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McEwan’s *Saturday* and Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close:* September 11th in Contemporary Literature

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“We tell ourselves stories in order to live... We look for the sermon in the suicide, the moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of narrative line on disparate images, by the ‘idea’ with which we learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual existence.” (Joan Didion)

The distinctive language of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks pervades contemporary American existence: 9/11, *World Trade Center*, *terrorist*, *Al-Qaeda*, *Afghanistan*, *Osama Bin Laden*, *Iraqi War*. Surrounded by the fallout of the 9/11 trauma, the survivors—arguably collective American society or the increasingly global community—bear the burden of carrying the memory of the event and the 2,752 people who died. The responsibility is problematic and, at times, overwhelming. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Cathy Caruth explains, “The problem of survival, in trauma, thus emerges specifically as the question: What does it mean for consciousness to survive?” (61).

Searching for an appropriate response to Caruth’s question, artists throughout the ages take up their pens. Thus from Job’s lament over incomprehensible loss of his family and property to the moment when Hamlet mourns over Yorick’s skull to the explosion of a shell killing Andrew Ramsay, literary tradition centers on the problem of “consciousness” and survival. Moving down the literary timeline to our age, it is fitting that Caruth’s question lie at the heart of the authorial response to 9/11. The characters of 9/11 literature stand as Hamlet clutching Yorick’s skull or Lily Briscoe gripping her paint brush; they stare at us from pages and ask us how to live.
Contemporary author Joan Didion once wrote, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live." If ever a story responded to a moment, attempted to find emotional sensibility in the midst of senseless trauma, the literary reaction to 9/11 seeks to do so. Such is the case with novelists Jonathan Safran Foer and Ian McEwan. In his 2005 work *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, Foer weaves the narrative of nine-year-old Oskar Schell, 9/11 orphan. Through the dissonance of Oskar’s cognitive genius and emotional naivety, Foer shows his readers what it felt like to be in New York on Tuesday, September 11, 2001. Two years after the events, Oskar fears “suspension bridges, germs, airplanes, fireworks, Arab people on the subway (even though [he’s] not racist), Arab people in restaurants and coffee shops and other public places, scaffolding, sewers and subway grates, bags without owners, shoes, people with mustaches, smoke, knots, tall buildings, turbans” (36). Because there are multiple perspectives to every story (and also, perhaps, because history is unattainable), McEwan’s *Saturday* gives readers Henry Perowne. In contrast to Oskar, Perowne lives an ocean away from the trauma of September 11th, yet its tragic events overshadow his life and consciousness. A cerebral being, Henry, perhaps, illustrates for readers the life of the intellectual in the post-9/11 world.

Indeed, the narratives of 9/11 contemplate the most highly repercussive world event since the fall of the Iron Curtain and the destruction of the Berlin Wall. Like that triumphant moment of human unity, the literature of 9/11 waves a banner proclaiming the common in the mass of humanity. Faced with
fundamental questions about the meaning of human existence, the characters look for common ground in science, literature, and, perhaps most importantly, society. As the characters struggle with the problem of memory, they turn to each and attempt to share and understand their unspeakable loss. Ultimately, they find balm for their wounds in the most basic of human unions, the family. Seeking meaning from their memories as well as meaningful ways to remember, the characters experience dichotomous drives to communal bonds or masochistic solitude.

I. The Cognitive Resonance of Trauma: Science and Art

In *Saturday* (2005), Ian McEwan characterizes Henry Perowne as a conscientious London citizen, a loyal husband, and a proud father. A highly educated neurosurgeon, Perowne enjoys analyzing the people and events around him. Thus in the fallout of the traumatic 9/11 events in New York Henry spends time reflecting on the state of the world, weighing the question: "And now, what days are these? Baffled and fearful, he mostly thinks" (McEwan 3). At the beginning of the novel, the reader finds the slightly paranoid Perowne, as he awakens on a seemingly ordinary Saturday morning; going to the wind of his bedroom, he gazes out to see a burning plane on the London horizon. Imagining the plane to be a terror attack parallel to the previous New York attacks, Henry’s day commences in fear. Continuing about his routine weekend activities, terror and the impending war with Iraq form a backdrop for Perowne’s consciousness.
McEwan writes Perowne’s story of post-9/11 existence under the premise of two rubrics. The first takes shape in the dialogue of Henry’s family. A socio-moral debate between the logical truth of science and the emotional truth of art results from the potpourri of characters—a doctor, a lawyer, a musician, and two poets. Representing the various values of science and art, these players act as primary filters for the violence of 9/11 and the violence of Baxter in the novel, as they shift the puzzle pieces of scientific and artistic truth that lie at the root of the novel’s quest for answers to the greater questions of how and why such terror exists in the world.

Henry formulates responses to the 9/11 and the impending war by following his unwavering dedication to logic. McEwan illustrates Henry’s systematic collection of facts and derivation of conclusions through his beliefs about the impending war. As Henry travels throughout the text, he continually sums up the facts for and against the war. On one hand, he reasons the war-protest “marchers could be right;” after all, they merely act on “concern for their own safety” (72-73). Henry notes the disjointed logic behind placing any blame for the 9/11 attacks on the Iraqi government—the attacks, rather, were orchestrated by Al-Qaeda, who “[loath] both godless Saddam and the Shiite opposition” (73). Though these facts provide significant evidence against the war, Henry acknowledges that the anti-war marchers probably know little of the horror and terror of Saddam’s regime (72). Thus, Henry’s conclusions hinge on reason free from emotion.
In contrast, artists Daisy and Theo rely on more emotive arguments to formulate their world views. As Daisy argues against the war, McEwan characterizes her as a hero of romance literature: “She’s slaying a dragon with every stroke” (191). Similar to the often buffoonish protagonists of romantic works who congratulate themselves on their heightened moral sensibilities, Daisy takes on a didactic tone as she deems the war “completely barbaric,” prophesying terrible ramifications of epic proportions—“three million refugees, the death of the UN, the collapse of the world order if America goes it alone, Baghdad entirely destroyed...the whole region in flames” (191). As she speaks “the colour rises from her neck...the dark outcomes she believes [make] her euphoric,” signifying outwardly the zeal of her sensationalist argument (191).

As Daisy delivers her impassioned argument against the war, Theo reluctantly admits the interconnections of world affairs and private existence. Though the 9/11 trauma proves to be Theo’s “induction into international affairs,” Theo advocates the motto: “The bigger you think, the crappier it looks...think small” (31-32, 35). He explains his attempt to shut out world affairs:

> When we go on about the big things, the political situation, global warming, world poverty, it all looks really terrible, with nothing getting better, nothing to look forward to. But when I think small, closer in—you know, a girl I’ve just met, or this song we’re going to do with Chas, or snowboarding next month, then it looks great. (35)

Theo’s youthful optimism focuses all importance on the domestic picture and the exchanges of friends, striving to shut out the dismal scenes on the news and
bleak conversations about war and possible terror threats. As though contemplating the background to foreground relationship of a Rubin figure, Theo prescribes that only the foreground should have significance. Theo’s message is one of the artist: he believes in the individual’s power to create his or her own reality. It is this message that reverberates in his blues lyrics: “Baby, you can choose despair,/Or you can be happy if you dare” (175).

Theo removes himself intellectually from the dialogue of Perowne and Daisy; however, the attitudes of father and daughter synthesize in friction. The tension appears in their argument in the Perowne’s kitchen (190-196). The debate between Henry’s scientific approach and Daisy’s artistic one is akin to a central question of modernism: can art create meaning apart from reality? The question is also central to the text, as McEwan’s characters live “in a city,” “in a century,” “in transition,” “in a mass” (epithet Bellow).

Beyond scientific logic and artistic sensibility, McEwan gives Perowne a greater historical framework for the contextualization of the 9/11 terror attacks: for Perowne, other horrifying events on the world stage precede those in New York. In contrast to his son, Henry historicizes his coming of age among skirmishes over land and politics:

Born the year before the Suez Crisis, too young for the Cuban missiles, or the construction of the Berlin Wall, or Kennedy’s assassination, [he] remembers being tearful over Aberfan in ’sixty-six—one hundred and sixteen schoolchildren just like himself, fresh from prayers in school assembly...buried under a river of mud. (32)
Eleven years old at the time of Aberfan, the event first signifies the importance
Henry places on the link between global and personal affairs—the schoolchildren
were “just like himself.” The Aberfan events, in contrast to the other events cited
in Henry’s historical biography, also occurred notably close to home, in
England’s neighboring Wales. Henry’s anticipation of terror at home in London
after the events in New York, thus, comes as no surprise. Similar to Henry’s own
globally historicized childhood, he describes World War II as an interruption of
his mother’s quiet girlhood:

On Sunday morning, September the third 1939, while Chamberlain
was announcing his radio broadcast from Downing Street that the
country was at war with Germany, the fourteen-year-old Lily was
at a municipal pool near Wembley, having her first [swimming]
lesson with a sixty-year-old international athlete who had swum
for Britian in the Stockholm Olympics in 1912. (159)

Each occurrence of world-scale violence comes wrapped in a package of peaceful
domicity: innocent school children die mid-lesson when a colliery tip slides off
of a mountain, crushing the building; a child takes swimming lessons at the
neighborhood pool as troops deploy to war. The diegetic scenes of the novel
repeat the theme, juxtaposing world terror and domestic serenity: Henry cooks
dinner in the family kitchen while watching news of the war protest or debating
the ethics of war with his daughter; the antiwar march defers Henry’s drive to a
friendly weekend squash game.

McEwan embeds the culmination of the novel’s plot and theme in another
such moment—pairing the violent intrusion of Baxter with the serenity of the
family reunion. Coming in search of revenge from his afternoon alley run-in with Henry, he threatens the family members, breaking Grammaticus’ nose and making Daisy undress. The trauma of the invasion parallels that of the September attacks on the victims’ families and simultaneously mirrors, perhaps even more closely, the raids conducted by the Iraqi government on the homes of innocent civilians. The twist of plot also illustrates the proximity of calamitous occasions to the life of any average citizen, shattering Theo’s theory of intellectual and artistic escapism—neither “thinking small” nor creating one’s own reality serve as a guarantee of peace and happiness. Inevitably, the situation of the world, for better or worse, exudes a powerful hand in the artist’s life. Yet, even in this precarious moment, the artist is not powerless, for Daisy holds the violent force of Baxter at bay.

Saving her family from Baxter’s assault, Daisy realizes her potential as an artist. Forcing Daisy to undress, Baxter threatens to rape her. However, Daisy’s nakedness reveals the early states of an unannounced pregnancy. Her maternity symbolizes her independence from her parents and renders her untouchable by Baxter’s gang. Drifting into Henry’s consciousness, the reader becomes aware that he sees her as a “vulnerable child” (226). Indeed, vulnerability characterizes the scene, as before her family and her would-be rapist, Daisy’s pregnancy is revealed for the first time, but as she stands on the brink of motherhood, Daisy is a child no more. In the moment of danger, Daisy asserts her independence as a
being of action: she publishes her book of poetry; she disagrees with her father about the war; she chooses to keep her baby.

Seemingly repulsed by Daisy’s condition, Baxter first notices her book; picking it up, he insists that she read a poem. Pairing Daisy’s poetry with the life of her unborn child, McEwan evokes the sanctity of life to illustrate the sanctity of art. Daisy, protective of her new creation, hesitates to render it to Baxter, who threatens the destruction of both life and art. Encouragement to continue comes from Daisy’s grandfather: “Daisy, listen. Do one you used to say for me” (228). This bidding acts as the elder poet’s blessing to Daisy; from one artist to another, he understands the sanctity of her words. As she opens *My Saucy Bark*, her words stretch before her on the page, but instead of giving these to Baxter, she searches within to find the words of another poet, words taught to her by her grandfather. The poetry spoken by Daisy illustrates the power of artist and artwork, soothing Baxter’s fury and actualizing Daisy as an artist. In this moment, McEwan plays on life’s fragile balance; in the room, stand four generations of family members, grandfather, children, grandchildren, and a great-grandchild, yet to be. Daisy stands in their midst, poet and mother, symbolizing creator and artist. Thus, it is Daisy’s power which overcomes Baxter.

From outside the exchange of artists—grandfather to granddaughter—the confused Perowne thinks the words “unusually meditative, mellifluous and willfully archaic;” ironically, he fails to recognize they are not Daisy’s own.
Meanwhile, Baxter exclaims, “You wrote that. It’s beautiful. You that, don’t you. It’s beautiful. And you wrote it” (231). As hours pass before Henry realizes that his daughter quoted Matthew Arnold; for Baxter, however, the realization perhaps never will come.

The events following the conflict with Baxter demonstrate the progression of trauma on a community. Though the police instruct the Perowne family not to share accounts of the assault, the family feels the need to form a communal memory of the occurrence. The desire for sharing and standardizing the memory of terror acts not only as a method of forming the history of the event, but also as a healing process: “They want to have it all again, from another’s point of view, and know that it’s all true what they’ve been through, and feel in these precise comparisons of feeling and observation that they’re being delivered from private nightmare, and returned to the web of kindly social and familial relations, with which they’re nothing. They were overrun and dominated by intruders because they weren’t able to communicated and act tighter; now at last they can” (238). Glancing backward through the text, the reader finds a great importance placed on the workings of a healthy mind and on community.

Afraid of losing his memory, Henry fears that without clarity of mind, Henry believes he will be no better than Baxter. In particular, the map of Henry’s thoughts darts with the memory—clear, foggy, or almost-forgotten—of the burning plane on the dawn sky over London. Almost forgetting its occurrence, he thinks, “[I] should look out what William James wrote on
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forgetting a word or name; a tantalizing, empty shape remains, almost but not quite defining the idea it once contained. Even as you struggle against the numbness of poor recall, you know precisely what the forgotten thing is not” (56). Perhaps, the urge for collective memory of Baxter’s assault derives from the fear of his “tantalizing, empty shape.” For Henry, his mother, too, embodies the fear of mental infirmity.

II. Emotional Trauma: the relationship of the dead to the living

Oskar Schell, the nine-year-old narrator of Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, lives at the epicenter of the 9/11 terror. A New York resident, Oskar is sent home from school on the Tuesday morning that the planes fly into the World Trade Center; he arrives at his family’s apartment just in time to pick up the ringing telephone—it is the last call from his father who went to the Towers for a business meeting that morning. Shaken by his father’s untimely and unnatural death, Oskar embarks on a journey throughout New York City to find the lock that belongs to a key in his father’s closet. On his quest, the people Oskar encounters has a story to tell—some are sad, some happy—but each story proves the human need for community.

Foer shows readers the sensitive balance of inter-relations between his characters. After suffering traumatic experiences, each character responds differently to the surrounding world—some characters cry out “extremely loud” with anger, while others respond with deafening silence. Each of these scenarios
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... uniquely isolates the character from the surrounding world and people who care. The minor characters that Oskar meets on his journey throughout the city often exemplify loneliness; some, however, show the power of human connectedness.

During the year following his father’s death, Oskar’s continued state of trauma stems from a single moment—the moment in which he arrives home to the ringing phone and fails to answer. Throughout Oskar’s daily life, the sound of his father’s voice echoing from the series of answering machine messages haunts him. The trauma of the message pains Oskar to the point that he hides the answering machine from his mother and deceives his readers into believing that he did not arrive home in time to answer any of his father’s calls. Oskar reveals the startling truth—in a moment of inertia and fear, he fails to answer his father’s last call:

But this is the thing that I’ve never told anyone. After I listened to the messages, the phone rang. It was 10:22. I looked at the called ID and saw that it was his cell phone... I couldn’t pick up the phone. I just couldn’t do it. It rang and rang, and I couldn’t move. I wanted to pick it up, but I couldn’t... There was a beep. Then I heard Dad’s voice, ‘Are you there? Are you there? Are you there?’ (Foer 301)

Thus, Oskar’s desperate urge to ceaselessly mourn stems from this moment of inertia. He reiterates, “I couldn’t pick up. I just couldn’t” (Foer 301). Theorist Cathy Caruth terms the phenomenon Oskar describes “failed address” (Caruth 102). In her explanation of failed address trauma Caruth cites the situation of a father who loses his child; while the father sleeps the child burns to death (Caruth 102-103). As sleep stifles the father’s ability to act, Oskar’s fear prevents
him from answering the phone. After the child’s death, the father suffers recurring nightmares that replay the scene of the trauma: the child calls, he fails to wake. Similarly, Oskar acts on his ability to physically replay the messages left by his father in the moments before his death: “Are you there? He asked eleven times. I know because I’ve counted. It’s one more than I can count on my fingers... [The message] ended at 10:24. Which was when the building came down. So maybe that’s how he died” (Foer 301-302). For Oskar, survivor of the 9/11 trauma, his father is forever trapped in this moment, calling out to be heard. Oskar feels his responsibility to respond through mourning and repetition of these events.

Stifled by the memory ringing phone and failed address, Oskar’s angst spills over into his relationships with other characters. In particular, the emotional repercussions echo in his relationship with his mother, as the phone becomes an object of trauma and he hides it from her. Two years after 9/11, he continues to keep the answering machine message a secret, he grows jealous when she spends time with a male friend, and tells her a series of lies to hide his search for the lock. Oskar’s conversations with his mother often brim with the angst of the unspoken; in one of their bedtime exchanges, he tells her, “If I could have chosen, I would have chosen you!” meaning that he would rather she have died in the 9/11 attacks than his father (171). The exclamation silences his mother’s attempts to soothe him, and as she leaves his bedroom, he changes his feeling log to “INCREDIBLY ALONE” (171). Oskar’s anger towards his mother—though it stems from a general need for her to share his grief—contrasts
ironically with his incredible sensitivity to the feelings of others. (Oskar constantly wishes for the world to be more caring place and for its inhabitants to be more conscientious of each other. For instance, he thinks that ambulances should have signs on the top that flash messages from the wounded person inside to those who love them most, and he wishes that people’s skin color changed in accordance to their feelings.) Like the self-inflicted bruises, Oskar’s self-inflicted isolation from those he should be closest to acts as punishment for failure to answer his father’s phone call.

The uniquely modern possibility of the taped message perpetuates Oskar’s trauma, enabling him to continually act on compulsions to repeatedly listen to his father’s voice. In another conversation between Oskar and his grandmother, Oskar admits to himself that he believes his extraordinary grief stems from the unanswered phone call:

Grandmother: Oskar? Over.
Oskar: I’m OK. Over.
Oskar: I miss Dad. Over.
Grandmother: I miss him, too. Over.
Oskar: I miss him a lot. Over.
Grandmother: So do I. Over.
Oskar: All the time. Over.
Grandmother: All the time. Over.
Oskar: I couldn’t explain to her that I missed him more, more than she or anyone else missed him, because I couldn’t tell her about what happened with the phone. That secret was a hole in the middle of me that every happy thing fell into. (71)
Foer’s description of the messages Oskar’s father leaves and Oskar’s subsequent trauma anticipates the government’s release of messages sent on the day of 9/11. In a *New York Times* article from April 1, 2006, Jim Dwyer writes, “The city released partial recordings yesterday of about 130 telephone calls made to 911 on Sept. 11, stripped of the voices of the people inside the World Trade Center but still evocative of their invisible struggles for life.” An earlier article from CNN.com on March 26, 2006 explains that the New York City mayor’s office recently sent letters “to the families of 24 victims of the 9/11 attacks, informing them of unreleased recording of 911 calls made by their loved ones.” The article quotes Bill Doyle, whose son died in the WTC towers: “I had one family member call me today; she was hysterical. She actually fainted. She opened [the letter] up in an elevator and she couldn’t believe it, because she never heard from her husband that morning, but apparently he called 911.” As Oskar in Foer’s text, the 911 operators and these families experience the trauma of failed address.

Oskar’s trauma of failed address mirrors that of his grandfather nearly half a century earlier. Thus the grandfather, like the grandson, remains stifled by the memory of failed address, and like the grandson, the grandfather’s experience of trauma and failed address acts as a prohibitive force in the succeeding years of his life. Foer splices glimpses of Thomas Schell’s story in the middle of Oskar’s narrative. A survivor of the World War II Allied bombing of Dresden, Thomas experiences failed address as he frantically runs through the burning streets of Dresden to find his fiancée, Anna. Unable to find her, Thomas
never sees her again. Plagued by the events, Thomas is stricken with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Thomas gradually loses the ability to speak; he writes later, "'I' was the last word I was able to speak aloud, which is a terrible thing, but there it is, I would walk around the neighborhood says, 'III.'" (17). The resounding "I" against the outside world signifies Thomas' ultimate inward withdrawal. Completely isolated and finally unable to speak, he writes his story in a letter to Oskar's father: "I haven't always been silent, I used to talk and talk and talk, I couldn't keep my mouth shut, the silence overtook me like a cancer" (Foer 16).

Once again the actions of grandfather and grandson mirror each other—the grandfather isolates himself from the world including family members. Coming to America, Thomas accidentally reunites with the Anna's sister, and the couple decides to marry:

I thought we could run to each other, I thought we could have a beautiful reunion, although we had hardly known each other in Dresden. It didn't work. We've wandered in place, our arms outstretched, but not toward each other, they're marking off distance, everything between us had been a rule to govern our life together, everything a measurement. (109)

As their "arms outstretched...mark off the distance" between them, Oskar's grandparents allow their unspeakably traumatic memories to form barriers between them. Seeking deeper isolation, the couple marks off literal "no-fly" zones within their apartment, where they cannot speak to or look at each other:

"Only a few months into our marriage, we started marking off areas in the
apartment as 'Nothing Places,' in which one could be assure of complete privacy, we agreed that we never would look at the marked-off zones, that they would be nonexistent" (Foer 109-110). Void of connection with others, this "nothingness" encompasses the life of the couple.

The couple's relationship, Caruth writes, "is not simply an act of empathy or understanding," nor is it "simply the isolation of two opposed and locked understandings" (Caruth 41). Their silence and isolation emerge out of the "imperative of distinguishing between life and death" (42). Thus, Thomas rules that he wants no children but provide no explanation of his wish to Oskar's grandmother. In the pivotal moment of their relationship, she announces her pregnancy—only the does Thomas reveal the sorrowful fact that Anna was pregnant before her death. The interruption of the couple's silence robs them of "a history...which joined them only in their absence within their own stories" (42). The pregnancy violates the fragile demarcation between life and death, as in response to Caruth's question: "What do the dying bodies of the past...have to do with the living bodies of the present?" Thomas makes himself into a living momento mori. He revokes life, flees from his pregnant wife, abandons his unborn child to return to Dresden and live with the dead.

Oskar's life also reflects the balance of isolation and connection, something and nothing, as he transforms himself into a memorial of his father. As he struggles for meaning in the 9/11 destruction, he describes paradoxical feelings of complete union and extreme loneliness in the world: "I
felt...incredibly close to everything in the universe, but also extremely alone” (145). Oskar focuses on feelings of loneliness, believe these are the best remembrances of his father, pushing himself away from his mother and grandmother. Simultaneously, Oskar seeks unlikely connection via fan mail to celebrities. The writing exemplifies his search for connections with distant people: “A few weeks after the worst day, I started writing lots of letters. I don’t know why, but it was one of the only things that made my boots lighter” (11). Oskar writes to Stephen Hawking, Jane Goodall, and Ringo Starr. In addition to a search for human interconnections, the recipients of Oskar’s letters indicate a quest for a greater existential meaning. Writing to Hawking, perhaps, offers Oskar hope for a scientific explanation of significance of life and death, while writing Starr promises the discovery of artistic truth.

The cognitive and emotional struggles of grandfather and grandson arise from Caruth’s initial problem of consciousness and survival, from “possibility of knowing history” (Caruth 61, 27). A precocious, yet innocent, nine-year-old faced with the “deeply ethical dilemma: the unremitting problem of how not to betray the past,” Oskar fears severing the link between his life and the life of his father and, therefore, clings to images and thoughts of his father’s death (27). For Oskar, remembering and mourning become synonymous. Oskar’s mother, however, proposes an alternate existence: “Why can’t you remember [Dad] and be happy?” (Foer 171). However, this solution is impossible for Oskar without a physical resolution—Oskar finds closure in the act of digging up his father’s
empty coffin. He explains the solution to his grandmother’s “renter:” “Because it’s the truth, and Dad loved the truth” (321). Ironically, Oskar believes he is once more asking a stranger for help—he fails to realize the “renter” is his grandfather. Foer uses this twist as a final illustration of human inner-connectedness; Foer shows us that emotional and moral community reaches beyond familial ties.

As Thomas and Oskar dig up the coffin each closes the void between life and death; as Thomas acknowledges and embraces existence of son and grandson, Oskar acknowledges the permanence father’s death. Filling the coffin with Thomas’ countless letters to his unknown son, Thomas and Oskar bury refusal of life. Despite the importance of these words to the living, the letters exist without the more significant foundations of human relationships: physical and emotional contact. Thus, the letters symbolize absolute inertia— inability to live and inability to form human connections. The burial of the letters evokes the separation of the living and the dead, as Oskar and his grandfather choose life.

Returning home from the cemetery, Oskar realizes his ability to choose living relationships. He finds his mother waiting on the couch. For the first time in the novel, he shows concern for her feelings. “Are you mad at me?” he asks; “Is Ron mad at me?” he asks (323). Sharing with Oskar that Dad called her from the Tower on the day of the attack, she cries. As they weep and talk, Oskar wonders, “Was she relieved? Was she depressed? Grateful? Exhausted?” (324). And he tells her, “It’s OK if you fall in love again” (324). Acknowledging her
need for human connection, Oskar shows his concern for his mother’s need to align with the living as well.

III. Conclusion

Through the stories of Henry Perowne and Oskar Schell, we achieve a holistic picture of the post-9/11 world where the sensitive balance of cognitive and emotional responsibility relies upon uplifting the ideals of family and community and cultivating a sense of intuition about the feelings and perspectives of fellow humans. Saturday’s dialogue between scientific truth and artistic truth illustrates the human need for a spectrum of ideas, for good citizenship entails piecing together the most workable of these in order to form thoughtful solutions to the most complex of human problems. Similarly, the pastiche form of Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close evokes the various field of interlocking images and ideas that create human consciousness, as via Oskar’s narrative we experience the sights, sounds, and, most importantly, the feelings of the 9/11 trauma. Oskar’s dichotomous experience of humor and pain, connection and isolation reminds us all of our innate yearning to find love and understanding among our families and communities. In times of epic trauma, the need for these ties grows in importance.

While Henry and Oskar seek meaningful ways to remember, as readers of the Saturday and Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close we also experience McEwan’s and Foer’s textual memorials to the trauma and its victims. We, simultaneously,
also must address the question of how best to remember the events of our lifetimes, and like Henry, we must keep our own historical autobiographies.

Didion reminds us, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live..."
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