

## Vaulting Ambivalence

By A. O. Scott

HOW TO BE ALONE

Essays.

By Jonathan Franzen.

278 pp. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$24.

AT the close of his essay “Sifting the Ashes,” a bittersweet love song to cigarettes sure to stir a tremor of uneasy recognition in the breast of any current or former smoker—not, as the essay makes plain, that there’s really a difference—Jonathan Franzen catches a Baudelairean glimpse of a woman leaning out of her apartment window, stealing a puff. “I fell in love at first sight as she stood there,” he writes, “both inside and outside, inhaling contradiction and breathing out ambivalence.”

These elements, much more than the seductive poison of nicotine, make up the air Franzen breathes, just as the woman’s elegant, precarious position at the meeting point of home and world, private and public, self and city, is his own native ground. The 13 essays in “How to Be Alone,” which appeared in *The New Yorker*, Harper’s Magazine and other publications between 1994 and 2001, record a sensibility in perpetual conflict with the world around it, and with itself—agonized by contradiction and addicted to ambivalence. “As a smoker,” Franzen declares, “I’ve come to distrust not only my stories about myself but all narratives that pretend to unambiguous moral significance.” Substitute “novelist” for “smoker” and you have some sense of the assumptions that organize this unfailingly intelligent, intermittently infuriating and notably coherent collection. But Franzen’s is not a coy, postmodern suspicion of certainty, a knowing, complacent celebration of slippage and indeterminacy. Nor does he write like someone who is unsure of himself, or who has difficulty making up his mind. Rather, he starts from the hypothesis, basic to any good novelist’s inquiry, that even the simplest, most trivial activities—stubbing out a cigarette, mailing a letter, dialing a telephone, reading a book—are riven with complexities, and then proceeds, with exemplary ethical seriousness, grouchy stubbornness and silken wit, to break those complexities down into their moral, psychological and historical components.

The activity that most preoccupies him, partly for obvious professional reasons, is reading. Like most writers, he worries about being misread, and about not being read at all. At the time most of these essays were first published, when Franzen was the author of two reasonably well-reviewed but otherwise widely ignored novels, the second concern must have seemed more salient. Now, however, after the spectacular success of “*The Corrections*” and the dust-up that followed its selection by Oprah Winfrey’s book club, he has moved from the doldrums of neglect to the vertiginous heights of celebrity. He is menaced not by poverty, a creeping sense of futility or the need to take on magazine assignments, but rather by the fatuity and tedium of the publicity culture.

These are detailed in a prefatory note and in a piece called “Meet Me in St. Louis,” which records Franzen’s visit to his hometown with a camera crew shooting “B-roll” footage for the Oprah show, and which ruefully anticipates the uproar to come. “Winfrey will disinvite me from her show because I seem ‘conflicted.’ I’ll be reviled from coast to coast by outraged populists. I’ll be called . . . an ‘ego-blinded snob’ in *The Boston Globe* and a ‘spoiled, whiny little brat’ in *The Chicago Tribune*. I’ll consider the possibility, and to some extent believe, that I am all of these things. I’ll repent and explain and qualify, to little avail. My rash will fade as mysteriously as it blossomed; my sense of dividedness will only deepen.”

Before all this, Franzen’s found himself, as a serious literary novelist in a fast-moving, media-saturated world, alone and out of sorts, fundamentally at odds with the culture

he was nonetheless determined, in good faith, to inhabit. But Franzen is a writer of remarkable temperamental consistency, and the impression one takes away from “How to Be Alone” is that being a semi-obscure serious novelist and being a best-selling serious novelist are not all that different. The alienation—the “dividedness”—is now, if anything, deeper, since your own success can be taken as a rebuttal to your deeply held convictions about the novel’s loss of prestige and cultural authority. What’s more, your complaints about the marginality of thoughtful literary discourse in the age of television, quick-fix therapy and the Internet, which might previously have been regarded with patronizing sympathy (“I mean, what do you expect? The guy’s a writer. Have you seen his place? He’s got a rotary phone, and he doesn’t even own a VCR. Jeez”), are likely, now, to meet with some hostility, since nobody likes a sore winner.

Or, as Franzen puts it, “In publishing circles, confessions of doubt are widely referred to as ‘whining’—the idea being that cultural complaint is pathetic and self-serving in writers who don’t sell, ungracious in writers who do.” This is from a 1996 piece now best known as “the Harper’s essay,” a dense, self-divided lament that was widely mistaken, last year, for a manifesto of literary ambition, the polemical promissory note that “The Corrections” was written to redeem. Originally titled “Perchance to Dream,” the essay has been given the deflationary new title “Why Bother?” and revised to minimize the possibility of future misreading (which is perhaps to say that the author has availed himself of the privilege of changing his mind). In its current form, “Why Bother?” is both elegy and therapy—a lament for the novel’s loss of scope and prestige that ends with a cautious note of hope: “The world was ending then, it’s ending still, and I’m happy to belong to it again.”

But this belonging, paradoxically enough, is itself a form of isolation. The kind of reading Franzen champions is not only a beleaguered undertaking—in the modern technological regime, “the individual worrying consciousness,” he writes, has become “ever more isolated from others like it”—but a fundamentally antisocial mode of experience. Its current state, indeed, is in some ways a fulfillment of what it has always been: “The electronic apotheosis of mass culture has merely reconfirmed the elitism of literary reading, which was briefly obscured in the novel’s heyday. I mourn the eclipse of the cultural authority that literature once possessed, and I rue the onset of an age so anxious that the pleasure of a text becomes difficult to sustain. I don’t suppose that many other people will give away their TV’s. I’m not sure I’ll last long myself without buying a new one. But the first lesson reading teaches is how to be alone.”

One of the secondary lessons that this defense of reading teaches, however, is how to feel superior to everyone else, and Franzen does not quite dispel the charge of elitism by copping to it in advance. But when he ventures beyond literary reflection into other matters—examining the crisis of the Chicago post office, a new maximum security prison in Colorado or the effect of Alzheimer’s on his father’s personality—it becomes clear his anxiety about the collapse of literary privilege is symptomatic of a more general unease. Whether or not the Harper’s essay foretold a return to the “social novel,” and whether or not “The Corrections” made good on that prophecy, “How to Be Alone” reaffirms the novelist’s prerogative to engage in social criticism. And Franzen’s calm, passionate critical authority derives not from any special expertise in criminology, neurology or postal science, but rather from the fact that, as a novelist, he is principally concerned with the messy architecture of the self. Novels teach us how to be alone by absorbing us in alternate selves, by momentarily satisfying our craving to understand, as if by osmosis, what it is to be an individual.

At present, in Franzen’s humane, pessimistic view, our individuality is under assault from all quarters, and the novel is part of a web of modern institutions—along with the daily mail, the industrial city and the idea of a democratic public sphere—undermined by the irresistible (that is, both unstoppable and undeniably attractive) forces of standardization and privatization. To point this out is, inevitably, to sound like something of a

crank, and the accomplishment of this book is to offer its cranky author and his like-minded readers a suitably contradictory and ambiguous consolation: we're not alone.

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