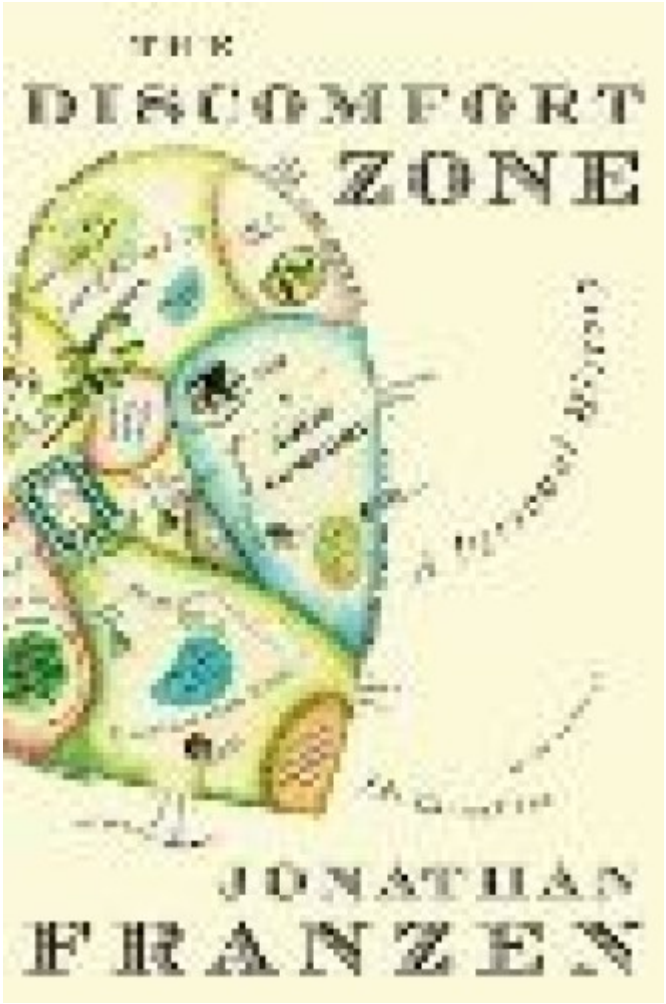
Wandering pilgrim

By Todd Shy in the December 26, 2006 issue

In Review



The Discomfort Zone: A Personal History

Jonathan Franzen
Farrar, Straus & Giroux

Literature is a greater rival to religion than science is because both religion and literature seek the same kind of good. Science proposes explanations of the physical

world, but literature, in its most persistent form, evokes and then presses hard at deep human dilemmas. Darwin, Einstein and Hawking may set off theoretical fireworks; but the slow burn of Melville, or Chekhov, or Roth is, I suspect, the more profound challenge to the resilience of belief. Where scientists compose an alternative priesthood, writers are fellow pilgrims on labyrinthine paths, aiming, like religious believers, for a kind of transcendence, for mystery, for some hard-won light to relieve human pain. In a context in which both literature and religion have lost whatever assumed moral authority they once had, visionary literature—art for our sake—is something like what religion might be if it were forced to start from scratch without a Redeemer. There is something irresistible and unnerving in gazing at such mirrors.

Jonathan Franzen, a hip, intelligent, deeply melancholy writer, explores, among many other musings, the odd intersections in his own life of religion and art. First in an essay collection, *How to Be Alone*, and now in a memoir, *The Discomfort Zone*, Franzen tracks his youthful religious influences as they are discarded and transformed into artistic vision. But his is not an older trajectory of art neatly succeeding religion: the gospel as chrysalis, artistic vision as butterfly. In fact, Franzen mistrusts this kind of crisp, linear account. What he is interested in instead is the ways our experiences rearrange and harden in new patterns depending on fresh recollection.

Because writers like Franzen have a more ambiguous posture toward narrative itself, they are less stressed by religion than predecessors who felt the need to account for their relationship to inherited faiths. In the end he does shun religion but not as an artistic rite of passage, and religion retains some of its power even as it’s not believed. Indeed, the challenge in reading Franzen is that his experience seems simultaneously charged with great urgency and yet empty of conviction. He is at once earnest and convinced that earnestness won’t cut it.

Franzen’s career took off in starts and stops. He was the talented author of two literary novels when he published a now-famous essay in *Harper’s Magazine* bemoaning the plight of the modern fiction writer. Then, as if in response to his own artistic complaint, Franzen produced the wildly successful novel *The Corrections* (2001), which won the National Book Award and stirred controversy when its author expressed ambivalence about its selection for Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club. Since then, Franzen has focused on writing essays and “personal histories,” the latter now gathered as his meandering memoir, in which he describes his tense relationship

with his parents, his early love for the comic strip *Peanuts*, his involvement in a church youth group, high school shenanigans (he and his friends try to ring a tire on the flagpole), college years at Swarthmore, a year abroad in Germany, and finally the difficult cycle of married life and a late passion for bird watching.

Throughout, Franzen gives voice to an overriding bitterness. Unguarded about his resentments, in one instance he complains of feeling inconvenienced by Hurricane Katrina relief and in another admits a misanthropic bond with his wife: “Deploring other people—their lack of perfection—had always been our sport.” Reading these personal histories, then revisiting the *Harper’s* complaint, then recalling his uneasiness about what Oprah Book Club stickers would mean for the integrity of his novel, one is tempted to label Franzen the most anxious of our important writers. The author who once idolized *Peanuts* describes its creator Charles Schulz as “a mass of resentments and phobias.” If defiance is one of the strengths of Franzen’s own work—which I think it is—it is nourished, ironically, by self-pity.

Franzen’s memoir, however, isn’t an exercise in depth psychology. His command of the wandering narrative has an impressive naturalness, so that he weaves, in the book’s best chapter, environmental politics with marital problems and a growing passion for birds in a way that is neither frivolous nor heavy-handedly allegorical. And when he expounds, in the end, on what he learns from watching birds, the insight achieves surprising pathos. Mostly, though, Franzen seems bereft, wanting more than anything to curl up inside the discomfort zone of a *Peanuts* panel from the 1950s.

Interestingly, Franzen spent his teenage years participating in a counterculture-type youth group called Fellowship, whose dynamic leader smoked cigars, had a Jesus beard, talked frankly about sex, and attracted members with a charisma that bordered on the cultish. Fellowship was, in Franzen’s experience, deliberately non–Bible-centered and nonchurchy, focusing instead—this was the mid-1970s, after all—on cultivating “Authentic Relationship.” Franzen remained a loyal if uninspired member of Fellowship for years, and, tellingly, when he discovered the real passion of his life—and his subsequent vocation—he borrowed the language of his youth group to describe it: “The Authentic Relationship I wanted was now with the written page.” This seamless transition suggests a continuity of vision at some level.

In *How to Be Alone*, Franzen explores the connection between religion and art more directly, quoting this observation from Shirley Brice Heath: “What religion and good

fiction have in common is that the answers aren’t there, there isn’t closure.” Franzen agrees, but prefers the Nietzschean description “tragic” for the novelist’s ultimate aim: “Even for people who don’t believe in anything that they can’t see with their own two eyes, the formal aesthetic rendering of the human plight can be (though I’m afraid we novelists are rightly mocked for overusing the word) redemptive.”

Where religion and art intersect is in this aiming for some sort of “rendering of the human plight,” in taking that plight seriously and offering glances of redemption—however disparate and contradictory—even if, on art’s path, that redemption is ultimately denied, while on the pilgrim road of religion it is necessarily affirmed.