

May-2017

## Book Review: Wrestling with God with Foer and Melton

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### Recommended Citation

Shanahan, Jenny (2017). Book Review: Wrestling with God with Foer and Melton. *Bridgewater Review*, 36(1), 33-34.

Available at: [http://vc.bridgew.edu/br\\_rev/vol36/iss1/10](http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol36/iss1/10)

# BOOK REVIEWS

## Wrestling with God with Foer and Melton

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Jonathan Safran Foer, *Here I Am*  
(New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2016).

Glennon Doyle Melton, *Love Warrior*  
(New York: Flatiron Books, 2016).

By a stroke of serendipity created by end-of-the-year “best books” lists, I spent winter break contemplating two deeply nuanced and vastly different meditations on the biblical assest, “Here I am,” by novelist Jonathan Safran Foer and memoirist/blogger Glennon Doyle Melton.

Foer’s long-anticipated novel—published 11 years after *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*—is titled by that statement of presence and willingness to serve God made by Abraham, Moses, Samuel, and Isaiah. *Here I Am* is a story of fathers, sons, brothers, and (male) cousins pondering their Jewish identities in a

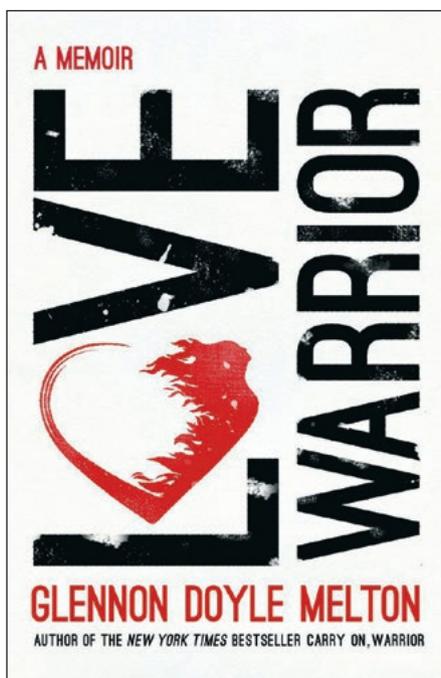
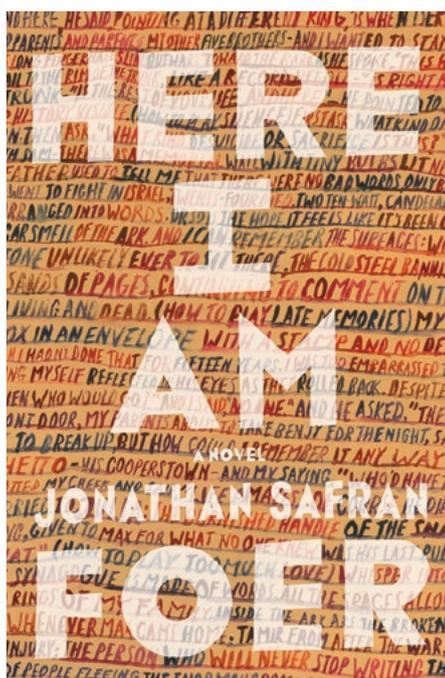
contemporary, upper-middle-class suburb of Washington, DC. The novel, it turns out, is a text within a text—a chaotic and sweeping screenplay by the novel’s narrator Jacob Bloch, who is an occasionally successful but disengaged, “meek,” and “desperately needy” writer in a collapsing marriage and a sexting affair.

Foer’s Jacob—whose eponym uttered “Here I am” (“Hineni” in Hebrew) not as a ready response to Yahweh’s call, but as deception of his father Isaac when he called Esau for the birthright blessing—is himself a deceiver, admitting to his wife Julia, “I’ve never said what I feel” (113). He intermittently parents and abdicates responsibility for his three sons, argues dispassionately with his father and grandfather about Zionism, and envies his Israeli cousins’ moral certitude while lamenting his own lack of a sense of cultural and religious duty.

I began to wish that Glennon Doyle Melton could run an intervention on Jacob Bloch.

Melton’s new memoir *Love Warrior* derives from more than a decade’s worth of blog posts, which she has been sharing with an online community of millions on Momastery.com, a liberal, mostly Christian, politically active site with the slogan “Truth Tellers + Hope Spreaders.” *Love Warrior* details Melton’s adolescent and young-adult years of bulimia and alcoholism, unplanned pregnancy and marriage, then 15 years of recovery from addiction. Her recovery and the dissolution and restoration of her marriage following her husband Craig’s pornography habit and series of random affairs, form the backdrop of Melton’s feminist, spiritual, and sexual awakening: “Here I am. Here you are. All of me. All of you. Here. In love” (250). (News that emerged as *Love Warrior* hit the shelves that Melton was divorcing her husband and planned to marry a woman, soccer star Abby Wambach, likely would not surprise many of her devoted readers who may now anticipate a follow-up memoir.)

In the Book of Genesis, God asked Adam and Eve, “where are you?” when they hid themselves in shame. Their inability to announce their presence



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signified their fall from grace—their expulsion from Eden and symbolic separation from God. It was their descendant Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac and his answer, “Here I am,” when his name was called, that began the restoration of the people of God with Yahweh. Moses’ response of “Here I am” to the burning bush signified both linguistic and deeply personal unity with “I am,” or

pull from the easy Judaism of suburban America, where he can be Jewish by giving his children scriptural names (e.g., his youngest and most beloved son is Benjy, or Benjamin) and sending them to weekend Hebrew school at the local synagogue; he can even go through the motions of hosting his son Samuel’s bar mitzvah even after discovering evidence of Samuel’s attempts to thwart it by writing hateful

He answered with a statement: ‘Here I am.’ Whatever God needs or wants, Abraham is wholly present for Him, without conditions or reservations or need for explanation” (102).

That vulnerability and willingness to be known and loved is what Melton ponders throughout her narrative as well. Her response of “Here I am” builds on Christian scriptures, too. Having hit rock bottom with her drinking and despairing over a positive pregnancy test, Melton was comforted by an image of Mary, the mother of Jesus. When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and announced that she was to be the Mother of God, Mary replied, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). For Melton, that consent signifies both surrender to the unknown and a promise to do the work of recovery—not just “a day at a time,” but minute by minute.

It is the “am-ness” with God that both Glennon Doyle Melton and the fictional Jacob Bloch seek. In the end, Foer at least partially resolves his character’s conflict far too easily, allowing Jacob to go to Israel—“Here I am!”—and when he is not needed, to return home to DC where he actually is. What Melton has learned in the hard work of recovery is that that sense of a unified self is not accomplished in a single theophany, but in deciding in each moment of each day to do the next right thing.



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## In the Book of Genesis, God asked Adam and Eve, “where are you?” when they hid themselves in shame... It was their descendant Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac and his answer, “Here I am,” when his name was called, that began the restoration of the people of God with Yahweh.

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Yahweh. And Isaiah’s reply near the end of the Hebrew scriptures added a clear and powerful acceptance of mission: “Here I am. Send me.”

In Foer’s novel, the words “Here I am” form a literal and figurative complaint by Jacob Bloch about his obstructed/ blocked aspirations, as well as an ironic sung response in the children’s game “Where is Thumbkin?”—made emotionally painful following an accident involving a sliced thumb. Most importantly, “Here I am” is for Jacob a profoundly conflicted signal of Jewish identity, which he, the grandson of Holocaust survivors and victims, is seeking to reconcile. There is a lazy

graffiti on his Hebrew school desk. But after a catastrophic earthquake in the Holy Land throws the region into greater chaos, Jacob is called by his cousins in the Israeli military, as well as Israeli leaders in their plea to the Jewish diaspora, to “come home” to Jerusalem.

Jacob is vexed by a question he wishes he could understand as clearly as his 13-year-old son apparently does (and who, like Foer’s other adolescent characters, is precocious beyond credibility). Samuel reflects at his bar mitzvah that God’s demanding test of the biblical Abraham was not only the directive to kill Isaac, but the call to Abraham in the first place: “Abraham didn’t say, ‘What do you want?’ He didn’t say, ‘Yes?’