Book report Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close

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Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close
By Jonathan Safran Foer
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# Summary

Extremely loud and incredibly is the story of the nine-year-old boy Oscar Schell. Oscar lives in New York City, America. He is extremely sad and depressed because his father died in the terrorist attacks on the twin towers in September eleventh. That day his father called home multiple times, no one was home, so he recorded a voice mail. The last time he called Oscar was home, but could not pick up the phone because he was too scared. He was too scared to tell anyone about it. He buys another answering machine that looks exactly the same and hides the answering machine with the messages on it in his closet, he wraps a white scarf, which his grandmother made for him but never finished, around it. At first, Oscar is too scared to look in his father’s closet. After a few moths Oscar is really depressed, so he looks in his father’s closet. He sees his grandfather’s camera and tries to take it off the shelf. As he does that, a blue vase accidently falls and breaks. In the vase was an envelope with the word “Black” on it and a key in it. Oscar thinks it is part of the expedition his father made for him before he died. Oscar goes to the art equipment store close to him to ask if they know anything about his father. The store clerk tells him that Black is most probably a name. Oscar decides to visit everyone with the surname Black in alphabetical order to ask what they know about his father and the key. On his journey, he meets a lot of people. One of them is an old man called Mr. Black. The man joins him on his adventures for a while. In the building across the street from Oscar lives his grandmother. She has a renter that she never talks about to Oscar. She only calls him “The Renter” and tells him to never talk to him. When on an evening he goes to visit his grandmother, she is not home. He meets the renter and talks to him, he finds out that the renter doesn’t talk. They like each other, so they make the arrangement to dig up Oscar’s father’s grave. Oscar finds a half old voicemail on the answering machine from Abby Black, a woman he had already been to. She was even the second women he went to. The voice message says that she had not been exactly honest. He goes back there to hear what she has to say. She says she doesn’t know anything about the key, but her ex-husband might. Oscar goes to the husband to ask about the key. The man, William Black, tells Oscar that his father passed away. He tells that after he sold all his deceased father’s belongings he read his letter, which said that he left him the key and that it opens a safe that was meant for William. It was in a vase that William sold to Oscar’s father. William was looking for the key just like Oscar was looking for the lock all that time. Oscar is very disappointed because the search did not lead him anywhere. He asks Abby Black why there was half a voicemail. She says that his mother picked up the phone. Oscar then realizes that is mother knew about his plan all along. His mother knew where he would be going and had called every single one of them to prepare them. Oskar is still very disappointed that his search has lead to nothing because now he feels farther away from his father than in the beginning while the whole point of it was to feel closer to his father. He then opens up his father’s grave with the help of his grandfather. When he gets back, he looks at a set of pictures of a man jumping out of one of the twin towers and falling to death that he cannot stop thinking since his father died. Oscar thinks it looks like it his father on the picture. Oscar puts the pictures in backward order, so it looks like the man is flying back into the building. He then imagines the same happening to his father. The complete morning of September eleventh happens backward and Oscar’s father is still alive.

The book also tells a second storyline, the story of Oscar’s Grandparent. His grandfather is named Thomas Schell, the real name of his grandmother is never given. This story is told through letters that the grandmother sends to Oscar and the Grandfather sends to his son Thomas, Oscar’s father. Oscar’s grandparents were both born in Dresden in Germany. Thomas was in love with Grandmother’s sister, Anna. Thomas and Grandmother lost all their loved ones, during a bombardment in the WW2. Thomas loses his ability to speak. They meet years later in the United States of America. They fall in love and go live together. When grandmother becomes pregnant of Oscar’s father, Thomas leaves her, because he is not ready to be a father. When he hears his son died in a terrorist attack, he comes back. He can live with Oscars grandmother, but he can never talk to Oscar, can’t show himself and he is called “The renter”

# Title

The title does not have one clear explanation, there are multiple ways it could be interpreted. Throughout the book, there are many small clues. Oscar uses “Extremely loud” and “Incredibly close” quite often, but he doesn’t use it in the same context every time. There are a few explanations for the title that stood out to me.

Firstly, the title could be explained by the emotions of Oscar, because Oscar’s father died in the terrorist attacks of September eleventh, he is easily scared of many things. He is especially afraid that if he uses public transportation or if he enters a tall tower, there will be a terrorist attack. The title “Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close” could refer to his fears. His father wanted him to be less afraid of everything and everyone around him, so he made him do expeditions that led him through the whole neighborhood. He interprets anything and anyone he doesn’t know as extremely scary, to him everything is extremely loud and incredibly close because it is unknown to him and he finds the unknown frightening.

The title could also be explained by the multiple tragic events in the story. Oscar’s grandfather survived a bombing during the Second World War in Dresden, which is in Germany. He lost all his family during that bombing, the bomb explosions were extremely loud and incredibly close. Just like the storm in which Oscar’s grandmother lost her father and her sister Anna, which was also the love of Oscar’s grandfather. Oscar’s father died in the terrorist attacks of 9-eleven and Mr. Black fought in the Vietnam wars and the Second World War. All these tragic events were extremely loud and incredibly close to the characters.

A third explanation is that the title refers to characters being extremely close and the opposite, extremely far away. Oscar’s grandfather leaves his grandmother when she becomes pregnant because he is not ready to become a father. He then travels all over the world. Oscar wants his father to be close to him. That is why he wants to complete the expedition and find the lock the key belongs to, as long as he keeps looking he feels close to his father. When he finds out the key had nothing to do with his father, he is devastated, because he can no longer feel close to his father. Three weeks after Oscar’s father died, his grandfather came back to Oscar’s grandmother. He then lives with her in a spare room she has. She does not want Oscar to know it is his grandfather, so she says he is just a renter. Every time Oscar goes looking for the lock that the key belongs to, his grandfather follows him to make sure he is safe. His grandfather is extremely close the complete time.

Character description

Oscar Schell is the protagonist, he lives in New York City with his mother and grandmother. His father, Thomas Schell died during the terrorist attacks on the twin towers on eleven September. Oscar is an intelligent, curious and shy boy, he likes to learn and is quite socially awkward. Oscar has different interests and hobbies than his peers, he invents things in his mind. He writes letters to well-known scientists, but rarely gets a personal reaction. Oscar is easily frightened and has many fears. After his father dies, he gets scared even easier and develops fears for everything that could be associated with terrorism.

Thomas Schell is Oscar’s father, he wanted to be a scientist but started working in a jewelry shop to support his family. Dies because of the terrorist attacks on 9/11. He was very close with Oscar because just like Oscar he was curious and smart. He set up journeys for Oscar to make Oscar less scared of the world.

Oscar’s mother: Her name is never mentioned, she does not have the same kind of relationship. Oscar thinks she is heartless and did not love her husband because she becomes friends with a man short after Thomas died. She tries to help Oscar but does not succeed in replacing Oscar’s father. She allows Oscar to go on adventures through NYC, but only because she knows where he is going and informs all the “Blacks” that Oscar is going to visit them.

Oscar’s grandmother is the mother of Oscar’s father. Oscar and his grandmother love each other very much. She has devoted her entire life to taking care of Oscar. Like Oscar, she is very sad and depressed, because of Thomas Schell, her son. She is one of the few that understands what Oscar is going through. She was born in Dresden but moved after she survived a bombardment.

Thomas Schell Senior is Oscar’s grandfather. Oscar’s grandmother calls him “The Renter”. When he was young, he lived in Dresden in Germany. He was in love with Anna, Oscar’s grandmother’s sister. When Anna was pregnant she died in a bombardment that destroyed almost everything. This was so traumatizing for him that he started to lose his ability to speak. Years later, after he completely lost his ability, he met Anna’s sister in The United States of America. Despite not being in love, they still end up in a relationship. When she gets pregnant he leaves her behind, because he is not ready to be a father. After many years, he hears his only son Thomas died and returns to Oscar’s grandmother. She allows him to live in her apartment, but he can never show himself and cannot talk to Oscar. When they one day finally meet, they immediately connect. Oscar tells him the whole story about the key and his father. They decide to dig up Oscar’s father’s empty grave.

Personal opinion

I chose to write a book report about Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close because some other people chose this book and I had heard a lot from it. Another reason I chose it is because I recently recorded the movie adaptation of the book. The movie is quite different from the book, the film does not focus on the story of Oscar’s grandparents while the book does. The movie leaves out certain events that are in the book. Because of the missing scenes the movie would make no sense, so they made up different scenes to avoid major plot holes. The movie has all the conclusions the book has, but sometimes slightly different. The movie leaves certain things out, but mentions them out of the blue and never mentions them again. An example is “Heavy boots” in the book Oscar uses this to describe his sad and depressed feelings, but in the movie, they only mention it once, like they had to put it in the movie. I did not like the movie, but I did like the book. I found the book easy to read, because it has short chapters, has a lot of pictures, uses understandable language and explains situations clearly. It also switches between Oscar’s story and his grandparent’s story just frequently enough, which results in the story not becoming dull after a few chapters, but also not being hard to get into every time they continue with the other story. I liked the book very much. I liked it so much I read the whole book in a single week. The story is simple to follow, the underlying message is harder to understand, I needed to think about what happened and how it affected the characters and their feelings. I did find the story sad, because of all the death and misery. I would recommend everyone to read the book because it is short but detailed. It is simple to follow but needs more thinking to understand.

# Themes and Motive

The theme of the book is dealing with loss, throughout the book all the characters lose people. Oscar and his mom lose his father in a terrorist attack, his grandparents lose all of their possession and every loved one because of storms and bombings when they’re young and their only son and Mr. Black loses his wife. They all deal with this differently. The motives of the book are Fear, Terrorism, War, Violence, Love and Communication. Oscar is very scared of everything because his father died in a terrorist attack. He thinks that if he uses public transportation, the same is going to happen to him. All of the characters have experienced war and violence, Mr. Black fought in several wars, Oscar’s grandparents have been in the Second World War and Oscar and his mother lost someone because of Al Qaida’s holy war against America. Because of all the loss the characters are going through, they lose their ability to love and communicate properly. Oscar’s grandfather experiences this quite literally, after he loses Anna he loses his ability to speak and never falls in love again. Oscar experiences this too, but not as literally, after the loss of his father, he barely talks to his mother, keeps many secrets and cannot have the same love for her he had for his father. All motives are a part of dealing with a grievance. After someone loses a loved one, all of the motives are things that happen.

Time & Setting
Oscar’s story takes place in New York City shortly after 9/11. The story can only take place at this certain time and place because his father dies in the terrorist attacks on the twin towers. If Oscar wouldn’t have lived in that time and place, he wouldn’t have lost his father and the story wouldn’t be the same. The attacks on the twin towers resulted in Oscar, like many others, losing a loved one. For many people, including Oscar, this caused a lot of fear. Oscar’s fears and emotions are representative for all of the New Yorkers and Americans.