regained consciousness in only a few minutes and been able to walk himself, paraded himself, through the maze of muddy capillaries to the office of Dr. (and caterer without clients) Abraham M." (126). Not only does the Kolker get up right away—which again seems unlikely, though plausible, after such an incident—but he "parades" through work. The readers chuckle at the image of the Kolker strutting through the mill with a saw in his head. In *Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, Lawrence Langer says that deception is always easier to deal with than the truth. Langer finds that the truth does not liberate those in a powerless situation; instead, it "harass[es] the imagination" (272). This is especially the case with Jonathan. Even if he discovered the truth of his family's past, he would not feel freedom from it. Knowing the past does not help him save people from it, which is why he distances his feelings with lies, humor, and the fantastic. He more easily accepts the death of someone who seems unreal—like a man with a saw disc in his head, the perfect woman, or a newborn with teeth—than someone he can believe in.

Putting the whole distancing issue aside, the fantastic has a comforting presence all its own. The Holocaust taught humanity that abominable acts do occur in this world. Rosenfeld says, "We begin to see that Holocaust literature is an attempt to express a new order of consciousness, a recognizable shift in being. The human imagination after Auschwitz is simply not the same as it was before. Put another way, the addition to our vocabulary of the very word

Auschwitz means that today we *know* things that before could not even be imagined” (13). The terror and evil of the Holocaust made humans realize just how awful the world could be. People had to reconcile with this repulsive side of their species. The Holocaust horrified and depressed the human race. Losing a culture was a huge trauma. Knowing that someone wanted to inflict that kind of pain might have been worse. After the Holocaust, people learned that true evil does exist among their peers. Magic in Holocaust literature explains the reality of evil: since true evil (which people thought to be impossible) exists, magic could also exist...maybe it was what made evil spring live in the first place. However, Foer’s novel uses magic for more comforting purposes. The human race learned that the evil they thought was impossible truly exists, but the magic in *Everything Is Illuminated* implies that, in addition to evil, pure goodness also exists.

Jonathan counteracts the malevolent deaths of the Holocaust with fantastical birth scenes. In the very beginning of the Trachimbrod story, Brod seems born from the river. Although Jonathan explains that her real father might have died in a wagon accident, that does not explain how a helpless baby survived when her father did not. When two girls first catch sight of Brod, Jonathan says, “In the middle of string and feathers, surrounded by candles and soaked matches, prawns, pawns, and silk tassels that curtsied like jelly-fish, was a baby girl, still mucus-glazed, still pink as the inside of a plum” (13). The imagery in this section is beautiful. What at first seemed like a ton of junk now appears as a pastiched throne for Brod. The fantastic part of this story—Brod’s survival—is further emphasized by her upbringing. Brod excels in every subject she studies, and no man in the town can resist her. She becomes a god-like character, further supporting the notion that maybe she survived the river because of intervening magic and that magic is what makes her so perfect as an adult.

Brod's copulation with the Kolker is just as magic-infused as her birth. Jonathan writes optimistic sex and birth scenes because he feels it is the only way he can cancel out the death and horror of the Holocaust. When Brod gets pregnant, Jonathan says, "Her belly lit up like a firefly's bulb—brighter than a hundred thousand virgins making love for the first time" (98). The reader *could* interpret Jonathan's writing style at this point as overly-poetic. Maybe Brod's belly did not glow; maybe he is just referring to the new life growing within. However, his language sounds factual. Whether read literally or not, Jonathan associates sex and a new life with pure light to instill hope about the future. The Holocaust's force of death was so huge that Jonathan nullifies it with a big, sanguine scene about life.

Jonathan continues this pattern even when Brod and the Kolker's relationship deteriorates. He does not want them to lose their love because he needs extreme forms of happiness to balance out the tragedies in his story. After the Kolker's accident, he flips between his normal personality and an abusive one caused by brain damage. As a result, he and Brod have separate bedrooms to keep her safe. However, she cuts a hole in the wall, so they can still speak to each other. Eventually, they start making love through the wall, which results in the birth of their third son (Foer 135). Again, although this can technically happen, it feels unreal, which is why Trachimbrod falls into the fantastic category. It's weird enough where the readers might think that some external, magical force is making this happen. Naturally, the hole scenes are bizarre, but they also are beautiful because Brod and the Kolker can still be together even though his mind is slowly deteriorating. The fantastic is Jonathan's way of celebrating limitlessness. The Holocaust made extreme evil happen, but magic—something that feels just as impossible—makes extreme good happen. Foer wants his readers to fully appreciate the beauty of life—and the beauty of the fantastic—before they face the evil of death and the Holocaust.

The most traumatic scene in the Trachimbrod story contrasts starkly with the other scenes, not just because of the dark subject matter but because it is the only moment without magic or the fantastic. In the final pages of Jonathan's story, the Nazis invaded Trachimbrod. They either drown the Jews or burn them in a synagogue. Safran and his wife are part of group forced into the river, which is where she finally births their child. Safran survives, but his wife and child do not. Although Jonathan avoids the fantastic in this scene, the horror feels as unrealistic as the parts with magic. Jonathan writes in stream-of-consciousness, a literary technique meant to record the thought process of a character. He records what Safran sees and perceives about his wife and newly-born baby as they die:

...the baby refusing to die like this was pulled up and out of her body turning the waters around her red she surfaced like a bubble to the light to oxygen to life to life WAWAWAWAWA she cried she was perfectly healthy and she would have lived except for the umbilical cord that pulled her back under toward her mother who was barely conscious but conscious of the cord and tried to break it with her hands and then bite it with her teeth but could not it would not be broken and she died with her perfectly healthy nameless baby in her arms... (Foer 273)

The stream-of-consciousness writing further emphasizes the "realism" of this moment because it echoes thinking, not prose. Although it may seem fantastical for the wife to have her baby in the river, this is actually a hyper-realistic situation. The reader knows she is nine months pregnant, and stress—in this case, brought on by the Nazi arrival—can easily trigger labor. Jonathan trickles the fantastic into every other part of the Trachimbrod storyline, yet he eliminates it here. He wants his readers feel that *this* is real, that *this* is the pain that actually happened, and yet, even with the magic gone, it is hard for us to accept. If possible, this moment

feels less real than the bizarre, fantastic ones from before. In this, Jonathan highlights—and fails to resolve—the challenge he faces when writing about the Holocaust: how to make it feel real. This moment does not feel real on its own, but we do feel the weight and seriousness of it. The readers are most hurt in this passage because there is no magic to save the characters. That is the best Jonathan can do when it comes to connecting his readers to the Holocaust.

The Holocaust taught humans that things they thought did not exist—like evil—actually did. Jonathan suggests magic may also be real since it seems just about as impossible as the Holocaust. With this new view of reality, he looks at the past in a fresh, magic-like way. Hunter says, “the tensions between knowledge and understanding...is inherent in any response to the Holocaust” (64). Jonathan—and his readers—*know* that the Holocaust happened, that one group of people took it upon themselves to eradicate another. However, we all struggle to understand how people can think and act so horribly. This bewilderment is the whole purpose of the Trachimbrod storyline in *Everything Is Illuminated*. Jonathan’s perplexity about the Holocaust extends to his entire family history. He knows parts of what happened—both during the Holocaust and before—and this novel-in-progress is his way of trying to understand how and why such strange occurrences happened. He can only make peace with his knowledge and his understanding by introducing the fantastic—an element just as ambiguous as his thoughts about the past. Feuer argues that *Everything is Illuminated* allows Jonathan to make his fantasies about his identity a reality (36). Though the Holocaust has many issues—like fragmentation and unbelievably—it also allows Jonathan to make the past into whatever he dreams. Thus, he makes himself into whatever he wants to be—which apparently is the descendent of Brod, the perfect woman, and Safran, the irresistible man. He chooses his past because he does not truly know where he came from.

Although the fantastic has some setbacks—like distancing readers emotionally or glazing over the truth—it ultimately conveys what Jonathan needs it to. The fantastic is his means for connecting his fragmented past into one, big storyline. It also comforts his readers, so they do not dwell too much on the evils of the Holocaust. Magic helps us celebrate goodness and life. Most of all, Jonathan contrasts the fantastic with a realistic, Nazi scene so that his readers can feel the weight of this trauma. The way Jonathan uses magic seems to contradict itself: magic comforts the readers while distancing them; it connects historical truths while exposing lies. Jonathan's technique with the fantastic, however, reflects the various and contradictory view people have of the Holocaust. Of course, it was a travesty brought on by cruel people, but it also led to the creation of Israel, a Jewish nation. Some Nazis raided homes for hidden Jews, but we also remember the brave and honest people who risked their lives to hide them. The good does not balance out the evil, but the evil does not completely overshadow it either. Likewise, Jonathan's story is not clean or easy to follow. Sometime, it is absurd; sometimes, it is tragic. Other moments are both. The Holocaust is a modern day puzzle. Many authors and historians attempt to make sense of it even though it should never have happened. Jonathan solves this issue with the supernatural; only the fantastic—"magic" that may or may not be real—can truly convey a history that feels artificial.

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