

THE DISPUTE BETWEEN JONATHAN FRANZEN AND OPRAH WINFREY

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Abstract

Following the publication of Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* in September 2001, the novel was selected by Oprah's Book Club. Afterwards, Franzen commented negatively on the club's previous selections, upon which the invitation was withdrawn. The objective of this paper is to investigate the reasons behind Franzen's negative response, the preceding media fall-out and the effects of the Winfrey – Franzen dispute.

In an attempt "to get the whole country reading again," Oprah Winfrey established Oprah's Book Club (hereafter OBC) in 1996 and proved that a great number of people were prepared to interact with literary texts which would then serve as the basis for a guided discussion in a book club. When she decided to use the medium of television in order to expose her relatively low-educated audience to high literature, Winfrey defied the typical highbrow-lowbrow divide and proved that it was not just accessible to the highly educated elite but also to the uncultured and the marginalized and that, therefore, culture was no longer "something created by the few for the few" (Levine 1988:252). On her show, Winfrey stressed that "literature is powerful", that "it has the ability to change people, to change people's thoughts" and that "books expand your vision of yourself and your world" (qtd. in Farr 2005:52). In this way, every month for the next six years, Winfrey recommended a book for the audience to read and invited them to send a written response in order to be selected to attend the OBC show i.e. dinner with the author at which that particular book would be discussed. She always gave clear instructions as to how the books should be read i.e. not in terms of their literary value but as material providing help and advice in challenging everyday-life situations. Reading as promoted by OBC thus focuses on identification with events and characters, followed by a discussion about these which Farr calls the 'oprafication of books' (*ibid.*) Consequently, in OBC, books were regarded as a self-help device and a means to achieve an internal change of self rather than being evaluated in accordance to the standards of literary criticism, which is the main reason why the academia held a negative view towards the club throughout its existence in the original form. In her book *Reading with Oprah: The Book Club That Changed America*, Rooney suggests that it is possible that such reading

could result in the misinterpretation of a novel (Rooney 2005), which could be one of the reasons why Jonathan Franzen opposed his appearance on the show.

Since the majority of Winfrey's audiences have always been women, most of the recommended books were intended for female readers. Winfrey realised that it was mostly women who were victims of discrimination, harassment and violence and selected books which talked about these realities. In this manner she, for example, recommended *The Book Of Ruth* by Jane Hamilton, in which the protagonist is a mentally challenged but kind-hearted Ruth, who survives mental abuse by her mother and physical abuse by her husband, or *White Oleander* by Janet Fitch where the main character is faced with a mother who refuses to take care of her own daughter. These two novels are typical selections of the OBC as far as content is concerned.

On September 24, 2001 Winfrey announced on her show that the next book of the month was going to be Jonathan Franzen's new novel, *The Corrections*. If we consider some of OBC's previous selections and the introduction to the novel, which is still found on OBC's website it is clear that the novel was chosen because it talks about a modern dysfunctional all-American family. The Lambert family, who live in the Midwest are father Alfred, mother Enid and their children Gary, Chipper and Denise who have all moved to the East coast. At first glance this family is like any other, but readers follow its metamorphosis from the 1960s to the end of the 1990s as this suburban nuclear family gradually disintegrates, which is evident in the father's Parkinson disease and the children who try hard to socially, psychologically and geographically detach from their Midwestern roots. The novel is an account of cultural history through the configuration of social class identity (Green 2005: 105). At its most basic level, *The Corrections* is a novel comprised of six related novellas with a prologue and an epilogue and incorporates everything that is modern-day America – from politics, literary criticism as an undergraduate subject at university to clinical depression, from the ambivalent attitude to death penalty to third world exploitation, from illegal and legal drugs to pressure that comes from conforming to a particular sexual identity, from the pointless want of material goods and terrible pain that could only be caused by members of immediate family. While the first and the fourth chapter deal with the stories of Alfred and Enid, the last chapter entitled "The Corrections" brings all the family together and solves the family conflict described in all of the previous chapters. "The Corrections" shows that the future of the Lambert family is optimistic. *The Corrections* is, therefore, a portrayal of the American modern-day society and deals with family relationships and the effects these have on the family members' lives. It is, for this reason, not at all surprising that the novel made the OBC's list as it would provide a great basis material for a discussion over dinner where Franzen's Midwestern roots would surely feature at the core of the discussion as, before Winfrey withdrew the invitation, the author and the OBC film crew went to St. Louis, a suburb in Missouri where Franzen grew up to film a short introduction to the show. The latter was later described in Franzen's essay "Meet Me in St. Louis" (Franzen 2002).

Jonathan Franzen was born on August 17, 1959 in Chicago, Illinois but grew up in St. Louis, a suburb in the state of Missouri. He was educated at Swarthmore College and received a Fulbright Scholarship in the early 1980s to study at a Berlin university. To date, *The Corrections* is his most successful novel for which he was awarded the 2001 National Book Award for Fiction and the 2002 James Tait Black Memorial Prize

for fiction. He is also the author of *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988), *Strong Motion* (1992), *How to Be Alone* (2002) and *The Discomfort Zone* (2006).

In the essay entitled “Perchance to Dream: In the Age of Images, a Reason to Write Novels” published in the *Harper’s* magazine in April 1996, Franzen expressed concerns about the fact that at this day of age Americans know more Hollywood stars than writers as he wrote: “Exactly how much less novels now matter to the American mainstream than they did when *Catch-22* was published is anybody’s guess. Certainly, there are a few American milieus today in which having read the latest work of Joyce Carol Oates or Richard Ford is more valuable, as social currency, than having caught the latest John Travolta movie or knowing how to navigate the web” (Franzen 1996: 38). In that same year the American talk show host Oprah Winfrey started her Oprah’s Book Club hoping to give a novel a more meaningful spot in the American mainstream culture. Hence, at that time both Franzen and Winfrey were concerned about the Americans’ lack of interest in literature. From Franzen’s article and the fact that Joyce Carol Oates’s novel *We Were the Mulvaney*s even made the OBC book of the month it could be expected that Franzen’s attitude towards OBC selecting his novel would be positive, which at the beginning it was, as he told the *People* magazine that after Winfrey called him to tell him how much she had loved the book and invited him to the show he immediately called his girlfriend in California because he was so excited (Schidehette 2001: 83). Considering that *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motions* published before *The Corrections*, sold only around 50 000 copies and that Winfrey’s recommendation would in all probability boost the book sales, his excitement was justified. Nevertheless, only weeks after agreeing to appear on the show, Franzen, in the middle of a sixteen-city book tour, began to make rather dubious remarks pertaining to his OBC status telling David Weich who conducted the interview with Franzen on October 4, 2001 in a bookshop in Oregon, “The problem in this case is some of Oprah’s picks. She’s picked some good books, but she’s picked enough schmaltzy, one-dimensional ones that I cringe, myself...” (qtd. in Rooney 2005: 39). Later, in an interview with Jeff Baker for *Portland Oregon*, Franzen said that not only the OBC logo made him feel uncomfortable, but that “[the novel] does as much for [Winfrey] as it does for us” and when the journalist asked him to explain further he said, “Well, it was already on the best-seller list and the reviews were pretty much all in. What this means for us is that she’s bumped the sales up to another level and gotten the book into Wal-Mart and Costco and places like that. It means a lot more money for me and my publisher” (40). Indeed, according to *The New York Times*, Winfrey’s selection encouraged Franzen’s publisher Farrar, Straus and Giroux, to print an additional 500 000 copies, which brought the author \$1.5 million (41).

However, Franzen’s arguably most regrettable statement was yet to come. After having been prompted to explain what his selection means, in turn, for Winfrey, he replied only that, “It gets that book and that kind of book into the hands of people who might like it” (*ibid.*). The journalist then asked him what he meant by “that kind of book” and in doing so Franzen stated that his selection for OBC “heightens this sense of split I feel. I feel like I’m solidly in the high-art literary tradition, but I like to read entertaining books and this maybe helps bridge that gap, but it also heightens these feelings of being misunderstood” (*ibid.*). In doing so, Franzen put a gap between him as representative of highbrow culture and Winfrey as middlebrow. In another interview he expressed

concerns about not having enough male readers as he said, “It has been a source of pain that there are interesting male novelists out there – and I’ll just leave myself out of the statement for the moment – who don’t find an audience because they don’t find a female audience because it is – I mean, so much of reading is sustained in this country, I think, by the fact that women read, while men are off golfing or watching football on TV or, you know, playing with their flight simulator or whatever” (42) from which it is clear that Franzen was looking for a male audience and that he might have thought that being an Oprah’s pick would dissuade the male readers from picking up his novel, which is clearly visible from his statement, “Now I’m actually at the point with this book where I worry – I’m sorry that it’s – I had some hope of actually reaching a male audience and I’ve heard more than one reader in signing lines now in bookstores say, ‘You know if I hadn’t heard you, I would’ve been put off by the fact that it is an Oprah pick. I figure those books are for women, and I never touch them.’ Those are male reader speakers. So I’m a little confused by the whole thing right now” (43). Considering the fact that a lot of the books that Winfrey had recommended were indeed intended for female readers as demonstrated above, Franzen’s fears may have been justified. Not only did Franzen make negative comments about the kind of books OBC selected, but he also criticised the production of Winfrey’s show saying, “I’ve done the sort of bogus thing where they follow you around with a camera and you try to look natural. And I’ve done a two-hour interview, which will be boiled down to three minutes or so. But, no, the show with – which I’ve never seen until they sent me a tape – the little coffee klatch and then the full audience stuff that has not happened. Won’t happen till November” (44), thereby criticising not only the show but also its audience. For *Philadelphia Inquirer* he said that the book would be difficult for Oprah’s Show viewers and thus implied that typical viewers of Winfrey’s show were less intelligent (Schindehette 2001: 84). Franzen was also very critical of the OBC logo which was to appear on the cover of the novel as he said that he was an independent writer and saw the book as his creation and did not want a logo of corporate ownership on it, especially because it was not just a sticker but part of the cover and, therefore, impossible to take off. Indeed, Franzen had always been critical of the consumer society and his view on corporate ownership was the result of this as expressed in his essay collection *How To Be Alone* (Franzen 2002).

As a result of Franzen’s continuing negative comments about OBC, on 22 October 2001 *Publishers Weekly* published Winfrey’s statement withdrawing Franzen’s invitation to the OBC show (Rooney 2005: 46), however, she has never taken *The Corrections* off her recommended books list, which to this day remains on her website.

After Winfrey withdrew the invitation, the media turned the Winfrey – Franzen dispute into a tabloid-like scandal rather than understanding it as an opportunity for a discussion about the role of culture and literary authorities in the modern world and the relationship between the high- middle- and lowbrow culture. Critics were either on the side of Franzen or Winfrey avoiding any argumentative criticism. *Washington Post* journalist Jonathan Yardley, for example, expressed his deep indignation for Franzen and writers who are bothered by the fact that the wrong people might read their books (Yardley 2001). A *Chicago Tribune* columnist Mary Schmich focused on Franzen’s appearance which, in her opinion, corresponds to that of a highly educated individual, “Maybe you’ve even run across Franzen’s official photo during his burst of fame. He’s a

handsome guy. He looks as if he might show up in one of those high-art fashion ads that wants you to believe that the brooding, cleft-chinned model is a Harvard grad student because who else would wear such earnest glasses and not have time to shave?" (qtd. in Rooney 2005: 53). These responses from the media even deepened the high-, middle- and lowbrow divide. Only a few critics managed to see the dispute as the consequence of the changing relationship between the three cultural categories, and the fact that middlebrow culture has penetrated highbrow culture, making the later today only available in small, highly specialized journals, thereby pushing it to the fringe of the academic world (Levine 1990). The editor of the *Harper's* magazine Lewis Lapham wrote that Franzen was too much like a literary genius of the 1920s who in today's world do not have the same effect on people as they did in the past and that more financial capital does not necessarily result in less cultural capital¹ anymore (Kirkpatrick 2001).

After the media created such a scandal, Franzen apologised on October 23, 2001, blaming the media for deepening the high-, middle- and lowbrow divide and said that he continues "to be grateful to Oprah for her love of *The Corrections*" (qtd. in Rooney 2005: 47). In a telephone interview that he gave Kirkpatrick for *The New York Times* Franzen said that he failed to realise that "you can't talk to reporters you don't know the same way you talk to family and friends – you really only learn by burning your hand on the stove" (*ibid.*). After the dispute he had obviously also changed his mind about what kind of readers he would like to have as he said that he did not have any preconceptions about what kind of reader made a good reader for his work and that anybody who enjoyed the book was a friend of his. He also began defending Winfrey's contributions to the American literary community in the same fashion he had previously employed against OBC. His wish to heal the cultural rift was perhaps most noticeable after he had won the National Book Award as he thanked Oprah Winfrey "for her enthusiasm and advocacy" (Rooney 2005: 50).

If Franzen responded to all the media frenzy again and again, Winfrey refused to comment, missing an opportunity for a public debate on cultural elitism and authority. Although she never specifically said that the dispute with Franzen was to blame, she announced the end of OBC in April 2002 saying that it had become continuously more difficult to find books she wished to recommend:

I just want to say that this is the end of the book club as we know it. Well, yes, yes, every month for the past six years I have selected a novel and this is my last regular selection. From now on when I come across something I feel absolutely compelled to share, I will do that, but it will not be every month. The truth is, it has just become harder and harder for me to find books on a monthly basis that I really am passionate about, and I refuse – because you all have noticed that first it's a month, then it's five weeks, then it's like six weeks, then seven weeks – and so I refuse to pick a book I have not personally read. I have to read a lot of books to get something that I really passionately love, so I don't know when the next book will be (qtd. in Rooney 2005: 163).

¹ The phrase 'cultural capital' was first used by Pierre Bourdieu in his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*.

One possible explanation that Rooney gives in her study of the club is that Winfrey had been continuously attacked by the academia when all she wanted was “to be loved and to be considered smart” (171) or that, as *The Economist* once observed, “The suspicion is that, like many who have successfully clambered to wealth and influence, Ms. Winfrey now craves intellectual respectability. After all, when you have \$500 million to your name, you can afford a little vanity” (1998: 76). This statement may prove true if we consider that Winfrey herself once said, “Once Maya Angelou had a party. It was a party for Tony [Morrison] after she received the Nobel Prize, and I went to it. I was surrounded by authors, and I felt like I was 11 years old. I felt like I could not even speak. At one point, somebody said, ‘Oh, I’d like some more coffee,’ and I got up to get it. Maya said, ‘Sit down,’ and I went ‘No, I’ll get it. It’d be a treat’” (qtd. in Rooney 2005: 172). Apart from her personal reasons, it is also possible that the show got cancelled because of low ratings and that the sales of books recommended by OBC and carrying the OBC logo were on the decrease selling 1.5 million copies in 1999 but only 700,000 in 2001 (Rooney 2005: 169).

After the show was cancelled there was varied media reaction. *Washington Post*, for example, published an advertisement, “THANK YOU; OPRAH, for your unique and magnificent work over the past six years on behalf of books, authors and readers everywhere” and finished it by saying, “Yes indeed, thank you, Oprah, for what you’ve done – in particular, for enlarging the readership for African-American writers – but that wasn’t exactly a Great Books discussion you were conducting, and it was about a mile short of ‘unique and magnificent’” (Yardley 2002). *L.A. Times* published an even more negative article entitled “Good Riddance to Oprah’s Book Club, and Her Literary Amateurism” (Vincent 2002).

The New York Times’ reaction was more positive as it admitted that some of OBC’s selections were prime literature and that “the list has included some truly distinctive writers, like Ms Morrison, Bernhard Schlink, and, notoriously, Jonathan Franzen” (“Oprah Demures” 2002).

OBC was revived on July 18 when Winfrey recommended the next title saying it would be John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*, which resulted in sales sky-rocketing in just twenty-four hours after the announcement and the book finishing in second place just under *Harry Potter* (Rooney 2005: 187). Winfrey decided to return to the classics as they are the safest choice while being aware of possible attacks on the way OBC approached them as she said, “[Steinbeck] is not like Shakespeare, or even Faulkner; it is reader-friendly. I want to lead people down this path without them thinking they’re back in school. When you read something that’s good and juicy and it’s called literature, then you’re not closed to the idea of it. ... There are some who would argue that [*East of Eden*] is not really a ‘classic’... and I realized that that was a conversation that would come up over and over again...I just want to read great books without it becoming controversial” (qtd. in Rooney 2005: 192).

CONCLUSION

By establishing OBC, Winfrey exposed millions of people, who would otherwise not have picked up a book, to reading. As her audiences are mostly women and because

her show deals with addressing everyday personal problems, she typically selected books that would provide a good basis for a discussion about these. Despite the fact that most of her selections were novels of high literary value, if we trust *The New York Times Book Review* as a distinguished arbiter of literary taste, her attitude to presenting and evaluating these novels was most often middlebrow in that it focused on the plot and identification with characters. As this could result in misinterpretation of a novel, it could well be one of the reasons behind Franzen's negative attitude towards Winfrey's invitation to her show as he publicly expressed fears of being misunderstood. Furthermore, Franzen follows the traditional discourse which sees books as a serious, classic, permanent and intellectual property and not as consumer goods, which is the case with OBC as the club traditionally puts its logo on the cover of the monthly selections. The thought of having an OBC logo printed on the covers of his book, his intellectual property, made Franzen, who has always been a severe critic of consumerism (as is seen from his essays and *The Corrections*), cringe, as the traditional discourse that he is part of, sees books as dignified objects. However, OBC turned what used to be considered sacred, and which the traditional discourse still regards as such, more accessible by promoting books as objects offering possibility for reflection, contemplation and, above all, pleasure.

Although OBC followed the highbrow idea that stresses the inherent value of culture as the legitimate pointer of social privilege and thus continues the logic of cultural differences, through promising access to culture to audiences that were not exposed to it when growing up, it threatened the traditional exclusivity of culture and knowledge, which had before only been accessible to members of the upper class. Considering that Franzen wrote for *Harper's* magazine, which is one of the publications for the highly-educated elite and known for its pure and rich writing style which is based on hierarchy and elimination, his reaction to Winfrey's invitation shows that he remains close to the ideology of highbrow culture of which he feels he is part.

Although divisions between highbrow and middlebrow culture/literature are no longer as rigid as they once were and middlebrow culture has penetrated highbrow culture, making the latter today only available in small, highly specialized journals, thereby pushing it to the fringe of the academic world because postmodernism brought about the end of elitist ideas which emphasised high quality, beauty, truth and authenticity by bringing democratic values which appreciate multiculturalism, relevance and equality (Levine 1990), judging from his first reactions Franzen still feels that highbrow literature should also be interpreted in highbrow manner, which is not something OBC was practising.

Franzen was worried that because of the way books were read and interpreted in OBC, *The Corrections* would be misunderstood, which is legitimate if we take into consideration the standard way in which OBC approaches book analysis. Moreover, taking into consideration that Franzen wrote about his mixed feelings about appearing in Oprah's Show in *New Yorker* even before the dispute (Franzen 2000) and even though he later apologized for all the negative statements he uttered saying that he was only a writer who was not used to giving interviews and who naively believed that media did not manipulate, shows that he must have believed in all that he had said and that he was not just "carried away", as he later said in his apology. Franzen is therefore not just a literary snob, which is how the media often portrayed him because he had always been

critical towards the consumer society and was, therefore, labelled as an elitist too soon. He is an independent writer, who refuses to be part of a large corporation like that of Oprah Winfrey. The scandal was to a large extent brought about by the media and Franzen later expressed regret about the dispute only deepening the divide between highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow culture, which again proves that he is not an elitist, as in that case, he would have wanted the divide to get bigger. However, it is true that Franzen was never willing to accept the fact that cultural and economic capital are becoming indistinguishable and that cultural definitions are not as rigid as they used to be.

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