

American Gothic

By David Gates

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THE CORRECTIONS

By Jonathan Franzen.

568 pp. New York:

Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$26.

Jonathan Franzen's marvelous new novel, "The Corrections," starts out as discouragingly as any marvelous new novel you'll ever read. The very first page devotes a full paragraph to overextending the metaphor of an "alarm bell of anxiety" ringing in a suburban house, in a community heavy-handedly called St. Jude. Then, when a septuagenarian Parkinson's sufferer named Alfred Lambert goes into demented exile in that house's basement, Franzen set off my alarm bell of anxiety by warning that some larger significance might be about to hit me over the head: "And so in the house of the Lamberts, as in St. Jude, as in the country as a whole, life came to be lived underground." Next we meet Chip Lambert, the black-sheep son -- hey, I didn't name these people Lambert -- who

had to leave his teaching job because he (yawn) had an affair with a student and is now writing a screenplay, based on the (yawn) Lewinsky scandal, and beginning it with a parodically preposterous monologue on "anxieties of the phallus in Tudor drama." Even though Franzen spares us the monologue itself, I was all set to bail on him, despite the microfelicities (ants "storming" a dead opossum; "assassin-like chauffeurs" holding up signs at La Guardia) that showed he could actually write. Did I need several hundred more pages of standard-issue smarty-pants high jinks? Or, worse yet, of suburban angst speaking, in large caps, boldface and italics, to our condition? Cripes, why not just call the book "American Something-or-other"? You know, truth in packaging.

You could read "The Corrections" as a conventional realist saga of multigenerational family dynamics -- that's how the publisher spins it -- and love's mutating mysteries, with just enough novel-of-paranoia touches so Oprah won't assign it and ruin Franzen's street cred. Or you could read it as a trickier and trendier sort of work, which flawlessly mimics old-school plottiness, readability and character development in order to seduce you into realms of bottomless geopolitical-spiritual disquiet. Damned if I know. But I know what made me decide to stick with the thing long enough to tell I liked it. It was Chip's cockamamie justification for the obviously suicidal beginning of his own magnum opus: " 'My idea,' Chip said, 'was to have this "hump" that the moviegoer has to get over. Putting something off-putting at the beginning, it's a classic modernist strategy. There's a lot of rich suspense toward the end.' " Aha. Was this Franzen's own way of hinting that he himself had a bunch of goodies up his sleeve that he meant to hold back awhile longer out of sheer modernist cussedness? And that I'd miss out if I didn't pull up my socks and soldier on?

Well, sure enough, just a few pages later the book started getting better. First Chip's apparently sane sister, Denise, arrives and immediately makes herself the reader's ally. "If I grant that these are interesting issues," she asks Chip, who is

delivering a too-familiar aria about antidepressants as an adjunct to consumerism, "will you stop talking about them?" Next comes a flashback in which one of Chip's students (she's splendidly hostile and relentlessly seductive) lays siege to his virtue and gives him a mysterious drug, an antidepressant-aphrodisiac in golden caplets she calls "Mexican A" -- and which we somehow sense (and if we don't, I'm telling you) that we'll learn much, much more about. And suddenly we were rocking: I only put the book down again when my life needed tending to. Mind you, I'm still not convinced that Franzen actually meant his first 30 pages to be such a slog, but it's an awfully funny coincidence.

It shouldn't interfere with anybody's rich suspense to report that all the mighty bulk of "The Corrections" turns on a single, definingly American question: Will Mom be able to get the whole family home for one last Christmas? Franzen tucks the more momentous questions into a branching system of subplots, starring each of the main characters in turn and making each one equally sympathetic. Will Alfred (a) be put in a nursing home, (b) enter a radical new treatment plan that proposes to restructure his brain or (c) deliver himself with that Hemingway-evoking shotgun in the basement? Will Denise, who cooks ~~at~~ a nouveller-than-thou restaurant, end up in bed with (a) her financial backer, (b) his wife or (c) both? Will Chip get (a) rich off that screenplay, (b) his married girlfriend back or (c) himself killed during a coup in Lithuania, where he goes as an aide to a politician turned con man? Will Gary, the banker who's the oldest of the Lamberts' offspring, (a) make a killing in biotech stocks, (b) stand up to his crafty wife and mocking children or (c) just keep drinking? Finally, will Enid, the materfamilias, ever get a grip?

And those are just a few of the balls Franzen keeps in the air. What will a drug, trade-named Aslan after the Christly lion in C. S. Lewis's Narnia books, do to his characters (if they end up hooked on it) and to society as a whole (if the stuff ever gets F.D.A. approval)? "Mexican A" is only one variety of Aslan; another is a revolutionary Parkinson's medication called Corecktall. What does the

upcoming execution of a brutal killer have to do with it all? Can Coreck tall also detangle the criminal brain? What's the connection between a long-forgotten patent held by Alfred and the schemes of a gurlike neurobiologist? Unless I missed something, Franzen ultimately lets this ball drop, and I wasn't sorry to see the last of it. Psychotropic drugs and their supposedly problematic effects on human autonomy and identity is a topic as old as "Brave New World" and as new as Peter D. Kramer's "Listening to Prozac" -- which is no longer all that new. In his own recent novel, "Spectacular Happiness," Kramer himself seems bored with the topic.

Sure, I guess it's a no-no to put stuff in your book that doesn't pay off, but I can't scrape together much outrage when I'm basically having a good time. Anyhow, you have to expect a degree of indeterminacy in an ambitious novel these days; an intricately, perfectly paranoid book like Pynchon's "Crying of Lot 49," in which everything seems to have some sinister relation to everything else, now seems as quaintly formalist as "The Waste Land." Franzen coyly tips his hat to several forebears along the way: he gives us a Web address called gaddisfly.com (Franzen's title, of course, echoes that of William Gaddis's novel "The Recognitions"), a magician named Alain Gregarius, a "brainy-looking" cruise-ship passenger named Roth, a slasher movie called "Moody Fruit," even a city park with the same name (Waindell) as the college where Nabokov's Pnin teaches. And some of the white noise in Alfred's head -- cirruslike clusterings of very high frequencies off in deep stratosphere behind his ears" -- must derive from Don DeLillo. These shadow presences announce that Franzen likes his fiction smart and larky, with glimpses of scary depths and a flirtatious, on-and-off relationship with realism. But you already knew that. And the success of David Foster Wallace's epic, minutely interconnected, ultimately unresolved "Infinite Jest" has made a novel like "The Corrections" -- a far less dense and demanding read -- seem part of a new mainstream, in which either teasing hints

of formalism dress up the randomness or irruptions of randomness juice up the formalism. (Choose one. Or not.) Whether or not this is a good idea is a matter of taste -- and a debate dating back to the Dionysians versus the Apollonians.

In "The Corrections," though, Franzen maintains a scrupulous neutrality on questions of order versus energy, control versus license, tradition versus innovation, old stick-in-the-muds versus their unmoored children. Lamberts versus lions. Alfred is an open-and-shut case of anality and sexual repression (and I guess I should admit that the R. Crumb-like talking feces he hallucinates may not be the book's subtlest moment), yet he's silently self-sacrificing, and admirable in his rigorous work ethic and fidelity. Enid is silly, obsessive and manipulative, yet loving and blessed with an unsuspected capacity for acceptance and self-reinvention. Franzen doesn't caricature either Gary's desperate embrace of family values or Denise's addled sexual adventurism; and he soon shows us Chip as far more than a cartoon of breast-fixation and arty self-delusion. The end of the novel has the same ambivalence Kafka achieves at the end of "The Metamorphosis": we're glad that one character has been released from an oppressive bond, yet we also suspect that a nobler soul has been undervalued. If you don't end up liking each one of Franzen's people, you probably just don't like people. And by the way, assuming the book really does speak to our condition, it doesn't pretend to know more about it than we do.

Still, it's often the microfelicities that keep you barreling through "The Corrections" toward its larger satisfactions. Wordplay worthy of Nabokov: a few pages after a discussion of a museum of transportation, Alfred and Enid slip into their marital bed, "the museum of antique transports." Tiny, revelatory gestures: the fastidious Gary sniffing his mother's dish towel before drying his hands on it. Magically precise images: a sandwich opened to "a slice of bologna on which the texture of bread was lithographed in yellow mustard." Knowing one-liners: "Police in ski masks," Chip says at a particularly bad moment in his Lithuanian adventure. "I'm struggling to put a positive construction on this."

Franzen writes with convincing authority about the minutiae of railroads, clothing, medicine, economics, industry, cuisine and Eastern European politics, and he knows just when to push his conceits over the top -- like his Lithuanian city built of radioactive cinder blocks from Belarus. But he also knows his way around more intimate territory. Enid painfully contrasts her current married life not only with "the loving-kindness of other couples," but with the days when Alfred had "been mad for her and had looked into her eyes."

No one book, of course, can provide everything we want in a novel. But a book as strong as "The Corrections" seems ruled only by its own self-generated aesthetic: it creates the illusion of giving a complete account of a world, and while we're under its enchantment it temporarily eclipses whatever else we may have read. But I guess that is everything we want in a novel -- except, when it's rocking along, for it never to be over. In that respect, "The Corrections" ends as disappointingly as it began. And in that respect only.