

Title: The Corrections
Author: Jonathan Franzen
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“And meanwhile the sad truth was that not everyone could be extraordinary, not everyone could be extremely cool; because whom would this leave to be ordinary?” This passage from Jonathan Franzen’s 2001 novel, *The Corrections*, somehow embodies the Midwest as a whole. Let me break it down in a series of semicolons. The Midwest has people who want to be extraordinary; people who want to be extremely cool; and at the end of the day those people end up leaving, so who is left? Those who are ordinary. Whether or not that claim is actually true, the implications of alienation and repression are hard to deny--both are very much characteristics of the Midwest and of Franzen’s novel. Much like the Midwest, especially after the turn of the twenty first century, there was a large sense of anxiety and dread; that same dread and anxiety hangs over the novel like a thick cloud of snow, ready to be released on us all.

The novel focuses on an elderly Midwestern couple, and their plan to unite the entire family for “one last Christmas.” The family lives in the fictional town of St. Jude, which, I suppose, acts as a fictional St. Louis, Missouri. But essentially, it’s a town that embodies the Midwest as a whole. A town that has been ruined by the loss of factories, loss of jobs and continuing decline by drug use in the community. This is the story of deindustrialization.

Alfred, the elderly father of the three children, is a retired railroad engineer who suffers from Parkinson's disease and dementia. Alfred’s declining physical and mental health show up in the novel as a metaphor for the Midwest at the turn of the twenty first century. Dementia eats away at your mind and is the *Men In Black* equivalent of the one device that wipes your memory. Alfred, once an integral part of the industrial megacenter of the world, has been left behind by a changing world. He and his wife, Enid, are good, conservative, God-loving folk, who have a nostalgia for the “good ole days.” As parents they tried to pass on the solid Midwestern upbringing to their children but the values they held dear have not translated to the next generation of Midwesterners. Their son, Gary, is a depressed alcoholic. Their middle son, Chip, (boy here is a piece of work) lives in New York City and is unemployed university professor following conviction for sexual assault of a student. Their daughter, Denise, is a career-obsessed workaholic who has no time for her family.

It’s clear from the novel that the children’s problems are not merely the result of rebelliousness, but also the result of relocation. Alfred’s sons and daughter have branched out. They have experienced life beyond the Midwest. So when the family is reunited, the family has trouble connecting, because the sons and daughters have grown up and grown apart from what was once them, all while their parents stay the same. As the 1990’s end and the twenty-first century takes over, changes loom large and this is a change that Alfred and Enid are afraid of.

Before reading this book, I heard a good deal of praise for it and, for the most part, the praise is valid. Franzen is very good at writing characters and dialogue for those characters.

Each character has its own unique voice. However, the novel is not without its problems. For example there is a passage in the book where Franzen goes on a tangent and takes nearly 50 pages to describe how Alfred is feeling in a certain moment. It's supposed to convey the winding decline of a mind affected by dementia, but I found that part of the book to be a drag. And, unfortunately, this is not the only moment in the book like that. Franzen is not afraid to dedicate multiple pages to description of minor feelings and events. I'm universally opposed to this--David Foster Wallace, who is famous for his multiple-page tangents, which are often one long sentence). But, as a screenwriter, I found myself repeating throughout the reading of this almost 600 page book, "less is more."

The characters themselves are not likeable, but you get the sense that Franzen made them that way to convey feelings of isolation and distance among them. There are many points in the book where you feel sad and get the sense that this is the end of an era, not only for this particular family, but for the Midwest as a whole. And as things fall apart around the family, the extraordinary were extraordinary, the cool were cool and the ordinary were ordinary.

Reviewed by Maxwell Rinehart.