

*How to Be Alone: Essays* by Jonathan Franzen, Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2002, \$24.00 cloth, ISBN 0374173273.

In his new essay collection, Franzen brings to light a troubling paradox for the contemporary novelist. Faced with a world of mass technology and consumerism, the author wonders how to "engage with a culture in crisis" when that very crisis "consists in the impossibility of engaging with the culture." Franzen's distrust of the mainstream seems more personal. His novel *The Corrections* earned him the National Book Award in 2001, but he himself was torched with criticism for his comments about Oprah's Book Club. The goal of *How to Be Alone*, he attests, is to show the peace he's made with this arrangement. The foreword describes his movement "away from an angry and frightened isolation toward an acceptance—even a celebration" of the individual reader and writer.

Franzen's plea for the novelist as endangered species seems well founded. His appeal calls to mind a speech made by E. L. Doctorow twenty years ago on preserving funding for the arts. Before the House Appropriations Committee, Doctorow warned of our propensity for "guns before butter, the plating of this nation with armaments, the sacrifice of everything in our search for ultimate security." The crisis has deepened, to be sure. In what he rightfully calls our "noisy and distracting mass culture," Franzen implicates everything from SUVs to cell phones to the war-mongering of two Bush administrations. He wants the novel to matter and still believes it can be socially relevant, as it was for Dreiser or Dickens. He's just not sure how to achieve this end. He fears that to address contemporary issues openly is "to risk writing fiction that makes the same point over and over: technological consumerism is an infernal machine, technological consumerism . . ."

Franzen's essays are a perfect case in point. They are almost singularly committed to showing the individual's disappearance within our culture, rather than making this disappearance a springboard for other ideas. In "Imperial Bedroom," he examines the lost sanctity of public spaces, smartly comparing them to old-growth forests, which are "few and irreplaceable and should be held in trust by everyone." His typical response to modernity is less insightful, though. He marshals a kind of stubborn resistance, using a black rotary telephone or imprisoning his TV set in the closet, extreme behaviors for which he pokes fun at himself. In "Scavenging," he eventually admonishes: "*It was time to grow up.*" His real wake-up comes at the end of this essay, where he claims to have "stopped trying to be a writer-with-a-capital-W" and instead learned to treasure "a little time to write privately, for [himself]." But his list of grievances, from "Why Bother?" (the revised *Harper's* essay) to "The Reader in Exile," weakens the impact of such wisdom. Franzen's angst has built such a head of steam that his few hopeful remarks seem more like disruptions than credible shifts in momentum.

Outside of Franzen's larger cultural indictment stands his first essay, "My Father's Brain," a touching reflection on his father's Alzheimer's disease and the sad divide between his parents. Interestingly, his painful ambivalence on the subject seems not so distant from his troubles as a novelist. He confesses to a strange regret over the growing "currency" of the disease, stating, "There can be comfort in having company like this, but I'm sorry to see the personal significance drained from certain mistakes of my Father's." This selfishness seems the right kind, even ennobling. His feelings illustrate the victim's poignant desire for, yet ultimate rejection of, shared sympathy. On the more mundane topic of sex in the media, the essay "Books in Bed" struggles with a similar type of public/private split. Reading reports of normal male interests and climax times, he remarks, "I'm proud of not being like everybody else," although he says this recognition "leads directly to the worry that I'm not as good as—or . . . not having as much fun as—everybody else."

For Franzen, reconciliation with the norm proves vexing to the end, a fact that surprisingly turns out to be his tragic virtue. It is to Franzen's credit that the harder he tries to let go of his misgivings, the more determined he seems to fight the good fight. At one point, he says the world's crop of "newly unemployed" and "eternally unemployable" are the "fiction writers' guarantee that they will never be alone." The words feel late in coming but are welcome nevertheless. They remind the novelist of his chief concern, which is to voice not his own personal malaise but the malaise of everyone who lacks the ability to do so himself.

—Jonathan Liebson