Foer — behind the myth

By Arthur Dudney
PRINCETONIAN 'STREET' WRITER

Jonathan Safran Foer '99 introduced himself to the world as a character in his first novel, "Everything is Illuminated."

"He did not look like anything special at all. I was underwhelmed to the maximum," the narrator said of Foer.

In this fictional world, Foer had not received a reported $500,000 advance for his first novel and a million for his recently published second. Nor was he the highest-earning American literary novelist under 30, whose debut novel will soon be adapted into a movie starring Elijah Wood.

The 28-year-old's rise to fame and fortune has led many to praise him, but others to pan not only his novels but the author himself.

The Daily Princetonian interviewed him by phone on Tuesday when he stopped in Chicago on a book tour.

Usually sporting a blazer over jeans, Foer dresses like a typical college student for public readings. He approaches the podium shyly and opens a brutally marked-up copy of "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close." Besides picking up dry cleaning and going toiletry shopping, marking the book was Foer's preparation for the tour. He does not act as he reads, but Foer's reading voice becomes as thin and staccato as one would imagine his nine-year-old protagonist's to be.

He says that he enjoys book tours but doesn't like flying. "As long as you accept death the second you get on the plane," that phobia is manageable, he said. There was a pregnant crunch over the phone. "I'm eating a potato chip," he explained.

During the interview, a phone began tinkling in the background. "Do you know how to turn a cell phone off?" he implored. "Shut up! I got a cell phone for this book tour, never had one before. I f--king hate it."

Foer's years at Princeton

Foer's literary career began when Joyce Carol Oates, a prolific novelist and professor in the Creative Writing Program, stopped him in the hall after their seminar to say that she liked his writing. Until that moment, "it had never dawned on me that there was such a thing as 'my writing,'" he recalls.

His other mentors at Princeton were Gideon Rosen in the Philosophy department and James Seawright, a sculpture teacher in the Visual Arts Program. Jeffrey Eugenides, the novelist who wrote "The Virgin Suicides," also taught Foer.

Foer doesn't recall which class he first took with Rosen ("Introduction to something in Metaphysics," he suggests), but it was because of Rosen that he joined the Philosophy department.

"[Professor Rosen] is the most articulate person I've ever met in my life," Foer said. "He probably still is."

"I wasn't the greatest student at all," Foer admits. He had only taken two classes in philosophy before deciding to major in the subject. "And my senior thesis [in philosophy] was nothing special." However, his creative writing thesis, most of which was written between his sophomore and junior years, was later published as his wildly successful first novel.

The Princeton career of the University's most famous recent graduate was mediocre by most standards. He told the "Nassau Weekly" that he didn't have "a huge circle of friends and ... sometimes felt alienated from the campus at large." During our interview, he said that he probably wouldn't ever write about Princeton. "There's material everywhere ... but I certainly didn't have enough experiences [at Princeton] to justify a novel."

Almost everyone's a critic

Foer established his reputation in 2002, when he was just three years out of Princeton. But his second book was not treated with the same deference as the first.

"I was warned when my first book was out, and I was getting nice reviews, that my second book when it came out would be gone after," he said.

Some critics have called Foer's close relationships with his mentors evidence of an unfair advantage in getting his first novel published. In "So Over Foer," an article in the New York Post, William Georgiades claims that Foer "is a hopeless schmoozer." That is the fifth of Georgiades' dozen "reasons to hate Jonathan Safran Foer."

The novelist tells a different story. He claims to have shopped the manuscript to seven agents, all of whom turned it down. Once he found an agent, the book was rejected by a number of publishers. Houghton-Mifflin finally accepted the book, and offered him a comparatively large advance of $500,000. Other Ivy League novelists in recent years have been paid advances of $350,000 for their first books.

"You can't acquaint success in the world with success in what you write," Foer explained. The book that was published, "was the exact same book that was rejected. That was the lesson I really learned. Good or bad, you can't tie your worth to how your writing is received."

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Jonathan Safran Foer '99

His second novel was savaged by many critics in New York City, though reviews from other parts of the country were generally very positive.

Michiko Kakutani wrote in the Arts section of The New York Times that Foer was "trying to sprinkle handfuls of Gabriel García Márquez's magical realism into his story without really understanding this sleight of hand."

Foer responds that the negative reaction won't affect his writing because he is an instinctual writer.

"It's a losing proposition to think about it too much because so much of writing is being unselfconscious ... As much as possible, I try not to think of what I do as a writer," he said.

Writing in The New York Times Magazine, Deborah Solomon portrays the novelist in much the same way. For her, Foer is completely sincere in both his writing and personal life. Several media blogs hyperbolically referred to Solomon's piece as "the worst profile ever" because it failed to leave distance between subject and writer. One commentator writes that it "feels uncomfortably like a (teen-age) romance."

Foer called the profile "very sensitive, very generous," but cautioned, "I think of myself as a little less earnest than that piece made me."

Despite living in a multi-million dollar house and leading the life of a professional author, Foer claims to still be writing what he sees and feels.

"My books are assemblages, rather than some sharply delineated thing carved out," he said. "If there are things I want to express, stories I want to tell, I can usually figure out ways to get them into a novel."