

THE PORTRAITIST



Jonathan Franzen sits
for street photographer
Tikam Chand outside
the Hawa Mahal, Jaipur

Few might know that The Great American Novelist had an early start penning campus fashion previews for his college newspaper. In a *Vogue* exclusive, ANINDITA GHOSE talks to JONATHAN FRANZEN about the beginnings of his illustrious writing career, bad press on the internet, environmental activism and how the protagonist of his first novel came to be a woman from Bombay

Photographed by ADIL HASAN



On my flight to Jaipur to meet with Jonathan Franzen, I'm passionately hoping he isn't the disgruntled person the internet has made him out to be—a few months ago, *Vulture.com* even carried a listicle titled 'Everything Jonathan Franzen Currently Hates' based on the annotations in his new book, *The Kraus Project*.

But at the Jaipur Literature Festival (January 17-21), three hours after getting off a long-haul flight from the United States, he is disarmingly cheerful. At his panel, he even does a Schopenhauer impression. Dressed in a black puffer vest, he jokes about how he has the best seats in the house: "The stage lights are a great heat source."

The 2010 *Time* magazine cover that controversially tagged him as The Great American Novelist, in the ranks of Ernest Hemingway and JD Salinger, does make him a bit of a target, he concedes during the interview later. "But it's a lot easier when you're in your 50s. If everyone likes you, you're not doing something right," he says.

The 55-year-old American author was one of the big draws at the eighth edition of "the world's largest literary festival". William Dalrymple, who curates the festival's international programming, shares that he had to organise a two-week-long birdwatching trip across the country—covering Ranthambore and Kaziranga—to convince him to come down. An avid birdwatcher, Franzen lives most of the year in New York, and some of it in a leafy community on the outskirts of Santa Cruz in California, which gives him plenty of opportunity for birding.

The Guardian called his last novel, *Freedom* (2010), 'the novel of the century'. Jonathan Franzen makes brilliant, incisive portraits of our times; of the modern lives of modern American families. But to reflect his old-world affiliations—he has made his hatred for Twitter and technoconsumerism known—*Vogue* invited him for a photo shoot to the more historic part of

Jaipur, where he affably posed for Tikam Chand, a photographer who operates his 150-year-old box camera outside the iconic Hawa Mahal.

Edited excerpts from the interview:

The Austrian satirist Karl Kraus, whose works you've recently translated for *The Kraus Project*, was known as 'The Great Hater' in his time. Do you feel a kinship?

Because I don't take the internet as seriously as it takes itself, it hates me. If one actually reads what I write—the essence of the internet is people don't read what you write, they read about what you write—my second most recent book is a series of essays about love. From the Kraus book, too, it should be clear that my enthusiasm for him was as a 23-year-old, when I was an angry young person.

You quip about the transformation of Canada's boreal forest in *The Kraus Project*. The character of Walter Berglund in *Freedom* is a committed environmentalist too. There's clearly a part of you that's very interested in the environment.

I was an angry environmentalist in my 20s and came to feel it was a dead end. Once you start being mad at human beings for existing, you end up in a deeply misanthropic position. I gave up on the whole thing and started to live my life... Then I found my way to birds and became involved in conservation and journalism about the threats to wildlife—birds, in particular—so yes, I'm an environmentalist, I guess. I have a science background. It's hard to ignore evidence of what we're doing to the climate. I'm also on the board of a wonderful organisation called the American Bird Conservancy.

"Success for me is... successfully serving readers. In the world of human beings, if you're not a reader I don't know you. I don't care about you"

How did you get interested in birdwatching?

It was a midlife development. I was starting to be a little interested in birds—maybe because I don't have kids—and then I got involved with this Californian woman whose sister and brother-in-law were birdwatchers. They took me walking in Central Park in New York one May Day and opened my eyes to birds. It's been 10 years. Novelists have a lot of time on their hands [*laughs*].

It was exciting to learn that a woman from Bombay (Jammu, 'the former police commissioner of Bombay') is the protagonist of your first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City*. How was Jammu born?

It was the days of Indira Gandhi's reign, just after the Emergency, that I started writing the book. It's sort of embarrassing where the idea came from... me and my friends from high school decided we're going to write a play over the summer. A friend had been reading books about the Raj and had this idea of setting a comic murder mystery in British colonial India. We were so completely naïve that we were looking for names of characters in the atlas. That's how we found 'Jammu'. Later, for a class in college, I decided to transport the Indian characters to my hometown, St Louis, Missouri, and see how that goes. With some encouragement from my teacher, I decided I was going to make it a novel... that is how *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988) happened.

Had you visited India then?

No, I hadn't. But I did manage to make the story about people from Bombay landing up in St Louis personal because when I went home after being in Europe for a year, the place was utterly strange to me.

When you embarked on a writing career, did you resent the fact that you had a normal childhood? Your parents weren't migrants, you weren't born in a prison...

For a while, that was how I saw it. So my first two novels had these extremely exotic plots. It was not until my third novel, *The Corrections*, that I re-

alised that we may have been a white middle-class family in the middle of the United States but there was a story there, too.

You're interested in the contemporary and you respect other writers who have 'skin in the game'. But contemporary subjects are often considered unliterary. Do you believe that's the reason so many young writers are writing historical fiction?

There are a lot of young writers who're doing very engaging work, so I wouldn't want to generalise. And every once in a while I read a historical novel that feels like it does have skin. I read a wonderful novel by Jane Smiley that is set in Greenland in the 12th century. It's called *The Greenlanders* but you can feel on every page that this is about Jane Smiley. It's basically a story about a woman who steps outside a marriage and is ostracised. I believe a good writer can find a personal connection to anything. Some of this trend has to do with the marketplace. People don't know why they're supposed to be reading fiction. They feel guilty about it. But if they're learning facts—learning what life is like in Somalia—they feel like they're doing something productive.

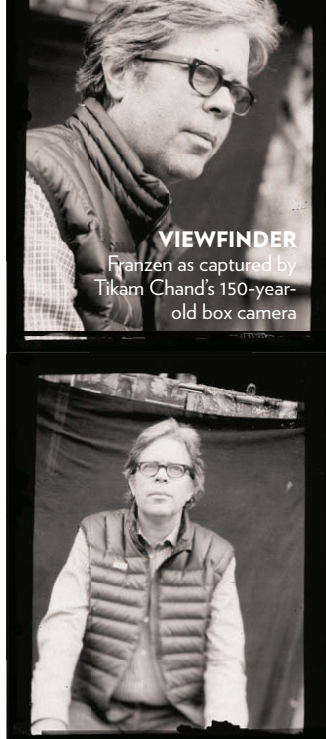
To explain it from the author's point of view, I'm only happy when I'm working on a novel; it's painful when I'm not able to write. I think a lot of writers would rather be writing anything than nothing. Maybe that's the attraction of the historical. You're doing something.

So *The Kraus Project* was a way to bridge the gap between *Freedom* and your next novel?

Partly, yes. And I'd taken a detour into television... I spent the better part of the year helping HBO make a TV series out of *The Corrections*. It didn't work out. And having wasted all that time I wanted to do something that was not like TV.

Would you be interested in a screenplay? You mentioned you loved writing dialogue.

I have started writing a movie screenplay. It's not based on my books. It's an original idea. We'll see if it actually gets made.



Is there a Great Indian Novelist in your opinion?

Back in the day there was RK Narayan. Rohinton Mistry is a fine novelist. I claim Jhumpa [Lahiri], to some extent, to being a Great Indian Novelist. Akhil Sharma is a terrific writer... he only has his second book coming out this spring. Do we count Rushdie as Indian? I stand by my feeling that *Midnight's Children* is a fantastic novel and had that kind of ambition to be a Great Indian Novel.

At your panel, you spoke very fondly of David Foster Wallace and how both of you were bound by ambition and competitiveness. What did you define as success in your 20s? How has that changed?

I always wanted it all. I wanted a large audience. I wanted to matter to the cultural fabric. I also wanted critical respect. Actually, it's a really good question because Dave—David—was more concerned with critical reception and spent much of his life one way or another working in universities.

Success for me is... successfully serving readers. I believe I have responsibilities to the reader. In the world of human beings, if you're not a reader I don't know you. I don't care about you.

I read in your *Paris Review* interview that the writer Hugh Nissenson's advice for your first novel was to cut it in half and

add a lot of sex. Do you think about sex very consciously in your books?

To have drama you need conflict. To have conflict people have to want things. And sexually wanting is a strong motivation, so it's natural to make use of that. It's such a fundamental part of life for most people... maybe I'm flattering myself but I feel like I've figured out ways to write about sex that don't make you run screaming from the room.

Tell me more about writing when you're half asleep.

My mind starts going too rapidly if I start doing email in the morning or reading a book. Then I'm too awake. There's that Tom Waits song: 'Got to get behind the mule in the morning and plow'. It's great to get up in the morning and, before you know what you're doing, to get behind the mule.

Are you very disciplined when you're working on a novel?

I wake up every morning at six. I'm an undisciplined person fundamentally but once you get into a state of obsession—which is what working on a novel is—then the only hours that count are those five-six hours you're writing.

An exciting question for *Vogue*: You wrote campus fashion previews for your college paper?

I was very unhappy in college and that was one of the ways in which I expressed it. I was giving fashion tips to Swarthmore students because the school was so full of itself it didn't believe in such worldly things as fashion. It was satirical [*laughs*].

You mentioned the effect of sitcoms on writers of your generation. What about TV now?

I'm going through the great American TV shows now—*Breaking Bad*, *Homeland*, *Nurse Jackie*... they're the social novels of our times, really well done. If Dickens were working now... that's the level of talent making these shows.

If there's one book of yours you could go back and rewrite...

The first one. Somebody dies at the end of it who shouldn't die. ■