

THREE NOVELS OF 9/11

In Search of the Right Questions

JONATHAN SAFER FOER'S *EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE*

Mariner Books, 2005), Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* (Vintage Books, 2007), and Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* (Random House, 2009) are responses to the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. They are not political analyses, but examine, as novels always do, the lives of the characters who are affected by the great event. The differences among these novels are important, and each of them gives us a version of New York City to contemplate.

I

The narrator of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is Oskar Schell, a brilliant, hilarious, touching nine year old, whose interests are both eccentric and encyclopedic. On 9/11 he is sent home from school early and sees on the answering machine four messages from his father, who works in the World Trade Center. He is there when the fifth call comes in at 10:26:47—about two minutes before the North Tower collapsed—and he hears his father pleading for someone to answer as the building he's in is being evacuated. Oskar is paralyzed and can't pick up, so this is the last time he hears his father's living voice. Later, in his father's closet, he finds an envelope with the word "Black" on it and inside it a key. He decides to search for the meaning of this key, and therefore of his father's life, by looking up every "Black" in the New York City phone book and going on foot to see them, to see what they may know. The search of the son for the father has been an archetypal quest at least since Homer's *Odyssey*. The quest for a lock to fit a key, however, is a different story: the search is usually for the key itself, the key to the lock that opens the answer to the question. Oskar, however, can't frame his quest as a question; there are too many dimensions to the whole experience.

Oskar's journey through New York City brings him into contact with an assortment of mostly hospitable characters who aid or educate him in unpredictable ways. Some of them are eccentric as he is, and the book itself is something else. Some pages hold only a single short phrase. There are pages on which the type gets desperately smaller and smaller until it is indecipherable. One page is printed in colored inks—green for the word green, red for the word red—a page on which Oskar's father had once written his name. This is a seriously playful book, a kid's version of *Tristram Shandy*, and its whole method and end are suggested by the game Oskar and his father called Reconnaissance Expedition. Oskar goes into Central Park to look for clues, but his father doesn't tell him what they are clues to. They are not answers to a question, but a game that may be a search for a natural order to the city. Or

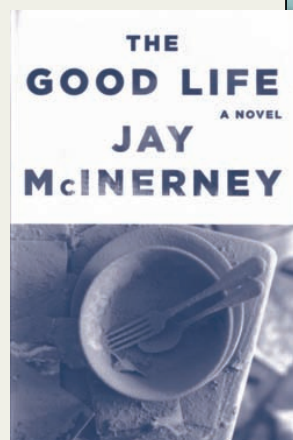
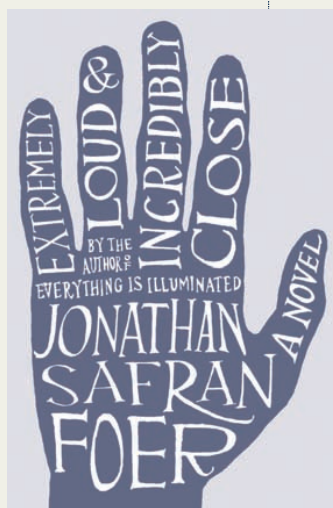
maybe a gentle sign that the city has too many parts to be legible in any way at all. This is a book full of codes, secrets, and extraordinary accidents.

Oskar's narrative is interrupted, or complemented, by a series of letters begun in 1963 and written to their author's unborn son, who turns out to be Thomas Schell, Oskar's father. Their author is Oskar's grandfather who is now living as "the renter" in Oskar's grandmother's apartment, across the street. Eventually, we learn why Oskar has passed through the city unharmed—despite the terrorist attack, this New York City is remarkably safe—and he and his grandfather meet to examine the empty grave that marks the death of Thomas Schell, their father and son. Oskar's grandfather has been traumatized in another terror attack, the firebombing of Dresden, and cannot speak. He has to write everything. His suffering, isolation, and the arduousness of all human connection is a tragic balance to Oskar's story. Still, the differences between the two narrative lines often test the patience and may not work for everyone. On the other hand, what does work is the ending. The last 14 pages are a flip book of the photo sequence known as "The Falling Man," taken as a man leaped to his death rather than die in the tower's fire. Foer, however, arranges the images in reverse order, and the man rises into the realm of the happy ending that Oskar, at least, deserves. In a book of extraordinary devices, this is the most audacious: a happy ending to the unimaginable realities of 9/11.

II

The ending of Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* answers a question that has been on everyone's mind as soon as the plot's central question is formed. This is a novel of manners, the kind that traditionally ends in a marriage, but the couple at the center are each married to others when they meet at Ground Zero. Luke McGavock is a wealthy investment banker who lives on the Upper East Side; his wife, Sasha, is a beautiful, ambitious, expensive socialite; and their teenage daughter is more at risk than either of them realizes. On September 12, Luke walks out of the ruins covered with ash and sees Corrine Calloway. She thinks he must be in shock. He thinks she looks like Katharine Hepburn. As he heads home on foot, she gives him her cell phone number and asks that he call to tell her he is safe.

Corrine's husband, Russell, is in publishing; they live in a literary world downtown and have young twins. (Russell knows Salman Rushdie!) The romance has gone out of their marriage, Corrine thinks, and she wants to get back to writing her screenplay of Graham Greene's *The*



Heart of the Matter. So she is already trying to make a change when she meets Luke, and she continues to work at the aid station at Ground Zero because it gives her a chance to stay away from home. For his part, Luke is burned out and has recently retired, to Sasha's chagrin, to write a book about samurai movies. And, of course, he keeps going back to the site to visit Corrine.

McInerney writes a regular wine column for *The Wall Street Journal* and knows New York City and the manners of its professional classes very well. *The Good Life* is filled with characters who spell out the uptown life, the different downtown life, and the very different life at Ground Zero, where a "natural man" named Jerry steals the show. The play of these geographies gives the novel its always unexpected details and texture. So if you like New York, like seeing it in movies, and read *The New Yorker* or *The New York Times*, you will find this novel filled with many collateral pleasures.

About halfway through the story, Corrine and Luke begin wondering whether or not they can separate from their marriages and end up together. In other words, they too want to know how the novel ends, and this gives McInerney another dimension to work in. *The Good Life* isn't a metafiction in the way *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* is. It is a meditation on the nature of change. Can we change ourselves? How do we do it? And, obviously, what effect do great events, terrible events, have on us? Do we change under their power? Or do we react to the terror by pulling back, digging in, and trying to hold onto order? McInerney's ending may not be the end the reader desires, but it is complex and satisfying. The unusually insightful copy on the back cover even calls *The Good Life* "redemptive."

III

Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* is set on August 7, 1974, the day Phillippe Petit strung a wire between the World Trade Center's towers and performed for the crowd below in the morning rush hour. It is not explicitly a book about 9/11, but what else can it be? How can we read it after its publication in 2009 and not be mindful of the World Trade Center's subsequent history? How can we not ask questions? None of these books is a historical novel as we usually mean by the phrase, but each of them asks us to think about the ways we narrate our lives, the history they contain, the connections we discover.

Redemption is an issue in this book too. In the first episode, "All Respects to Heaven, I Like It Here," Corrigan is a Dubliner who lives in the housing projects next to the Major Deegan Expressway in the Bronx, and he has opened his apartment to the hookers who work the neighborhood streets. They come to him for a drink of water and the use of his bathroom, and that's about all he does. When his brother suggests he move to some place sunnier, Corrigan simply says, "I'm called here." It is clear that his calling is to seek God and his own sanctity, but his search seems as eccentric and disordered as Oskar's Reconnaissance Expedition. In a book that is clearly about the responsibilities that come to us by accident in a city filled with strangers, Corrigan's ascetic ministry is both the most compelling and the hardest to understand.

His hooker friends include Tillie and her daughter, Jazzlynn. Tillie once entertained a client by reading verses by the Persian poet Rumi to him, and Jazzlynn, who is still a teenager, has twin baby girls. One day as Corrigan is driving Jazzlynn back from a court hearing, they are killed in a car accident.

In the next episode, we meet Gloria, an African-American woman from the same projects that Corrigan lives in. She is in the Park Avenue apartment of Claire Soderberg. They have both lost sons in Vietnam and become unlikely close friends, forming a support group with three other women. They all see and discuss "the walking man," the French tightrope-walking funambulist, and Claire in particular is offended by Petit's flagrant display of sheer bodily life. Claire's husband is the city judge in whose courtroom Petit is arraigned and who, with great self-delight, fines Petite \$1.10, a penny for every floor of the towers he has trespassed on. After Jazzlynn is killed, Gloria adopts and raises her baby daughters. In the final episode, many years later, one of the twins, Jaslyn, appears as a grown-up to comfort Claire on her deathbed, an end that is wholly unpredictable and beautifully tender.

Many other connections and consequences keep building through the remaining episodes, but the slim links between them are not the book's only point, nor are the different glimpses of the walking man. Every episode is rich and independent, and their unpredictable relationships are hard to simplify to a single point. Only in "Etherwest," for instance, the slightest and funniest of the episodes, do we get a full version of Petit's walk from the viewpoint of one of the characters. And this comes when a group of programmers in a basement in California hack into the lines to call pay phones on the streets in New York when they become aware of Petite's walk. Sabel Senatore picks up and describes the walk in detail to an audience 2,500 miles away, and she has the advantage of the opera glasses she took the night before to see Marakova at the American Ballet Theatre. Afterward she and they disappear from the book.

McCann himself writes beautifully about the walking man in three short sections that describe his walk and his background. But he makes no effort at simple correlations between the walker and the characters below. Like Corrigan, Petit has a calling and great faith, but he also has a constrained perspective: he sees nothing else in the book. His walk is not even a metaphor for the other stories. The connections to be made we have to make for ourselves; the city's order is in no way plotted.

McInerney's novel encourages us to meditate on the nature of change, and

Foer's to recognize that innocence can endure in the face of tragedy. McCann's book seems to be an inquiry into the nature of order itself. Where is it? How do we think about accidents? If boundaries usually draw a moral line, what does historical distance do to the moral field? How do distances connect us? And what, exactly, does this novel say about 9/11?

There is a passage in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, the novel that got him in trouble with the Iranian theocracy, that doesn't answer the question, but proposes another perspective:

Up there in air-space, in that soft, imperceptible field which had been made possible by the century and which, thereafter, made the century possible, becoming one of its defining locations, the place of movement and of war, the planet-shrinker and power-vacuum, most insecure and transitory of zones, illusory discontinuous, metamorphic—because when you throw everything up in the air anything becomes possible. . . . c

