

HERE I AM

Jonathan Safran Foer

Analysis by Sofia Mangiaterra

Biographical Novel, Social Novel

Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Here I Am* is a social-biographical novel published in 2016. A devastating earthquake that strikes the Middle East triggers the collapse of geopolitical structures while simultaneously influencing the private sphere of the Bloch family. The earthquake marks a shift in the regional landscape, where long-standing rivalries give way to unexpected alliances. Foer’s style, marked by his Jewish identity, also explores how individuals navigate both real and metaphorical ruins.

Year of Publication	2016
Publication Place	New York
Editor	Farrar, Straus and Giroux
Entity	Middle East Earthquake

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Earthquake Middle East Earthquake

LITERARY EVENT

Time	18:23
Location	Middle East Israel
Coordinates	31.563915, 35.489957
Impacted Areas	Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria
Emphasis Phase	Post-disaster (consequences)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Magnitude	7.6 and 7.3 Richter magnitude (Foer 296, 326)
Anthropization Level	Facilities Religious Buildings And Sites Public Buildings Cultural Heritage Sites Streets Settlements

Ecological Impacts

Physical Landscape Changes

Social Impacts

Deaths

Injuries

Social Disruption

Diseases

Conflict

War

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Reactions

Name Jacob

Age Adult

Gender Male

Nationality Jewish- American

Reactions

Self-Absorption

Astonishment

Fear

Sharing Of Information

Name Julia

Age Adult

Gender Female

Nationality Jewish-american

Reactions

Fear

Astonishment

Resignation

Sharing Of Information

Name Tamir

Age Adult

Gender Male

Nationality Israeli

Reactions

Discomfort

Intervention

Name Benjy

Age Child

Gender Male

Nationality Jewish-american

Reactions

Curiosity

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name Politicians

Reactions

Surrender

Scepticism

Cooperation

Intervention

Fight For Survival

Distrust

Name The population

Reactions

Despair

Distrust

Fight For Survival

Name

The media

Reactions

Astonishment

Sharing Of Information

Group Attitudes

Name

Humans

Reactions

Unawareness

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes

Apocalypse

Hyperdisaster

The Downfall Of Society

Syntax

Parataxis, Hypotaxis, Simple Sentences, High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language

Punctuation

Multiple Colons, Multiple Commas, High Frequency Punctuation Marks

Morphology

Preference For Nouns Adjectives, Preference For Verbs Adverbs, High Frequency Passive Forms, High frequency of phenomena of the spoken language

Phonetics/Prosody

Sound-related word choice (onomatopoeia, rhyme, alliteration), Relevance of language rhythm

In his novel “*Eccomi*” (*Here I Am*) published in 2016, Jonathan Safran Foer depicts a fictional earthquake of monumental scale - magnitude 7.6 and a second one of 7.3 (Foer 296, 326) - striking the Middle East. Although the seismic event does not correspond to any real catastrophe, it serves as a narrative and symbolic epicenter around which the characters’ personal crises, cultural identities, and geopolitical anxieties revolve.

The story follows the Bloch family, deeply embedded in history, as their orderly life begins to unravel. It is both a story of diaspora—specifically the Jewish diaspora—and a family saga of ordinary life (*Indice*). The narrative intimately dissects the Bloch family, whose members “live in the world,” constantly negotiating the weight of Israel’s ancient history and contemporary geopolitical tensions alongside the emptiness of their mediated, fragmented lives (De Cristofaro, 2017). While Jacob and Julia face the slow breakdown of their marriage and, as their personal tensions rise, a devastating earthquake and political crisis shake the Middle East. As «The Guardian» notes, the novel intertwines private and global upheaval, exploring themes of identity, family, faith, belonging, and moral responsibility. This tension becomes part of its texture, reflecting the overwhelming nature of modern existence and the difficulty of finding coherence in a context of crisis (*The Guardian*).

The depiction of the earthquake as a geological phenomenon is precise, especially in its account of territorial consequences: structural collapses, infrastructure failure, cultural and religious devastation, and widespread disruption are described with the clinical detail of a civil defense report. The earthquake initiates the collapse of both infrastructure and meaning. The devastation is both vast and deeply symbolic: historic and religious sites like the Church of the Holy Sepulchre—dating back to

the Crusades—have crumbled, trapping an unknown number of visitors and religious figures. Places of worship and learning across all faiths, including synagogues, yeshivas, monasteries, mosques, and madrassas, have been reduced to rubble (Foer 296). Alongside these cultural sites, homes, schools, and military installations have also suffered heavy damage. Out of the 650,000 structures in Israel, less than half are adequately equipped to endure such a massive disaster (Foer 297). Furthermore, the entire nation faces a power outage expected to last several days, even in major cities (Foer 299). The official report offers a bleak outlook: critical infrastructure, including the Ministry of Defense headquarters, has been irreversibly damaged; major roads are at least partially blocked, and the railway network is completely inoperative (Foer 327).

The aftermath goes beyond physical devastation, triggering systemic collapse marked by despair and social unrest, with large numbers of people anticipated to flee toward Israel's borders (Foer 300). The reader first learns of the earthquake during a General Assembly of the UN Simulation, in which Julia participates as an accompanying adult. The revelation is marked by an atmosphere of total unawareness and confused apprehension - a kind of stunned cognitive dissonance between simulation and reality: "C'è appena stato un grave terremoto in Medio Oriente." [...] Lo definiscono epocale." / "There has just been a severe earthquake in the Middle East.» [...] They're calling it monumental." (Foer 294; my trans.). This disoriented response reflects both the surreal overlap between fiction and catastrophe and the emotional paralysis that precedes understanding in the face of large-scale disaster. The earthquake functions as a narrative detonation exposing the fault lines in both the story and its characters. In the descriptive passages of emotional response, Foer favors verbs and adverbs, especially introspective or speculative ones: "La mente di Jacob si teletrasportò verso scenari apocalittici" / "Jacob's mind teleported to apocalyptic scenarios" (Foer 301, my translation) reveals a psychological shift, with verbs reflecting inner movement rather than external action. In contrast, the public discourse sections lean on nouns, adjectives, and passives, distancing emotion and creating a sense of institutional remove. Jacob reacts with self-absorption, fear, empathy, and a strange desire for normalcy. He imagines ceilings collapsing and people trapped under rubble (Foer 301–302), but also slips into denial, asking himself why no one is talking about the earthquake (Foer 313). Even planning his son's Bar Mitzvah becomes morally complicated—an act at odds with the external world (Foer 344).

Julia meets the crisis with fear: her response to a phone call is not relief but dread. "Quando ho visto il tuo nome mi sono spaventata" / "When I saw your name I got scared" (Foer 295; my trans.). The simple, short syntax mimics the immediacy and rawness of spoken language, capturing her instinctive anxiety. At the same time, her response is also of resignation: "Julia abbozzò un sorriso, il sorriso della rassegnazione." / "Julia smiled faintly, the smile of resignation" (Foer 312; my trans.). The implied ellipsis in Julia's faint smile and the short, clipped sentence reflect her emotional exhaustion and helplessness. These spoken-language features—ellipses, repetition, and brief syntax—capture her resignation and anxiety, expressing the fragmented experience of enduring constant fear.

By contrast, Tamir, Jacob's cousin, is caught in the immediate urgency of intervention: "Tamir aveva tentato di farsi dare un passaggio da un cargo della Croce Rossa, aveva cercato di procurarsi un'autorizzazione speciale tramite l'attaché militare all'ambasciata. [...]" / "Tamir had tried to get a ride from a Red Cross cargo ship, he had sought to obtain a special authorization through the military attaché at the embassy [...]" (Foer 396; my trans.).

Because the Bloch family—and particularly Jacob and Julia—are physically distant from the Middle East, living in the United States, they experience these events entirely through mediated channels rather than firsthand. In this context, journalists and the media serve as the central conduits through which the disaster becomes real to them. It is through news reports, live broadcasts, institutional briefings, and mediated imagery that the catastrophe permeates their private lives. Despite the initial astonishment, the media continue to report and disseminate information. In effect, the media narrates the disaster and frames the reality for those far from the epicenter.

The novel expands from the personal to the collective, tracing the reverberations of the earthquake beyond the Bloch household and into broader structures of power and national identity. In this wider context, politicians oscillate between denial, surrender, strategic realignment, and opportunism. The earthquake forces Israel (the hardest-hit country) to confront its deep-rooted paranoia, tied to its struggle for survival and the perceived threat from Arab and Islamist regional forces. Consequently,

Israel isolates itself, refusing any external aid. As the political and social consequences of the disaster unfold, the narrative begins to measure time through its aftermath—marked in a countdown of days that underscores the escalating tension. On Day 3, for instance, a statement from the Israeli Interior Ministry exemplifies the stark, zero-sum logic that begins to dominate public discourse: “non è tempo di litigi meschini.” / “It is not a time for petty disputes” (Foer 323; my trans.). Addressed to the Islamist forces in the region, the statement reflects the mounting geopolitical tension and a hardening of rhetoric: “se gli islamisti vogliono il controllo, possono avere il controllo. Se vogliono che i loro luoghi santi siano preservati si possono preservare. Ma non possono avere le due cose insieme.”/ “If the Islamists want control, they can have control. If they want their holy places to be preserved, they can be preserved. But they cannot have both things together.” (Foer 323; my trans.). In the aftermath of the disaster, this language reveals a nation gripped by fear and defensiveness, increasingly perceiving itself as surrounded and outmaneuvered.

Following the earthquake, the novel portrays a dramatic shift in the political landscape of the Middle East, where long-standing rivalries momentarily give way to unexpected alliances. The Syrian President announces the immediate implementation of a truce and strategic alliance “coinvolgendo gli undici principali raggruppamenti di ribelli” / “involving the eleven main groups of rebels” (Foer 324; my trans.), signaling a temporary unification of fractured internal forces. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and Jordan sign a temporary unification agreement to assist the relief effort (Foer 327) - an initiative that Israel pointedly refuses to recognize. In contrast, the American President adopts a tone of compassion and solidarity, offering sincere condolences and reaffirming the nation's steadfast support for those affected by the earthquake. He underscores that this is not a time for isolation, but for collective effort and mobilization (Foer 339, 340). As he poignantly remarks, “E infine permettetemi di dire che momenti come questo ci ricordano che apparteniamo tutti a un'unica comunità umana.” / “And finally, allow me to say that moments like this remind us that we all belong to a single human community.” (Foer 340; my trans.), reminding us that in times of crisis, we are all part of one shared human community.

Media coverage fluctuates between sensationalism, bias, and politically charged narratives. The media's role is scrutinized through stylistic contrast: commas, colons, and complex hypotactic constructions dominate these segments, reflecting the over-articulated, opinion-laden character of reportage. For instance, *The New York Times* is criticized for its use of “disproportionate” (Foer 323), while *Al-Jazeera* reports that medical supplies are being held at Israeli-controlled border crossings (Foer 326), and *CNN* highlights another significant earthquake of magnitude 7.3 impacting the Middle East (Foer 326). These dominant media voices shape the public discourse, while the perspectives of ordinary people often emerge only in brief, poignant fragments—such as a twenty-two-year-old Arab-Israeli citizen, who, after losing four brothers, reflects: “La bottiglia di vetro è tanto inutile come arma quanto micidiale come simbolo.” / “The glass bottle is as useless as a weapon as it is deadly as a symbol” (Foer 324; my trans.). But this statement, too, is channeled through reportage. The emotional landscape of the population (grief, confusion, anger) is largely implied, not voiced. What we see instead is the unfolding of consequences: the silence of the people is filled by the language of crisis, filtered through political statements, news coverage, and institutional reports. One week after the disaster, the WHO confirms a cholera outbreak in the Palestinian territories and in the area, marked by posters appearing with the message “FERMATE IL COLERA.” / “STOP CHOLERA” (Foer 325; my trans.). Alongside the spread of disease, revolts also take hold: “La rivolta, non più spontanea, ha un nome: *tdamar*, «risentimento».” / “The revolt, no longer spontaneous, has a name: *tdamar*, ‘resentment’ (Foer 324; my trans.). Even rebellion is linguistically named, labeled, and categorized—language becomes a tool of containment, not catharsis. The line between disaster and conflict blurs; war becomes not an escalation, but a contagion.

The novel offers a polyphonic narrative in which the private sphere and the geopolitical arena collapse into each other through the cataclysmic event. Its structure is rhizomatic rather than linear, branching out in multiple directions without a central core. This complexity has led it to be described as an epic of “ordinariness”, reflecting its ambition to connect the intimate with the global (De Cristofaro 79). The seismic disaster is used as a dramatic fulcrum around which individual emotions, collective anxieties, political tensions and cultural identities unravel and reconfigure. Dialogues are claustrophobic and relentless, echoing the dynamics of Jacob and Julia's marriage. The rhythm is constantly interrupted by digital communications - chats, emails, phone messages - practical updates

of daily life that reflect the fragmented nature of contemporary existence (De Cristofaro 78). This soundless rhythm, devoid of poetic effects such as onomatopoeia or alliteration, gives the text a functional tone, focused on emotional processing through structure, not sound. These interruptions reinforce the *topos* of the Hyperdisaster, where catastrophe is ambient, dispersed, and filtered through technology. Even banal messages about logistics or appointments become emotional labor under the strain of constant partial attention. The narrative engages also with the *topos* of the Apocalypse, not as spectacular destruction but as a gradual collapse of meaning, identity, and moral order - especially in its portrayal of an “apocalyptic Israel”. This intimate form of apocalypse reflects contemporary literary tendencies to internalize catastrophe, as seen in Jacob’s remarks: “«è una catastrofe regionale,» proseguì Jacob «non israeliana. è geologica, non politica.»” / “«It’s a regional catastrophe,» Jacob continued «not Israeli. It’s geological, not political.»” (Foer 342; my trans.). Thus, disaster becomes ongoing and psychological, rather than spectacular and external.

Foer’s prose frequently resorts to lists - inventories of names, actions, damaged places, and social roles - that punctuate the narrative like ritual incantations. Syntax fluctuates between parataxis (short, urgent clauses conveying immediacy) and hypotaxis (complex, institutional structures conveying detachment). This syntactic oscillation contributes to the novel’s formal dissonance, as if the grammar itself were torn between feeling and explanation. These enumerations serve as futile attempts to impose order on chaos, evoking a fragile desire to preserve normalcy in the midst of collapse. The style here is intentionally recursive and additive: the use of colons and commas structure institutional or media-style communication (introducing headlines, quotations, or categorical assertions) while dense sequences of commas reflect recursive, overloaded syntax. The skillful use of repetition as a stylistic hallmark, along with a sharp and ironic tone, are aspects that characterize Jewish prose. The tone, sharp and often ironic, aligns with this tradition as well balancing existential gravity with wry humor, absurdity, or detachment (*Internostorie*).

In conclusion, “*Eccomi*” interweaves a range of complex and deeply resonant themes: the specter of an apocalyptic Israel, the unraveling of a marriage, a critique of the ethical façade of New York’s liberal middle class, and an ongoing interrogation of Jewish identity. From biblical cataclysms to Holocaust testimony, from the shock of 9/11 to modern geopolitical anxiety, the novel belongs to a lineage of literature that seeks not only to represent disaster, but dissects how it is narrated, politicized, and emotionally processed (*The Guardian*). Foer’s realism exceeds mere representation - it aspires to a “truer truth,” one that anticipates unsettling yet entirely conceivable scenarios. Through its construction of a shattered world, Foer explores how people navigate ruin - mwhether through empathy or avoidance, irony or ideology. The novel doesn’t simply recount catastrophe; it embodies it, formally and emotionally. In the end, the question is not how the world ends, but how we manage to go on speaking, living, pretending, and loving, as it quietly does.

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