Foer — beyond the myth

By Arthur Dudney
PRINCETONIAN 'STREET' WRITER

Jonathan Safran Foer '93 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 unimpressed by 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 would 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 have criticized his novels as too autobiographical.

The Daily Princetonian interviewed him by phone on Tuesday when he stopped in Chicago on a book tour. Usually chatting a blazer over jeans, Foer dresses like a typical college student for public readings. He approaches the podium shyly and opens his speech by repeating "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close." Besides picking up dry cleaning and going to toilet 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 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, I can be flyable," he said. There was a pregnant crunch over the phone. "I’m eating a potato chip," he explained.

The interview, a phone call beginning 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 professor and director of the Creative Writing Program, stopped him in the hall after their seminar to tell her that she liked his writing. Until that moment, "it had never dawned on me that there could be such a thing as ‘writing’," he recalls.

His other mentors at Princeton were Gideon Rosen in the Philosophy Department and James Seawright, a sculptor 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,” Foer admits. "He had only taken two classes in philosophy before deciding to major in the subject. "And my senior thesis [in philosophy] was毫无 special," However, his creative writing thesis, most of which was written between his sophomore and junior years, was later published as a wildly successful first novel.

The Princeton career of the University’s most famous recent graduate was mediocre at best. Foer was a regular "Nassau Weekly," that he didn’t have "a huge circle of friends and... sometimes felt alienated from the campus large." During our interview, he said that he was "not overly impressed with his first novel.

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 college. But his second book was not treated with the same deference as the first. "I was warned when my first book came out," he said, "that if I wasn’t 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 advisors evidence of an unfair advantage in getting his first novel published. "In So Over Foer," an article in the New York Post, William Geoghegan claims that Foer is a "legend in his own mind." The fifth of Georgie's dozen "reasons to hate Jonathan Safran Foer.

The novelists tells a different story. He points to have had 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, he self-published, and eventually 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 $500,000 for their first books.

"You can’t accomplish success in the world with suc-

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Jonathan Safran Foer '99

"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."

His second novel was savaged by many critics in New Sensibility, 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 Garcia Marquez’s magical realism into his story without really understanding this sleight of band."

Foer responds that the negative reaction won’t affect his writing because he is an "intinctive writer."

"It’s a losing proposition to think about it too much because so much of writing is being unconscious... 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 Soloman'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 keen-"ege romance."

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

Despite living in a multimillion 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 put 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."