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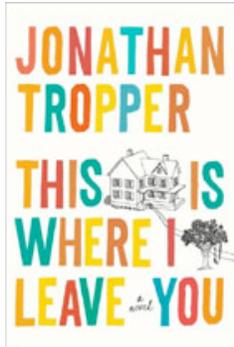
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## Review



### THIS IS WHERE I LEAVE YOU

**Jonathan Tropper**

Dutton Adult

Fiction

ISBN: 9780525951278

Enough with the incessant Nick Hornby and Tom Perrotta comparisons made by members of the media (including this sheepish reviewer, I'm afraid). Jonathan Tropper is his own writer --- and his books deserve an honor and distinction all their own. His special blend of wry humor, pitch-perfect dialogue and on-the-mark pacing make for a wickedly amusing read that encourages, if not induces, cackling (literally) on the subway, at the café, or in that cozy armchair in the den. (Hypothetically speaking, of course. Ahem.)

What makes Tropper's books so refreshing is that they tend to flow naturally --- just as they would, say, at your annual family reunion where Aunt Margie gets sauced, Grandpa George takes out his false teeth and makes lewd remarks to Grandma Susie under his breath, and the rest of the relatives try not to notice Cousin Jane's lack of underwear underneath her less-than-mini skirt. There aren't any heavy-handed monologues that drone on for pages on end. The characters don't take themselves too seriously (except for when they do). And never does Tropper drop in from his lofty authorial chair with the intent to manipulate his readers. Like a writer who's confident in his craft (and with his talents), he lets his characters speak for themselves while they bumble through their deteriorating --- but always entertaining --- lives.

In his latest crackup, THIS IS WHERE I LEAVE YOU, Tropper once again makes bedfellows out of human tragedy and humor. The story that unfolds takes place over seven days --- the time it takes for the Foxman family to sit shiva for their dearly departed (atheist, mind you) father/husband. Normally, devout Jews endure this period of formal mourning by following a few strict rules. They cover up mirrors to prevent vanity. They don't bathe, work, go out, or indulge in pleasurable activities. They sit on low stools and gratefully accept the condolences of visiting relatives, colleagues and friends. They grieve. The Foxman siblings want nothing to do with these antics. Instead, they drink, smoke pot in the synagogue, have sex, have sex with someone who isn't a partner, get into fistfights, trash a Maserati with a crowbar, and reconnect with old friends, family and flings (in more ways than one and in many a surprising combination!). It's the first time they've been together under one roof in years --- and in true Foxman fashion, it's an all-out free-for-all.

Judd, the novel's sardonic narrator, is the epitome of a cuckolded husband. He walked in on Jen, his "Ex-wife elect," doing the nasty with his boss (just one of a 14-month-long-line of boss-related dalliances) and has been bouncing between irate, vengeful and

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self-deprecating ever since. Phillip, his coddled younger brother (and the family screw-up), is "engaged to be engaged" to his blonde, buff, but significantly older Life Coach. Paul, Judd's older brother, is married to the girl Judd lost his virginity to in high school, and still harbors feelings of resentment about it. And Wendy, the oldest who has two kids and a bombastic portfolio-manager-for-a-prestigious-hedge-fund husband, still holds a (sometimes physical) candle for Horry, her next-door neighbor and childhood sweetheart who got hit in the head with a bat and was never quite the same in the noggin. And the matriarch of the family? She's a "sixty-three-year-old best-selling author with a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and Pamela Anderson's breasts, who talks about f--king her late husband like she's discussing current events."

The thing is, despite the depressing circumstances, the novel is anything but maudlin. In fact, it's a bawdy, rollicking world to inhabit for the few days (or hours) it'll take you to read through it --- mostly thanks to Tropper's way with words. On shiva catering: "You could fill an airlift to Africa with all the food generated by one dead Jew." On entering into marriage at a young age: "We knew marriage could be difficult in the same way that we knew there were starving children in Africa." On unhappiness and blame: "People love to do that, to point to some single phenomenon, assign it all the blame, and wipe the slate clean, like when overeaters sue McDonald's for making them fat pigs. But the truth is always a lot fuzzier, hiding in soft focus in the periphery." Always ready with a wisecrack or a perfectly executed punchline, many of the weightier moments are palatable precisely because they're *not* forced or over-written, but, instead, infused with an extra dose of banality that's oddly...well...refreshing.

But THIS IS WHERE I LEAVE YOU is far from a witty fluff piece on familial dysfunction. Tropper's characters aren't entirely detached from themselves, nor are they flippant about life, death and everything in between. A few candid morsels ("Childhood feels so permanent, like it's the entire world, and then one day it's over and you're shoveling wet dirt onto your father's coffin, stunned at the impermanence of everything."); "Things happen. People get lost and love breaks."; "You have to look at what you have right in front of you, at what it could be, and stop measuring it against what you've lost. I know this to be wise and true, just as I know that pretty much no one can do it.") do just the trick to remind us what's at stake in their lives --- and in ours as well.

In the end, it's abundantly clear that the Foxmans --- like most families --- can't stand to spend too much time together. But buried deep beneath their petty annoyances, their spats and their betrayals, the truth is that they'd risk the world for each other in less than a moment's notice, no questions asked. There's a simple beauty in that. And therein lies the rub.

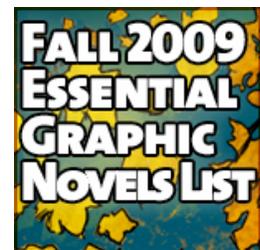
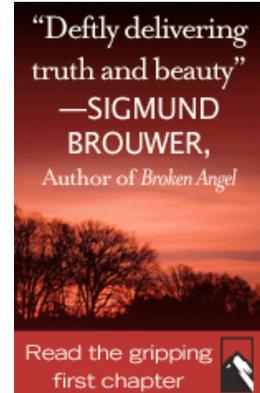
"You never know when it will be the last time you'll see your father, or kiss your wife, or play with your little brother, but there's always a last time. If you could remember every last time, you'd never stop grieving." 'Nuf said.

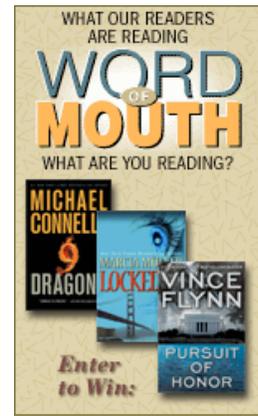
--- Reviewed by Alexis Burling

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