



Title: What's it all about, Judd?

Interviewee: Jonathan Tropper

Duration: 7 minutes, 13 seconds

About this transcript

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Introduction

Thomas Wolfe said you can't go home again. But most of us can and do, despite the snide comments and weird family dynamics.

In this episode of Bookpod, Jonathan Tropper talks about *This Is Where I Leave You*, a novel that considers what happens when you are forced to bare your most private humiliations to the people who think they know you best.



Presentation

The book is about a family that comes together to bury and mourn the death of their father. It's about a group of grown siblings who haven't really been together for a long time. Really, it's the story of one of them, Judd Foxman, who's recently found out that his wife has been carrying on a fourteen-month-long affair with his boss.

So, he's lost his marriage, he's lost his job and he's lost his house all at the same time, and just as his coming to terms with all that he has to bury his father. It's the story of a man who's been stripped of everything that he thought made him a man, [uh] trying to figure out where to go from here, and doing that in the worst possible environment, his childhood home, where he is suddenly surrounded by his three adult siblings and their families and his somewhat strange mother, and having to get along with these people he's never really gotten along with that well while he's going through his own personal crisis.



Judd is thirty-five years old. He's been married since he got out of college, and he's one of these guys who really set about trying to build a perfect life for himself.

He married a beautiful girl, got himself a job, bought the house in the suburbs, got away from his wacky family. He was on such a mission to do all that that I don't think he ever stopped to really consider if that's what was going to make him happy.

And now here he is kind of blindly going along with his perfect little life and his wife throws a major monkey wrench into it. And he's suddenly forced to ask himself, you know, "Do I try to save this or do I move on and find something that actually makes sense for me?" So, that's what he's going through.

His older brother, Paul, is the guy who stayed home when everybody else moved away. Paul went into the family business, which was sporting goods, and Paul is very resentful of his siblings for having flown the nest while



he stayed there to keep the family's legacy alive, to keep their father's legacy alive, and he feels very invaded by his siblings who have now come back home just for this week because he lives here and this is his life.

And he also has a lot of issues with Judd. He's never really forgiven Judd for an accident that he feels cost him his career as a potential major league pitcher. So, there's a lot of bitterness and anger between him and Judd.

Wendy, the oldest, the sister, is in a marriage that on the surface looks fine, but she's clearly somewhat unhappy, and yet she has a husband who's a financier and is always off doing deals. And she has kids and she doesn't seem to be terribly excited about having kids.

She seems both resolved to her life and bitter about it, and when she comes home, we see that she once had another love and circumstance took him away from her and she's never fully recovered from that.



Then we meet Philip, the youngest brother, who's ten years younger than everybody else, who's in his twenties and who's still pretty much a wild kid. And he's always getting drunk and sleeping around and getting arrested, and he's never really held a job. And, you know, he doesn't really know what to make of these siblings who were all pretty much grown up and out of the house when he was coming of age. So, you know, he's a source of a lot of entertainment, but also a lot of friction, and he's the guy who says what everyone else is thinking out loud, much to everyone's embarrassment.

And the mom, Hillary is, she's almost like an archetype. She's a child psychiatrist who's written a book that's pretty much the authoritative book on child-rearing. She's kind of the Dr. Spock of her generation, and yet her own kids are all just terribly screwed up. You know, that's the model of many psychiatrist moms, I suspect, and certainly a few that I've known and I really enjoy creating a character like that.



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Shiva is a Jewish mourning ritual. When somebody dies, what the Jewish family does is after the funeral, they sit together, usually in the house of the deceased, although not always. And they sit together for seven days to mark the passage of their father, husband, wife, son or daughter, brother or sister.

The word *shiva* means "seven," and you're meant to sit for seven days, but, you know, over time, some people have shortened the tradition.

The reason I chose it was actually not because I wanted to do any kind of examination of the *shiva* custom, but I was writing a story about this family, in particular about Judd Foxman, who was going through his own crisis, and I needed an excuse for this family to stay together for more than the day or so of the funeral.



[You know,] What would keep Judd Foxman, a guy whose marriage just fell apart, in his parent's home with these angry siblings for more than a few minutes? So, I made them all Jewish and I decided that they were going to observe *shiva*. It was really just a plot device that would keep this family together for seven days.

Judd tends to notice, especially among his parents' friends who come to visit them during the *shiva*, he seems very haunted by all the signs of aging, by all these people that he knew, you know, twenty years ago when he still lived there who have now gotten so old.

Judd was well on the way in his own life and now he's lost it all and he's going to have to start again, and he's suddenly very aware of the fact that he's 35 years old, which isn't terribly old, but he has nothing.

He has no wife, no job, no anything, and so he's very sensitive to how fast people get old and to the clock of his own life ticking on and he's very sensitive about the



fact that he doesn't have forever to put his life back together. He's just sort of terrified of the encroaching time limit when he has so little to show for his life.

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People are finding the book very funny and they're always shocked that I could write a book about the end of the marriage and the death of a patriarch and the family in mourning and make it funny.

But I don't write a book only to be funny. I don't consider this to be a comic novel. To me, if there isn't a larger truth to be told underneath it all, then it's not a novel worth writing.

And I have in the past started novels because I had a great premise and then I couldn't find the bigger story to tell or the more meaningful, the thematically relevant story to tell, and I've abandoned them.



So, while the novel, you know, certainly is funny, it's also sometimes very sad and more than anything I'm trying to, you know, reveal or reflect a truth about life and living in this day and age in this part of the world. And if the novel didn't accomplish that, I wouldn't be interested in writing it.

Presentation

You can learn more about Jonathan Tropper and his five novels by visiting jonathantropper.com.

Bookpod producer is Barbara Finkelstein. Music is by Kevin MacLeod.

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