

HERE I AM

A FAMILY PORTRAIT DISPLAYING
THE SHADOWS AND BEAUTY OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS
WITH BRUTAL AND HEARTWARMING HONESTY

Guest contribution by Svenja Blank, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

“Jacob was a man who withheld comfort but stood at thresholds long after others would have walked away.”

The reader first encounters the Blochs, a modern Jewish American family, when many of its members find themselves at a threshold. Isaac, the family's old patriarch, is at the threshold between life and death. A fact that could also be said about Argus, their dog. Jacob and Julia Bloch are at the threshold between marriage and divorce, whereas their oldest son Sam struggles at the threshold between boyhood and manhood. This existence on the verge is uncomfortable for all of them, but they have somehow gotten used to it, have developed coping strategies and do their best to maintain the status quo. Still, there is an undeniable desire to sneak a peek beyond the brink. What could life be like if someone dared to take a step? However, it takes an earthquake to make them move eventually. A literal earthquake in Israel and two metaphorical earthquakes - the discovery of an affair and Isaac's death. These events cause a breakdown of their carefully choreographed system and bring up questions about the characters' individual search for happiness, the duties and bliss of parenthood, and the family's Jewish identity.

In the Old Testament, “Here I am” is Abraham's answer to God as He calls him, asking Abraham to sacrifice his only son

Isaac. “Here I am” could be understood as a way of saying “I am here for you” or “I am wholly present for you”. Yet, paradoxically, Abraham's answer is the same as his son calls out to him, realizing that he is about to be sacrificed. Can Abraham be wholly present for both of them? Can he steer a middle course here, or would that be just as bad as one of the extremes? With reference to this predicament in the Old Testament, the characters in *Here I Am* by Jonathan Safran Foer explore their obligations to their loved ones, to their religion and heritage, to their people's legacy, and last but not least to themselves. How can we be a good parent, son/daughter, spouse, friend, Jew, architect, etc., without neglecting ourselves? How can we balance all these demands, and which sacrifices are we prepared to make? In many cases (apart from sacrificing one's son), righteousness might not so much depend on what we do but how we do things and how we communicate our needs and decisions. As grandfather Irving Bloch reminds us:

“Without context we'd all be monsters.”

Last but not least, it cannot be denied that “Here I am” also has an “I” in the middle,

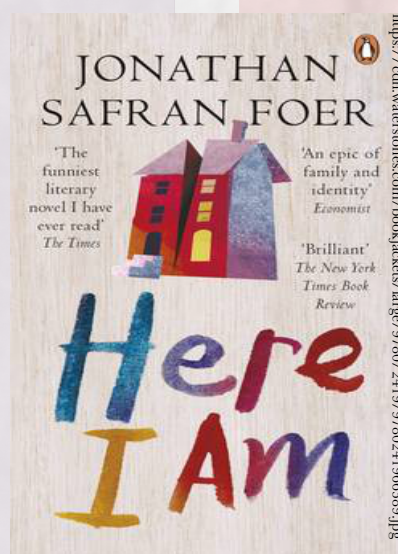
and it could be argued that the statement requires the speaker to know their own position, their own standpoint. The metaphorical and literal earthquakes in the novel lead the characters to reflect on who they are and who they want to be. Mainly focusing on Jacob Bloch, husband and father of three, the reader witnesses an honest, touching, and often highly amusing process of self-reflection. At the same time, we might equally feel inspired to contemplate our own roles, viewpoints, and priorities in life, and to wonder what constitutes happiness for us personally.

Reading *Here I Am*, I often had the feeling that there is a constant double layer of meaning. It was like peeling an orange - only by going beyond the first layer of words you get to see the soft and delicate core of the individual characters. In a way, this parallels the protagonists' own process of self-discovery. Indeed, this digging is sometimes challenging and definitely requires a good bit of empathy from the reader. I certainly have to admit that some things still remain unresolved to me. However, this is also what makes the novel so intriguing, even poetic. For everyone who loves to be challenged by and grapple with literature it is definitely a good choice.

Reading this review one might get the impression

that this book is somewhat hard to read and heavy-hearted. But no, despite its thought-provoking and deep character, *Here I Am* is written in an accessible style, the protagonists are relatable and many family scenes are outright hilarious. There are moments of brutal honesty and heartbreaking struggle, but there is also a good portion of comic relieve, warm intimacy, and a benevolent view on human fallibility. Without being overly sentimental, Foer manages to display this great range of emotions involved in human relationships with a fine eye for edges and nuances. A strong recommendation for everyone who reads a book not so much for the story itself but for the life that beats in every scene and every character.

Besides *Here I Am*, Jonathan Safran Foer has written two other award-winning novels, *Everything Is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. He is also well-known for his bestselling works of nonfiction, *Eating Animals* and *We are the Weather*.



Jonathan Safran Foer:
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