Review of:

by Sudha Shastri

1. *Everything is Illuminated* is a novel composed essentially of two narrative voices: of the Ukrainian Alex and the American Jonathan respectively, both approaching the same narrative from two points-of-view. Jonathan Safran Foer, designated by Alex as "the hero of this story" (1) is travelling to Ukraine to look for Augustine, the woman who supposedly saved his grandfather during the second world war. All Jonathan has to help him in his search is a photograph of Augustine. Jonathan does not know Ukrainian, and hires the services of Alex as translator. Alex's skills in this direction are dubious, but he makes up in enthusiasm what he lacks in competence. Accompanying the two in their search is Alex's grandfather, and their bitch, Sammy Davis, Junior, Junior.

2. The spectrum between the two voices that construct the novel highlights the remarkable versatility of the English language, whose contours become unpredictable in Alex's use of it. "My legal name is Alexander Perchov" says Alex, and with this introduction, he draws us into a world of linguistic singularity to continue: "But all of my many friends dub me Alex, because that is a more flaccid-to-utter version of my legal name. Mother dubs me Alexi-stop-spleening-me!, because I am always spleening her" (1). His is a verbal gymnastic created out of slang and impossibly erudite language, evident in such remarks as, "But nonetheless, I know many people who dig rapid cars and famous discotheques" (2). As raconteur, Alex's role is to tell the story of the search, and in the process, the story of his grandfather as well.
3. Jonathan, on the other hand, (re)constructs the (his)story of Trachimbrod. We first ‘hear’ his voice when he asserts: "It was March 18, 1791, when Trachim B's double-axle wagon either did or did not pin him against the bottom of the Brod river" (8). Uncertainty, present here in the form of an option in facts, persists in his tale so as to strain the credulity levels of the reader. Whether it is in the discovery of the baby girl in the river at the end of this chapter, or in the inexplicable survival of the Kolker after a blade sticks in his head, Jonathan repeatedly distorts the boundaries of the believable in his story.

4. So if Alex's language is the domain of the novel's stylistic creative endeavours, in Jonathan's story, reality and reliability become areas in which to assert the power of the imagination. There is also the fact that Alex occasionally embellishes facts or even lies while translating to Jonathan. All these collude to create a unique world where either language or and the story resist an unambiguous interpretation.

5. *Everything is Illuminated* comes to be assembled together not only by the two voices relating events independently, but also dialoguing with each other. Alex's letters to Jonathan are expansive enough for the reader to get a glimpse of the latter, as when he remarks, "As you commanded, I removed the sentence ‘He was severely short,’ and inserted in its place, ‘Like me, he was not tall’" (53), innocently drawing attention to Jonathan's pardonable vanity over his appearance.

6. As his voice unfolds, Alex's child-like temperament overwhelms his language to leave us with an endearing sense of his naïveté. Nowhere is it more apparent than when he confesses to Alex, well into the novel, that he has been lying about his sexual exploits to Jonathan and that he is in fact, inexperienced. The novel's ability to elicit affection rather than scorn for Alex is quite a feat, as the style of Alex's speech not only becomes predictable, but also exhausts its effect of novelty quite rapidly, by sounding affected and grating in places.

7. Foer's experimentation with Alex's style includes malapropisms like "rotated" for "turned", "luxuriated" for "enjoyed", "premium" for "important", or "appeased" for "pleased", used interchangeably in the way of an English language learner whose attention to vocabulary is ignorant of the context in which words make meaning. In general, Foer achieves this effect by having Alex use superlative adjectives and adverbs ("I did not yearn to mention this, but I will" says Alex in a letter to Jonathan on p.52, and "Enough of my miniature talking," he remarks on p.53) where moderate words would do. He also mixes his adjectives—typically, he says "boring" when he means "bored". Quaintness characterises his language when he refers to sleeping as "manufacturing Z's".

8. *Everything is Illuminated* is about many things. It is about memory and the pain of recall; about identity; about the past being a place as well as a time. Some of these ideas are very evocatively imaged, as for instance in the search for Augustine culminating in the woman outside the hut who is presumably
Augustine, even if her name is Lista. Before they reach her they drive in circles, passing by the same places without encountering either Augustine or Trachimbrod, for what seems like an eternity. Alex's language rises to unexpected poetic heights here: "So we painted more circles into the dirt roads". On a more profound note, "It was seeming as if we were in the wrong country, or the wrong century, or as if Trachimbrod had disappeared, and so had the memory of it" (115).

9. There is the occasional element of suspense. Brod's meeting with the Kolker at the time of Yankel's death in fact conceals a truth that is revealed much later in the retelling of the event. But such surprises that reward the reader are few, and the overall reading experience of Everything is Illuminated leaves one dissatisfied with the slackness of its structure. Moreover, the fine line between experiment and affectation is occasionally blurred, such as towards the end of the novel, where the three words "we are writing..." run to over a page in tedious self-replication. Reminiscent in part of One Hundred Years of Solitude, Everything is Illuminated nevertheless fails to achieve the narrative power of Marquez's magic realist novel.