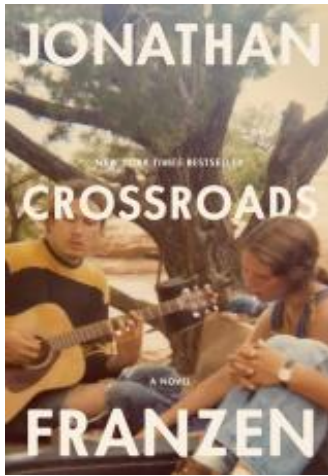


Crossroads

by Jonathan Franzen



About the Book

Jonathan Franzen's gift for wedding depth and vividness of character with breadth of social vision has never been more dazzlingly evident than in CROSSROADS.

It's December 23, 1971, and heavy weather is forecast for Chicago. Russ Hildebrandt, the associate pastor of a liberal suburban church, is on the brink of breaking free of a marriage he finds joyless --- unless his wife, Marion, who has her own secret life, beats him to it. Their eldest child, Clem, is coming home from college on fire with moral absolutism, having taken an action that will shatter his father. Clem's sister, Becky, long the social queen of her high-school class, has sharply veered into the counterculture, while their brilliant younger brother Perry, who's been selling drugs to seventh graders, has resolved to be a better person. Each of the Hildebrandts seeks a freedom that each of the others threatens to complicate.

Jonathan Franzen's novels are celebrated for their unforgettably vivid characters and for their keen-eyed take on contemporary America. Now, in CROSSROADS, Franzen ventures back into the past and explores the history of two generations. With characteristic humor and complexity, and with even greater warmth, he conjures a world that resonates powerfully with our own.

A tour de force of interwoven perspectives and sustained suspense, its action largely unfolding on a single winter day, CROSSROADS is the story of a Midwestern family at a pivotal moment of moral crisis. Jonathan Franzen's gift for melding the small picture and the big picture has never been more dazzlingly evident.

Discussion Guide

1. The Hildebrandts share a complicated bond of compassion and conflict, honesty and infidelity. Consider their family dynamic. In what ways are the Hildebrandts good toward one another? In what ways are they deceitful or manipulative?

If you had to identify a crucial hitch --- or "barrier" (p. 26), as Rick Ambrose might call it --- that hinders their relationship, what would it be?

2. When we first meet Russ Hildebrandt, he's a pastor "starved in spirit" (p. 17) who's desperate for a change in his professional, personal and spiritual life. Discuss Russ' outlook at the beginning of CROSSROADS. Do you think he sees himself as a martyr of forces beyond his control or a victim of his own misdeeds? What are Russ' solutions for turning his life around? How do you view his plight?

3. Crossroads is a powerful force in the New Prospect community, inspiring both devotion and skepticism. For some, the youth group is a Christian sanctuary of "honesty, confrontation, and unconditional love" (p. 32). Yet even Rick Ambrose worries that Crossroads is "just an intense kind of psychological experiment [that] could just as easily end up hurting people as liberating them" (p. 74). Discuss the youth group's virtues as well as its dangers. How do you feel about its methods? When does it foster fellowship among its followers? When does it resemble a cruel social game to be played --- and if it is a game, who do you think is winning?

4. Perry's resolution at the beginning of the novel is clear: he's determined "to be good" (p. 22). Soon, however, fissures appear in his plan. Discuss Perry's struggle with what it means to be good. What setbacks does he endure --- and burdens must he carry --- on his quest for goodness?

5. On Becky's first night at Crossroads, she experiences a breakthrough. "I want to be liked," she admits during a group exercise, before realizing that her admission "might have been the most honest words she'd ever uttered" (p. 70). Discuss Becky's moment of clarity. What does it reveal to her? If you had to imagine an equally honest disclosure about each of the Hildebrandts --- Russ, Marion, Clem, Perry, even Judson --- what would it be?

6. Clem knows that giving up his student deferment to serve in Vietnam is a "steep price to pay" (p. 99) for moral righteousness, yet he feels compelled to act. What events and arguments convince Clem to take action? What point is he trying to make with his decision, and whom does he end up hurting along the way?

7. During her therapy session with Dr. Sophie Serafimides, Marion reveals her ability to "dissociate" (p. 144) --- to "flip the switch" (p. 145) on her personality and become someone else. Consider Marion's history, the many lives she lived out west, and the person she's become. When has this ability helped her cope with unimaginable trauma? When has it placed her in great jeopardy? Why do you think Marion chooses to disclose some elements of her past to Dr. Serafimides while keeping other key details a secret?

8. There's always another side of the story to the major events of CROSSROADS. Case in point: "Russ's humiliation" (p. 219) and the truth surrounding his ouster from the youth group. Retrace your reaction to Russ' humiliation as each new detail emerges, from your first glimpse at the disastrous fellowship meeting to the real reason why Russ switched places with Ambrose at Kitsillie and Ambrose's own handling of the confrontation. What was your response when you first learned of Russ' ouster? In what ways did your opinion change as new details came to light?

9. Upon returning from his tense and troubled week on the mesa at Kitsillie, Russ' eyes are opened to Ambrose's true intentions: "Only now could he see that he and his young associate had been engaged, from the beginning, in a competition of which only one of them had been aware" (p. 225). Dive into Russ' knotty relationship with Rick Ambrose. How are the two alike? How are they irreconcilably different? How might Ambrose describe his falling-out

with Russ and Russ's own fall from grace at First Reformed?

10. Russ longs to be with Frances Cottrell, yet it isn't until he heatedly expresses his emotions "like Rick Ambrose in confrontation mode" that Frances looks at him "with a new kind of interest" (p. 394). Discuss the affair that Russ and Frances share. What role does honesty play in their illicit relationship? What role does fantasy play? What type of person does Frances wish Russ to be? What type of person does Russ need Frances to be?

11. Consider the act of prayer in *CROSSROADS*. Who turns to prayer in the novel, and why? Who appears resistant to prayer? What do you make of the disparity?

12. Russ's triumphant return to Arizona as a Crossroads leader is complicated by the presence of Clyde Jackson. At first, Clyde's belligerence appears unjustified. Soon, however, we're shown the motivation for his anger. Discuss Clyde's confrontation with the youth group. What does it reveal about "the cultural and economic gulf between New Prospect and Kitsillie" (p. 463), the "imbalance of power" (p. 473) inherent to Crossroads' volunteer efforts at the Navajo reservation, and the blind spots in Russ's own religious point of view?

13. On their first Sunday together, a young Marion surprises Russ by saying that she doesn't believe in an eternal afterlife. "The only thing that matters," she says, "is the state of your soul while you're alive.... The present is where you find eternity...[and] I think there's eternity in every second we're alive" (p. 437). Discuss Marion's radical affirmations. What do they reveal about her faith and personal connection to God? What might they say about her forgiving Russ's infidelity so that they can "experience the joy of God together" (p. 531)?

14. In the wake of Perry's breakdown in Arizona, Russ and Marion make a startling demand of Becky: they need to borrow her college money and what remains of her bequest from Aunt Shirley to "pay reparations to the Navajos whose barn Perry had burned" (p. 554). Discuss this tense moment in the Hildebrandt household. Where do your sympathies lie? How does it affect Becky's relationship with her parents?

15. At the end of *CROSSROADS*, Clem returns to New Prospect and reunites with his sister, only to discover that Becky is now a "dominating force" (p. 580) within the family. Picture the Hildebrandts 10 years from this moment. How might Becky's ascension reshape the future of the family?

Author Bio

Jonathan Franzen is the author of six novels, including *THE CORRECTIONS*, *FREEDOM* and *PURITY*, and five works of nonfiction, most recently *FARTHER AWAY* and *THE END OF THE END OF THE EARTH*, all published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. He lives in Santa Cruz, California.

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