

EXTREMELY LOUD & INCREDIBLY CLOSE

Directed by Stephen Daldry
Produced by Scott Rudin
Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures
Released in 2011

If a country, insulated and prosperous, which had known only peace within its borders, were subjected to a shock-attack from the outside, that country would feel incredible fear and anger and confusion. The protagonist of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, Oskar Schell, is representative of the United States in the wake of 9/11. Oskar's father is killed when the World Trade Center towers collapse. America dealt with Islamic terrorism; her people anguished over its cause and found the necessary response to it. Oskar deals with something far more personal and apolitical—the sudden, catastrophic loss of his father. And arguably, like his country, on 9/11 Oskar loses his innocence.

Because Oskar is mildly autistic (we presume), he already has difficulty interacting with the world; he only knows *his* world. As such he is an ideal conduit for broader collective thought on the tragedy. This connection between the immediate loss of the child and America's collective despair is seen in the warm response Oskar receives as he traverses New York City looking for clues to help explain a mystery his father left behind (and in the process extend his father's presence). These people are upset for him, but they have their own stories of loss to share. In the end Oskar realizes that the key he found held no message but, almost by accident, discovers a note his father had hidden for him in Central Park. That note, in conjunction with his realization that the key helped somebody else find perspective on his own father's death, his new appreciation for his mother, and the discovery of his grandfather (played by the inimitable Max Von Sydow) helps Oskar find peace.

Along the way we are treated to some electrifying storytelling. The first hour is slow-going and a little frustrating because we are locked into our hero's limited, selfish perspective. But this sense of unease and disquiet is not just because of the way the story is presented, but because we are forced to get into the mind of someone who has faced tremendous loss, and we are hurting with him.

We are able to feel how Oskar feels, not just in his sense of loss, but as a prisoner to his obsessions. The tambourine that he carries cues us in to his fears—when it rattles, he's rattled. He is incredibly bright, but he is a prisoner to thinking *inside* the box, as it were. On his first day out, headed to Brooklyn, we are presented with a series of quick cuts as Oskar rattles off his fears—planes, people with bad teeth, loud noises, tall buildings, etc.—and the music and noise make us feel as he feels. A similar example comes a few minutes later in the film, as Oskar retreats to the bathroom and begins to equate the water droplets dripping from the faucet as people falling steadily from the World Trade Center. Presumably, Oskar can't stop his constant meditation on the shower of death raining down that bleak day, just as he can't shut off the dripping faucet. Moreover, we learn how Oskar is trapped by his thinking, but his self-imposed

(though unconscious) limitations make his life manageable (just). Consider: he limits his search for the lock to the five boroughs. But New Jersey is just a few miles away (and Connecticut isn't much further). There's no reason for Oskar to conclude that the lock would not be in either of those two states. But if Oskar let his logic control his reasoning, then he would be utterly immobilized—the lock could be anywhere or nowhere. (The film is also a tribute to the city, so it's highly appropriate that we don't venture further.) He cannot let the eight minutes of sunlight (his analogy of the warmth left by the memory of his father) die out. His mania is explicit. "Stop," his grandfather writes. "I can't!," yells Oskar. Regarding his interaction with the various Blacks, Oskar observes, "I didn't want to feel better, and I didn't want friends."

The story progresses nicely with the grandfather's introduction. Now we have another character to share this journey, and someone to remind Oskar that he is not the only person to feel locked in his own world. A shocking childhood tragedy that resulted in The Renter's parents' death has rendered him speechless for fifty years. His emergence opens up the picture, and allows us to start cultivating new perspectives on Oskar's pain. And Linda Schell chews her son out, letting him know that he has to face reality—his father is dead, and she is alive, and they have to live life together. Many New York locations are put to good use, and there is great tension in the scene with William when Oskar is finally able to unburden himself and we, at last, hear the sixth answering machine message from Thomas Schell (these six messages, plus the truncated phone call to Linda, may represent the best acting Tom Hanks has ever done). And then, just when it seems Oskar has made peace the best he can, he finds real closure (assuming there is such a thing) when he discovers a message his father had hidden for him on the underside of a Central Park swing. Thomas had encouraged his son to try the swing out, but Oskar, fearful, refused. Mr. Schell, resigned to his son's limitations, and demonstrating his ever-present patience and adaptability, lets the matter go, accepting his son's decision. So now Oskar, older, wiser, and having already met so many difficult challenges in his lengthy quest, accepts the note and embraces the swing, finally letting his fears (and his father) go. And as he swings, he builds confidence and strength and joy.

The film begins with a shot of blue sky. And then we see a foot, then a hand. The breeze is blowing—is this someone on a swing or someone falling out of the Tower? In the end, by embracing the swing, the ambiguous imagery of the film's beginning is stricken; the swing was a source of fear, as was 9/11. Our hero has overcome both.