

Family values

A major new novel probes the dark depths of dysfunction

BY ORIANA GREEN

The *Corrections* might be a first for an Oprah Book Club pick: a novel in which one of the main characters turns out to be a lesbian. It's certainly a first in a different kind of way: Winfrey waved her let-me-make-you-a-millionaire wand over the head of Jonathan Franzen, a decidedly high-end literary writer (meaning a lot of this might swoosh right over the heads of some of her regular readers).

The author, true to his artier-than-thou mind-set, actually objected to having the Oprah seal of approval on his book cover and demanded a special edition be printed without the offending money-maker! Something tells me the size of his first royalty check will seem less offensive.

Her Oprahness later learned about some of the snide comments Franzen made during an interview at Portland's own Powell's Books and uninvited him to her show. "We'll just move on to the next book," she decreed. The fairy godmother giveth, and she taketh away!

I also wonder how many folks will soldier on through more than 250,000 words (more than twice the length of a standard novel). *The Corrections* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001; \$26 hardcover) is not a coffee table book; it's a doorstop.

Still, for readers who don't mind a fair sprinkling of \$10 words (keep your Webster's handy) it can be worth the week of your life you devote to it. And I say a week because Franzen did manage to motivate me to read almost nonstop during one entire weekend. Probably because I could relate so well to his thoroughly screwed-up family.

Simply put, it's the story of the Lamberts, a Midwestern family of five with a father so dis-

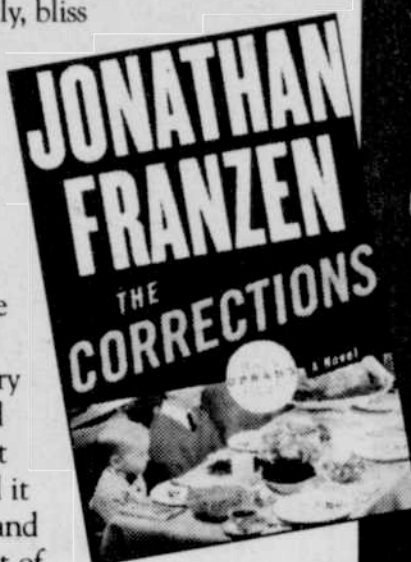
tant and a mother so smothering that all three children flee to the East Coast ASAP. The elder son, Gary, attempts to settle into his fantasy of conventional wedded bliss in tony Chestnut Hill, Pa., with his three sons and lawyer wife (who gets around town in her "Ford Stomper"). Sadly, bliss is in short supply.

Chip, the younger son, is the artiste who blows New England ivory tower tenure over a stupid tryst with an obsessive student. We also learn far more about his masturbatory practices than I cared to know, but I suspect male readers will find it alternately hilarious and familiar. Suddenly out of work and out of money, Chip manages to land a dot-com job in Lithuania (!), which actually leads to one of the more lively sections of this tome.

And then there's daughter Denise, whose poor taste in a deflowering partner is just the first of several really bad choices on her part. A gifted chef, she eventually lands her dream job, creating a pricey, trendy restaurant in a derelict



Jonathan Franzen



building. That she ultimately ruins it with an inappropriate liaison seems par for the course in this family.

The only good news is Denise finally figures

out she's a genuine dyke. Although Franzen thankfully doesn't attempt play-by-play commentary on the lesbian sex, he does devote a fair amount of ink to the emotional turbulence of two women jumping into unknown waters for the first time.

I don't have sibs, but I'm sure readers who do will feel the sting of reality in the crossfire among this trio—and echoed in the trio of grandchildren. Franzen puts a disturbing spin on the classic "Mom loved you best" debate.

Several aspects of this book validate the raves it's getting. (Even Oprah gushed—before Franzen pissed her off—"All of you who've been lookin' for that Great American Novel can stop lookin'.")

The author lavishes details on his characters—we know what brand of olive oil they buy, what CDs they play in their cars, how much they allocate for Christmas presents, what's hidden in their underwear drawers—resulting in so much dysfunctional verisimilitude, I have to hope he simply has a phenomenal imagination. I'd hate to wish these lives on anyone.

But what really makes *The Corrections* worth the investment of time are the rich, universal insights Franzen has into human nature. I had so many "aha" moments I lost count.

You'll laugh, you'll cry, you'll stay up too late reading, and this book will flat out exhaust you. But you'll learn more about yourself and your own family relationships than you thought possible. **J**

Entertainment Editor ORIANA GREEN found the scene in which a kid spends an evening alone at the dinner table staring down cold vegetables absolutely harrowing. You'll find her eating macaroons at oriana@justout.com.

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