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How to Be Alone

by Jonathan Franzen

(Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 278 pp., \$24)

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Noel Coward had a talent to amuse. Jonathan Franzen has the knack to annoy. Is it a conscious gift? Is he aware of how grating his pleafull moans and hopeful sighs have become? (It's like a snore turned inside out.) Or is he intentionally irritating us, passive-aggressively wearing down his readers' resistance until we finally crack and agree with what he thinks and, more importantly, how he feels? How he felt in the 1990s was melancholy. The country was partying, but he was gnawing on a dry bone. He evokes his sunken condition with a litany of "d" words: darkness, depression, despair ("My despair about the American novel began in the winter of 1991..."). The good news delivered by *How to Be Alone* for anyone who cares is that Franzen's downbeat mood has begun to lift.

No longer a miserabilist, Franzen has made a separate peace with the anachronistic calling of being a serious writer in America, a lighthouse keeper who refuses to desert his post. In the personal essays that make up his first collection (which includes a couple of straight reporting pieces to give the book some fiber content), Franzen fuses the roles of

fiction writer, social commentator, and concerned citizen, qualifying earlier positions and making amends for being an impetuous hothead in his Shelleyan youth. "I used to be a very angry and theory-minded person," he half-apologizes. "I used to consider it apocalyptically worrisome that Americans watch a lot of TV and don't read much Henry

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James.... I used to think that our American political economy was a vast cabal whose specific aim was to thwart my artistic ambitions, exterminate all that I found lovely in civilization, and also rape and murder the planet in the process." In that order of importance.

As a nonfiction advocate for his one-man novelistic cause, Franzen doesn't ape the Norman Mailer of Advertisements for Myself and flaunt his ambition like a Popeye tattoo, muscling aside the competition to clear more legroom for himself in the first-class section. Nor does he try to blow up the rickety structures blocking his own fictional constructions, like Tom Wolfe in some of his broadsides. As with so many of his generation, Franzen is conflicted about conflict. Arguing is what grownups do when they are mad (Mommy, Daddy, don't fight); and swagger doesn't play well on the current scene, which has partly converted into a Generation X recovery ward for the depressed, medicated, and formerly addicted children of divorce. Rather than swinging from the heels, he hugs the ropes in these essays, taking all the pain, the indignity, and the bland indifference that a mass-media culture can inflict on a passionate bookworm. He is not a masochist, he is a shrewd passive-aggressive (aren't they all?), courting sympathy by constantly telling us where he hurts and fastening reader interest on himself, regardless of the issue or controversy. No matter what is flying around Franzen, the soft-focus lens is always on him.

In "Erika Imports," a brief reminiscence about a job that Franzen held during his high school years working for a German émigré couple, he ruminates, "Now everyone is dead, and I wonder: Is there no escaping the personal?" For him, no. When the Starr Report was lobbed raw into the country's lap, he wasn't appalled by it as a document dump of politically motivated dirt, a gross misuse of prosecutorial powers, or a hypocritical display of neo-Puritanism. "I wasn't offended by the sex qua sex," he testifies in "Imperial Bedroom," an examination of privacy in a prying media world:

I wasn't worrying about a potential future erosion of my own rights; I didn't feel the President's pain in the empathic way he'd once claimed to feel mine; I wasn't repelled by the revelation that public officials do bad things; and, although I'm a registered Democrat, my disgust was of a different order from my partisan disgust at the news that the Giants have blown a fourth-quarter lead. What I felt I felt personally. I was being intruded on.... The report's mere existence so offended my sense of privacy that I could hardly bring myself to touch the thing.

He is able to forge ahead, however, when a graver intrusion threatens to interfere with his livelihood, or at least to throw a shadow.

"My third novel, *The Corrections*, which I'd worked on for many years, was published a week before the World Trade Center fell," begins the introductory note to *How to Be Alone*, making it sound as if the buildings keeled over by themselves. The shatter and grief of mass murder and gouging devastation seemed to call for a ceremonial stillness. "This was a time when it seemed that the voices of self and commerce ought to fall silent--a time when you wanted, in Nick Carraway's phrase, 'the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever.' Nevertheless, business is business. Within forty-eight hours of the calamity, I was giving interviews again." Well, a boy has to hustle his book, as Truman Capote was fond of saying, but even so I gasped when I hit the sentence "Nevertheless, business is business."

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Nearly three thousand people die and he shrugs "Nevertheless" as if he's clearing crumbs off the table?

Since *The Corrections* went on to sell more than two million copies in hardcover worldwide, making it the publishing event of 2001, the terrorist attacks obviously didn't rain cinders on Franzen's parade. Business was pretty damned good. The cover of the reviewers' galley for *How to Be Alone*, photographed at the Three Lives bookstore in Greenwich Village, shows a woman browsing through a book with a copy of *The Corrections* set prominently on the table next to her. Perhaps the publishers thought this would be too self-reflexive even for Franzen, because *The Corrections* has been removed from the cover of the finished book and replaced with a copy of *The Brothers Karamazov*. An amusing switcheroo, but it doesn't dispel the impression that *How to Be Alone* is a flag planted on the alpine peak of the novel's commercial and critical triumph, a brand-name tie-in.

The irony is that *The Corrections* was such a runaway hit that the maid-of-constant-sorrow ballads that Franzen sings in some of these essays ring a little hollow now. When he writes, "I intend this book, in part, as a record of a movement away from an angry and frightened isolation toward an acceptance--even a celebration--of being a reader and writer," a reader could be forgiven for thinking, "Hell, if I'd hit the jackpot, I'd be ready to celebrate too. Where are my boogie shoes?"

The longest essay in *How to Be Alone* is a revised version of Franzen's famous five-thousand-word soul cry and forelock tug on the plight of the American novelist that was first published in *Harper's* under the title "Perchance to Dream" and is more commonly known as "the Harper's essay." After re-reading it years later, Franzen concedes that he sounded a wee hysterical swaying over literature's open grave and eulogizing its passing by pointing the finger of blame at an indifferent, instant-gratification society. The essay was an outburst of frustrated idealism, "written from [a] place of anger and despair," he explains in the foreword. Having left a place of anger and despair for a nicer suite, he has cut the *Harper's* essay by a quarter, reined in its bronco rhetoric, and retitled it "Why Bother?"

Even abbreviated, it is long and leaden. Nearly every sentiment and idea that Franzen relays about the fallen preeminence of literature has been expressed before, and better. No one needs to be reminded for the umpteenth time that Dickens was a popular sensation and that the audiences that once clamored at the docks for news of Little Nell now queue at the multiplex or congregate in cyberspace. Like Broadway, the fabulous invalid, the serious novel has seemed poised to breathe its last ever since electricity entered the home. As a cultural analyst, Franzen is simply the latest to join the chorus line of declinism: Gore Vidal has been signing the novel's death certificate for a half-century; Saul Bellow was flinching from the neon blare of the entertainment society in the 1950s; Ted Solotaroff's *American Review* ran a symposium over several issues in the early 1970s in which the top critics and fiction writers of the day, wrestling with the prophecies of Marshall McLuhan, made long faces and pondered their obsolescence ("To begin at the beginning: There is no writing for glory any more--not great big glory, anyway," wrote Wilfrid Sheed, and he was one of the cheerier ones); and today we have Harold Bloom, Neil Postman, and others serving as pallbearers.

The difference is that Franzen makes his state of mind the social indicator, his mood at any given moment the measure of literature's misery index. He tortures the significance out of an incident in Paula Fox's novel *Desperate Characters* ("A generation ago, by paying close attention, Paula Fox could discern in a broken ink bottle both perdition and salvation"), but the most desperate character in this essay is Franzen himself, lost in America and longing to connect without having to leave the premises (a common malady among us drudges). When a social scientist named Shirley Brice Heath, who has studied the reading habits of children and how they persist into adulthood, looks Franzen in the eye during an interview and declares, "You are a socially isolated individual who desperately wants to communicate with a substantive imaginary world," she scores a telepathic bull's-eye. "I felt as if she were looking into my soul" is Franzen's awestruck reaction.

In the absence of private and informal networkings (ranging from the clubs and coffeehouses of Samuel Johnson's London to the salons of Paris to the Algonquin Round Table to the crash pads of the Beats), writers tend to devolve into mole people and pack rats, sandbagged at their desks by mounds of books, magazines, newspapers, folders, and manuscript pages. During his most militant isolationist phase, Franzen walled himself off even more than most, toiling inside a deprivation tank where he spurned invitations to teach, avoided parties, declined to review books or to discuss writing ("To speak extranovelistically in an age of personalities seemed to me a betrayal"), and did his best to insulate his brain from the hubbub of world events ("Even deep in my Queens neighborhood, however, news could reach me through my TV set and my Times subscription," he reports, as if he were getting faint signals over the wireless). In a country inhospitable to creativity, he and his wife have a hard time finding a patch of sunlight in the asphalt jungle, moving from one town without pity to another. "Finally, after exhaustive deliberation, we'd rented a too-expensive house in yet another depressed city"--welcome to Philadelphia--where Franzen languished in front of the raybox. "Even as I was sanctifying the reading of literature, however, I was becoming so depressed that I could do little after dinner but flop in front of the TV. We didn't have cable, but I could always find something delicious: Phillies and Padres, Eagles and Bengals, *M*A*S*H*, *Cheers*, *Homicide*." (The Phillies, delicious?)

The daily dose only intensifies Franzen's sense of estrangement from the popular culture, since he frames his existence "in the context of Raskolnikov and Quentin Compson, not David Letterman or Jerry Seinfeld." When he and the wife with whom he shares this "self-enforced solitude" separate, it compounds the aloneness that is his capital as a writer. He is alone when he reads. Alone when he writes. And never more alone than when what he writes is unread. As he says elsewhere in the book, "We don't blame the audience for defecting, we know it hurts to have to stay conscious, we understand the need to drug yourself, to feel the warmth of the up-to-the-minute hipness or whatever. But the loss of that audience makes us feel all the more alone. Aloneness makes the burden of knowledge heavier." The author's photo for the book looks like a hostage shot, Franzen holding himself captive and refusing to free himself until we accept the terms of his release.

The sole relief from the thick syrup of platitude and pretentious solipsism poured on every paragraph in this essay--"It's possible to have a general sense of history's darkness, a mystical Dionysian conviction that the game ain't over till it's over, without having enough of an Apollonian grasp of the details to appreciate its consolations" is how Franzen introduces his belated discovery that Herman Melville had it rougher than today's M.F.A. graduates ("I wish ... that he'd been able to say to himself, when he was struggling to support Lizzie and their kids: Hey, if worse comes to worst, I can always teach writing")--the sole relief is an epistle from Don DeLillo, to whom Franzen had written "in distress" in his crisis of faith about fiction. (One wishes he had reprinted his S.O.S. call. Dear Don, I can't go on any longer....) An actual grownup, DeLillo addresses Franzen's fear and sense of futility with a calm, realistic encouragement that seems to walk upright across the page after all of the essay's handwringing impersonation of Hamlet at the computer.

How to Be Alone traces the arc of Franzen's acceptance of the solitary nature of being a writer and reader at the fadeout of "the Age of the Written Word." As he told Charlie Rose in a recent interview, "Somehow I got from that point of feeling really radically alone and despairing to feeling like, 'Yes, I'm alone, and it's good to be alone.'" In "Scavenging," which ends with Franzen rescuing a crummy chair from "a delicious trash pile" to take home and restore (making him a pioneer in the school of "Shabby Chic"), he invests the rotary phone, the tape deck, and other rinky-dink devices to which he is fondly attached with a poignant awareness of the novelist's own outmodedness. Only now he finds solace in being destined for the flea market. "I now believe obsolescence is not a darkness but a beauty: not perdition but salvation," he affirms.

The more headlong the progress of technological development, the greater volume of detritus. And the detritus isn't simply material. It's angry religion, resurgent countercultural ideologies, the newly unemployed, the eternally unemployable. These are the fiction writers' guarantee that they will never be alone. Ineluctable obsolescence is our legacy.

Perhaps he is rehearsing his Nobel Prize speech.

Franzen's book presents the portrait of a man who can't leave being alone well enough alone. For someone who repeatedly strikes a Garbo pose in print, he puts a lot of low-key effort into refining his identity. He is very picky about how he is perceived by all those strangers whom he is ducking. Although he chain-smokes as he types (or did at the time he was writing "Sifting the Ashes"), he doesn't want to be lumped in with his fellow wheezers, stating for the record that "I don't consider myself a smoker, don't identify with the forty-six million Americans who have the habit." Unlike the millions of nicotine fiends who first lit up out of peer pressure or misguided glamour, Franzen the smoking non-smoker cracked open his first pack in a defiant act of political defeatism. "I took up smoking as a student in Germany in the dark years of the early eighties. Ronald Reagan had recently made his 'evil empire' speech, and Jonathan Schell was publishing *The Fate of the Earth*." He figured that if the superpowers were racing to erase the planet in a nuclear puff, he might as well launch a pre-emptive strike on the lungs. "Indeed, there was something invitingly apocalyptic about cigarettes.

The nightmare of nuclear proliferation had a counterpart in the way cigarettes--anonymous, death-bearing, missilelike cylinders--proliferated in my life.... The fear of a global nuclear holocaust was thus functionally identical to my private fear of death." Older now, less in love with easeful death, Franzen has to reconcile thanatos and eros ("Smoking may not look sexy to me anymore, but it still feels sexy"), which is no easy trick. Arriving right on cue is one of those convenient last-paragraph vignette-ish epiphanies that has him spotting a woman leaning against the windowsash of a Tribeca apartment and blowing cigarette smoke into the sultry air. "I fell in love at first sight as she stood there, both inside and outside, inhaling contradiction and breathing out ambivalence."

In "Books in Bed," a roundup of sexual how-to guides that elicits the coy admission "I have no objection to a nice bra, still less to being invited to remove one" (down, tiger), Franzen again fidgets to set himself slightly apart. "The last thing I want is to be reminded of the vaguely icky fact that across the country millions of other people are having sex," he writes, horrified by all that humping going on down along the railroad shacks. "This is the conundrum of the individual confronting masses about which he can't help knowing more than he'd like to know: I want to be alone, but not too alone. I want to be the same but different." Bedding down with a good novel satisfies that want. "[T]hough I'm alone in bed with a book, I don't feel alone. For a moment, I belong to a group neither as big as a statistically significant sample nor as small as the naked self. It's a group of two, the faithful writer and the trusting reader [the Lone Ranger and Tonto]. We're different but the same."

A lone. Together. Inside yet outside. Outside yet inside. The same but different. Different but the same. It's a shame Franzen couldn't just grow a Siamese twin, keep himself company, and leave the rest of us out of it. He cannot even engage in political activity without communing with his irreducible self. The last chapter of *How to Be Alone* recounts a long bus ride into Washington, D.C. to take part in a march against the inauguration of George W. Bush. It's a not bad *New Yorker* "Talk of the Town" dispatch--wryly observed, properly civic-minded, wistfully bittersweet (Updike's early "Talk" pieces had this lyric note of instant nostalgia)--until the inevitable inward stare in search of deeper meaning. As he re-enters New York,

Rain is freezing on the ground, snow covering the slush. You may still be one version of yourself, the version from the bus, the younger and redder version, as long as you're waiting for the subway and riding home. But then you peel off the thermal layers, still damp, of the long's day's costume, and you see a wholly different kind of costume hanging in your closet [his Lone Ranger outfit]; and in the shower you're naked and alone.

He was expecting guests?

Jonathan Franzen must be stopped, and yet he can't be stopped, because the catapulting success of *The Corrections* has granted him a lifetime permit to pontificate--a license to preen. The most unintentionally hilarious sentence in *How to Be Alone* is his offhand comment "In a sense, I'm proud of not being like everybody else." In a sense?! His entire persona rests upon the pride he takes in not being like everybody

else, a reluctant nonconformist--a shade different and slightly better; a bit of a snob perhaps, but considerate enough not to flaunt it. ("All people should be elitists--and keep it to themselves.") You don't need a black belt in reverse psychology to recognize that when someone acts shy and "little me" in essay after essay, strumming the same muted chord from the stage of prominent magazines, what he really craves is public attention. He wants his individuality validated. (True recluses such as DeLillo and Anne Tyler do not post regular bulletins as to their non-whereabouts and unavailability.)

The truth hops out of the bag in "Why Bother?" when Franzen mourns "the failure of my culturally engaged novel [*The Twenty-Seventh City*, which he hoped would sell "a zillion copies"] to engage with the culture. I'd intended to provoke; what I got instead was sixty reviews in a vacuum." Considering how the overwhelming majority of novels creep in and out of print like refugees crossing the border, most novelists would be gratified--thrilled--to receive sixty reviews. It's as if Franzen expected those sixty reviews to form a constellation in the sky--a mandala.

Which is why so many people were put off by his petulance after *The Corrections* was chosen as an Oprah Book Club selection. He had wrung his handkerchief in *Harper's* over not being able to engage the culture, and when the culture accepted the engagement he got cold feet. If he had rejected outright being labeled an "Oprah author," the entire staff of Farrar, Straus and Giroux might have downed Jonestown Kool-Aid and crawled under their desks to die, but he would have been credited in the press with taking a decisive stand. Or, conversely, if he had accepted the tap of Oprah's fairy wand graciously, realizing his good fortune in being able to leap to the top of the best-seller list in a single bound, he could have weathered the hullabaloo like a good sport. In fairness, he did try at first. In "Meet Me in St. Louis," he recounts his mortifying attempt to give the Oprah producers what they want by letting a crew follow him around his old neighborhood, filming him as he tries to gaze meaningfully at a tree. Finally, he snaps: "This is so fundamentally bogus!" But he doesn't walk off the shoot; he schleps to the next location ("my job is to stand or walk near trains and look contemplative"), and continues to breathe out ambivalence, airing his qualms, complaining about the Oprah sticker on the jacket cover, and announcing that the typical Oprah title was a "schmaltzy, one-dimensional" book that made him "cringe."

To spare him the flinching discomfort of having his novel feted on national television, Winfrey withdrew the invitation to appear on her broadcast and soon afterward lowered the lid on the Oprah Book Club as a regular feature. Franzen may have skunked it for other authors, but the clamor pro and con was a publicity coup. Cynthia Ozick recently cited Franzen as someone who became a celebrity by spurning celebrity: "[He] had declined celebrity, he had scorned it, he had thumbed his nose at it. It was because for him celebrity was a scandal, an embarrassment. It shamed him. It demeaned him. It was the opposite of his desire." Shades of Stephen Dedalus's non serviam. But celebrity was decidedly not the opposite of Franzen's desire, and he did not so much thumb his nose as scratch it and look sheepish. If celebrity was an embarrassment, it was an embarrassment of riches. As Franzen told a London interviewer regarding his post-*Corrections* fame, "I could have gotten by on five percent of the recognition. The rest has become a bit of a problem." He also compared book tours to an unpleasant illness, saying that he got through them by "doing what I'm told." Business is business.

Apious opportunist, Franzen earnestly lobbies for the literary theory that affords him best commercial advantage, that improves his position in the marketplace. The stance that he takes is always a step on the escalator going up. When he felt marooned as an author of highbrow fiction, he longed to shatter the library hush of "the silence of irrelevance," but his sympathies remained with the cranky fictionists who refused to curry popular favor, especially William Gaddis, author of *The Recognitions*. "For a long time, trying to follow Gaddis's example, I took a hard line on letting my work speak for itself.... I had a cosmology of silent heroes and gregarious traitors." The new, gregarious, semi-outgoing Franzen now abjures his former hero, and patronizes him. In "Mr. Difficult," a *New Yorker* essay published too late for inclusion in *How to Be Alone* that reeks of archness, Franzen documents his disillusionment with Gaddis as artist-exemplar and gnomic gray eminence. As a criticism of the anfractuositities of Gaddis's thick-piled, parched narratives, "Mr. Difficult" is persuasive to those of us who find even a shorter Gaddis (*Carpenter's Gothic*) as dry and gnarled as driftwood; but the essay's chief mission isn't to "place" Gaddis among the postwar novelists but to use him as a prop to measure the progress of Franzen's own development. It's always about him.

Once upon a time Franzen pledged allegiance to the modernist canon, but now he committed infidelity in his heart. "I craved academic and hipster respect of the kind that Pynchon and Gaddis got and Saul Bellow and Ann Beattie didn't. But Bellow and Beattie, not to mention Dickens and Conrad and Bronte and Dostoyevsky and Christina Stead, were the writers I actually, unhiply enjoyed." Never mind that Ann Beattie and her sister-brother minimalists were very much the rage in the 1980s, or that the author of *Mr. Sammler's Planet* never sought "hipster respect." Who in his right mind reads the classics calculating whether Dostoyevsky and Bronte (which one: Emily? Charlotte? Anne?) are hip or unhip to enjoy? Only a budding writer-politician, a junior pollster. Now that Franzen has reconciled himself with being an unabashed, accessible storyteller--the John Gardner prose-philosopher of the post-postmodern era--he is regretfully consigning Gaddis and the "difficult novel" to the scrap heap. It is a symbolic act of parricide on Franzen's part. "Regarding Gaddis's two posthumously published books, I feel the way I did when my father was in a nursing home. Unless you're a very good friend, it's better not to see him suffering." Considering that Franzen's father died of Alzheimer's, his deterioration the subject of the first piece in *How to Be Alone*, the comparison could hardly be more pointed.

Having emptied the hospital beds and shucked the ascetic aesthetic of his cigar-store Indian forefathers, Franzen is free to embrace the pleasure principle. He has become a literary epicurean, instructing the readers of *The New Yorker*, "Think of the novel as lover: Let's stay home tonight and have a great time. Just because you're touched where you want to be touched, it doesn't mean you're cheap; before a book can change you, you have to love it." If only S. J. Perelman were alive to do homage to this conceit, the sultry novel beckoning in the doorway in a pink teddy, her almond eyes moist with the promise of an enticing simile. And if fiction be the food of love, Franzen purrs, think of the novelist "as the cook who prepares, as a gift to the reader, this many-course meal. It's not all ice cream, but sauteed broccoli rabe has charms of its own." I say it's spinach and I say the hell with it.

JAMES WOLCOTT is a contributing editor to *Vanity Fair* and the author of *The Catsitters* (HarperCollins).

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