

# 'Birds' takes off

Superb anthology mixes lit with aviary art — and helps launch a 24-year-old's career

by MICHAEL GILTZ

Like all good writers, Jonathan Safan Foer knows how to lie. The 24-year-old author readily admits that the introduction to his first anthology is "not factual."

In it, he describes a romantic introduction to the artwork of Joseph Cornell involving lovers, deceased relatives and a passed-long poster — which sounds a lot more exciting than the truth, which is that he first came across Cornell in a sculpture class at Princeton.

That embellished tale introduces "A Convergence of Birds: Original Fiction and Poetry Inspired by Joseph Cornell," one of the most unusual and beautiful anthologies to come along in years.

The book combines pages from the "bird boxes" of artist Cornell — strikingly evocative pieces that almost beg to tell a story — with fiction and poetry from new and major writers. The authors include

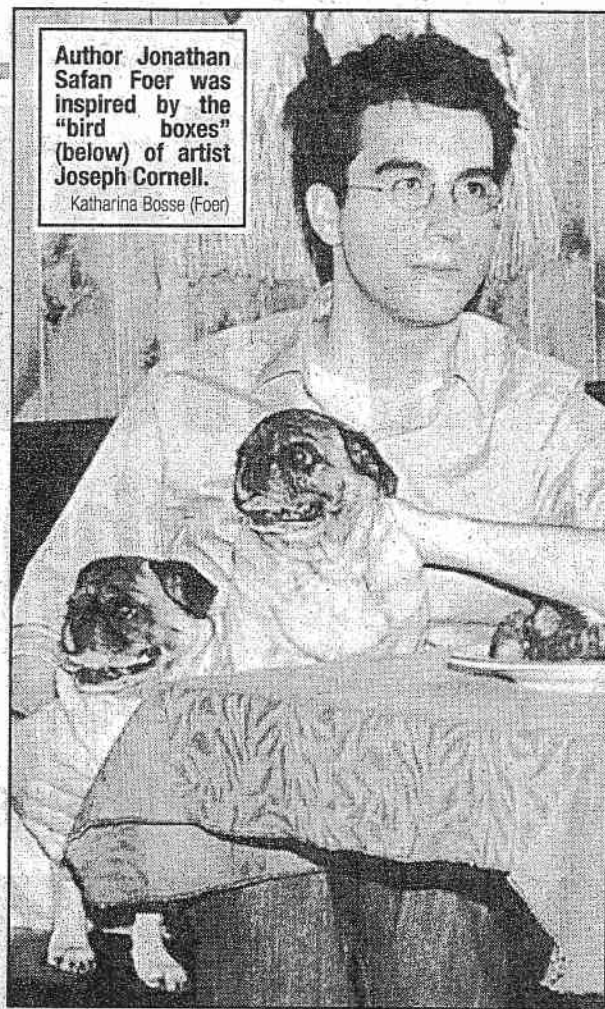
Joyce Carol Oates (an adviser to Foer at Princeton), Rick Moody, Dale Peck, Robert Coover and Barry Lopez, whose striking story leads off the book and should be remembered come awards time.

And the book will surely serve as a milestone in the rapid ascent of Foer, who was featured this summer in *The New Yorker* fiction issue as one of four hot young writers.

His agent, Nicole Aragi, was then named the "It Agent" by *Entertainment Weekly*, due in part to her work with Foer; and the writer's first novel — due out next spring — was bought by Houghton Mifflin in a 12-house auction for a reported \$450,000.

"That was not disappointing," Foer says drolly.

Amiable and smart, Foer has the air of a seasoned pro during our interview in a diner on the Upper



Author Jonathan Safan Foer was inspired by the "bird boxes" (below) of artist Joseph Cornell.  
Katharina Bosse (Foer)

Working on the book led Foer to some of the major collectors of Cornell's bird boxes, one of whom is based in D.C. That led to finally holding in his hands one of the pieces of art that had inspired him.

"It was awesome," Foer says. "A picture can never tell you the weight of something. Until you have it in your hands, you can never have that intimacy."

The collector urged Foer to actually pick up a bird box and hold it in his hands. "I was reluctant. But he said, 'Yeah, touch it, touch it.' It was great. It's such a shame that museums can't let people touch stuff!" he laughs.

Now, Foer is almost done with his second novel and looking forward to the publication of his first one next spring. He's also done with the odd jobs that many writers struggle through.

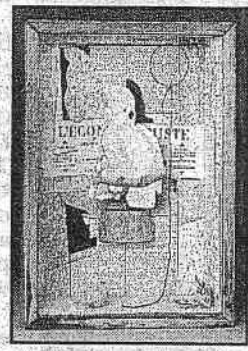
"I've had a lot of jobs," he says. "I was a math tutor, an archivist for a rare-book dealer, and I farm-sat at a farm in central Jersey for half a year."

He's saved all the original submissions of the various writers: computer print-outs, photocopies, e-mails, floppy discs. As an ex-archivist, Foer knows

most are of only sentimental value.

"One of my professors said, 'Do yourself a favor and save all your drafts. When you're watching TV, just run your pen all over it; it'll be worth something one day,'" he recalls. "Just write question marks or exclamation points in the margins."

Foer laughs, imagining all the little lies that would make his story even more valuable.



East Side. He tosses off names of editors and agents with aplomb and seems almost quietly jaded — much more like a veteran author on his latest tour than a new writer who has struck it big.

But Foer's recent collegiate roots come through when talking about his passion for Cornell.

"Cornell is the first person I never met that I fell in love with," he says. "The love was so profound and life-changing for me."

Foer's obsession accounts for his quixotic desire — to convince famous writers to contribute to an anthology, even though he was just a college student at the time, had no book deal and couldn't begin to suggest any payment.

"That's all part of what made it work — trust," insists Foer, who grew up in Washington and lives in Jackson Heights. "There's something very romantic about how it all happened."