

The *Scratch* Interview with Jonathan Franzen

by Manjula Martin



photo by Shelby Graham

**The novelist discusses money, power, and cliché.
And Twitter.**

I first met Jonathan Franzen nine days after September 11, 2001. Downtown New York City was still smoking. I was invited to dinner at Franzen's Upper East Side apartment by his partner, the writer Kathryn Chetkovich, who has been a friend of my mom's since I was a teenager and a friend of mine since I became an adult. Before dinner, the three of us drank and listened to the radio while George W. Bush's voice struggled to pronounce a phrase new to all of us: *al Qaeda*. It was an indelible experience.

Of the rest of the evening, I recall a birthday candle—for my twenty-fifth—and discussions on topics ranging from tattoos to the history of the American tobacco economy. As I remember it, throughout dinner, both Chetkovich and Franzen had a tendency to jump up from the table, run to a bookshelf, and dig out a relevant book passage in order to further the conversation at hand. This was shortly after Franzen's third novel, *The Corrections*, had been published to critical and commercial success, but his book was only mentioned peripherally, the way anyone's job would be.

The evening was memorable for obvious historical reasons; I'm also relating it here in order to disclose the social connections that helped me convince such a famous writer to grant a lengthy interview to a new indie publication. But now, upon approaching Franzen as a journalistic subject, I'm struck by how vividly I still hold in mind the image of him and Chetkovich looking stuff up in books like they were eager kids, as if they were so excited about what they might discover next inside that small apartment, as if there wasn't a falling sky outside.

Three weeks later, Franzen was disinvited to *Oprah*; he sold millions of books anyway, and a decade later sealed his mainstream influence with a cover profile in *TIME* magazine and the headline "Great American Novelist." I didn't know any of that in 2001; all I knew was that I was hanging out with people who love books even more than I do.

In recent years, Franzen has increasingly asserted his love by criticizing the Internet and its impact on literature. This October, Farrar, Straus and Giroux published *The Kraus Project*, Franzen's en face translation of the Viennese satirist Karl Kraus's essays, complete with footnotes, in which Franzen mirrors Kraus' condemnation of a society smitten with tech. As if to solidify Franzen's self-proclaimed status as a literary "grandpaw," on November 5, 2013, Picador is re-releasing his 1988 debut novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City*, as the flagship title in a series of "Modern Classics."

For a writer who shuns the clamor of social media networks, Franzen is certainly good at trolling them in absentia. Whether one thinks Franzen is a sincere champion of culture, an outpaced relic, or a "crank instead of a critic," his success at creating novels the world wants to read is not up for debate. The man knows how to be a writer.

Franzen, who is 54 years old, grew up as the youngest of three siblings in a "solidly middle-class" environment in Webster Groves, a suburb of St. Louis. Both his parents had been strongly affected by the Great Depression, and they encouraged their children to seek reliable professional jobs, live cheaply, and avoid debt. (Franzen still abides by those last two directives.) While in high school, Franzen co-wrote a play with his soon-to-be girlfriend. At the urging of a teacher, the duo sold it to a dramatic publishing company for \$100—a formative experience for a smart young boy wondering whether he might be able to make a reliable living as a writer someday.

“He gave me six 100-dollar bills, which seemed like a lot of money. I put it in my sock when I took it back to my apartment, in case I got mugged.”

Franzen went on to an elite college, Swarthmore, where an atmosphere of economic privilege interacted with his middle-class upbringing to give him the confidence that comes from having a safety net. “It was pretty clear to me that I could bail out at any time and make a good living at something else,” he says. So why not give this novelist thing a go?

Despite his ability to deliver inflammatory sound bytes, Franzen’s conversational style isn’t that of a reactionary. He speaks slowly, measuring his words during long batches of silence (which come in handy if one happens to be taking notes). He’s also funny, which rarely comes across in his stern critical pronouncements—his humor toes a complex line between Midwestern understatement and New York sarcasm. Either way, it’s sometimes hard to tell whether Franzen is messing with you, just giving you what you want, or leading you exactly where he wants you to go—or some combination of all the above.

Our conversation, which has been edited for clarity and length, took place in the backyard of the home Franzen shares with Chetkovich in Santa Cruz, CA (the two split their time between Santa Cruz and New York City). While we talked, Franzen kept a pair of hunter-green Swarovski binoculars on the patio table, just in case a bird of note flew by. (For the record: a swifling kestrel and a common towhee, one of Franzen’s favorite birds.)

Manjula Martin: **How did you pay the rent in the years between college and the success of *The Twenty-Seventh City*?**

Jonathan Franzen: After I graduated, I worked a little bit in New York City for my brother, Tom, in the summer of 1981. I was his gofer, basically going to plumbing supply stores on the Bowery. It was wonderful. And at the end of six weeks, he gave me six 100-dollar bills, which seemed like a lot of money at the time. I put it in my sock when I took it back to my apartment, in case I got mugged. Then I had a Fulbright in Berlin, a free year, and then I came back to Somerville, MA, and rented an apartment for \$300 a month with my [then] wife. I was writing seven days a week.

What were you working on?

I’d set *The Twenty-Seventh City* aside and was going for the quick money of selling stories to *The New Yorker*.

Easy money!

Yeah, easy money, right?

[laughter]

Were you successful with that?

No, no. But the stuff was presentable enough that editors would write back and sign their names. So I lived on that hope for a couple of years and then, thus encouraged by 250 rejections, I went back to work on the novel. But clearly I had to get a job, and I found one in the seismology lab at Harvard through one of my good college friends who was a student there. It was one of those great research positions, which I continue to recommend to all fiction writers: make yourself an expert at some arcane thing, because then you become very hard to fire. That was five years of living. It's how I got my first novel written.

What was your first book deal like?

You know, it was a saner publishing world back then. Nowadays I think *The Twenty-Seventh City* would have gotten a six-figure advance just because, whatever its merits are in hindsight, it was considered an impressive first novel. But when you're spending half a million dollars on a hot first novel, well, that's twenty-four \$20,000 advances you're not giving to twenty-four other people.

So you're not a fan of the practice of publishers giving huge advances to authors?

What would be the argument for it?

That the publishing industry needs stars, basically. And the "hot" novels will make enough money to enable the publishing of the rest. Which I'm not saying I agree with, but...

The way it used to be is that Farrar, Straus and Giroux made *The Twenty-Seventh City* its lead title in the fall of 1988, and they did that having invested only \$20,000 in it. And then I earned good royalties beyond my advance.

Really?

Well, that's an earnable advance. That's like 7,000 copies and you've earned out. So between that

and some foreign sales I had enough to not worry about money for a couple of years. Somerville had taught us how to live on nothing. We eventually graduated to a \$450 apartment. And, you know, my wife baked our bread, we shopped at the cheapest supermarkets and drank jug wine and Rolling Rock.

Classic.

Yeah, totally classic. But it works. And once you do that for long enough, you just get used to it. I spent quite a bit of the Nineties living like the characters in Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days*, subsisting on food from book parties. I should add that another problem with big advances is that, if you don't come close to earning out, your stock goes way down with the next book. I took quite a bit more money for my second novel, *Strong Motion*, because the first book had done well. Then *Strong Motion* did not do well, and the relatively small advance I got for the first 200 pages of *The Corrections* reflected that. I earned out my advance for *The Corrections* in literally the first week of publication

At what point did you realize you didn't have to drink the jug wine anymore?

Probably the week *The Corrections* hit number one on the bestseller list. At some point I realized that I was going to be picking up restaurant and bar tabs for the foreseeable future. But even then, you know, I lived for another year and a half in a 600 square-foot apartment with Kathy.

How did it feel? Was there a moment when you knew, "I am successful"?

It's difficult to sort out because so much happened in the fall of 2001. Obviously nationally, but I also got in hot water with Oprah in a hurry, and almost to a man the entire literary community of America turned against me. So I wasn't entirely clocking the success part.

I was never in writing for the money anyway. My ambition, starting in 1982, was to write critically acclaimed novels, and after publishing a couple of them, I figured, I might not be making a living but I could get a teaching job with a light load at a good school. The money really only mattered all along as a token of fame, a token of recognition. The main thing I was clocking in the fall of 2001 was, hey, I had a feeling this novel might do this, and it's doing it. I could finally relax. A little bit. I didn't have so much to prove. Maybe as important as anything was the sense of being read.

How did you learn about the business side of publishing?

I got some basic pointers in the years when I subscribed to *Poets & Writers* magazine. The rest I've picked up from discussions with my agent and trading notes with my writer friends.

“Flannery O’Connor talked about the writer’s concern being ‘a poverty fundamental to mankind.’ You lose touch with that impoverishment at your own risk.”

I think the literary novelist who makes money is like a fish in a tweed suit. Flannery O’Connor talks about the fiction writer’s concern being “a poverty fundamental to mankind.” You lose touch with that impoverishment at your own risk. Edith Wharton stands out as one of the rare really happening novelists who had a fair amount of money. Not many serious novels end up at number one. Some finely executed, entertaining ones do end up there, along with a lot of really terrible ones.

Define “serious novel.”

Read the first five pages. Count clichés. If you find one, the buzzer goes off: it’s not a serious novel. A serious novelist notices clichés and eliminates them. The serious novelist doesn’t write “quiet as a mouse” or paint the world in clichéd moral terms. You could almost just substitute the adjective “cliché-free” for “serious.”

I too have this perception of a literary novelist who makes money, who is both critically and popularly acclaimed, as a unique thing, a rarity—perhaps more of a unicorn than a fish. There’s a feeling of resignation among a lot of emerging writers I know, a suspicion that the sort of success you have enjoyed might be impossible because the prospect of publishing as a functional economic industry might be over. Are you the last unicorn?

There are a lot of cliché-free writers, and there are still dozens who make a very good living at it. Alice Munro is a number-one bestseller in Canada. Ian McEwan had a string of hits, and so did Cormac McCarthy, belatedly. I’m not the only one.

But are you the *last* one?

Are there people who are twenty years old today who have some hope of that? That depends on the larger economics of book publishing. People will not stop reading books. But I think there’s no question that people are reading fewer books than they did thirty years ago—how not, with all the good cable shows and electronic distractions?

The result is that life has gotten much harder for the so-called midlist writer, because people reach for the star writers when their reading time is limited, and when conventional media coverage of novels is shrinking. I think e-books may actually be helping to offset these trends, because

they present a lower barrier of investment—it's so easy to try something new, and if you don't like it you can just delete it. The publishers and bookstores, of course, are worried that e-books will take over completely. But the early adopters have already adopted, and the number of e-books as a percentage of all books sold seems to be plateauing.

Let's say the economics hold up more or less as they are now. I don't see any reason to think that the particular kind of literary writer who's dedicated to entertaining as well as to writing without cliché would not continue to have a shot at finding a commercial-sized audience. And the possibility of that larger audience is important, it's part of what kept me in the game long enough to write *The Corrections*. I was probably more ambitious and more competitive than the average writer starting out, and I couldn't help feeling disappointed by the size of the audience I found for the first two books, especially *Strong Motion*.

With regards to ambition, you mentioned a driving motivation early on in your career was being read—fame, recognition.

That's an ego thing that I will cop to but not want to place too much emphasis on.

I think it's legit, though, because I think everyone has that. Most writers want to be famous writers.

I rationalize my competitive and ego-driven wish for fame as being something that is also good for the novel.

In what way?

When *USA Today* does its annual tiresome “What is life in the culture now?” spread and they list ten TV shows and fifteen websites and five Twitter feeds and a couple of music acts, and there's not a single fiction writer on the list? That is bad for the novel. It's bad for the community of the novel. I mean, writers are horribly envious and so nobody likes stars, we always feel like it's a zero-sum game and whatever stardom somebody else has is being taken directly from us, so we hate the stars. But we also need them. Because the possibility of some level of stardom is what will continue to attract new writers to the game. If you're a linguistically talented 22-year-old, there's a list of things you can be: you can work in Hollywood, you can be a blogger, etc. And if being a novelist equates to some quaint thing like being a Morris dancer, who's going to choose this? You need the excitement that comes with some people actually being in the public eye.

Do you find being in the public eye exciting? In your interview with *The Paris Review* you spoke about having a fantasy when you were younger of being followed around by a camera. Do you remember this?

Yeah, yeah. Turns out to be not so fun.

[Laughter]

But it's also sort of your job now.

Yes, I've appointed myself as one of the spokesmen and public advocates for the cliché-free novel.

As such, you get a lot of what I'll call blowback. Do you make an effort to insulate yourself?

Totally. I haven't Googled myself since the fall of 2001. Because I don't experience the blowback firsthand, and rarely even second-hand, I mostly encounter it when I'm trying to find something related to bird watching on Google. This little headline, "World's Most Annoying Birdwatcher," referring to me, pops up. So that's there to remind me what's out there. But at this point I'd worry more if I weren't being hated. Who said it's the writer's job to be liked by everybody?

How much of your job is marketing? Whether that means being out there promoting your books, or just generally the cultivation of a public persona?

Psychically, less than one percent of my job is marketing. It's a game I play with the same intensity I bring to computer Hearts, which is to say a lot of intensity, but I'm always aware that it really has nothing to do with who I am or what I'm writing. I still want to do well at it, in part because I'm friends with so many of my publishers. My loyalty to them is a motivator. When the Oprah thing blew up, due to my poor media skills, I felt terrible for FSG. They were the ones who had me do media training for two days, when I was going to have to defend myself on *The Today Show*. I had total contempt for TV at that point, and unfortunately it was obvious. The first thing the media trainer did was sit me down, show me a Canadian television performance I'd done, and rip me to pieces. Beginning with my white shirt.

Oh, dear.

Yeah. Exactly. And it was great. It was a transformative experience, because I realized that in my contempt for it I'd failed to see that TV appearances are their own miniature art form. Live TV is the one interview that cannot lie. If you say something ironically, your face looks like you're saying something ironic. If you say something ironic in a print interview, you're at the reporter's mercy. Which is how I got in trouble with Oprah.

That seems to happen pretty consistently with you. The literary world tends to react strongly to things you say in public. To me, it's beyond being about you as a writer and more about you as...

As a psychological object?

Yes, I was going to say as a symbol. A symbol of the literary establishment, perhaps. It is consistently fascinating to me how strongly other writers react to you. Since you don't read your press, are you aware of that?

Well, people project things onto people who happen to be visible.

Yes, but do you consider it?

The great thing about the Oprah affair was that all the hatred was right out there. I had about three weeks of enjoying the success I'd always wanted, and then the firehose of hatred came [laughter]. And when you survive a thing like that, you realize, you know, that it's all just words and it's not going to hurt me. So if anything, I hold back less now. *The Kraus Project* is . . . a strange book. But in it I don't hold back what I really think about Twitter, what I really think about Amazon, what I really think about John Updike. Earlier in my life I might have been afraid to say some of these things, because I didn't want to be disliked. But it's like, boy, is that horse already out of that barn for me.

Right. Like, whatever.

Whatever. Really. Whatever. Which is, I think, what every politician goes through. By the time you get to be even just a state legislator, you've already survived a bunch of vicious campaigns against you. You've learned that, you know, that's just part of the game.

It's interesting that you compare yourself to a politician, because part of being in the position to have everybody talking about you in the first place means you already have power—you're coming from a place of power.

The only power that matters to me—and it matters a lot—is the power of writing. If the writing is weak, everything else is bullshit. But, yeah, sure, people want the famous writer to endorse this and appear at that and support this cause and comment on that current event. It's a kind of power, I guess, but only in a fairly narrow little world. For me, the important thing to do with power is to try to stand up for those who have less of it. My pet projects have to do with threatened migratory birds, illegal hunting of migratory birds—animals that by definition have no voice in the public discussion. I also do my best to promote cliché-free writing by younger writers. I have, my whole career, tried to bring public attention to women writers who belong in the canon and who've been undervalued. People may see me as the man, but I don't feel like I'm working for the man.

“I have a particular animus to that social-media world. ... Hard to see Kafka tweeting, hard to see Charlotte Brontë self-promoting.”

Earlier you mentioned Edith Wharton’s wealth as a rare privilege for a literary writer to have. But there are other kinds of privilege than money. Consider the VIDA count, or the lack of reviews of books by writers of color in outlets like the *New York Times*. Can you understand, then, how some writers might look at you and your power, and see someone who looks suspiciously like “the man”?

Well, I am a male animal, and there’s nothing I can do about that. I can’t stop writing and disappear just because someone chooses to project onto me her grievance with a million years of sexist human history. I can only do what I’ve always done, which is try to be gender-balanced in the books I recommend, the authors I write criticism about, the characters I put into my novels. I wince as much as anyone else does when I read the table of contents of *Harper’s* or the *New York Times Book Review* and see mostly male names. The point where I draw the line is when politics starts dictating literary judgments. I don’t think we should call pedestrian writing great, or vice versa, just because it makes someone feel better.

I guess I do find it ironic that I’m considered “the man,” given what I’m doing with my so-called power. What about all the white guys who are using their power to support large multinational corporations, or \$50 billion Silicon Valley enterprises, or the Republican Party? Go take on those guys.

Okay, let’s talk about those guys. What do you really think of Twitter? [laughter]

I have a particular animus to that social-media world because I feel as if the kinds of writers I care about are just temperamentally not very good at that. Hard to see Kafka tweeting, hard to see Charlotte Brontë self-promoting. If we don’t maintain other avenues for establishing a literary reputation and finding some kind of readership—things like traditional publishers and reviewing, where the writer could just be a writer and not have to wear the flak hat, the salesman hat, the editor hat, the publisher hat—if we don’t maintain those, then we hand over the literary world to the personality types who are, I would say, less suited for the kind of work I care about.

It could be that my model of literature is simply outmoded, but I feel closer to Joyce with his “silence, cunning, and exile.” I worry that the ease and incessancy of communication with electronic media short-circuits the process whereby you go into deep isolation with yourself, you

withdraw from the world so as to be able to hear the world better and know yourself better, and you produce something unique which you send out into the world and let communicate in a non-discursive way for you.

That's something I struggle with myself, because in many ways I feel I am of a personality type who is unsuited to being online all the time. So I'm a somewhat begrudging eager participant, I suppose. But since joining Twitter two years ago, I have found there are conversations going on there that are not strictly self-promotion. For example, I recently saw Gabriel Roth—whose novel, *The Unknowns*, I would certainly call cliché-free—read in San Francisco, and he said he loves Twitter because it's basically a formal way to play with language. It's text.

A great artist can make great work out of anything, even Play-Doh. It doesn't mean Play-Doh is an expressive medium for the ages.

But isn't it possible to structure an online discourse that enables the creation of literature, even for cliché-free or introverted writers?

It's not like I'm militantly opposed to discursive interactive communication. It's fine, it's great. But there's a tipping point you reach where you can't get away from the electronic community, where you become almost physically dependent on it. And that, I persist in thinking, is not compatible with my notion of where terrific literature comes from.

Are you worried because people can't get away from electronic media, or because we may not want to?

I think the model of the new technology is addiction. You're sort of asking, "You can't quit cigarettes, or you just don't want to?"

For me and cigarettes, the answer was actually a bit from column A and a bit from column B. What about journalism, though? You're a journalist as well as a novelist, and journalism as a form is well-suited to the electronic space.

It is and it isn't. Where's the pay model? I have many reasons to resent this new electronic world, and one of the big ones is that the people whose job it is to report responsibly are getting kicked out of work, downsized, reduced to half time, having their pay slashed, by this bloodsucking monster squid of the Internet. All these blogs—they all need information. Where's the information coming from? Who is paying for the information? The Silicon Valley visionaries say, "Oh, well, we'll crowdsource it." Yeah, give me a fucking break. As if you therefore don't need people

whose job it is to have a beat, to work contacts for years, to understand a subject thoroughly, to put things in context, to be able to distinguish meaningful information from nonsense... it's just not doable. And nobody is talking about what happens when the Internet kills journalism.

In my experience a lot of people are talking about that. On the Internet.

Good.

But nobody seems to have the answer.

Well, I've got an answer.

[Laughter]

I'm listening.

Um, pay the fucking journalists!

How?

Obviously I have a vested interest in this, as someone who lives off royalties, but I think we should put an end to the expectation that stuff be free. I think we're unfortunately at sort of a middle point right now where you have a few blue-chip journalism sources like *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* that can get away with paywalls. So even there, as in publishing, you have the reasonably well-paid stars and then the unpaid non-stars.

You call the Internet a “bloodsucking squid,” which I assume is a reference to journalist Matt Taibbi’s takedown of Goldman Sachs and the company’s role in economic crises. In *The Kraus Project*, you speak with vitriol of “the Internet’s accelerating pauperization of freelance writers.” How do you make the connection between the tech corporations that have become global economic powers and the economic environment for writers, particularly freelancers and non-stars?

I think the tech corporations are like the nineteenth-century coal magnates, and the freelance writers are like the people slaving in the mines, the only difference being that the tech corporations can't stop congratulating themselves on how they've liberated everybody. I think the Internet should be really strictly regulated, the way the airwaves used to be. If an entire region of the country had its main industry suddenly lose 90 percent of its paying jobs because of the predatory practices of a different region's industry, you might, if you were the government, step in and say, “We can't actually let this entire region starve. We're going to subsidize prices, we're going to redistribute

some income.” Why should Apple shareholders be getting rich while working journalists are getting fired? This is an unjust situation, and the libertarians in Silicon Valley are either moral idiots or liars. They know they’re getting away with shit they shouldn’t get away with, and all they’ve got is this idea of libertarianism. That, and the mantra of making the world a better place.

Plus all the money.

Plus all the money. But who knows? It’s still early days. It’s a scrimmage. Let’s see how the game plays out.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Manjula Martin is the editor of *Scratch*. Her essays and writing about culture have appeared in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Aeon* magazine, *Hazlitt*, *Pacific Standard*, and *The Awl*.