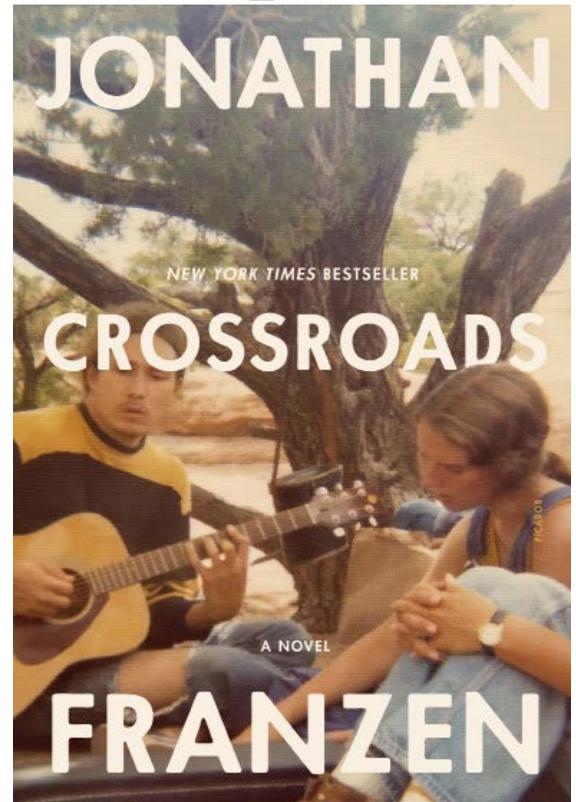


FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

Reading Group Gold

Crossroads

by Jonathan Franzen



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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.

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. With characteristic humor and complexity, Jonathan Franzen conjures a world that resonates powerfully with our own.

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QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

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” (page 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” (page 17) who’s desperate for a change in his professional, personal, and spiritual life. Discuss Russ’s 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’s 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” (page 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” (page 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” (page 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” (page 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” (page 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” (page 144)—to “flip the switch” (page 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” (page 219) and the truth surrounding his ouster from the youth group. Retrace your reaction to Russ’s humiliation as each new detail emerges, from your first glimpse at the disastrous

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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's 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's 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" (page 225). Dive into Russ's 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" (page 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" (page 463), the "imbalance of power" (page 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" (page 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" (page 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" (page 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" (page 580) within the family. Picture the Hildebrandts ten years from this moment. How might Becky's ascension reshape the future of the family?

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ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. At the heart of the Crossroads youth group is Rick Ambrose and his exercises in radical honesty. For your next book club gathering, choose one of Ambrose's exercises to conduct with your group. Examples include the sharing of a personal struggle exercise found on page 74, or the admire/barrier confessional found on page 26. Commit to the process as fully and honestly as you can—after all, you don't want to play it safe, do you? What do you notice about the exercise? How does it make you feel? How does it make your partner feel?
2. Early on in the novel, Russ mockingly reveals Crossroads' musical origin story: "Do you know why the group is named Crossroads? It's because Rick Ambrose thought kids could relate to the name of a rock song" (page 11). The song in question is "Crossroads" by the English rock group Cream, which is a cover of "Cross Road Blues" by Robert Johnson. For your next book club gathering, host a listening party where you play Johnson's 1936 recording followed by Cream's cover, as well as any other covers you turn up (there are many). What do you hear in the original? What do you hear—and what *don't* you hear—in the many covers it inspired? In what ways do these musical differences harmonize with the racial, cultural, and socioeconomic disparities explored in *Crossroads*?
3. Acts of charity occur throughout *Crossroads*, opening the eyes of characters to lived experiences beyond their own. For your next book club gathering, arrange a day of volunteering with a community organization outside of your immediate area. Compare your experience with the different experiences featured in the novel.
4. The Hildebrandt family is composed of six distinct personalities that come together just as often as they conflict. After finishing *Crossroads*, conduct a role-playing exercise, in which two book club members take on different Hildebrandt personalities and work through an issue together. The issue at hand could be something from the novel—Clem's decision to forfeit his student deferment, Becky's surprise inheritance from Aunt Shirley—or it could be a new scenario invented by your group. The goal is to inhabit your assigned character, using all that you learned about them to see the world through their eyes. Where do you stand before the exercise begins? Where do you stand once the exercise concludes? For added spontaneity, randomize your Hildebrandt personality pairings by drawing names out of a hat, Crossroads-style.

Discussion guide by Matthew Thompson