

***Everything is Illuminated* (2005)**

Directed by Liev Schreiber

Novel by Jonathan Safran Foer

Screenplay by Liev Schreiber

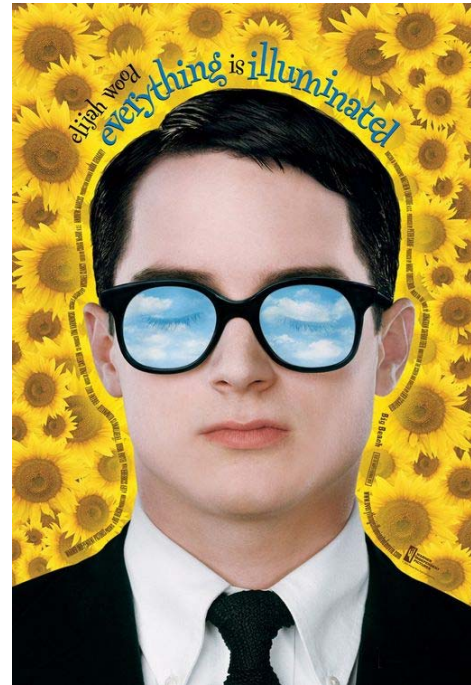
Note to teachers. This is an incomplete lecture, several of the facts, reviews and interviews have been included here, but it needs to be polished.

Cast

Alex	Eugene Hutz
Jonathan Safran Foer	Elijah Wood
Jonathan's Grandmother	Jana Hrabetova
Jonathan's Grandfather	Stephen Samudovsky
Alexander Perchov, Father	Oleksandr Choroshko
Igor	Gil Kazimirov
Alex's Mother	Zuzana Hodkova
Grandfather	Boris Leskin
Augustine	Tereza Veselkova
Lista	Laryssa Lauret
Young Grandfather	Lukas Kral
Young Lista	Vera Sindelarova

Crew

Co-Producer	Tom Karnowski
Co-Producer	David Minkowski
Producer	Peter Saraf
Executive producer	Matthew Stillman
Producer	Marc Turtletaub
Directed	Liev Schreiber
Novel	Jonathan Safran Foer
Screenplay	Liev Schreiber
Original Music	Paul Cantelon
Cinematographer	Matthew Libatique
Film Editing	Andrew Marcus
Film Editing	Craig McKay
Production Design	Mark Geraghty
Set Decoration	Petra Trachtmanova
Costume Design	Michael Clancy
Makeup	Georgina Abanto



Filming Locations Lvov and Odessa, Ukraine, Prague, Czech Republic

Budget \$7,000,000 (estimated)

Filming Dates 14 June 2004 - 12 August 2004

2005 Awards: Laterna magica Prize, Venice Film Festival, Live Schreiber

Chapter 1: Credits

Chapter 2. Jonathan's Collection

Chapter 3. Alex and His Family

Chapter 4. Destination Lutsk

Chapter 5. Back-Seat Companions

Chapter 6. More of a Collector

Chapter 7. No Meat, No Meal

Chapter 8. Proximate With Your Grandfather

Chapter 9. Directions and Tips

Chapter 10. N, H and C Words

- Chapter 11. Lost
- Chapter 12. Coming to Blows
- Chapter 13. Grandfather's Thoughts
- Chapter 14. Mirror Image
- Chapter 15. Perfect Place
- Chapter 16. I Am Trachimbrod
- Chapter 17. Illumination
- Chapter 18. Why Jonathan Collects
- Chapter 19. All That Is Left
- Chapter 20. Survivor's Story
- Chapter 21. Rising From the Dead
- Chapter 22. Because of the Ring
- Chapter 23. Survivor's Surrender
- Chapter 24. The Past Alongside Us
- Chapter 25. Illuminated Faces
- Chapter 26. Dedication and End Credits

Author's website welcome

Welcome to the official site for Jonathan Safran Foer, author of EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED.

In the summer after his junior year of college, Jonathan Safran Foer journeyed to Ukraine with a faded photograph, hoping to find the woman who saved his grandfather from the Nazis. He intended to write a non-fictional account of his experiences, but he returned home deeply disappointed, having found next to nothing. Fortunately, Jonathan turned his journey into a miraculous work of fiction.

In this “zestfully imagined novel of wonders” (in the words of Joyce Carol Oates), a young writer -- also named Jonathan Safran Foer -- searches for his family's lost roots in rural, contemporary Ukraine. Guided by the unforgettable Alex, his young Ukrainian translator, who writes in a sublimely butchered English, an amorous dog named Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior, and an old man haunted by his memories of the war, Jonathan is led on a quixotic search across a devastated landscape and back into an unexpected past. Braided into this story is the novel Jonathan is writing, a magical fable of his grandfather's village in Ukraine, a tapestry of startling symmetries that unite generations across time. In a counterpoint of voices blending high comedy and deep tragedy, the search moves back in time, the fantastical history moves forward, and they meet in a heart-stopping scene of extraordinary power.

EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED mines the black holes of history and is ultimately a story about searching: for people and places that no longer exist, for the hidden truths that haunt every family, and for the delicate but necessary tales that link past and future.

About the story

With only a yellowing photograph in hand, a young man -- also named Jonathan Safran Foer -- sets out to find the woman who may or may not have saved his grandfather from the Nazis. Accompanied by an old man haunted by memories of the war; an amorous dog named Sammy

Davis, Junior, Junior; and the unforgettable Alex, a young Ukrainian translator who speaks in a sublimely butchered English, Jonathan is led on a quixotic journey over a devastated landscape and into an unexpected past.

Interview with the author:

HOW WOULD YOU SUMMARIZE YOUR NOVEL?

In the summer after his junior year at college, Jonathan Safran Foer leaves the ivy of Princeton for the impoverished farmlands of Eastern Europe. Armed with only a photograph of questionable origin, he hopes to find Augustine -- a woman who might, or might not, be a link to a grandfather he never knew. He is guided on his journey by Alexander Perchov, a young Ukrainian translator, poignantly insightful and absurd, who is also searching for lost family, but in his case, family that is very much alive and near. What follows is a Quixote-like misadventure, at sharp turns comedic and tragic, which culminates in the most essential existential questions: Who am I? What am I to do?

Woven into this narrative is the novel that Jonathan is working on -- an imagined history of Trachimbrod, the shtetl that he and Alex investigate. As the contemporary section moves back in time, the imagined history moves forward. "Reality" and "fiction" meet at the final scene, when the Germans invade Trachimbrod, and all is, or isn't, lost.

EVERYTHING IS ILLUMIATED is, above all things, about love -- between parent and child, between lovers, friends and generations, between what happened and what will happen.

Q: HOW DID THE IDEA FOR THE BOOK ORIGINATE?

JSF: When I was young, I would often spend Friday nights at my grandmother's house. On the way in, she would lift me from the ground with one of her wonderful and terrifying hugs. And on the way out the next afternoon, I was again taken into the air with her love. It wasn't until years later that I realized she was weighing me.

Being a survivor of the War, being someone who spent years -- approximately the years I am now experiencing -- feeding from waste while traversing Europe barefoot, she is acutely, desperately aware of weights: of bodies, of presences, of things that do and don't exist. And it has always been with measuring -- the distances between what is felt and said; the lightness of love, the heft of showing love -- that I have related with her. My writing, I have begun to understand -- I am learning anew with each newly written word -- springs from the same need to measure.

I did not intend to write EVERYTHING IS ILLUMIATED. I intended to chronicle, in strictly nonfictional terms, a trip that I made to the Ukraine as a twenty-year-old. Armed with a photograph of the woman who I was told had saved my grandfather from the Nazis. I embarked on a journey to Trachimbrod, the shtetl of my family's origin. The comedy of errors lasted five days. I found nothing but nothing, and in that nothing -- a landscape of completely realized absence -- nothing was to be found. Because I didn't tell my grandmother about the trip -- she would have never let me go -- I didn't know what questions to ask, or whom to ask, or the

necessary names of people, places and things. The nothing was as much a result of me as what I encountered. I returned to Prague, where I had planned to write the story of what had happened.

But what had happened? It took me a week to finish the first sentence. In the remaining month I wrote 280 pages. What made beginning so difficult, and the remainder so seemingly automatic, was imagination -- the initial problem, and ultimate liberation, of imagining. My mind wanted to wander, to invent, to use what I had seen as a canvas, rather than the paints. But, I wondered, is the Holocaust exactly that which cannot be imagined? What are one's responsibilities to "the truth" of a story, and what is "the truth"? Can historical accuracy be replaced with imaginative accuracy? The eye with the mind's eye?

The novel's two voices -- one "realistic," the other "folkloric" -- and their movement toward one another, has to do with this problem of imagination. The Holocaust presents a real moral quandary for the artist. Is one allowed to be funny? Is one allowed to attempt verisimilitude? To forego it? What are the moral implications of quaintness? Of wit? Of sentimentality? What, if anything, is untouchable?

With the two very different voices, I attempted to show the rift that I experienced when trying to imagine the book. (It is the most explicit of many rifts in the book.) And with their development toward each other, I attempted to heal the rift, or wound.

EVERYTHING IS ILLUMIATED proposes the possibility of a responsible duality, of "did and didn't," of things being one way and also the opposite way. Rather than aligning itself with either "how things were" or "how things could have been," the novel measures the difference between the two, and by so doing, attempts to reflect the way things feel.

Q: DID YOU EVER FIND THE WOMAN WHO APPARENTLY SAVED YOUR GRANDFATHER FROM THE NAZIS?

JSF: I wasn't even close to finding her. The trip was so ill-conceived, so poorly planned, so without the research that would have been necessary to have had any hope of accomplishing what I thought was my purpose -- finding Augustine -- that I never even had a chance.

But in retrospect, I'm not sure that the purpose was to find her. I'm not even sure I wanted to find her. I was twenty when I made the trip -- an unobservant Jew, with no felt connection to, or great interest in, my past. I kept an ironic distance from religion, and was skeptical of anything described as "Jewish."

And yet, my writing -- what little I did, then -- began to take on a Jewish sensibility, if not content. To my surprise, I started asking genealogical questions of my mother, and sending Amazon.com workers to the darkest recesses of the warehouse for titles like *Shtetl FINDER Gazetteer*, by Chester G. Cohen (Chester G. Cohen?) I was a closeted Jew.

After twenty years of life, the feelings and facts had begun to diverge. I spent my time and energy on activities I didn't think I cared about. There was a split -- a strange and exhilarating split -- between the Jonathan that thought (secular), and the Jonathan that did (Jewish). Because

my trip to Ukraine came at the beginning of this fracture -- before I could appreciate my coexistence of my halves -- I was not yet ready to want to find Augustine. I jeopardized my trip by refusing to prepare for it.

Thankfully. The complete absence that I found in Ukraine gave my imagination total freedom. The novel wouldn't have been possible had my search been that other kind of success.

Q: WHAT'S THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE?

JSF: Most explicitly, it refers to a passage in which all the citizens of Trachimbrod are making love at once. The narrator puts forth a pseudo-scientific "theory," the gist of which is here:

From space, astronauts can see people making love as a tiny speck of light. Not light exactly, but a glow that could be confused for light -- a coital radiance that takes generations to pour like honey through the darkness to the astronaut's eyes.

In about one and a half centuries -- after the lovers who made the glow will have long since been laid permanently on their backs -- the metropolitan cities will be seen from space. They will glow all year. Smaller cities will also be seen, but with great difficulty. Towns will be virtually impossible to spot. Individual couples invisible.

The glow is born from the sum of thousands of loves: newlyweds and teenagers who spark like lighters out of butane, pairs of men who burn fast and bright, pairs of women who illuminate for hours with soft multiple glows, orgies like rock and flint toys sold at festivals, couples trying unsuccessfully to have children who burn their frustrated image on the continent like the bloom a bright light leaves on the eye after you turn away from it.

Some nights, some places are a little brighter. It's difficult to stare at New York City on Valentine's Day, or Dublin on St. Patrick's. The old walled city of Jerusalem lights up like a candle each of Chanukah's eight nights. Trachimday is the only time all year when the tiny village of Trachimbrod can be seen from space, when enough copulative voltage is generated to sex the Polish-Ukrainian skies electric. We're here, the glow of 1804 will say in one and a half centuries. We're here, and we're alive.

Of course, the title is also playing off of the other notions of illumination, particularly revelation. The book traces an arc from ignorance to knowledge, from inexperience to wisdom.

I've also always loved the idea of illuminated manuscripts -- embellished, overstuffed books. And I love the idea of books being more than books, or being, rather, something other than books. I think the ideal experience of my book would be like listening to music.

Q: WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON NOW?

JSF: I'm trying to finish a draft of another novel, tentatively titled, The Zelnik Museum.

About the Author

Jonathan Safran Foer was born in 1977. He studied at Princeton where he won the Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, and Senior Creative Writing thesis prizes. He has also worked as a morgue assistant, jewelry salesman, farm sitter and ghostwriter. Four years ago, he traveled to the Ukraine to research his grandfather's life. He was chosen as the Zoetrope: All Story Fiction Prize winner (2000) and his short stories have appeared in the *Paris Review* and *Conjunctions*. He is also the editor of the *Convergence of Birds*, and anthology of fiction and poetry inspired by Joseph Cornell's birdboxes, which was a Boston Globe bestseller and a Book Sense '76 selection. An excerpt of EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED appeared in the *New Yorker's* debut fiction issue, eliciting a huge response and a flood of letters from admiring readers. Jonathan Foer grew up in Washington, DC and now lives in Brooklyn, NY. He is currently at work on his second novel, which takes place in a museum.

What the reviewers have said:

Some of the praise for EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED:

"A certified wunderkind at 25 . . . a funny, moving...deeply felt novel about the dangers of confronting the past and the redemption that comes with laughing at it, even when that seems all but impossible." — *Time* magazine

"Rarely does a writer as young as Jonathan Foer display such virtuosity and wisdom...Read it, and you'll feel altered, chastened—seared in the fire of something new." — *Washington Post Book World*

"One of the most impressive first novels in a long time . . . this book is, as its name implies, brilliant." — *Esquire*

"[A] wild, indelible first novel ... The payoff is extraordinary: a fearless, acrobatic, ultimately haunting effort." — *New York Times*

"A zestfully imagined novel of wonders both magical and mundane . . . He will win your admiration, and he will break your heart." — Joyce Carol Oates

"Clearly, the author of this first novel is an extraordinarily gifted young man. Rare enough, surely, but this young man also happens to possess something approaching wisdom. Don't just check him out. Read him." — Russell Banks

"J.S. Foer's EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED is a novel intricate in structure, fantastical in its story, and irreverent in 100 different ways." — Nathan Englander

"Not since... *A Clockwork Orange* has the English language been simultaneously mauled and energized with such brilliance and such brio." — Francine Prose, *New York Times Book Review* (cover review)

"Foer has written a glittering first novel. . . with great humor, sympathy, charm and daring. Every page is illuminated." — Jeffrey Eugenides

"He has given us a deeply resonant work that could only be the first great American Jewish

novel of the 21st century.” — *Forward*

“Read, you can feel the life beating.” — *Philadelphia Inquirer*

“A book that illuminates so much with such odd and original beauty.” — *New York* magazine

”Everyone who takes books seriously is talking about EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED.” — *NPR's Fresh Air*

“An impressive, original debut.” — *Publishers Weekly*

“You will have to ignore everything you read about this novel. For you will read that EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED is a work of genius, that its author, at 24, has staked his claim for literary greatness, that it’s a new kind of novel, that after it things will never be the same again. You won’t believe it and you’ll decide not to read the book on principle. And that would be a disaster, because it’s all true.” — *London Times*

“Everything is Illuminated is not only an extraordinary addition to novels about the Holocaust, but also the most impressive first novel I’ve read in years.” — *Hadassah Magazine*

Trivia

- Eugene Hutz's band Gogol Bordello appears as the polka band that greets Elijah Wood at the train station.
- **Cameo:** [Jonathan Safran Foer, the author of the novel on which the movie is based] appears as the leaf blower at the beginning of the film.

Goofs

- **Crew or equipment visible:** In one scene when they driving, over the grandfather's shoulder you can see the car which is carrying the film/sound crew.
- **Continuity:** When the three meet the small kid who asks them for chewing gum, the kids hands have different positions on the window when filmed from inside the car or from his back.
- **Miscellaneous:** When Alexander closes his grandfather's eyes, you can see the actor playing the grandfather close them himself just before Alexander's hand passes over them.
- **Factual errors:** Francis Scott Key is credited for the "Star Spangled Banner". The composer, John Stafford Smith 1750-1836, should have been given credit rather than Key who was the lyricist. Incidentally, in the movie the performance is played by a band and no lyrics are heard.

Everything is Illuminated, reviewed by Sam Osborn -www.samseescinema.com
rating: 2 out of 4

Director: Liev Schreiber Cast: Elijah Wood, Eugene Hutz, Boris Leskin Screenplay: Live Schreiber (based on the book by Jonathan Safran Foer) MPAA Classification: PG-13 (disturbing images/violence, sexual content and language)

Everything is Illuminated will be a sharp disappointment for many of the avid fans that devoured Jonathan Safran Foer's literary debut of the same title. Although it's a passable film, director Liev Schreiber's first in fact, it only deals with the travelogue aspect of the novel, which, as many will know, is only half of the story. Having only read the first couple chapters of the book, but being a fan of Foer's second novel, I only have an idea of the author's style: wandering, contemporary prose. Schreiber's film adaptation feels very little like wandering, contemporary prose. It retains some of the imaginative, foreign humor of the book, but feels oddly disjointed and uneven. The first half runs like a whacky, travel comedy, but the second half treads through well-trodden ground with uninspired drama. I attribute most of the film's problems to its potentially catatonic lead character, but there's the unshakeable feeling that there's more of the story waiting to be told behind the financial constraints of a \$7 million (I believe) project.

The film centers around Jonathan Foer's (Elijah Wood) search for the woman in his grandfather's 60 year old photograph. Known by the narrator, Alex (Eugene Hutz), as The Collector, Jonathan obsesses over the collection of family items, the latest and most mysterious being the photograph. Convinced of the woman's importance, he travels to Ukraine to find her. Finding assistance in an old tour guide family run by Alex's supposedly blind grandfather (Boris Leskin), Jonathan sets off on his quirky, awkward journey.

In any film, it's most important to give the audience an emotional interest in the plot. Action films can achieve this by sparking adrenaline, and comedies can do so with laughter. With Everything is Illuminated, it is imperative for us to connect with Jonathan in order to have sympathy for his journey. Except, this connection is impossible when he has very little to do with the actual film. Having very few lines and almost no facial expressions or body language, I felt nothing for Jonathan. He seemed as emotionally capable as a statue. And without any sympathy for the character, I felt no sympathy for the journey. In this case, the supporting characters and sub-plots must be captivating enough to fill the film's gaping void. This, however, is not the case. Although sometimes laugh-out-loud hilarious, when the film slows down to focus on the main storyline, my interest slows down with it, grinding nearly to a complete halt. This, with credit to Elijah Wood, is no fault of the actor's. Wood does as well as he can with the catatonic role, with his pale face and moony eyes. But the screenplay offers him very, very little to work with. He's as expressive as his cannibal character from Sin City.

That being said, most of the first half of the film is entertaining enough with its comedy. For instance, Alex's grandfather has a...debatable case of blindness. He wears the sunglasses and owns what he calls a "seeing eye bitch" (a dog), but agrees to drive Jonathan and Alex around the nation in his beat-up car. Also, Alex has his own brand of English that we pick up throughout the film. Repose means sleep, premium means good, and in distress is mad, among others. Eugene Hutz, being a non-actor originally hired for his band's music (Gogol Bordello) does a surprisingly wonderful job with his role as Alex. Liev Schreiber had been doing an extensive talent search to find an Ukrainian actor right for the role and stumbled upon Eugene at a meeting.

Eugene took a look at the screenplay and said in his very Ukranian accent, "yoo knoe, I aym thaat gie." And after taking a look at him, Schreiber said, "Yes, Eugene. Yes you are."

Everything is Illuminated, even with all my complaints about the film's neglect of Foer's style aside, still doesn't work as a stand-alone film. Its uneven pacing and muted lead character plague its playfully foreign mentality. There are some unique laughs to be had, but they aren't enough to warrant a recommendation.

-www.samseescinema.com

EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED

(a film review by Mark R. Leeper)

CAPSULE: This is a film that starts slowly, moves into comedy, and then serious drama. An American Jew travels to Ukraine to find information about members of his family. Forgotten secrets of past are unearthed. This is a film with a wide range of emotions. It is a film with some laughter and some very affecting moments. It may be a flawed film, but parts are really excellent. Rating: +3 (-4 to +4) or 9/10

Liev Schreiber is a talented and intelligent actor. Here he turns to writing and directing a film based on the popular novel **EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED** by Jonathan Safran Foer. By an odd coincidence, the main character of this film is also named Jonathan Safran Foer. Foer (played by Elijah Wood) is a man who is surrounded by a force field that seems to deaden all emotion. He observes the world dispassionately from behind a pair of Coke- bottle-lens glasses. His every experience is remembered by taking a souvenir, placing it in a plastic Ziploc bag and putting it on a complex wall that represents for him his life. There every aspect of his life can be studied like a bug under a magnifying glass. One thing seems to defy his analysis. It is a photograph of his family from the Old Country. Perhaps to understand this one specimen he will have to go to Ukraine and investigate the town where his grandfather lived.

It is in Ukraine that he meets the Heritage Odessa Tours Company, basically a one family business that specializes in driving rich Jews to Jewish heritage sites. Though they do not think much of Jews, they are happy to make a nice comfortable living off of them. The Dad will be unable to drive Foer around. Instead he sends his blind father as a driver and his twenty-ish son Alex Perchov (Eugene Hutz) as a guide. How can the grandfather be blind and still see well enough to drive? It seems like one more strange and silly facet of Ukraine society. By the end of the film it will, in fact, be an important question. Can one truly believe what one knows to be false? What is the effect of convincing oneself to live a lie?

Also along for the ride is their nasty, growling dog Sammy Davis, Jr. To make her official the dog wears a shirt that explains that she is the "Officious Seeing Eye Bitch." Clearly the delicate nuances of the English language are something of a mystery in Ukraine. But then Ukraine is also a mystery to Foer. Much of the film is a road trip trying to find the long lost town of Trachimbrod. During the trip Foer tries to understand Alex and his society, Alex tries to figure out Foer. The two will have to learn about each other and each will understand the history of the region better. Both are very much in the dark, but by the end of their travels everything is illuminated.

The film is shot with subdued color to subdue the mood of the piece. The score is in large part klezmer that provides a perfect backdrop for the almost surreal and quietly madcap journey into the heartland of Ukraine and also into the past. Though the film gets off to a slow start the characters and the humor really draws the audience in. People in my group were repeating lines from the film and laughing at them for days after, so we must have really liked it. By the end of the film festival we were singing "Start Wearing Purple" and "Officious Seeing Eye Bitch" had become the mascot of festival.

Rumor has it that the novel the film is based on is much more complex and fulfilling than the film. That is what novels are. As films go, EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED tells a pretty good story all by itself. I rate EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED a +3 on the -4 to +4 scale or 9/10.

Mark R. Leeper
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EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED

A film review by Steve Rhodes

Copyright 2005 Steve Rhodes

RATING (0 TO ****): **

In his writing and directing debut, actor Liev Schreiber (the candidate in THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE) clearly knows exactly what he wants to accomplish in EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED. The problem is that many viewers may well be like me. No matter how loud and often the whimsical folk music is played, I never got in the mood. Instead, I quickly got whimsied out by this movie that tries way too hard for off-beat cuteness, until it switches gears entirely in the last act, turning into a tender Holocaust drama.

Elijah Wood, THE LORD OF THE RINGS' Frodo, plays the central character of Jonathan, a boy going back to the Ukraine in order to search for his Jewish roots. His big glasses with thick lens make his eyes appear the size of silver dollars. Couple that with his little boy lost demeanor, and the taciturn Jonathan appears like more like a refugee from a comic strip than a flesh-and-blood American.

As Alex, Jonathan's translator and guide, Eugene Hutz appears to be channeling John Travolta in SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER. Of course, Alex butchers the English language, while asking politically incorrect questions of his client. "Are you carnal very often?" Alex asks Jonathan, as well, as, "How much does a Negro, homosexual accountant make (in America)?"

Alex's Grandfather, played by Boris Leskin, is their blind driver. He isn't actually blind, but he wants others to think he is. Accompanying the three of them on their journey is the grandfather's clumsy dog. This "seeing eye bitch" with razor sharp teeth is named Sammy Davis, Jr., Jr. Don't ask. Another thing not really worthy asking about, although the story is centered on it, is Jonathan's hobby. He collects everything about people and deposits the items in Ziploc

bags. From false teeth to underwear, he saves it all and staples it to his wall. As this slow story crept along, I began to wonder if he had any NoDoz in one of those little bags.

EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED runs 1:46. The film is in Ukrainian and Russian with English subtitles and in English. It is rated PG-13 for "disturbing images/violence, sexual content and language" and would be acceptable for kids around 11 and up.

The film opens nationwide in the United States on September 30, 2005. In the Silicon Valley, it will be showing at the Camera Cinemas.

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Everything is Illuminated

BY ROGER EBERT / September 23, 2005

Liev Schreiber's "Everything is Illuminated" begins in goofiness and ends in silence and memory. How it gets from one to the other is the subject of the film, a journey undertaken by three men and a dog into the secrets of the past. The movie is narrated by Alex (Eugene Hutz), a Ukrainian whose family specializes in "tours of dead Jews." Alex and his grandfather (also named Alex) drive American Jews in search of their roots to the places where many of their ancestors died.

The trip through a bewildering but beautiful Ukrainian countryside involves a Soviet-era car that may not exactly have air bags. The grandfather is the driver, although he claims to be blind and insists on going everywhere with his "seeing eye bitch," whose name is Sammy Davis Junior Junior. Alex's English seems learned from a thesaurus that was one word off. He tortures words to force them into sentences from which they try to escape, and keeps a journal with chapters like *Overture to the Commencement of a Very Rigid Search*.

The movie's hero is Jonathan (Elijah Wood), a solemn, goggle-eyed American known as "The Collector" because he accumulates bits and pieces of his life and stores them in Ziploc bags, carefully labeled. He has come to the Ukraine to find the woman who saved his grandfather's life. To this woman is due much gratitude, because Jonathan's grandmother passed along the belief that the Ukraine treated Jews so badly that if the Nazis invaded, it might be an improvement.

The opening hour or so is a weirdly hilarious comedy, based on the intractable nature of Grandfather (Boris Leskin), his fierce love for Sammy Davis Junior Junior, and his truce with his grandson, who idolizes American popular culture, especially Michael Jackson. When Jonathan tells him Sammy Davis Jr. the First was Jewish, he is astonished: "What about Michael Jackson?" No, says Jonathan, definitely not Michael Jackson.

There is much perplexion (the kind of word the younger Alex savors) that Jonathan is a vegetarian, and in a hotel dining room he is told potatoes do not, cannot, have never, come

without meat. He is finally served one boiled potato, in a scene that develops as if Chaplin had been involved. Then he goes to his room, a narrow single bed in the midst of vast emptiness. Alex advises him to lock his door: "There are many dangerous people who would try to steal things from Americans and also kidnap them."

The journey continues. Sammy Davis Junior Junior begins to love Jonathan. Grandfather speaks like a crusty anti-Semite, Alex covers for him in his translation, and nobody seems to have heard of the hamlet of Trachimbrod, which they seek. Then abruptly the grandfather steers off the highway and into the middle of nowhere, and they find a beautiful white-haired old woman (Laryssa Lauret) living in a house in the middle of a field, who simply says, "You are here. I am it."

The movie is based on a novel by Jonathan Safran Foer that reportedly includes many more scenes from the distant past, including some of magic realism in the 18th century Ukrainian Jewish community. "Everything is Illuminated" lives in the present, except for memories and enigmatic flashbacks to the Second World War. The gift that Schreiber brings to the material is his ability to move us from the broad satire of the early scenes to the solemnity of the final ones. The first third of the film could be inspired by Fellini's "Amarcord," the last third by Bergman's darkest hours.

I described Jonathan as the hero of the film, but perhaps he is too passive to be a hero. He regards. He collects. Alex is the active character, cheerfully inventing English as he goes along, making the best of the journey's hardships, humoring his grandfather, telling the rich American what he wants to hear. Eugene Hutz, a singer in a punk gypsy band, brings notes of early John Turturro to the performance. Elijah Wood's performance is deliberately narrow and muted -- pitch-perfect, although there is a distraction caused by his oversized eyeglasses so thick they make his eyes huge. He visits, he witnesses, he puts things in Ziploc bags.

Then again, perhaps the real hero of the film is the grandfather, unless by default it is the old lady, who is a Collector, too. For Grandfather, this is as much a journey of discovery as it is for Jonathan, and the changes that take place within him are all the more profound for never once being referred to in his dialogue. He never discusses his feelings or his memories, but in a way he is the purpose of the whole trip. The conclusion he draws from it is illustrated in an image that, in context, speaks more eloquently than words.

"Everything is Illuminated" is a film that grows in reflection. The first time I saw it, I was hurtling down the tracks of a goofy ethnic comedy when suddenly we entered dark and dangerous territory. I admired the film but did not sufficiently appreciate its arc. I went to see it again at the Toronto Film Festival, feeling that I had missed some notes, had been distracted by Jonathan's eyeglasses and other relative irrelevancements (as Alex might say). The second time, I was more aware of the journey Schreiber was taking us on, and why it is necessary to begin where he begins in order to get where he's going.