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HEAT 6. New series

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*Edited by Ivor Indyk*

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Happy  
Days

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Gabrielle Carey

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## An Interview with Jonathan Franzen

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Gabrielle Carey is a freelance writer and doctoral candidate at the University of Western Sydney. She is the author of *In My Father's House*, *The Harrowed Girl* and co-editor of *The Penguin Book of Death*.

Ron, the studio technician, was astonished. 'Wow, you look great,' he said, looking me up and down, admiring my shoes – Perugian pointed heels with bows on the side. Completely impractical. My osteopath would have been appalled. But they matched.

'I dressed up for my author,' I confessed.

'I don't know why,' said Franzen. 'I didn't dress up for you.'

This was the meeting I had been anticipating for months. My producer had asked for a phone interview in January but Franzen preferred to do it in person. If we could wait until he was in Australia for the Writers' Festival in May. I decided we could wait.

Franzen's emails gave me the impression he was fed up with talking about *The Corrections*. That didn't matter. I wanted to talk to him about James Joyce. I emailed and said so. I said I was also interested in discussing the Fall. Franzen seemed happy with this idea.

The reason I wanted to talk to Franzen about Joyce was because I thought that he and Joyce were getting at the same idea. That idea was *felix culpa*.

*Felix culpa* is a tricky concept. Literally it means 'happy fault', but can also be translated as 'fortunate fall' or 'blessed sin'. The concept suggests that being fallen may not be all that bad. In contrast to the Christian impulse to correct and purify all that is 'wrong' in a person ('Happy is the man whom God correcteth' says the Book of Job, 5.17), Joyce considered the fallen state of humanity as something to celebrate. He saw great potential in slips of the pen and lip, in misprints, mispronunciations and even typographical errors. The potential in error, as far as he was concerned, was also the potential for play. After all, double meanings and puns, the hallmarks of Joyce's writing, are born of misunderstanding and ambiguity. Instead of negating meaning, error offers the possibility for the extension of meaning. Imperfection, in other words, is the human condition, and our task is to embrace that condition, rejoice in our fallenness, laugh and enjoy its contradictions, and learn to love the imperfect human world as it is.

Jonathan Franzen, I thought, was also concerned with the impulse to correct our fallen, flawed humanity. His hugely successful third novel takes the idea of correction as a theme; the story starts with manuscript corrections and continues with the correction of the market economy, corrective surgery, corrective lenses, corrective facilities and a 'Corecktail' laxative. Implicitly criticising the modern American way of life, Franzen describes the frenzied rush for therapeutics, the self-improvement industry and the obsession with remedy. Every contemporary American, it seems, feels in need of cosmetic surgery or psychotherapy or both. He also reminds us of all the people whose job it is to correct others: parents, teachers, priests, editors, judges. But correction, he suggests, is not the role of the writer.

'While Franzen may forgive a few characters,' wrote John Leonard in his *New York Review of Books* review of *The Corrections*, 'he won't fix them.' Whereas the teacher, and the religious instructor in particular, seek ways to make men good and righteous, the writer seeks to explore and report on humanity as it is, in its natural, uncorrected condition. Redemption, for Franzen, is not gained through penance and good works. To write truthfully is redemptive in itself. 'To write sentences of such authenticity that refuge can be taken in them,' he says. 'Isn't this enough? Isn't it a lot?'

I like things as much as the next man. I'm not anti-consumption. Not really. I like consuming myself and I've loosened up about all of this in general. Nevertheless, there is this notion that one is perpetually being sold, and that you can achieve coolness by buying x, y and z products. Never mind that it's the same coolness that ten million other people are achieving. It seems to me that that is an aspect of life that has been killed. There is no longer the possibility of being an individual in those areas of life. Which is to say that there is a sort of fugitive nature to the individual. You can find parts of life where you are still very specific, particularly, I would say, in relation to your family. There are those times of years, for example holidays, when you can't escape the fact that you are not in fact the creation of the products you've bought but instead the product of these weird old people who are expecting you to spend Easter with them.

**GC:** Isn't that ironic within the context of American society which has always had the image of a place that champions the individual?

**JF:** That is what's so remarkably sophisticated and intoxicatingly evil about the modern sales apparatus in that individuality is still being peddled. If you get this particular kind of Nike sneakers you are going to achieve that American dream of being an individual. It's going to make you a rebel. In fact, if you buy those sneakers, you're really going to let them know who's boss. You're the scary rebel individual American if you listen to this particular flavour of the month hip hop record.

**GC:** How do we struggle against that? Is the fact that some people lock themselves away from these things and indulge in their interior worlds and then share that with their readers – is that a way to reject that kind of society?

**JF:** No. I think it's making the best of one's inability to join that society. It's not at all clear that these developments are harmful. I think, in the long run, everything is harmful. Terrible, terrible things are going to happen to society and the individuals in it.

GC: Whether they're buying Nikes or not.

JF: Exactly. But in the short term, I don't want to make someone unhappy. I don't want to deprive them of their products. I just prefer my own products and they tend to be books.

GC: I want to talk about your essays. We'll start with the one that everyone's talked about – 'Why Bother?' from your collection *How To Be Alone*. There's a sentence in it that I really love: 'To write sentences of such authenticity that refuge can be taken in them. Isn't this enough? Isn't it a lot?' The words that really seem to matter here seem to be 'authenticity' and 'refuge'. By refuge do you mean an escape from reality – from the kind of reality we've been talking about – or do you mean redemption?

JF: I use the word refuge and I like the word refuge. I've done some more thinking about the word authenticity and I've decided it's an adolescent category. I'm not so interested in authenticity any more. I think it's a fundamentally bogus concept. It's just a way of beating up something you don't like to call it unauthentic. Who's to say that my old paint-spattered chair is any more authentic than the other man's chair? I don't want to get into competing about authenticity. So I prefer the word refuge. Refuge... Let me give you an example. We have something owned by Rupert Murdoch in the United States called Fox News Channel. It was set up as an alternative to CNN – the supposedly liberally-biassed CNN – which by being moderately mainstream rightist was perceived to be far too dangerously left by the likes of Murdoch and company. So they started this new cable channel which is unabashedly idiotic, unabashedly politicised. The newscasters don't pretend that they're not rightists. They don't pretend to be giving you a balanced account of things. It's jingoistic this and rah rah the US that. They take whatever slogan the administration has decided to apply to its war in Iraq and they plaster it over the screen as the official news version. I have to watch this station sometimes at the gym. They have these TV monitors and what will occasionally happen is that angry looking young men – they're always men – in their twenties,

will come up and change the channel without even asking the other people who are watching. So I might be happily watching the Simpsons or happily watching golf even – I'd happily watch Judge Judy before I would watch Fox News. Anyway, they'll come up and change it to Fox and it upsets me. It really upsets me. It makes me despair about America. It makes me despair about democracy. It makes me despair about modern culture. So it's kind of nice to go home and take down a slender volume of writing that isn't trying to sell me something and that is informed by a completely different, often much darker, more mordant but also funnier spirit.

**GC:** So in some way that balances out the experience you've had in the gym?

**JF:** It's a form of refuge. It reminds me of why it's okay to be a person; to go home and read a few pages of *The Man Who Loved Children* for instance, or Denis Johnson or Alice Munro. So that's what I mean by refuge. I think it's a losing game though, to describe Fox News as unauthentic, because it is unfortunately frighteningly authentic.

**GC:** In another essay you wrote for the *New Yorker* last year you said, 'As a writer I seek a direct personal relationship with art.' It sounded to me a bit like, 'As a mystic I seek a direct personal relationship with God.'

**JF:** Oh yes, absolutely. As a Protestant actually. That was the Protestant revolution. It was, we don't need the vicar, we have a direct personal relationship. Which is pointing towards the Protestant roots of all American culture.

**GC:** You went on to talk about your faith in literature. It also sounded as though you were suggesting that literature is capable of offering a person the kind of faith and hope that religion once did.

**JF:** Absolutely. These [writers'] festivals, they have a sort of religious feel. People congregate now and instead of a sermon you have a reading

from some text and simply being together in a room matters. Being around other readers, being around other writers, it seems pretty analagous to why people – especially Protestants who didn't need a minister or an intermediary – may nonetheless go to church because it's a way of ceremonially reaffirming that faith and reassuring yourself that you're not alone with that. So yeah, an essay I would like to write sometime is, 'What happened to American Protestant spirituality in the twentieth century?' It essentially vanished among educated people. Our grandparents and great grandparents were religious in a way that was almost beyond our comprehension. They read the Bible. They said prayers. They were deeply involved in church. People became lay preachers. There was just this ferment and tumult throughout the nineteenth century and it was unthinkable to miss a Sunday of church when I was a child. I said prayers every night. I said grace at the dinner table. Even in my childhood it was so much stronger than it is now for equivalent families. There's still the Pentecostal and the evangelical so-called Bible belt. It's obviously still a strong force, but not among the cultural elites the way it was. I think art has taken up some of the slack there. The church of environmentalism has taken up a lot. The environmental movement is schismatic in just the same way that the Protestant Church was and it implies an almost Catholic sense of the guilt at the centre of each of us. I'm polluting everywhere I go. I'm flushing the toilet. I'm an evil person on the face of this clean earth.

**GC:** So it works very well for Protestants and Catholics.

**JF:** It works very well for guilt-ridden Christians of any stripe. I think some of that energy found its way into literature. Certainly for me it did. I grew up in a church. It was very important to me. It was a left-wing, relatively liberal Protestant church. The church experience doesn't really work for me any more but I think I bring some of that experience into my own work now.

**GC:** So your sense is that Protestant American spirituality has gradually petered out and some of it has transmuted into art and some of it into the green movement.

**JF:** I researched but never published an article on the modern environmental movement and it was so striking talking to the true believer leaders of the various groups how directly it came from that sense of spiritual experience – insufficiency of mankind, unknowability – of not God's ways any more but of Nature's ways. In the deep ecological movement one of their favourite slogans is, 'Nature always bats last'. It's a baseball metaphor; it may not play over here but essentially it means that nature always gets the last shot.

**GC:** Didn't that all start with Romanticism and Wordsworth and what someone called 'spilt religion'?

**JF:** Yes, that's a factor but in the United States there was no such thing as an environmental movement for a hundred years after Romanticism. Its rise can be traced, practically to the decade, if not to the very year, to the decline in church attendance.

**GC:** So to a large extent you think that that spirituality has been channelled into the green movement?

**JF:** No, not just the green movement. That's just one of eight or ten things it's been channelled into. Daytime talk show hosts and the kind of religious devotion they inspire.

**GC:** And public confessions?

**JF:** Exactly. You go and publicly confess, the congregation gathers. They are all filmed before audiences. Instead of taking collections you have: 'We're going to give everyone a pair of Gap jeans today!' So it's sort of a reverse collection plate. It's gifting time. But in a way, that's communion. It is commercial TV after all and receiving your free pair of Gap jeans and dutifully applauding when the applaud light flashes, that's the equivalent of communion. And then, as I found when I had that little run-in with Oprah Winfrey, it's like attacking the Pope.

**GC:** They're the holy people of the times.



**JF:** Yeah, she comes out in robes and people speak of her in those Dalai Lama hushed tones.

**GC:** She's the oracle?

**JF:** Yeah, and that aspect of it is very much tied up with personal growth, which was always part of the province again of religion. Certainly for me growing up as an adolescent in a church group, it was adolescents experiencing personal growth in a Christian context.

**GC:** And I suppose that's also related to the huge growth in self-help books.

**JF:** That's right. Not to mention all the vaguely culty diets and fads and EST and scientology. It doesn't go away. It just takes different forms. But the thing is, living in a pluralistic society really isn't that bad. Consider the alternative.

**GC:** In that same essay you talked about coming from a Congregationalist childhood and going straight into a collegiate worship of Art, without noticing the transition and without ever quite buying either faith. Is this the crisis of the contemporary era – not that we are passing from one faith to another – but that we are, as Wallace Stevens said, living in an age of unbelief?

**JF:** No. Literature is the church of doubt. It's for people who are incapable of experiencing certainty for long. It's not the only church but I think that the good books are about doubt rather than about certainty. Essentially doubt, theologically speaking, can be seen as the negation of religion but it can also be seen as the confirmation. If faith were easy – if you could just check in and wear it on your car-key chain, why not have it? It's a pleasant attribute. It accessorises your life if you can do it that easily. The whole point is that it goes against everything your reason is telling you. The whole point is you're never going to really figure out what the truth is. So I think faith, properly conceived, whether it's a religious faith or the kind of faith I dance around as a

writer, is about a struggle. It's not about arriving some place. It's about process.

GC: So what you're saying is that you have faith in doubt.

JF: Yeah, basically. It's because when you meet somebody else who is confused and who is not certain in the same way that you're not certain, isn't it the most wonderful sense of relief?

GC: Communion.

JF: Yes, exactly. I'm not the only one who is freaked out by Fox news. I mean, one other person in the room, on the treadmill, is rolling their eyes and looking at me and it's like, I *love* that person. And the kind of connection between those people is all the stronger for it. And even though the reading and writing of books is a tiny minority activity I think that precisely because it is a tiny minority, people care very passionately about it and it's an incredible, outward-bound experience. You get to love the people who are doing it.

GC: Staying on the question of doubt, you've also expressed your extremely earnest doubts about art. Are these doubts related to whether art is socially useful?

JF: Yes, my doubts had to do with social utility. I was raised with a very strong sense of social responsibility. I heard it – God, it felt like every single day of my adolescence – 'Able people have a special responsibility to give back to society'. And I got that double barrel. My parents agreed about almost nothing but that was one thing they agreed on. It's possible to imagine even more frivolous, useless things than writing novels but there aren't very many. So I feel sorry for myself as a twenty-two year old trying to see what I was doing – making up these stories – as somehow socially useful – but that was what I was trying to do. You know, maybe art is not serious enough, maybe it's not socially useful enough – those were the kind of doubts I was experiencing. In the book, *The Recognitions*, that I was writing about those

doubts I had to do with, it was the straightforward Protestant suspicion of idolatry and art in general.

**GC:** Wallace Stevens once wrote that the nobility of poetry is that it is a violence from within that protects us from a violence from without. Or in Seamus Heaney's words, it's the pressure of the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. Is this also the nobility of the novel?

**JF:** Those are both poets I really, really love and they make me feel like one of those slutty, doubting Sunday churchgoers who sees some incredibly dedicated believer. They seem to really truly have the faith. I have more mixed ideas. The novel is a much more popular form. I don't think it does the novel good to speak of it in such earnest terms. I think those are very apt descriptions of poetry. The novel was originally, still is, in the first instance, an entertainment. It's a story. It's telling stories. If you can do more as a writer you will usually try to do more. But the most basic thing is giving us what we want, which is stories. I think the world is made of story. I think I would account for the relation between writing and the world differently than either Stevens or Heaney because, I think, as a pretty good postmodernist, I can rather successfully argue that the world is the stories we tell about it. I don't have to invoke the abstractions of the internal reality and external reality. Those feel like somewhat nineteenth-century kind of constructions, whereas I think I'm on pretty firm, late-twentieth-century ground in saying, Hey, narrative, can't live without it. Who you are is a constructed narrative. We construct narratives of who we are as countries and as cultures and so forth. What I'm doing as a novelist is participating in a certain kind of structured storytelling – which we obviously need because the storyteller is making the whole world. It's hard to account for why that is so pleasurable, why story is such a wonderful thing to hear, and why we need to hear stories, but there's no question that it's something people want. Everybody wants stories. You can go beyond that and dress it up a little but that's what it all is, ultimately.

GC: One last question about *The Corrections*. I'm interested in the division between the readers who absolutely adore it and those who can't get past page twenty. It seems that those who couldn't read it found the reality of your characters and situations too much. It seemed too close to life. And in a way people expect novelists to write a better reality. Indeed, they want a novelist to correct reality, in the same way that Alfred wants to correct his wife and his children and the railways. In that way, these readers are looking for a different kind of refuge, aren't they?

JF: People seeking escapism – there are plenty of places to find that. You can get it on sixty-two cable channels. You can get it in almost every movie that Hollywood releases. It's not hard to find escapism. To me, that's the thing that I want refuge from. But I know not everyone feels that way. But yes, that divide [over *The Corrections*] is striking to me and yes, it's certainly flattering to my sense of accomplishment to think that Oh, those people who don't like it, *they just can't take it. It's just too true and they can't take it so they have to hate it.* That's a nice thought. Happy to think that. And it may be true. I don't know.

'I don't know,' seemed to be the right place to end a discussion about doubt and uncertainty. I've always admired people who can say 'I don't know' publicly, especially people who obviously know an awful lot.

Franzen got up from the microphone reiterating how pleased he was not to have discussed Joyce.

'But so much we've discussed relates to Joyce,' I objected, 'uncertainty, guilt, original sin, faith.' Then I found myself asking, in a doubtful tone, 'Have you ever read *Ulysses*?'

Franzen looked slightly uncomfortable and I suddenly realised I was sounding like an English Lit. tutor chastising her student for not being sufficiently acquainted with the canon. Here was I, *correcting* Jonathan Franzen.

'I picked it up second-hand once and read half of it.' He put on his jacket, preparing to leave, his minder at his side. 'I don't think it's a good model for the novel.'

I restrained myself from following him out the door and arguing.

Weeks afterwards I emailed one last question.

What are your objections to *Ulysses*? Surely, Joyce hadn't intended that it be used as a model for the novel.

Franzen fired back a prompt and prickly response.

'Yes, JJ never intended *Ulysses* to be a model novel, but who cares what he intended. The fact is that it has become the iconic twentieth-century novel – it's number one on the list of great novels of the century, as chosen by a distinguished panel of American novelists and critics, etc. etc. – and so it's important for us to keep saying why it's such a lousy model. It's a lousy model because it's a lyrical thing, not a narrative thing – it isn't really a novel at all – and because most of it is a total drag to read unless you're a graduate student in literature. And the novel as a thing-to-be-studied-and-then-possibly-enjoyed, as opposed to a thing-to-be-enjoyed-and-then-possibly-studied, is exactly what we don't need any more of.'

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John Leonard's review of *The Corrections* was published in the *New York Review of Books*, 21 September 2001. Jonathan Franzen's essay 'Mr Difficult' was published in the *New Yorker*, 30 September 2002.

An edited version of this interview was broadcast on ABC Radio National's 'Books and Writing' on 27 July 2003.