

# Huttner reviews of *Everything is Illuminated* and *Divan*

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## JEWISH LIFE



### Tour Guides to the Ineffable

BY JAN LISA HUTTNER SPECIAL TO THE WORLD JEWISH DIGEST

Can a cinematic adaptation ever best its source? The conventional wisdom is no, but at least two recent cases argue otherwise. Although many readers loved the character of Melanie in *The Cider House Rules*, the film's many fans didn't miss her when she was dropped from John Irving's Oscar-winning screenplay. On the other hand, some readers of *The Human Stain* dismissed Delphine Roux as yet another one of Philip Roth's tiresome shrews, so few complained about her greatly diminished role in Robert Benton's screen version.

Since the audience for a successful film dwarfs the readership of even the most popular book, directors have to do what makes sense cinematically and live with the consequences. First-time screenwriter/director Liev Schreiber (best known for his acting roles in *A Walk on the Moon* and the recent



Liev Schreiber's adaptation of "Everything is Illuminated" remains true to the author's search for his family's rescuers in the Ukraine, but departs on the subject of a mythical shtetl.

remake of *The Manchurian Candidate* should ready himself for outrage from the faithful when *Everything is Illuminated* is released this month, but

his decisions—which include eliminating 200 years worth of Trachimbrod shtetl history—are the right ones.

The source of Schreiber's film is the 2002 novel of the same name by Jonathan Safran Foer. "Everything is Illuminated" was an immediate best-seller which won numerous prizes, including the National Jewish Book Award for Fiction. But buried within the critical praise were some caveats about "grandiose targets" and overuse of "technical tricks," and by the time Foer's second novel, "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close," came out a few months ago, most critics had toned down their praise. John Updike's very long and extremely kind review for the *New Yorker* captured the problem in its concluding paragraph: "...a little more silence, a few fewer messages, less graphic apparatus might let Foer's

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excellent empathy, imagination, and good will resonate all the louder." Bottom line? Foer's novels read like too much of a good thing.

But Schreiber's adaptation is just right. In the book, there are two main characters. The first is a young Jewish-American college student named Jonathan Safran Foer. The second is a Ukrainian college student named Alexander Perchov. These two characters are doppelgangers, meant to mirror each other so that the real Jonathan Safran Foer (the author) can speculate about what his own life might be like today if the Nazis had never occupied Ukraine.

But the Nazis did occupy Ukraine, and in both film and novel, the action begins when Jonathan arrives in Ukraine to search for Augustine, the woman who saved his grandfather Safran's life and thereby enabled his escape to America. Alex's father works for an Odessa-based travel agency called Heritage Touring, which specializes in trips such as these, and the two students meet when Alex is assigned the task of serving as Jonathan's translator.

The book's narrative takes place after the trip, in the form of a correspondence between Alex and Jonathan, both of whom have returned to their respective colleges. Alex sends Jonathan long letters that include chapters of a book he is writing about their trip. Jonathan sends Alex chapters of a book he is writing about Trachimbrod, the Ukrainian shtetl in which Safran was born and raised. Jonathan's chapters are ersatz drivel, heavily imitating Isaac Bashevis Singer's style of magical realism. The book's most authentic voice belongs to Alex, and this is where Schreiber concentrates. (Readers must draw their own conclusions about the poor quality of the Trachimbrod book. Maybe Foer wants Jonathan to be a bad writer or at least a very young one.

Schreiber doesn't care. His Jonathan isn't even a writer; he's referred to as "the collector," for reasons alluded to in the novel and beautifully embellished in the film.)

The film follows Alex and Jonathan as they travel around Ukraine together in the present tense in a Heritage Tours van with a prominent Jewish star driven by Alex's grandfather (named Alex). Alex-the-Grandfather also insists on bringing his dog, an amorous female mutt called "Sammy Davis Junior Junior." The point of a journey like this is never just the object of the search, although Alex and Jonathan do reach Trachimbrod and find a woman there whom they decide to call Augustine. This works because, in truth, there is no answer to the mystery of the Holocaust, which is why authors and filmmakers and historians will keep circling the terrain for years to come. Although nothing is exactly illuminated, by the end many things can still be understood, and in Schreiber's intelligent rendering, Alex wins our trust as a guide to the ineffable.

Coincidentally, a film called *Divan* will be released on DVD this month after a successful run around the Jewish film festival circuit as well as some commercial bookings (including a week at Chicago's Landmark Century Theater). The narrator is Pearl Gluck, a Jewish-American woman on a quest of her own.

Pearl comes from a large Hasidic family based in the Borough Park neighborhood of Brooklyn. Unlike the more devote women in her family, however, Pearl finished college, began work on a doctorate in European Studies, and received a Fulbright Fellowship to collect the oral histories of Yiddish-speakers in Eastern Europe. But her father thinks she's making all the wrong choices, so in an attempt to modify him she makes a promise: while in Europe she will search for a precious heirloom, a divan that according to family legend served as the sleeping place for generations of prominent traveling rabbis.

Compared to Jonathan's journey, Pearl's adventures are straightforward. She meets an Alex-like doppelganger, just aging relatives who never left Hungary, somehow managing to survive both Hitler and Stalin. She drives



In *Divan*, film maker Pearl Gluck travels to Eastern Europe in search of a family heirloom, but ends up finding an even greater treasure.

through the countryside with an elderly uncle, all the while discussing the difference between current borders and the borders of memory. She finds the divan, but when she tries to bring it back to her father, relatives on distant continents make urgent phone calls to stop her. In the end, she finds a prize even more valuable than the one she went looking for, and she returns to Manhattan.

While this may sound heavy and serious, Pearl has a whimsical touch, and she counterpoints the travel scenes with the voices of Gen-Xers like herself who are struggling to find a balance between the religious and the secular. Some of the friends Pearl interviews are noteworthy in their own right (like Baya Schechter of the band Pharaoh's Daughter), some less so. But all are articulate and engaging. The glue is provided by a fabulous soundtrack by prolific composer Frank London, best known for his work with the Klezmatics.

Like Schreiber's Jonathan, Pearl is a *zamer* (Yiddish for "collector") who understands that seemingly ordinary objects can sometimes embody the sacred.

*Everything is Illuminated* opens in metro Chicago on September 23 and in South Florida on September 30. *Divan* will be available on DVD beginning September 17. (JWS)

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**UPDATE:**  
*Everything is Illuminated* is now available on DVD from Amazon.



Eugene Hutz as "Alex" (left) & Elijah Wood as "Jonathan" (right) with Sammy Davis Junior Junior in their Heritage Tours van.  
Photo Credit: Neil Davidson/Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.