

Review / Books:

All Grown Up and No Place to Go

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## THE CORRECTIONS

By Jonathan Franzen

(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 576 pages, \$25)

IN THE FIRST few pages of "The Corrections," Jonathan Franzen's hugely ambitious new novel, the author seems to be swinging so hard for the fences that the reader begins to worry about getting knocked down by the breeze from his bat.

Given the hype surrounding this work, it would be gratifying to report a humiliating strikeout. But the prologue isn't even over before it's clear that Mr. Franzen has got hold of a pitch he likes, and he simply crushes it. Bystanders will be forgiven the instinct to whistle in awe as they watch the ball disappear into the furthest reaches of contemporary fiction.

"The Corrections" is the story of two generations of Lamberts, a family from the suburbs of a Midwestern city called St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes lending his name to a fictional metropolis that takes the place of the St. Louis familiar from Mr. Franzen's remarkable first novel, "The Twenty-Seventh City" (1988). The patriarch, Alfred, a rigid lifelong depressive, has begun his long, sad slide down the slopes of Parkinsonism and dementia, gathering speed as he goes and dragging Enid, his sweetly self-deluding spouse, along with him.

The damage has already been done to the grown Lambert children. Gary, a portfolio manager who would seem the natural heir to his father's powerful role, doesn't want to work that hard. Instead, he's sunk in a manipulative marriage that exalts selfishness and materialism, values his own children seem to have imbibed with their mother's milk. He has collected 10 of his wife's pronouncements into a kind of personal Decalogue, including, "You're nothing at all like your father," "There's absolutely nothing useful about suffering," and "Let's buy both!"

Chip, the Lambert's intellectual son, teaches Textual Artifacts and other trendy subjects at a college in New England. He helps draft the school's sexual-abuse policy only to find himself cashiered as the result of an obsessive affair with a student. He turns to screenwriting, failing at this too, and while Enid thinks he works at The Wall Street Journal, he actually makes desultory unpaid contributions to the Warren Street Journal: A Monthly of the Transgressive Arts.

Denise, the most appealing of the three offspring, is a celebrated chef who loses herself in work and sex as she struggles to escape the undertow of the family's sinking ship. Her life is thrown into chaos by romantic entanglements with both her restaurant's wealthy owner and his idealistic wife.

All three children lead adult lives blessedly free of the patriarch's cold hand, yet without his pitiless grip on the tiller they appear rudderless. It's as if the decline of the old Midwestern moral order, with its emphasis on self-control and reserve and thrift, has left the younger Lamberts ethically weightless, unable even to find their bearings. They've banished the worst aspects of their upbringing -- the knee-jerk prejudices, the sexual repression, their father's emotional cruelty -- but can't seem to find anything to take their place.

Their father's growing confusion and loss of control is a metaphor, of course, but the challenge it poses for his children is an instrument of revelation. Using it, Mr. Franzen delineates the awful hollowness of Enid and Alfred's offspring, yet the vividness and humanity of his portraits recruit our understanding and sympathy. Corrections, in a sense, are their trouble. Gary, Chip and Denise live their lives as correctives to the terrible mistakes of their parents, but in doing so they overcompensate, get off course, lose their way. Hating the numbing sense of obligation that pervades the household in St. Jude, they live as if their own happiness is their only responsibility. It's no surprise, then, that they've perfected a recipe for despair.

"The Corrections," as its stern name implies, could have been a dark and miserable book; parents in particular may want to undertake it with a strong drink in hand. But the sheer familiarity of the Lamberts -- the homely accuracy of Mr. Franzen's portrayals -- removes some of the sting; we are all Lamberts, after all, and life really isn't so bad. The author's savage wit is also an effective leavening, but even as a satirist, Mr. Franzen is always hard-headed, as is clear when he takes us with Gary and Denise to a dog-and-pony show for institutional investors in advance of a hot new IPO (one that seems both to rely on a vague patent held by Alfred and to offer hope for his Parkinson's Disease).

In his two previous novels, in fact, Mr. Franzen showed a rare gift for seeing as deeply into souls as he does into the tectonic shifts in history that shape and sometimes warp them, and in this volume his twin abilities reach full flower. The author is abetted in this by his range of erudition, which extends from railroad signals to neurobiology. His evocations of Philadelphia, restaurant work, getting old, Lithuania, hospital-supply stores and a lifetime of accumulated Paul Masson bottles, among other things, feel unerring.

Mr. Franzen's grasp of politics, economics and business as well as love, greed, envy and despair will make readers think of Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon and even, at times, the Simpsons. Yet there is a gravitas about this work, a lack of sophomoric humor or empty portentousness, that makes "The Corrections" feel as if its author has somehow set out to correct some of the excesses of his literary predecessors.

The wonder is the extent to which he's succeeded. "The Corrections" is a wonderful book, and in many places it looks and smells like a great one. It is simultaneously tragic and hilarious, sweeping and minute, hot and cold. It even has some of the failings of a great

novel: There is no real overarching plot to drive us through the narrative (which goes forward on sheer authorial energy), and like almost every long book, this one probably could be shorter. Yet I wouldn't change either of those things; at the end, I wished only that it would go on.

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Mr. Akst's new novel, "The Webster Chronicle," will be published this month by Putnam.