

The Corrections

by Jonathan Franzen

Natasha Walter, The Independent
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What do we want from a novel these days? It hardly seems fair to start a review like that: after all, we are here to discuss one novel, not the whole point of fiction. But Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* has come to us, for some reason, as an answer to that question. It has been touted as the kind of novel we are all waiting for, a novel that straddles high and low literature, that is richly complex and easily readable, that takes in family life and the big international picture.

It is said that Franzen sat down and wrote an article about why contemporary fiction was failing, concluded that the problem was that it did not engage with the small corridors of character as well as the landscape of social trends, and then wrote *The Corrections* as an answer to his own criticism. Americans have certainly seemed to agree with him. There, the book has had the stamp of approval from all sides of the literary world. He won over the middlebrows early on: Oprah Winfrey wanted to showcase *The Corrections* on her book-club show, a quick route to the bestseller lists. When Franzen appeared to demur, saying he thought he was writing serious literature, she withdrew the offer but couldn't, of course, withdraw the publicity. Then he won the National Book Award, so seducing the smarter end of the market.

Expectations have been raised. The news that this is Don DeLillo with nicer people, or Thomas Mann with cellphones, has made proof copies of this book scarce currency.

At the heart of the novel is a well-realised and touching tale of suburban American family life. Franzen can never decide whether he loves or

loathes this family, the Lamberts – which is probably what most people feel about their families. At times you get an almost hysterical insistence on the viciousness that underlies the family's interactions, and at other times the tone flicks into a poignant sweetness. So when the father, a stropy patriarch whose authority has been undermined by his children's rebellions, his wife's wilfulness and his Parkinson's disease, takes a suicidal leap from a cruise ship, what he remembers are his children and the "evenings of sweet vanilla closeness in his black leather chair... when you were falling into water, there was no solid thing to reach for but your children."

At other times Franzen's emphasis is only on the boredom, bad smells and sexual frustrations of family life: the little boy left sitting all night at the dinner table because he won't eat his liver; the old man stuck down in the basement trying to give himself an enema; the young man unable to have sex unless his wife pretends to be asleep.

What you remember most clearly about the book may be the fuggy heaviness of the family home, but it has an ambitious scale. Franzen traces, in a leisurely way, the lives of Enid's and Alfred's three children – Gary, the suburban banker; Chip, the failed-academic-turned-waster; and Denise, the bisexual chef – as they struggle, and fail, to escape their parents. Most novels about family life try to dramatise a part of the whole: the departure from home, or the return. This novel is a series of departures and returns, a mosaic of unresolved wanderings.

Certainly, it's an ambitious book. And it's an all-American novel, but the times have gone when America was a bigger, wilder frontier. Now, America often seems frozen in its own limits. Franzen, even in this stretched novel, keeps hitting these limits. This is the suburbia made desirable by Frank Capra, made lyrical by John Updike, made surreal by David Lynch, but that now tends to feel merely claustrophobic.

Franzen tries to place these individuals in a wider social picture, but, oddly, the least successful parts of the novel thrust them against the

movements of the financial markets or the breakdown of Eastern Europe. As when Chip goes to Lithuania or, rather, to Nowheresville, Europe, since this place has no reality at all. The idea is that he goes off with a crooked politician to run a scam in which bits of the country are sold off to rich Americans on the internet, Lithuania.com being the name of the website. Neat, huh?

But the slickness of the idea is never fleshed out by any engagement with reality in Lithuania. Franzen's attempts at political analysis dwindle into journalese: "Chip was struck by the broad similarities between black-market Lithuania and free-market America. In both countries, wealth was confined in the hands of a few; any meaningful distinction between private and public sectors had disappeared." The failure of this section says less about Chip than about Franzen and what he knows of the world beyond middle-class North America.

Not that a good novelist needs to know anything more than his characters, however self-indulgent and neurotic they may be. Franzen knows his characters inside out and can realise them with almost frightening precision. His greatest inventiveness lies in his expressive detailing of sensation. Throughout the book, the physical world is brought into hyper-real life. Read *The Corrections* and see it all, taste it all, touch it all, through the eyes of Alfred and Enid, Denise and Gary and Chip, from the "beard of dried suds on the chin of the old dishwasher" to the fact that "tonsils release an ammoniac mucus when serious tears gather behind them."

But although the play of surfaces is absolutely entrancing, the heart of the novel is sometimes less alluring. We sense Franzen running out of vigour way before the end. Do we care much, in the rushed last chapter, that Enid "weathered the downturn" in the markets, that Denise "moved to Brooklyn and went to work at a new restaurant" and that poor old Alfred was installed in "a long-term care facility adjacent to the country club"?

For all the time we have spent with these characters, they struggle to move in on our inner lives. We know everything about them, and yet even by the end they seem rather like strangers who want to tell us too much about their illnesses and sexual fantasies and bank balances. This ambitious piece of fiction may be the novel America was waiting for, but some of us here are still waiting.