

Jonathan Franzen's lack of black friends is unsettling but it's hardly unusual in white America

By Lindy West

The novelist may be embarrassed that he socialises primarily with white people, but he hasn't stopped to ask why



'In this interview, Jonathan Franzen speaks with more warmth and familiarity about birds than he does about black people.' Photograph: Morgan Rachel Levy for The Guardian

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"This is an embarrassing confession," novelist Jonathan Franzen admits, "[but] I don't have very many black friends."

The line comes at the beginning of a lengthy interview on Slate (to promote the paperback release of Franzen's latest novel, *Purity*), when reporter Isaac Chotiner inquires if – in light of America's "weird year" – Franzen would ever consider writing a book about race. Right off the bat, "weird" seems a jarringly detached descriptor for a year of unrelenting xenophobia, white nationalism and state-sanctioned summary execution; one wonders if a person with more than "not very many" black friends might have remarked upon it.

But Franzen charges on: "I have never been in love with a black woman. I feel like if I had, I might dare ... I write about characters, and I have to love the character to write

about the character. If you have not had direct first-hand experience of loving a category of person – a person of a different race, a profoundly religious person, things that are real stark differences between people – I think it is very hard to dare, or necessarily even want, to write fully from the inside of a person.”

There’s little fault in his underlying logic. In fact, he articulates quite beautifully a truth that more people of privilege need to internalise: “I feel it’s really dangerous, if you are a liberal white American, to presume that your good intentions are enough to embark on a work of imagination about black America.”

Yes, absolutely. White people should stay in our lane. Jonathan Franzen should not write books about the black experience in America. The boundary he senses there is a healthy one. Such an endeavour would not be good for black people, Jonathan Franzen, experiences, America or books. (The profoundly colonial notion that “loving” a black woman can magically imbue a white man with the insight to “write fully from the inside” of her – that having sex with a person gives you ownership over their story – is evidence enough of that.)

But, writerly principles aside, human to human, I hope that Franzen and millions of other white people in this deeply segregated nation of the US take some time to interrogate the phrase: “This is an embarrassing confession, [but] I don’t have very many black friends.”

It’s a strikingly honest inversion of the cliché that white people usually reach for when asked pointed questions about race – “Some of my best friends are black!” – yet somehow more unsettling in its complacency. I don’t know these people, Franzen is telling us. These are not my people. I know enough to be embarrassed but I do not care enough to change.

Following the confession, Chotiner shepherds the conversation away from race and toward the meaning of the word “love”. But, wait. Why wouldn’t you ask “why?”

Why don’t you have very many black friends? Why doesn’t it bother you that you don’t have very many black friends? Why don’t you take steps to cultivate some friendships with black people? Why do we pretend like it’s perfectly reasonable for men to reach 56 years of age – some of those years spent in New York City – primarily socialising within their own race?

Friendship, integration, exposure, representation – these are engines of empathy. A 2011 study found that 75% of white Americans have no friends of other races at all.

A 2012 study found that white people perceive black people as more resistant to pain. A survey conducted by LinkedIn found that networking and referrals account for as much as 85% of new hires. Diversity and integration are not feelgood buzzwords. “I don’t have very many black friends” is a direct hindrance to black upward mobility, black safety and white perceptions of black humanity.

I dislike singling Franzen out, because it obscures the breadth of the issue. As the above study shows, self-segregation is business as usual in white America. It’s normal, and Franzen is more thoughtful than many white male writers of his generation about the politics of privilege. But there’s something about the blithe way he tosses out that line, the performative and ultimately gutless embarrassment, the shrug with which, later in the interview, he accedes to the public perception that he’s a “white guy writing about white-guy things” (“some people like it”). It’s particularly demoralising when compared with the tenderness with which he talks about bird conservation, his evening tennis routine and watching the NFL on TV. In this interview, he speaks with more warmth and familiarity about birds than he does about black people.

To be clear, I highly doubt that “less important than birds” is Franzen’s genuine, intellectual take on systemic racism and Black Lives Matter, but the ability to slide so deep into one’s bubble, because one lives next to a magnificent conservation area above the Pacific, and one has observed 27 of the 29 unique bird species of Jamaica, is precisely the brand of impenetrable whiteness for which Franzen and his contemporaries are teased.

The fight for diversity and inclusion deserves at least as much vigour as a hobby.