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BOOKS

ALL IS FORGIVENESS

With a history of offering insightful fiction, **Jonathan Franzen** is a reliable source of relatable stories. In an SA magazine exclusive, the preeminent American novelist talks Trump, doubt, privilege, and what writing needs to do right now

Words by **Cayleigh Bright**

GQ: You've parodied the male writer stereotype. Do you believe in embracing clichés when it comes to writing a character?

Jonathan Franzen: I struggled for many years to define a 'literary novel'. It's kind of a useful term if you're talking about readership,

and also, if you define yourself as 'a literary novelist', what do you mean by that? 'Cliché-free' is the synonym that I reach for, for 'literary'. Cliché comes in many forms – obviously linguistic clichés, and you can spot them on the first page of a Dan Brown novel, and it

tells you that this is not a serious writer. Maybe an entertaining writer – I'm not dissing Dan Brown in particular, though he is kind of a poor writer, at that level. Actually my job is to avoid producing the sensation in the reader of 'Oh, that's familiar to me.' You're trying to

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make the thing real enough that it feels specific to what's going on in that narrative.

GQ: What are the challenges of writing characters with whom you identify closely, as opposed to characters very different from yourself?

JF: The foreign ones are much easier. Most of the work of writing a book, for me, is coming up with characters who seem real. The female characters are easier, because I live in a gendered little world, and feel distinctly male. If I just use the pronoun 'she', I know I'm not talking about myself and it's much easier. The closer I get to me, the harder it gets, because I just become overcome with shame, and self-blame, and shame is icky in a book, and needs to be written around. Self-blame is icky in a book – it needs to be earned.

GQ: A lot of your plots are about disappointment – and having a low opinion of yourself as a result of one's own mistakes.

JF: Novelists would be out of business if people didn't make mistakes. A novel is a book in which errors are committed. Someone said to me recently, 'Why don't you write a book about forgiveness?', and I said, 'Well, wasn't that what my last novel, *Purity*, was about? Forgiveness?' And then I realised that it's what all my novels are about. And I suppose that there needs to be a disappointment in order to set up the forgiveness, so that's probably true – although I hadn't looked at it through that prism before.

GQ: You've talked about how those who've had a sheltered upbringing tend to become cynical once they lose their innocence. Do you still believe that?

JF: I was a very uncool teenager, and once I became aware of that

I didn't try to become cool, but I tried to defend myself from being uncool. In the same way, I was a very innocent teenager, and once I became aware that people my age were a lot more knowing and a lot more jaded than I was, it's not like I could become jaded or particularly cynical, but I could at least learn to present as somebody who might be more knowing than I was.

Cynicism is not actually the opposite of innocence, I don't think. I think experience is the opposite, and I think one of the things you learn from literature is to let go of these innocent youthful judgments of people and situations, to not overreact. And there's a certain coolness to that.

I'm not really on social media but I'm aware of the quality of a lot of online discourse, including social media discourse, and a lot of it is rabidly judgmental and rabidly simplified. People don't have the experience: they read about something, or they read some little fragment of something, and they leap to conclusions and come out with a full bore response to that. The Trumpists are horribly innocent. Nationalists of all sorts... Really? You think that that's the way the world really is?

GQ: Is the idea of the American Dream shifting?

JF: The American Dream is like the Great American Novel – it's something I never really understood what was meant by it. I think that the best definition of the American Dream is that you can come as a poor immigrant, work hard, better your situation and ensure a better future for your children – that there is upward mobility, and that it's available to all, particularly to newcomers.

GQ: How do you think literature has shifted as a result of the feeling of a need for urgent political activism?

JF: People who have a somewhat nuanced or ironic or distanced view, who might consider the possibility that they're not entirely right and that their opponents are not entirely wrong, tend to be silenced. I think it has become more difficult to stick up for what to me is a humane value – the shorthand word for it would be 'doubt' – it isn't clickbait, it's click repellent.

GQ: What are the challenges of exploring universal themes through characters who do have a certain degree of privilege?

JF: To some extent, you write what you know, and obviously I am a privileged person. I didn't particularly come from economic privilege, but in every other way – white, straight, male, American, with an elite education – I've checked pretty much every other box. And now I've got economic privilege, too, because my books have done well. There is an honourable tradition within the history of the novel of writers who try to write about characters who are suffering from extreme privation, but the audience has always been those with some leisure – not only leisure to read, but also the privilege of not needing simple answers to questions.

If you are living a tough life, you might not want to know that the way you look at the world is not the only way to look at the world. You may be a Trumpist. You may believe fervently in your religion. And literature – cliché-free fiction writing – there's a kind of belief system there, too, but at the centre of it that belief system is this radical doubt. And doubt is a privilege.