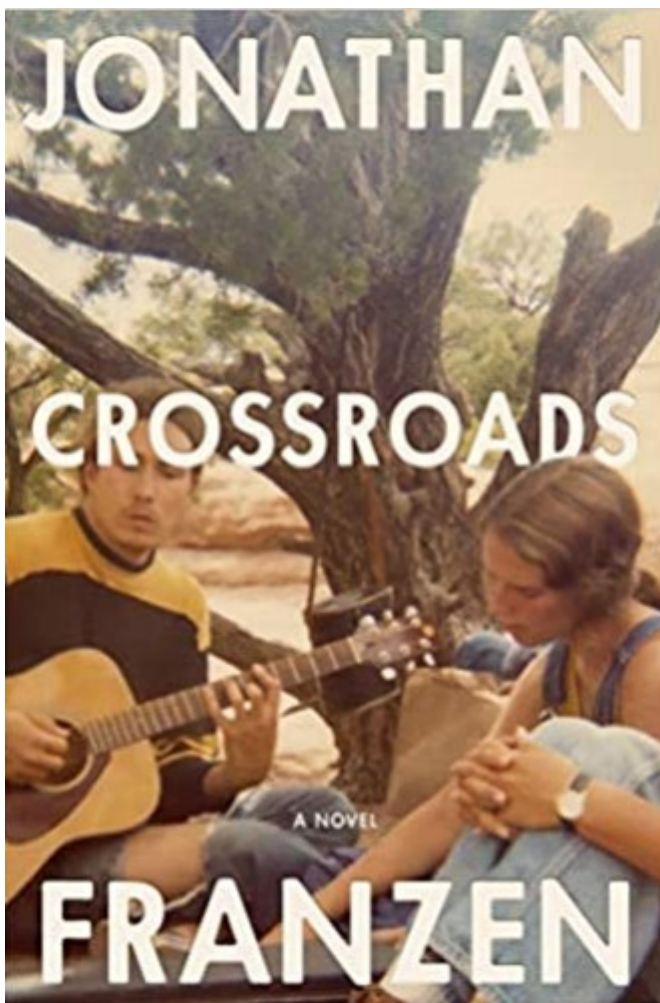


Jonathan Franzen writes a family that feels familiar

In *Crossroads*, a troubled associate pastor faces his deepest desires and doubts.

by [Joshua B. Grace](#) in the [December 1, 2021](#) issue

In Review



Crossroads

A Novel

By Jonathan Franzen
Farrar, Straus and Giroux
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“Ambitious.” That’s the word you’ll find splattered across the many reviews of Jonathan Franzen’s new novel. Throughout the book’s nearly 600 pages, Franzen pries into the seemingly quiet existence of the suburban Hildebrandt family and exposes the tensions that threaten to pull its members apart. As he does, he asks us to consider all manner of big questions. How well can we truly know someone? What does it mean to live and act in an authentic fashion? Are our attempts to be good forever tainted by our self-interests? How can we know or experience God?

The novel’s title mirrors its narrative structure. It follows not one single story but five different stories—or roads—told from the points of view of five Hildebrandts. These stories run in five different directions but cross paths as Franzen revisits key events and themes. But while this narrative structure may keep readers thinking of crossroads, it’s not the novel’s most direct connection to the title. That would be the Crossroads youth group at First Reformed, the small-town Illinois church where Russ Hildebrandt, the patriarch of the family, works as associate pastor. This youth group ties together three of the five stories and serves as the catalyst for Russ’s unrest.

The book opens with Russ lusting after Frances Cottrell, a widowed parishioner who has just recently joined First Reformed. To win time with her, he convinces her to join the group of women who go into Chicago on a regular basis to volunteer at another church. Her son has joined the Crossroads youth group, but that doesn’t concern Russ at first. Instead, he is giddily consumed by thoughts of Frances, and Franzen leans hard into the irony of a pastor using his official church activities to advance his adulterous plans. The more we learn of Russ’s lust, the more we find it rooted in the humiliation he feels at work and home.

We also learn that Russ isn’t nearly as sly as he thinks he is. As Franzen turns the narrative spotlight on 15-year-old Perry Hildebrandt, we learn that not only has Russ failed to conceal his pursuit of Frances from his family, but he has failed to pay attention to things at home. As we move from one character to another, we see the cracks opening. We see the familial bonds between Russ and his youngest son, but we also learn how Russ is ignorant of Perry’s drug use. We learn how Becky starts to view her father in a new light, becoming ashamed of a petty grudge he holds against the Crossroads youth pastor. We learn how Clem harbors bitterness toward his

father and makes a decision he expects will hurt Russ, only to be surprised by Russ's reaction. And we learn how Marion is not only aware of her husband's lustful designs, she's several steps ahead of him.

The transitions between these stories remind us of the many connections between the characters. They also pace the story, break tension, add tension, and keep us guessing. Franzen's plotting is tight. Each of his characters struggles with their own crises, and Franzen holds them to the screws page after page. When he switches between the different stories, he allows us to catch our breath or delights us with a new twist.

Yet for all that Franzen keeps his foot on the gas, he makes it feel as though the characters are the ones in control of their stories. We see this in how he explores the ways they rationalize their decisions. Perry, for one, makes an honest effort to be better—before questioning whether it's truly possible for anyone to be good when they also suspect the calculus of self-interest at play in seemingly altruistic behaviors.

Franzen's characters seem to make their own mistakes, rather than the mistakes a less skilled author might shove into their mouths or their minds. In this sense, *Crossroads* is a novel that feels close to home. The characters are rounded and given depth, so they feel familiar. They feel like us, and the novel elevates their experiences to that lofty place of literature where we can see themes written through actions. *Crossroads* asks us to reflect upon our secret desires and our secret doubts. It explores the different ways we might experience God's presence in our lives. It challenges us to consider whether we are living our lives the way we believe we should or the way that we think others believe we should. Franzen draws us into these big, ambitious questions through the decisions the various Hildebrandts make.

In the end, *Crossroads* feels much faster and slimmer than its many pages, but it also feels incomplete. Perhaps this is only because it's intended to be the first volume of a multigenerational trilogy, *The Key to All Mythologies*. However, there's also something appropriate about a book like this—one that feels so much at times like the lives we know and experience—ending without a clear resolution. Yes, there's a resolution of a sort, as Franzen traces Russ's adulterous story arc to its conclusion. But by that time, his children's stories are already splitting off in other directions. Franzen withholds from drawing his themes into nice, tidy packages. There are threads left dangling at the end. And it is a testament to his storytelling prowess that we are left wanting more.