

Is the Knowing Child the New American Adam?
The Figure of the American Family in
The Last Samurai and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

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Introduction

The image of a boy growing up and making sense of the world is a quintessential cultural icon, ubiquitous and recurring in modern American culture. As R.W.B. Lewis first argued in his classic discussion of “the American Adam,” children, mainly boys entering puberty, discovering the world and defining themselves as new men are the American prototype for Americans exemplifying the growing nation, such as Herman Melville’s Redburn or Mark Twain’s Huck Finn.¹ Revisiting this concept, as the United States has matured and weathered catastrophic experiences that have shaken the once reliable foundations of popular consciousness, is an important theme in contemporary American literature.

Parents, especially maternal figures, were seldom included in the American *bildungsroman*. If they were, they were obstacles or no more than background fixtures to be taken for granted. In *A Child of One’s Own*, a recent study on nineteenth-century novels, Amy Kaplan explains the idea that parenthood—often overlooked in the past discussions—has actually been a central theme in modern American literature, and the various forms of the family she suggests underlines the importance of the topic.

In this essay, I will discuss two twenty-first-century American *bildungsroman* that feature a prepubescent child rediscovering his family, in particular his mother. One is Helen Dewitt’s *The Last Samurai* (2000),² and the other is Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2007). Both stories feature a mother and a prepubescent boy in search of his lost father, suggesting a new possible form and uncovering issues surrounding the contemporary American family.

The Last Samurai is a story of mother and son. Originally from the American Midwest, Sybilla Newman trained as a classicist at Oxford but left the college after growing

disillusioned with the subject. She now lives in London with her prodigious six-year-old son, Ludo. He is largely a self-taught genius in languages and mathematics, devouring information from books in their household, where Sybilla barely makes a meager living by typing for magazines. In order to keep themselves warm in the heatless apartment and provide the fatherless Ludo with a male role model, mother and son bundle up in the bed to watch again and again *The Seven Samurai*, a movie by Akira Kurosawa. Having turned eleven years old, Ludo goes on a quest for his biological father, who is unaware of his existence because his equally brilliant mother deemed him unworthy of being the father and decided not to tell him of their son.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close takes place in the post-9/11 New York City and features a seven-year-old boy named Oskar, who has an inquisitive mind and hyperactive thirst for all sorts of information. Oskar is deeply hurt by the loss of his father, a jeweler who was in the World Trade Center at the moment of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Left with his mother and grandmother, Oskar struggles to recognize the imbalance in his family that the sudden absence of his father caused. Upon finding a mysterious key that seems to have belonged to his father, Oskar embarks on a quest to find the keyhole that might lead him to clues about his father's sudden disappearance from his world.

The Last Samurai seems to be known more for its ambitious storyline, abstruse outlook, and the sensational stories surrounding the novel and its author than the story itself, but it shares with *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* the characteristics of the *bildungsroman* tradition. Both novels feature a prepubescent, smart child who is at the same time innocent and mature, is in search of a nonexistent father, and rediscovers his bond with his mother. In doing so, both novels highlight a possible new form of family and parent-child relationship. These two works are not often discussed together, but the fact that they share so much in terms of the storyline and the characters means that examining their similarities and differences will serve as an important starting point in discussing family figures in contemporary American literature.

Does the knowing child looking for a new form of family represent a new American hero in a world lacking reliable symbolic order? This essay is a first attempt at revisiting this concept to see how it functions in Dewitt and Foer's works, which might point to possible trends in rethinking forms of family and of growing up in twenty-first-century American literature.

“The Knowing Child” and His Worldview

In order to understand the heroes of these two novels more clearly, I would like to introduce the notion of “the knowing child.” Marking a departure from the romantic idea of the “innocent child,” knowing children are children who have acute and mature minds but at the same time maintain their innocence and sensitivity, qualities associated with the romantic child. As John Updike pointed out in a review of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, stories featuring knowing children constitute a popular subgenre of the American urban novel, with the most direct precursor of this tradition being the children of the Glass Family created by J. D. Salinger or Edwin Mullhouse in Steven Millhauser’s novel of the same title. Both *The Last Samurai* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* convey the sense of the world as seen from the knowing child’s point of view. Told from this viewpoint, these novels address two main issues relating to the lack of the great narrative with some unrealistic intensity: that the children are in need of information and that they seek parental stability.

As children, they are insulated from worldly worries and the sense of responsibility. This allows them to have both a very particular and intense form of concentration toward knowledge and information and a complete lack of understanding toward society. This amounts to a special viewpoint on the world, providing a somewhat fable-like, unrealistic worldview.³ Since they are free from the real world, as it were, they construct their worlds through a bricolage of information found in the various texts that they have access to.

To express the idiosyncrasy of the children’s worldviews, the authors of the novels employ in-text visual elements that represent essential elements of the works. In *The Last Samurai*, they are samples of un-translated foreign languages from books that Ludo reads. Especially important are the exotic Japanese and Greek letters reproduced on the pages of the novel, which create a visual representation of the boy’s intense worldview.⁴ Foer, meanwhile, fills the work with images from Oskar’s “Things that happened to me” notebook, which the boy uses to collect unique visual imagery, as well as “reproductions” of letters and diaries to put the reader in the narrative and make various writings seem subjective and real.

Secondly, despite his smartness, the knowing child is still a minor in need of protection, unable to process complex and emotional family problems. They equate their problems with the world’s, for their families are, in essence, all they know in actual reality. They rely on narratives that connect them to the father in some way: *The Last Samurai* uses the Kurosawa movie, and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* uses the key as a path for the

boy to follow. For Ludo and Oskar, the quest for making sense of their environments is that of searching for their father figures.

In sum, the knowing child is thrown into a world lacking a reliable foundation in both the world at large and the character's personal environment. Given this void, the knowing child needs to construct a new relationship with the world. Upon this realization, the narrative tends to focus on the fragmentation of the world and the quest for father, with the discovery of the mother occurring along the way.

In the following sections, I will look at both novels to see how these ideas play out and what the novels succeed in illuminating society today: how the hero represents the world, how he makes sense of his environment, and how he rediscovers himself and the family, which is centered on his mother.

The Last Samurai: Fulfilling the Void

Novelist A.S. Byatt praises *The Last Samurai* for its “genuinely new story, a genuinely new form,” which suits the novel's particular structure: a novel both about fragments and made up of fragments itself. All the characters' stories are presented through various anecdotes, which in the end amount to one big narrative. The work is divided into two parts: the first part of the novel is narrated by Sybilla and recounts her life in London as a beleaguered single mother with an exceptionally smart toddler. Through her recollections, the reader learns that her life is filled with fragments of experience and knowledge, all left unfinished. The second part, narrated by the now eleven-year-old Ludo, is about his attempts to piece together fragmented knowledge and experience in search of his father. Departing from his mother's static world, Ludo eventually becomes her savior and guardian.

This development from the static to the active is closely connected to the way Ludo perceives his environment. In the first part, mother and son take refuge from the cold weather on the Circle Line subway, which, as its name suggests, never specifically leads to anywhere. In the second part, Ludo decides to get off the subway to visit six potential fathers.

Just as information from various books has filled Ludo's environment, what brings him outside his traditional milieu are narratives experienced in books. One obvious reference to Ludo's quest is *Odyssey*, one of his first books, in which the mythic hero goes in circles at the edge of the Mediterranean in search of his wife and child. Another text that informs the

fatherless boy's pursuit is *The Seven Samurai*, given to the baby Ludo to provide him with a male role model.

What is remarkable about this novel is that Ludo's quest, shaped by fragments of the impressions that *The Seven Samurai* evokes, casts the movie in a new light as a story of alternative possibility in identities. Ludo, in many ways, recreates the figure of the village peasant looking for the real samurai who would save the village of mothers and sons; when Ludo repeatedly says, "A good samurai will parry the blow" (348) as he approaches the potential father, however, he resembles *Kambei* recruiting lordless samurai to his band. In the last scene, which recreates breathtaking tension by reproducing original lines from the film, Ludo is *Kikuchiyo*, a fake samurai but posthumously recognized as a genuine warrior for his bravery, signifying that the boy is finally "becoming" the samurai. "The last samurai" in Ludo's context could be many different characters, depending on the viewpoint.

Interpreted as a story of the possibility of alternative identities, *The Last Samurai* resonates with Ludo's revision of the concept of the father itself. He finds his biological father but deems him intellectually unworthy of his role: "If we fought with real swords I would kill him. [...] I can't say I'm his son, because it's true" (308). Instead of attaching himself to his actual father, Ludo goes about selecting fathers by their potential—someone who can "parry his blow," so to speak, rather than someone whose genes he shares.

Revisions also transform the mother-son relationship; in the end, the son becomes more mature than the mother. The shift is not only an intellectual reversal but also a social metamorphosis as well: Ludo finally realizes that his mother's constant showings of *The Seven Samurai* are her way of escaping from life and its hardships (467).

The ultimate solution comes in the form of a practical contract. The seventh candidate, Yamamoto, who finally accepts Ludo's request to be his father, is a struggling artist who takes up Ludo's offer to cash a piece of artwork given to him by one of the possible fathers so that the artist can fund a recording of his work. In this scene, the novel recreates the film in which villagers bargain with the hungry samurai seen in *The Seven Samurai*. Yamamoto is an eccentric pianist known to work on the aesthetics of repetition of fragmental pieces and rhythms—traits that make him the perfect savior to rescue a family shattered into fragments. Ludo forges a temporary pact with this man to fill the void in his family.

In conclusion, Ludo succeeds in escaping his destination-less, fragmented environment and "translates" the story to understand his own surroundings. In doing so, he finds a way to select a father-like figure and transform him into the guardian of his own family, showing that the father need not be biological to be valid.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close: Accepting the Void

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close is very similar to *The Last Samurai* in its varietal and colorful outlook, but it mainly features ideas—fragments that are much shorter than the anecdotes of knowledge that make up Ludo’s world. Oskar understands the world in terms of ideas, such as his inventions, images he collects, things he finds, and inevitable flashbacks to his traumatic event. The products of Oskar’s spontaneous thoughts and actions, these ideas at once reflect his hyperactive mind and also testify to the synthesizing power of his subjectivity. Oskar’s way of making sense of the world is to connect the small ideas that fill his world in a pattern that points to another more important notion:

The dots from where I’d found things looked like the stars in the universe. I connected them, like an astrologer, and if you squinted your eyes like a Chinese person, it kind of looked like the word “fragile.” [...]

I could connect them to make almost anything I wanted, which meant I wasn’t getting closer to anything, and now I’ll never know what I was supposed to find. And that’s another reason I can’t sleep. (10)

This passage sums up the basic premise of this novel, which is about Oskar’s interpretation of the world and his process of accepting his father’s absence. As is apparent from the quote above, Oskar’s ideas are conceived and collected as “clues” that will eventually lead him to the truth that still remains vague because Oskar himself does not know what he is looking for. Unlike Ludo, Oskar does not have a narrative to follow; however, he is so in need of one that he forges one with the key he finds in his father’s closet. Oskar is hoping for a secret to unwrap, something that will explain his father’s sudden disappearance from his world.

Oskar’s attempt to make sense of the world is exemplified by his constant mapping of ideas. In the same way that he played games with his father, where he would keep track of all the spots in Central Park where he found things to decipher his father’s “secret message,” Oskar starts to mark all the residences housing people named “Black” live in—households that might eventually lead him to the secret behind the mysterious key—on a New York map, turning the environment into a space tangible to him. Secrets, which Oskar seeks but at the same time knows do not exist, are also imagined in an imaginary realm conjured up from visible clues, such as “the Sixth Borough” and “the Inverted Skyscrapers.” His mental bird-eye’s view of his environment is materialized as the view from the Empire State Building:

You can see the most beautiful things from the observation deck the Empire State Building. I read somewhere that people on the street are supposed to look like ants, but that's not true. They look like little people. And the cars look like little cars. And even the buildings look little. It's like New York in a miniature replica of New York, which is nice, because you can see what it's really like, instead of how it feels when you're in the middle of it. It's extremely lonely up there, and you feel far away from everything. (245)

Oskar's observations, made from a height that gives him privilege to see the city in its entirety while still being within the city, updates this classic trope in New York novels by adding attention to smaller details. His realization that people and other objects do not lose their individuality even if seen from a distance harmonizes with his quest, which ultimately shows him that the city is composed of "stories of everyone I've met." This epiphany signifies a resistance to the urge to reduce an experience to a single narrative.

Oskar's quest is to obsessively pursue a nonexistent narrative that he hopes would exist. However, this pursuit ultimately causes him to abandon futile hope and connect back with his environment, and with his family as it truly exists, namely with the mother he unconsciously blames for his father's death. It also means giving up the impossibly omniscient perspective one can only exercise on maps, and instead trying to revive a blurry figure of a person jumping from the Towers—a process that represents Oskar's attempt to restore individuality and subjectivity in those other than himself.

The attempts to reconstruct the family in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, which start with Oskar's realization that his father's death has left an irreplaceable void at the center of his life, ultimately amount to recognizing impossibility. This understanding impacts Oskar's comprehension of his environment deeply, especially when it is revealed that what was thought to be his quest was actually his mother's plan; her involvement explains, for example, the accommodating strangers who embrace Oskar and his pursuit along the way. (In the most awkward, unbelievable case, his own grandfather pretends to be a stranger.) In this way, the mother inherits the role of presenting Oskar with conundrums—a behavior that Oskar associates with his father. When his mother's masterminding of the quest comes to light, what seemed to be Oskar's territory turns out to be his mother's. In turn, Oskar's environment stops being a projection of an imaginary map populated with his ideas, and reveals its true nature as a family structure, now reimagined with the loss of the father.

Conclusion

In sum, each novel features a knowing child as its hero to exhibit a child-centered vision of family and childhood, free from social restrictions yet very sensitive to its surroundings. In order to recreate experience from such a subjective viewpoint, both novels show how the children project their subjective worlds onto the larger world. Both authors represent their heroes' quests in a way that is closely immersed in the environment, representing the material city as reflections of their minds. These novels also explore and redefine the possible form of family and position it as an essential part of the hero's experience. Although the characters venture into the larger world to find their fathers, their quests lead them to discover new familial modes in their relations to the maternal.

The figure of the knowing child and his idea of the family merits further exploration from two angles. First, it will be interesting to see similar figures in contemporary representations of the family, particularly those evident in the recent film version of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (Spike Jonze 2009, screenplay by Dave Eggers, which revisits the picture book of the same name published in 1963 as a story of a single mother and a hyperactive nine-year-old boy) and *What Maisie Knew* (an adaptation of a 1897 novel by Henry James, which reimagines it as a story of a seven-year-old girl and her parents in New York City 2012).⁵ Furthermore, it will also prove fruitful to connect these works to the tradition of American urban novels that feature "knowing children," such as J. D. Salinger's works and E. L. Konigsburg's *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil Frankweiler* (1973), to see how parents and family have figured in this genre.

Notes

¹ For a social study of representation of youth around the time of Lewis's theorization of the American Adam, see Dickstein.

² The novel is not to be confused with the 2003 historical movie of the same name, directed by Edward Zwick.

³ The question of the character's reality became apparent when *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* was made into a movie. As many reviews of this film suggest, though much less wordy than the novel and acted by a child actor who is actually a prodigy, Oskar's characterization still gave the impression of artificiality.

⁴ Since most of the novel's tension is constructed upon the idea that the Japanese part of the novel should be inaccessible, obviously Japanese readers are not the implied readers. The possibility of translating this novel into Japanese will pose interesting conceptual questions concerning translation.

⁵ Amy Kaplan's discussion of *What Maisie Knew* (Chapter 3) clarifies the importance of de facto parents and

the quasi-parental role at stake in this novel. The film version (directed by Stephen Chbosky), which reimagines James's novel as a custody battle between a rock musician and an art dealer in contemporary New York, will be a good testimonial to Kaplan's point.

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