

God Bless You, Mr. Franzen

Kurt Vonnegut [Letters, July], writing in response to Jonathan Franzen's April Folio on American novelists, "Perchance to Dream," claims that "Novelists are people who have discovered that they can dampen their neuroses by writing make-believe. We will keep on doing that no matter what, while offering loftier explanations." This makes Vonnegut look humble and lovable, but as a response to the stuff Franzen was talking about it is total horseshit. If Vonnegut's sound bite were the whole truth, nobody at all would read novels—who would want to devote hours of brain work to something somebody had written just to dampen his own neuroses?

Good art is a kind of magic. It does magical things for both artist and audience. We can have long polysyllabic arguments about how to describe the way this magic works, but the plain fact is that good art is magical and precious and cool. It's hard to try and make good art, and it seems to me wholly reasonable that good artists should be concerned with their work's cultural reception. I thought it was brave of Franzen to offer not only "lofty explanations" but honest and intimate descriptions of how it feels to try and make good, serious art in a culture that doesn't seem to value it very much. And I was disappointed that the *Harper's* Letters editor chose to run only sneery, disparaging letters about the essay. I've spoken with way too many readers and writers who admired Franzen's piece to believe disparaging letters were all *Harper's* got. I suppose one reason it was brave of Franzen to publish his essay is that it made it easy for other writers to look humble and adorable at his expense.

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