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A Conversation with Jonathan Franzen

Abstract

Jonathan Franzen, arguably the best living American novelist, began his career in the late eighties. His first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City*, is a thriller set in his hometown of St. Louis. Franzen's second novel, *Strong Motion*, tells the story of the Holland family, who live in a Boston that is beset by earthquakes. But it wasn't until 2001, with *The Corrections*, that the author found a wider readership. This book sets the Lambert family's conflicts and anxieties against the backdrop of larger social issues, like the changing economy of the '90s, and the rampant use of psychopharmaceuticals. When Franzen expressed ambivalence at having *The Corrections* selected as an Oprah's Book Club pick, the ensuing flurry of media coverage secured his foothold in mainstream culture. The author's fourth novel, *Freedom*, interweaves the story of the Berglunds with subplots that examine mass consumerism and environmental issues. Franzen's oeuvre also includes two collections of essays, *How to Be Alone*, and *Farther Away*, and a personal history, *The Discomfort Zone*. His most recent book is *The Kraus Project*, a translation with commentary of the work of the nineteenth-century Austrian critic, Karl Kraus.

Franzen's visit to Butler University—as part of the Vivian S. Delbrook Visiting Writers Series—was three-fold: a reading for the general public, a Q&A for Butler students, and an interview with Booth. As the MFA candidate/reader for Booth who was to interview Mr. Franzen, I attended his reading and Q&A so as to get a better sense of what the author is like. Many articles profiling the novelist cast him as a cranky contrarian, but the Jonathan Franzen I saw didn't fit into any of my preconceived ideas. During his reading he seemed intent on entertaining the crowd. Afterwards he fielded questions from the audience and responded genially. He smiled. He said thank you. When someone asked Franzen if he wanted his work to be a catalyst for social change, the novelist said he wasn't opposed to the idea, but added, "I'm just trying to give the reader a good time."

The undergraduates who attended the author's Q&A had questions about *The Discomfort Zone*. Franzen said that the first thirty pages he wrote were awful because he was ashamed of his innocence. "Shame is the worst substance on the page, the most contagious of all feelings," he said. After he rewrote the material using humor, casting himself as a "ridiculous figure," he was able to let go of that shame. When Franzen was asked about his intense interest in birding, he told the crowd—most of them in their late teens and early twenties—that he didn't start to grow up until he was in his forties. "I was so self-conscious for so much of my life, especially as a teenager," he said, adding that it was through birding that he learned how to be in the moment and enjoy it. After the undergraduates left, Jonathan Franzen sat down with me to share some of his thoughts on literature, social media, and infamy.

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by Susan Lerner

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rewrote the material using humor, casting himself as a “ridiculous figure,” he was able to let go of that shame. When Franzen was asked about his intense interest in birding, he told the crowd—most of them in their late teens and early twenties—that he didn’t start to grow up until he was in his forties. “I was so self-conscious for so much of my life, especially as a teenager,” he said, adding that it was through birding that he learned how to be in the moment and enjoy it. After the undergraduates left, Jonathan Franzen sat down with me to share some of his thoughts on literature, social media, and infamy.

Susan Lerner: Given that you’ve written novels as well as personal essays, do you find these two forms suited to different types of exploration?

Jonathan Franzen: I think fiction is the genre better suited to exploration. Essay is reporting, in a sense. There are artistic, tonal, and structural challenges in doing an essay but I don’t feel as if, in an autobiographical essay, I’m necessarily exploring. I’m trying to take what I already know and make it interesting, palatable, not icky, and possibly instructive. And it’s true that in journalism and reported essay I *am* exploring something. I go to China because I want to know what the environmental situation is like in China. But for internal investigation there’s nothing like fiction, because you have so much more freedom to go to places that would be too personally compromising either for yourself or for other people. You’re essentially putting on a mask, various masks, in the form of these characters. The demands of a novel are so much greater in terms of narrative propulsion, that you are really forced to poke around deep inside yourself to find strong enough emotional drivers to get you through five hundred pages of the book.

SL: You feel that a mask is a way of distancing yourself from the material, allowing you to get closer to certain emotional truths?

JF: I don’t know if there’s such a thing as an emotional truth. It’s kind of an oxymoron, don’t you think? Better to call it hot material. Hot material, absolutely. I’ve written an essay about this that’s in *Farther Away*. There’s a notion that what makes fiction autobiographical is whether you can identify features in the writer’s life in the fictional text. I think that’s a dismally vulgar conception of autobiography. Real autobiographical fiction requires that you make stuff up. I like to point to Kafka’s “Metamorphosis” as the most autobiographical novella ever written, and it’s about a bug.

SL: He was never a roach.

JF: Exactly. That was the way Kafka found to make his situation in his real life compelling and revealing. The story that conveyed the full whole horror of family life to Franz Kafka was about a bug.

SL: Last night in your reading you spoke about your discomfort with using first-person point-of-view—

JF: Voice.

SL: First-person voice. One of our visiting writers last year was Cheryl Strayed, the author of *Wild*. I'm curious about your thoughts on the sometimes maligned genre of memoir, which by definition is a first-person point-of-view, or voice, endeavor. I wonder how you see the job of memoir differing from the job of a novel?

JF: There are only two things that can make memoir really good. One of them is great material that is true, stuff that does not require embellishment or invention. Stuff that is just strong and a great story in itself. If you've got that, why *not* write a memoir? There's value added simply because it's a memoir. There's value added in terms of reader impact because the reader knows these amazing things really happened to you. The other thing is if you've got a great voice, if you've got a great tone going, then even if the story is not there, the combination of the value added from its being nonfiction and the pleasure of the tone or voice can add up to something, like *Speak*, *Memory* or *Stop-Time*. *Stop-Time*, *This Boy's Life*, and *Borrowed Finery*, some of the literary memoirs, interestingly are all kind of the same story. They're about kids who were in the way, who had really disrupted childhoods. If you read a novel about that, it wouldn't necessarily be that interesting. So it's the particular tone of Conroy and Wolff and Fox in those memoirs that make them work. Does that sort of answer the question?

SL: Kind of. Do you think a literary memoir can offer the reader the same type of deep experience a novel does, with the novel's wider casting of the net?

JF: Yes, if it falls into one of those two categories.

SL: There's been heated discussion lately about the uptick of adults who read literature written for young adults. Recently in *Slate*, the journalist Ruth Graham declared that adults should be embarrassed if what they are reading was written for children, and that it would be a shame if readers substituted "maudlin teen drama" for the complexity of great adult literature. What are your thoughts?

JF: I don't care what people read.

SL: You have no opinion on the question of whether or not readers might be cheating themselves if they're reading YA lit?

JF: If it's a loss, it's their loss, not mine.

SL: Well, I guess that's the point of Graham's argument, that it is their loss and that it's perhaps a greater loss, a collective loss, that fewer people would be—

JF: Most of what people read, if you go to the bookshelf in the airport convenience store and look at what's there, even if it doesn't have a YA on the spine, is YA in its moral simplicity. People don't want moral complexity. Moral complexity is a luxury. You might be forced to read it in school, but a lot of people have hard lives. They come home at the end of the day, they feel they've been jerked around by the world yet again for another day. The last thing they want to do is read Alice Munro, who is always pointing toward the possibility that you're not the heroic figure you think of yourself as, that you might be the very dubious figure that other people think of you as. That's the last thing you'd want if you've had a hard day. You want to be told *good people are good, bad people are bad, and love conquers all. And love is more important than money.* You know, all these schmaltzy tropes. That's exactly what you want if you're having a hard life. Who am I to tell people that they need to have their noses rubbed in moral complexity?

SL: That is not the answer I thought you would give.

JF: Good.

SL: Let's talk about women in literature. VIDA [a group of women writers who tally the gender disparity in major literary publications and book reviews] confirms that literary journals publish many more pieces by men than women. In *The Kraus Project*, as part of your lament about Amazon's power, you wrote that "literary novelists might be conscripted into Jennifer Weinerish self-promotion." Given that women writers are generally swimming against the established current, what are your thoughts about the use of social media by women to promote their work? And what are your thoughts on Weiner, in particular, who tweets to promote not only her work, but also to advocate for equal representation of women writers?

JF: It's tricky because there's something about Jennifer Weiner that rubs me the wrong way, something I don't trust...

SL: What is it?

JF: What is it? She is asking for a respect that not just male reviewers, but female reviewers, don't think her work merits. To me it seems she's freeloading on the legitimate problem of gender bias in the canon, and over the years in the major review

organs, to promote herself, basically. And that seems like a dubious project that is ideally suited to social media, where you don't actually have to argue, you just tweet. Where is her long essay about this, where she really makes a case? She has no case. So she tweets.

SL: No case for herself, you're saying?

JF: Yes. No case for why formulaic fiction ought to be reviewed in the *New York Times*.

SL: But I think she also advocates for other female authors whose work might be termed more "literary" rather than "commercial."

JF: Good for her.

SL: She's written that because she perhaps has less at stake in the literary community than women who write more "literary" fiction, she's become the de facto spokeswoman.

JF: That's unfortunate, because it's an important issue and she's an unfortunate person to have as a spokesperson.

SL: Have you read any of her books?

JF: No!

SL: Okay.

JF: I have yet to hear one person say, "Oh, she's really good, you should read her." And basically if two people say that about a book I'll read it. I know no one, male or female, who says, "You've got to read Jennifer Weiner."

SL: I want to ask you about technology and social media. Last night when a member of the audience asked you about your 1996 *Harper's* essay about the decline of the American novel, you mentioned you have had a change of heart about television. When Dwight Garner reviewed *The Kraus Project* in *The New York Times*, he wrote that you have technophobia. He quoted Clive James, who said: "Anyone afraid of what he thinks television does to the world is probably just afraid of the world." I was wondering, given your change of heart about television and its place within our culture, can you comment on this conversion and the possibility that social media might also one day redeem itself?

JF: TV redeemed itself by becoming more like the novel, which is to say: interested in sustained, morally complex narrative that is compelling and enjoyable. How that happens with pictures of you and your friends at T. G. I. Friday's isn't clear to me. Twitter isn't even trying to be a narrative form. Its structure is antithetical to sustained and carefully considered story-telling. How does a structure like that suddenly turn itself into narrative art? You could say, well, *Gilligan's Island* wasn't art, either. But *Gilligan's Island* paved the way, by being twenty-two minutes of a narrative, however dumb, to the twenty-two minutes of *Nurse Jackie*.

SL: You see a trajectory?

JF: Yes, you can see the trajectory there. Which is the same trajectory that the novel itself followed. There was a lot of really bad experimentation in the seventeenth century as we were trying to work out these fundamental problems of "Is this narrative pretending to be true? Is it acknowledging that it's *not* true? Are novels only about fantastical things? Where does everyday life fit in?" There were a couple of centuries of sorting that out before the novel really got going in Richardson and Fielding, and then, soon after, culminating in Austen. You can see that maturation in movies as well. You had *Birth of a Nation* before you had *The Rules of the Game*. It takes a while for artistic media to mature—I take that point—but I don't know anyone who thinks that social media is an artistic medium. It's more like another phone, home movies, email, whatever. It's like a better version of the way people socially interacted in the past, a more technologically advanced version. But if you use your Facebook page to publish chapters of a novel, what you get is a novel, not Facebook. It's a struggle to imagine what value is added by the technology itself.

SL: I'm thinking of a review I just read of Mallory Ortberg's new book, *Texts From Jane Eyre*. I think there's an argument that can be made about new technology providing different forms and twists on established ideas, so people can examine—

JF: I'm just looking at the phenomenology of this technology in everyday life.

SL: Pictures of desserts.

JF: Yeah, pictures of desserts and the fact that you can't sit still for five minutes without sending and receiving texts. I mean, it does not look like any form of engagement with art that I recognize from any field. It looks like a distraction and an addiction and a tool. A useful tool. I'm not a technophobe. I'm on the internet all day, every day, except when I'm actually trying to write, and even then I'm on a computer and using, often, material that I've taken from the internet. It's not that I have technophobia. It's the notion that somehow this is a transformative, liberating thing

that I take issue with, when it seems to me more like a perfection of the free market's infiltration of every aspect of a human being's waking life.

SL: So that it enslaves us.

JF: Enslave is a harsh word.

SL: Let's go back in time. In your *New Yorker* essay of 2002, "Mr. Difficult," you wrote that even William Gaddis might have preferred to watch *The Simpsons* rather than read his novel *J R*. Ironically, four years later you appeared in an episode of *The Simpsons*. Can you talk about this experience specifically, and also about your general feelings about being a public figure?

JF: Well, I always liked *The Simpsons*, so it was fun to be on. Those guys are smart. They are all-powerful and all-wealthy and can do whatever they feel like. They can get the best talent in the country, and they have some of the best talent in the country doing the voices. So it's like, Boy, those lads are doing well. But fame in general? It has its pluses and minuses. It's different now, because of the internet, of course. There were lies and rumors about public figures, always, but there's a lot more of that now. I spend a lot of time correcting false information from the internet. I try to do it fairly graciously, because I myself will believe false information if it suits my prejudices. That's the great thing about it, there are no fact checkers, essentially, on the web. It can be tedious to have to deal with. It's tedious every six months to have to send a photograph of myself holding my passport in order to get Twitter to take down the latest impersonator of me. I could go on. The downsides mostly have to do with the internet. The upsides? You know, it's kind of nice to be walking down the street and have someone just pass you by and say "Love your work," or "Hey, you're great." Wow, that's affirmation. Nothing wrong with *that*. But of course, if you're having a bad hair day and everyone can see it and people are actually noticing it . . . For me, fame matters only to the extent that it's fungible. I like being able to use it to help the causes I care about. Otherwise it's mostly annoyance, although some of the stuff on the web is dangerous, actually physically dangerous to me or to people close to me. I was not famous for so long, just like I was really, really, poor for so long, that no longer being poor or not-famous is not going to change the fundamental lines of my character. I don't want it to. I come from the Midwest.

SL: You do seem to be, amongst writers, a polarizing figure. I don't mean to be offensive, but it seems to be that you are the writer other writers love to hate. Why do you think this is?

JF: Well, if I hadn't been on the cover of *Time* magazine . . . I would hate me too for that.

SL: Jealousy-based?

JF: Whatever. I know that would be my first response: Let's kill him: how did he get that coverage? It's a natural response for any writer, me no less than anyone else. I went through a period of hating John Updike, really for no other reason than that he kept writing the books and getting praised. Am I particularly polarizing? Am I more polarizing than Jennifer Weiner or Philip Roth? I don't know if I'm particularly polarizing.

SL: I think with the ubiquity of social media and the engagement of writers on Twitter . . . my feeling is yes, you are.

JF: Really. Well, I don't spend time on those media, and you can see why. Why would I want to go there? To some extent I feel it means I'm doing my job, which is to try to tell the truth. You know, no prophet is welcome in his homeland. If I am indeed a polarizing figure here, it is certainly true that I am not a polarizing figure in Europe.

SL: Interesting.

JF: People don't ask me that question in France or Germany, so something weird is going on here. I once read an interview in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* with T.C. Boyle, who was visiting, and he was asked: "Why is there all this hostility toward you?" And he said, "Oh, it's just people envying me." And I thought that was really a dangerous thing for him to say, because the reason that I was somewhat hostile to him was that I hadn't liked his recent work. So I would be remiss if I didn't grant the possibility that what bothers people about me is that my work is terrible and overrated. But here's the interesting question. I think a lot of the hostility comes from the fact that I question the utility of social media. I certainly question the model of social media as the way that books are promoted and information about books is disseminated, because the essence of the model is self-promotion and I don't think nonstop self-promotion is a good head for a working writer to be in. I think it's a really badly suited model of literary culture, social media. Writers are alone. They work alone. They communicate through the finished page. It's gruesome to force them to self-promote on a gregarious medium. It goes against everything I know and understand about really good fiction writers. It's a terrible match. And, of course, if you spend a lot of time on social media, you're not going to be happy to hear me say that. I think there's a particular hostility toward that particular message. But it's kind

of hilarious that I've become the lightning rod on this issue, because who cares what I say? Why are you expending so much rage on one person's opinion? Am I really so much worse as a manifestation of the universe than Jeff Bezos? Or the Apple Corporation? Or Facebook? Am I really the bad guy? It seems peculiar to me.

SL: I am really intrigued at the various structures you employ in your novels. In *The Corrections* each large chapter concentrates on the voice and story of one of the main characters. In *Freedom* some of the plot is relayed by Patty through her autobiography, a text within a text. She addresses the reader with commentary, referring to herself in the third person, kind of a meta-third person. What led you to make these particular decisions?

JF: Desperation. That's a good closing line. We should stop there.

SL: Okay. But I want more.

JF: Well, I was very taken with what you could do in a very short, intense novel, but I can't write a short intense novel myself, so I cobbled together five of them in *The Corrections*. And then I had to find something new to do in *Freedom*. It becomes more desperate the longer you go.

SL: The further you are into the novel?

JF: No, the further you are into your career.

SL: Ah.

JF: First you pick the low-hanging fruit and then the medium-hanging fruit. The work gets ever harder and more desperate.

Susan Lerner is a student in Butler's MFA in Creative Writing program and reads for *Booth: A Journal*. Her work has appeared in *Word Riot*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Bluestem*, *The Believer Logger*, and *The Rumpus*. She lives in Indianapolis with her husband, three teenagers, and dog, Mischief.