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How To Be Alone: Essays

HOW TO BE ALONE

ESSAYS

JONATHAN FRANZEN

BY THE AUTHOR OF *THE CORRECTIONS*



Synopsis

Passionate, strong-minded nonfiction from the National Book Award-winning author of *The Corrections*. Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* was the best-loved and most-written-about novel of 2001. Nearly every in-depth review of it discussed what became known as "The Harper's Essay", Franzen's controversial 1996 investigation of the fate of the American novel. This essay is available in audio for the first time in *How to be Alone*, along with the personal essays and the dead-on reportage that earned Franzen a wide readership before the success of *The Corrections*. Although his subjects range from the sex-advice industry to the way a supermax prison works, each piece wrestles with familiar themes of Franzen's writing: the erosion of civic life and private dignity and the hidden persistence of loneliness in postmodern, imperial America. Recent pieces include a moving essay on his father's struggle with Alzheimer's disease (which has already been reprinted around the world) and a rueful account of Franzen's brief tenure as an Oprah Winfrey author. As a collection, these essays record what Franzen calls "a movement away from an angry and frightened isolation toward an acceptance - even a celebration - of being a reader and a writer." At the same time they show the wry distrust of the claims of technology and psychology, the love-hate relationship with consumerism, and the subversive belief in the tragic shape of the individual life that help make Franzen one of our sharpest, toughest, and most entertaining social critics.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It is amusing and instructional when someone so far removed from the social sciences as this author obviously is makes the intriguing connection between the deadening aspects of the social surround and its effect on individual consciousness. What Franzen bemoans here is really the entire

intellectual sweep of the materialistic culture we are embedded in, yet the individual characteristics he uses in the several essays included here in order to illustrate each of his well-taken points are better described as symptoms of the hollowness and lack of intellectual depth and meaning of most of our social artifacts and habits than as simply being problems in and of themselves. He hits the problem dead on when discussing the pandemic use of technology in the form of television, pop culture, and endless games and gadgetry in an attempt to stave off boredom and "entertain" ourselves. What we really are doing is what Aldous Huxley warned of so presciently in "Brave New World"; submerging ourselves in petty diversions and banal preoccupations, deadening ourselves to our environments and to the social world that would otherwise act to engage us in some fashion. Likewise, his discussion of how widespread use of "serotonin reuptake inhibitors" such as Prozac feeds into a general lack of awareness is quite thought-provoking. If pain, even mental anguish such as depression, can be thought of as a warning from the body that something is wrong, then the whole cultural approach now in vogue to anesthetize the pain is the functional equivalent of a denial of the pain, a quite deliberate attempt to paper it over and therefore disregard the important message it is sending to the individual that something is very wrong.

I found this book thought provoking on many social dimensions, but I still wrestled with why it was published. (Cynical hypotheses, not particularly my own: milk the Corrections-cow a bit longer by publishing fast? Allow an obsessive author to edit past works?) Who knows. But one assertion can be made about this book with a fair measure of certainty: Franzen wants to be understood, both as a writer and as a human being. And these roles, it is important to note, are virtually isomorphic for Franzen. In writing about Alzheimer's or the prison system or cultural degradation, Franzen doesn't offer clear-eyed, journalistic observations that strive for balance and objectivity. Rather, he fuses social critique with personal perspective, infusing his own musings, grievances, and experiences. As he mourns the decline of serious reading, he might point to a real social phenomenon, but he clearly illustrates his individual (and probably deeper) fear of professional irrelevance. His derision of fussy female lingerie and how-to sex manuals intends to skewer the hokum threatening to infiltrate our sex lives, but it also whiffs a bit of sour grapes swallowed long ago by some smart, geeky, awkward youth who was probably a bit afraid of women. And other examples abound, as Franzen reveals liberally of his inner terrain, whether he intends to or not (I think he mostly intends to). Among other things in "How to Be Alone," we are witnessing creative writing as a powerful Rorschachian projective device: Tell me, author, what do you see when formless ink meets blank white page? But, for me, this is the level at which the book works best. Franzen's (self) portrait of the

impoverished, angst-ridden artist is a beguiling one. He salvages broken furniture from a trash heap...

I admire Franzen's fiction. "The Corrections" in particular offered a scathing critique of the myths of family and meritocracy that govern contemporary life. As the Lambert family imploded, I winced and laughed and nodded as Franzen described a landscape both pitiful and familiar. Since his novels are so critical and affecting, I thought the essays in "How to Be Alone" would also be worthwhile. I was disappointed. Franzen's critique lacks nuance. He puts "serious fiction" on a pedestal and uncritically glorifies the "reading life." Meanwhile, he adopts an effete stance in relation to all things mass/pop culture, essentially showing off about getting rid of his tv and situating himself in the context of Quentin Compson, not Seinfeld. Without irony, he bemoans the moment when movies became "films." While arguing the distinction between high and low culture, Franzen reveals a loathing for anyone lacking his sense of taste and refinement: those unwashed masses who (gasp!) watch tv and listen to pop music. He concludes that he's learned that being a writer, reader, and thinker means being alone. Not only *working* alone, but also living apart from the culture and adjusting an "oppositional" (a term Franzen seems to define in a particular way--more on that in a moment) stance. I find this problematic. Yes, of course intellectuals must devote themselves to their work, spending long hours at the keyboard or in their reading chairs. And yes, writers ought to engage in "oppositional" thought--critiquing contemporary life (which Franzen does brilliantly in "The Corrections"), taking stances opposed to dominant thought with all its banality and oppressiveness.

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