



**2020 Fresh Reads Discussion
Guide for Jonathan Safran Foer's
*We Are the Weather: Saving the
Planet Begins at Breakfast***

Memphis Reads events include:

August 14, 2020 – Christian Brothers University Zoom, 11:30 am/ following the President’s welcome. Eric Barnes of The Daily Memphian will speak.

Discussion Groups to follow. Discussion Groups will be on Friday, August 14, 1 pm.

September 10, 2020 – Christian Brothers University Zoom, 7:30 pm, Jonathan Safran Foer talk and Q and A.

September 10, 2020 – Rhodes College Zoom, 5:30 pm. Communities in Conversation with Jonathan Safran Foer.

Please contact Karen Golightly at kgolight@cbu.edu if you have any problems during Welcome Weekend with Fresh Reads.

Summary

Some people reject the fact, overwhelmingly supported by scientists, that our planet is warming because of human activity. But do those of us who accept the reality of human-caused climate change truly believe it? If we did, surely we would be roused to act on what we know. Will future generations distinguish between those who didn't believe in the science of global warming and those who said they accepted the science but failed to change their lives in response?

In *We Are the Weather*, Jonathan Safran Foer explores the central global dilemma of our time in a surprising, deeply personal, and urgent new way. The task of saving the planet will involve a great reckoning with ourselves—with our all-too-human reluctance to sacrifice immediate comfort for the sake of the future. We have, he reveals, turned our planet into a farm for growing animal products, and the consequences are catastrophic. Only collective action will save our home. And it all starts with what we eat—and don't eat—for breakfast.

Foer writes, "This book is not a comprehensive explanation of climate change, and it is not a categorical case against eating animal products. It is an exploration of a decision that our planetary crisis requires us to make" (70).

About the Author

Born on February 21, 1977 in Washington, DC, Foer belongs to a Jewish family. His father Albert Foer is a lawyer and president at American Antitrust Institute and his mother Esther Foer, daughter of a Holocaust survivor, is the Director and CEO at the Sixth & I Historic Synagogue. Franklin Foer, former editor of *The New Republic* is the Elder brother of Jonathan and Joshua Foer, a freelance journalist is the younger brother of him. Foer studied at Georgetown Day School where he became valedictorian of his class at high school. Afterwards, he went to Princeton University where he studied Philosophy.

At Princeton, while he was a freshman, he took a writing course and got Joyce Carol Oates (an author) as a teacher. The Oates took interest in his writing and encouraged him to write more seriously. He recalls her as the first person who made his mind to work on writing. Foer wrote his senior thesis about his maternal grandfather; Louis Safran who was a Holocaust survivor. Ironically, Foer had never met his grandfather. Oates guided Foer as an adviser writing this thesis for which he received Princeton's Senior Creative Writing Thesis Prize. After completing graduation, Foer also enrolled himself in Mount Sinai School of Medicine but soon he left and pursued his career in writing.

In 2001, he had edited a compilation of work inspired by Joseph Cornell named as *A Convergence of Birds: Original Fiction and Poetry*. Foer went to Ukraine to do further research for his thesis which eventually turned into a phenomenal novel *Everything Is Illuminated*. This was his first novel published in 2002. This novel earned him some of the most prestigious awards including a Guardian First Book Award and National Jewish Book Award. In 2005, a film adaptation has been made based on the novel.

Jonathan Foer's second novel, 'Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close' got published in 2005. The novel is a story of a nine-year-old boy who lost his father in the 11th September attacks on the World Trade Centre. Despite being widely criticized upon his experimental writing the book became a best seller again and also a movie adaptation was made by Stephen Daldry. His third book and first non-fiction work, *Eating Animals* was published in 2009. His other noticeable work included a libretto written for an opera 'Seven Attempted Escapes from Silence' and an artwork in the shape of a book 'Tree of Codes' (2010) created with the words from his favorite book, *Street of Crocodiles* by Bruno Schulz. At present he is working on his new novel book *Escape from Children's Hospital* due to release in 2014. This exclusive work has earned him some very reputable awards such as Zoetrope: All-Story Fiction Prize (2000) and New York Public Library's Young Lions Fiction Award (2003).

In 2008 spring, Foer first time started teaching creative writing as a visiting lecturer of fiction at university of Yale. He has also taught at New York University as a professor of the Graduate Creative Writing Program.

In 2009, Foer published his third book, *Eating Animals*. A *New York Times* bestseller, *Eating Animals* provides a morally dense discussion of some of the ramifications that followed the proliferation of factory farms. It attempts to explain why and how humans can be so loving to our companion animals while simultaneously being indifferent to others, and explores what this inconsistency tells us about ourselves—what kinds of stories emerge from this selectivity. The book offers a significant focus on "storytelling"—the title of both the first and the last chapters of the book. Storytelling is Foer's way of recognizing and dealing with the complexity of the subject that is eating animals, and suggests that, ultimately, our food choices tell stories about who we are, or, as Foer has it in his book, "stories about food are stories about us—our history and our values. In September 2016, he released the novel *Here I Am*. In 2019, he released *We Are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast*.

Foer serves as a board member for Farm Forward, a nonprofit organization that implements innovative strategies to promote conscientious food choices, reduce farmed animal suffering, and advance sustainable agriculture.

10 Questions and Answers about Jonathan Safran Foer

Did Jonathan Safran Foer do his degree in creative writing?

No, he did his degree in philosophy, but did some courses in creative writing.

Did Jonathan Safran Foer always study philosophy or writing?

No, he briefly attended the Mount Sinai School of Medicine before dropping out to focus on writing.

How did Jonathan Safran Foer start writing his first novel?

Foer started writing his first novel, the critically acclaimed *Everything is Illuminated*, as part of his senior thesis at Princeton University, New Jersey.

Is Jonathan Safran Foer a vegetarian?

According to Jonathan himself, he has been both an omnivore and a vegetarian in his life. As of this moment, he is a vegetarian.

Has Jonathan Safran Foer won any awards for his books?

Yes, he has. For his first book, *Everything is Illuminated*, he was awarded the National Jewish Book Award and the Guardian First Book Award.

Has anyone made films of Jonathan Safran Foer's books?

Everything is illuminated was turned into a film by Liev Shreiber, as was *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*.

Does Jonathan Safran Foer teach creative writing anywhere?

He has taught at Yale University in the past, but currently teaches creative writing at New York University.

Has Jonathan Safran Foer done any screenwriting?

Yes, he wrote the pilot for the HBO comedy *All Talk*, which was about a Jewish family living in Washington, DC.

Does Jonathan Safran Foer come from a family of writers?

Yes, Foer grew up in Washington as the middle child of three boys, and all have become professional writers. Franklin, the oldest, is editor-at-large at the New Republic. Joshua, is a science writer and author of "Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything."

Does Jonathan Safran Foer's Judaism influence his writing?

Yes, Foer's maternal grandmother, a Holocaust survivor, has been a huge inspiration for much of Foer's work. He included part of her life story in "Everything is Illuminated," and she figures prominently in "Eating Animals."

Discussion Questions

Explain the extent of this quote from the book: “Changing how we eat will not be enough, on its own, to save the planet, but we cannot save the planet without changing how we eat.” (83)

Jonathan Safran Foer proposes that our planet is a farm. How does it shape your perspective of our planet when you think of it as the place that feeds us?

“We don’t need to reinvent food but to uninvent it. The future of farming and eating needs to resemble the past” (133). What aspects of our farming and food systems do you think need to be “uninvented”? What growing and eating practices of your grandparents’ time should we try to revisit and use?

How significant did you feel regarding your ability to impact climate change (both for better and for worse) before reading *We Are the Weather*? Did the book impact your sense of significance?

“We do not simply feed our bellies, and we do not simply modify our appetites in response to principles. We eat to satisfy primitive cravings, to forge and express ourselves, to realize community. . . All my different identities—father, son, American, New Yorker, progressive, Jew, writer, environmentalist, traveler, hedonist—are present when I eat” (67). What identities are most present for you when you eat? And how do those identities shape what you eat? How does what you eat shape your identities?

What is the significance of the book’s title?

How do the author’s Jewish history and the Holocaust factor into his beliefs about our capacity for radical behavior change? How does he address the concepts of believing vs. knowing?

Climate change is a collective action problem, meaning everyone on the planet must participate in global scale changes to the way we live. Do you think individual actions make a difference?

Is the author advocating for a strictly vegan diet? Are there ways you have changed or will change your eating habits after having read the book? What was difficult or easy? Have you experienced any benefits or drawbacks?

How does the Foer draw connections between our values and what we eat?

Foer writes, “Climate change is the greatest crisis humankind has ever faced, and it is a crisis that will always be simultaneously addressed together and faced alone.” How does that statement make you feel?

Animal agriculture is a leading cause of greenhouse gas emissions. How? Did you know this before reading the book?

Foer calls the “over there” quality of the planetary crisis a “fatigue of the imagination.” It can be hard to contemplate the scale of the problem. What are some of the ways we are experiencing climate change right here in our community?

***We Are the Weather* and Related Context/Background**

NASA's Research on COVID-19's impact on climate change

<https://climate.nasa.gov/news/3005/new-nasa-research-projects-probe-covid-19-impacts/>

Time Magazine's article on 2020 related to COVID-19 and climate change

<https://time.com/5864692/climate-change-defining-moment/>

Links of Interest

Busting Climate Change Myths with Jonathan Safran Foer

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CTdY4BvqkK4>

The Vegan Strategist

<http://veganstrategist.org/2015/11/06/compromise-isnt-complicity-four-reasons-vegan-activists-should-welcome-reducetarianism-and-one-big-reason-reducetarians-should-go-vegan/>

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

<http://www.fao.org/home/en/>

World Resources Institute

<https://www.wri.org/>

National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (free, downloadable charts, brochures, and longer works.

<https://sustainableagriculture.net/publications/#Local%20and%20Regional%20Food%20Systems>

Local Initiatives

Memphis Tilth

<https://www.memphistilth.org/growmemphis>

We Are Memphis article on Urban Gardens from May 2020

<https://wearememphis.com/culture/growing-memphis-one-urban-garden-at-a-time/>

Compost Fairy

<https://compostfairy.com/>

Book Reviews

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/06/jonathan-safran-foer-we-are-the-weather-saving-planet-begins-breakfast-review>

The New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/17/books/review/we-are-the-weather-jonathan-safran-foer.html>

The Washington Post

https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/we-know-what-we-have-to-do-to-save-the-planet-we-just-dont-care/2019/10/03/58c15e14-ca9a-11e9-a4f3-c081a126de70_story.html

Interview with Jonathan Safran Foer

<https://www.eater.com/2019/9/18/20870920/jonathan-safran-foer-we-are-the-weather-interview-meat-vegan-climate-change>

Jonathan Safran Foer's Podcast on How to Academy

https://www.howtoacademy.com/podcasts/jonathan-safran-foer-how-to-save-the-planet/?fbclid=IwAR3uKVf6daEKZSABaa4U1M-EooMitHzjQOdujyL8kNQu_bTVH4vi7iW7oEI

Interview with Jonathan Safran Foer in the Los Angeles Review of Books Blog

<https://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/interviews/eating-naturally-talking-jonathan-safran-foer/>



***We Are the Weather:
Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast
By Jonathan Safran Foer***

After reading *We Are the Weather*, write a short essay of at least 600 words discussing Foer's concepts of "crisis" and "wave" in terms of climate change. What is interesting or surprising about his thesis for this book and what actions does he suggest that we personally take to make a difference? In addition, what are three specific events/people/objects/decisions that he uses to help his readers to understand the climate crisis that we are encountering today. Do any of his points relate to our current health crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic? Finally, and most importantly, what action(s), however big or small, are you willing and interested in taking in response to reading this book?