

Shortfall

Tom LeClair

THE CORRECTIONS

Jonathan Franzen

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576 pages; cloth, \$26.00

Jonathan Franzen belongs to several select groups: *Granta* named him one of the “Best Young American Novelists”; *The New Yorker* placed him on their list of “Twenty Writers for the 21st Century”; and David Foster Wallace included him in his school of “white male novelists over six feet,” a foursome that includes Richard Powers, William Vollmann, and Wallace himself. Franzen has been less prolific and less stylistically adventurous than others in Wallace’s set of four, but, like Wallace, Franzen has published a good deal of journalism, some of it complaining about the difficulties of writing an American novel now. In *Harper’s* April 1996 essay, “Perchance to Dream,” Franzen admitted to being depressed about engaging the transient complexities of American public life and stated that his work in progress came unblocked when he decided to shorten his gaze and to “lose [him]self in the characters and locales” he loved.

The many positive reviews *The Corrections* has received in the mainstream press, the fawning of Sven Birkerts, and the novel’s selection by Oprah indicate Franzen’s mid-career correction was prudent, but how does this Big Book of this season stand up to the best work of the other tall tellers and to Franzen’s first two novels—*The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988) and *Strong Motion* (1992)—which earned comparisons with Pynchon and DeLillo?

Near the end of a year near the end of the twentieth century, Enid Lambert wants her three children to come home to St. Jude, a gerontocratic city in the Midwest, for Christmas. Enid is a spunky and hopeful 75, but her

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husband, Alfred, is 80 and suffering increasingly distressing symptoms of Parkinson’s. Son Gary is 43 and a successful banker with three darling children in Philadelphia. Chip is 39 and living in Lithuania, helping that country adapt to free-market economics. Though divorced at 32, Denise is a star chef at The Generator, a chic new restaurant in Philadelphia. So would Enid describe her children, but Franzen quickly corrects her delusionally upbeat version. Gary dislikes his wife, argues with his children, drinks heavily, worries about being depressed, and invests unwisely in biotech stock. Chip has been fired from his teaching job for having sex with a student and has fled to Lithuania to make some quick cash in a fraudulent Internet scheme. Denise lets her work slip while having affairs with both the restaurant owner and his wife.

Franzen probes the Lambert family’s past for sources of its dysfunctionality. Alfred, a stern and puritan patriarch who worked for the railroad, is predictably the primary cause of his family’s derailment and, in his dementia, is beyond transformation. Enid is a world-class passive-aggressive, asserting her neurotic desires through wifely persistence, self-abnegation, and motherly nagging. In his *Harper’s* essay, Franzen praised what he called “tragic realism,” and *The Corrections* wants to fit the term. But Alfred and Enid are more like nineteenth-century grandparents than the parents of postmodern children, who spend much of their lives attempting to “correct” their parents’ “errors.” The generational conflicts absolutely central to the novel are forced, possibly tragic, sometimes comic, but not “realistic.” Franzen calls the elder Lamberts “the squarest people in America.” If “realism” still implies the common and probable, generating a family novel from

extreme parents sacrifices psychological subtlety for dramatic artifice.

Franzen lavishes super-realistic detail on the more believable Lambert siblings. Gary's relations with his psychobabbling wife and his resentful children have the domestic density and cruelty of Heller's *Something Happened*. A former college teacher, Franzen knows how to mock Chip's attempts at political correctness and his later apolitical greed. The oral minutiae of Denise's life—in the kitchen and in bed—could teach Rita Mae Brown a thing or two. And Franzen is very good on the ways adult siblings compete with each other and attempt to correct one another as he alternates among their points of view and slowly, very slowly, moves them toward Christmas in St. Jude. The siblings' resistances, negotiations, and impediments to a family reunion form what little plot Franzen gives the book.

The Corrections, like English novels from Jane Austen on, is about marriage and money, mostly money. Alfred has a patent wanted by a pharmaceutical company researching a neurological wonder drug called "Corecktail." Enid and Gary would like to sell the patent for big bucks, and Gary uses insider knowledge to purchase stock in the company. Meanwhile, over in Lithuania, Chip is fleecing American investors who want to buy up the newly privatized nation. Only Alfred, the scientist, and Denise, the artist of food, care little for money. This does not preclude them, though, from doing damage to the Lambert family with their high principles.

Economic gain was also the subject of *Strong Motion*, but in *The Corrections* Franzen doesn't historicize beyond one American generation, as he did in that second novel. At 500-plus pages, *The Corrections* is one of the narrowest big novels I know, obsessively recording the small talk of its characters and painstakingly listing the objects they own. The intended effect is, I suppose, a strong emotional engagement with Franzen's few characters, but for long stretches *The Corrections* is like the gossip of strangers one can't help but overhear in a plane



Detail from cover

or train. Franzen's omniscient narrator has chosen to know (or reveal) only what his characters know, and their lack of an historical or intellectual or even useful psychological context keeps them mostly trapped in themselves. "The universe was mechanistic: the father spoke, the son reacted," says the narrator. Former academic Chip might be expected to supply an alternative way of understanding family and social dynamics, but he has sold off all his books and given up on all his old ideas to work on a moneymaking screenplay. The novel is thus like the "bureau of corrections" to which it refers, though Franzen does grant pardons to several of his characters to salvage a moderately happy ending.

In *The Twenty-Seventh City*, Franzen brought Indians from the subcontinent to seriously challenge the Anglo-Americans of St. Louis. Chip in Lithuania is played as farce, with Lithuanians resembling stock former Soviets. Just as *The Corrections* is historically flat, the novel is culturally thin. Lithuania is mostly represented as the future of American greed, and Franzen offers no ethnic or racial correction to his upper-middle-class white people. Like "Perchance to Dream," *The Corrections* has a mewling quality, projecting a feeling that its

characters and maybe even its author were somehow deprived of a success and happiness to which they were—again “somehow”—entitled.

Readers of Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996) or Powers’s *Gain* (1998) or any of Vollmann’s historical novels can bring to *The Corrections* ways of generalizing about American culture from the oh-so-personal lives Franzen documents. But much of what he includes seems present to satisfy mainstream readers’ lust for Tom Wolfe detail rather than to serve as cultural synecdoche. In “Perchance to Dream,” Franzen gave a lot of space to a sociologist named Shirley Heath, who studies readers’ responses and what they want from fiction. *The Corrections* seems more influenced by the sociologist Heath than by Pynchon or DeLillo or even Franzen’s earlier novels. Perhaps Franzen still belongs on the magazine lists, but with this new novel he shows himself to be the smallest of Wallace’s tall four.

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