

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

# *BOOKS OF THE TIMES; A Family Portrait As Metaphor For the 90's*

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Sept. 4, 2001

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## THE CORRECTIONS

By Jonathan Franzen

568 pages. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$26.

Jonathan Franzen's two earlier novels, "The Twenty-Seventh City" (1988) and "Strong Motion" (1992), were messy and wildly ambitious epics, crammed to overflowing with cautionary political plots and tendentious asides meant to add up to a dyspeptic portrait of America in the 1980's. Buried beneath the Pynchonian pyrotechnics and Sinclair Lewisesque satire, however, were intimate family dramas that grounded the characters in a recognizable emotional reality and provided an Updikean portrait of the vagaries of domestic life.

In his new novel, "The Corrections," Mr. Franzen has brought a family and its problems center stage to try to write **a sort of American "Buddenbrooks."** In doing so he has harnessed his penchant for social criticism and subordinated it to his natural storytelling instincts, while at the same time, shucking off the influence of other writers to find an idiosyncratic voice of his own. Though often self-indulgent and long-winded, the novel leaves the reader with both **a devastating family portrait and a harrowing portrait of America in the late 1990's** -- an America deep in the grip of that decade's money madness and sick with envy, resentment, greed, acquisitiveness and self-delusion, an America committed to the quick-fix solution and determined to try to medicate its problems away.

The Midwestern suburb of St. Jude where the Lambert family resides bears more than a passing resemblance to Lumberton, the supposedly idyllic suburb depicted in the opening scenes of David Lynch's movie "Blue Velvet." St. Jude, as Enid Lambert likes to think, is inhabited by nice people with nice children; her world "was like a lawn in which the bluegrass grew so thick that evil was simply choked out: a miracle of niceness."

But life for the Lamberts is far from nice or perfect. Alfred, the paterfamilias and a retired railroad executive, is suffering from Parkinson's disease, dementia and depression, and Enid spends her days trying to stem the gathering disorder in their lives. In her spare time she complains vociferously about Alfred to her  children and endlessly nags him to make more of an effort -- pleas that are met only with further resistance. This sorry state of affairs is not simply a function of Alfred's illness. In flashbacks we learn that even in the prime of life Alfred was a secretive and emotionally reticent man, ill-suited to the chirpy, socially ambitious Enid. The Lambert children have all moved East to escape their parents' suffocating marriage and the narrow, faintly bigoted ethos of St. Jude, but all three are just as unhappy -- and unpleasant -- as their progenitors. Chip, a former professor who was fired for sexual harassment, is a brooding disciple of

Foucault and Marx, a would-be social critic who likes to rant about "a commercialized, medicalized, totalitarian modernity" but who spends all his free time pursuing women and maxing out his Visa card on fine wines.

His sister, Denise, is a judgmental and wildly competitive hipster, who works as the chef at a trendy new Philadelphia restaurant until she gets herself fired by having affairs with both her boss and her boss's wife. Their older brother, Gary, a vice president of a Philadelphia bank, is a snobbish and bossy yuppie, trapped in a nightmare marriage and given to attacks of paranoia and depression that cause him to lash out at everyone around him.

In his portraits of the Lamberts, Mr. Franzen exercises his copious talents for satire, coolly excavating their vanities, hypocrisy and self-deceptions. There is a hilarious scene in which Chip, hard up for cash, tries to steal a paper-wrapped fillet of Norwegian salmon from a designer food boutique by stuffing it down his pants, and some equally antic scenes set in Lithuania, where Chip has gone to set up a Web site for a local politician bent on defrauding American investors by offering them perks like "pro rata mineral rights and logging rights to all national parklands" and "'no-questions-asked' access to wiretaps and other state-security apparatus."

While he is eviscerating the Lamberts' pretensions -- and by extension, the culture they represent -- Mr. Franzen also manages to make palpable the familial geometry of their problems. Gary's anxieties, we realize, mirror those of his father, while Denise's social ambitions echo her mother's cravings for status. Chip's alienation recalls Enid's sense of estrangement from neighbors and friends, while Gary's entire existence had been "set up as a correction of his father's life."

Clearly Mr. Franzen's novel would have benefited enormously from a strict editing job. There are lengthy digressions about Lambert friends and acquaintances, which serve no purpose but to provide the author with a wider

array of social types to send up; and there are passages where the omniscient narrator's voice gratuitously intrudes to tell us exactly what we are witnessing. An air of self-importance hovers over some of the novel's more melodramatic scenes, and the unsavory antics of the Lamberts often exude a self-conscious whiff of sociological import.

All in all, however, "The Corrections" remains a remarkably poised performance, the narrative held together by myriad meticulously observed details and tiny leitmotifs that create a mosaiclike picture of America in the waning years of the 20th century. And while the story line is propelled by several suspenseful questions -- whether Alfred's patent for a metallurgical discovery will pay off, whether Chip will escape from Lithuanian thugs, whether the shotgun in the Lamberts' basement will be put to use -- the real tension in "The Corrections" stems from the characters' emotional dramas, rather than from the sort of contrived plot points found in the author's earlier novels.

By turns funny and corrosive, portentous and affecting, "The Corrections" not only shows us two generations of an American family struggling to make sense of their lives, but also cracks open a window on a sullen country lurching its way toward the millennium.

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section E, Page 1 of the National edition with the headline: BOOKS OF THE TIMES; A Family Portrait As Metaphor For the 90's