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This Year's Great American Novel

Issue of 2001-12-24 and 31
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Jonathan Franzen's new novel, "The Corrections," recently received the National Book Award. It was also the subject of a controversy, when Franzen made remarks construed as disparaging about Oprah Winfrey, who had selected the novel for her popular Book Club. Franzen treats the Oprah selection in a piece that appears in the magazine this week (see Fact); here Franzen discusses his novel with *The New Yorker*.

THE NEW YORKER: What was the first seed of "The Corrections"—the first observation that later became a character, or the first note that later became a plot?

JONATHAN FRANZEN: I had a notion of Denise, of a character named Denise, who had dark, curly hair and fraught relations with her father, way back around 1992, but she was the last character to come properly into focus. (I was still figuring out her basic story late last summer.) Around the same time, in 1992, as part of the same abandoned project, I wrote a paragraph about a father who sets out to murder squirrels. This paragraph made it into the book. But the real seed was Chip, with his rebellion and shame, his troubles with debt. The oldest scene in the book is the one in which he meets his parents at LaGuardia. Something about the collision of East Coast and Midwest there, of the new and the old, gave me a key for the whole.

What was the first section that was written? Were there early drafts, or even entire sections, that were tossed out?

The first complete section was the cruise-ship chapter. That was the chapter that ultimately led me to throw away the elaborately plotted social novel I'd been writing for several years. I had so much fun writing the dinner-table scene, in particular, that I lost my appetite for big social plots.

What is your working day like? Do you sit at a desk? Do you walk around? Longhand? Computer? Dictaphone?

I sit at an old oaken teacher's desk scavenged from N.Y.U. I have a cushioned metal office

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chair that I found by the side of a road in Rockland County, in 1982. I use a used 486 I.B.M. clone that I bought for a hundred and fifty dollars through an ad at the gym. My software is the excellent, vintage WordPerfect version 5.0, pirated long ago. I have a dot-matrix Panasonic printer, bought in 1989. I like all of these objects, obviously. The work itself is the usual writer's round of obsession, procrastination, doubt, guilt, and breakthrough. I'm very much afraid that I speak my dialogue loudly as I write it.

O.K. On to the book. Some of the reviews have focussed on subplots, and the way that you drag your characters out of the central thoroughfare of the novel—the family dynamics—into dot-comedy, pharmaceutically assisted sex, etc. Talk a little about the pruning process: when life is so messy, and one event can, by an almost imperceptible causal chain, affect another event, where is it safe to draw the line between plot and subplot?

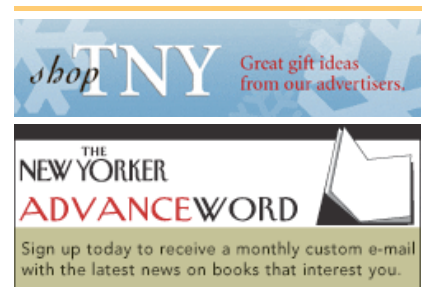
Well, I didn't really think in terms of plot. Does this book even have a plot? I thought more in terms of the story-character nexus. With each of the major characters and each of the large sections, I was striving for the classical unities of place, time, and action. I was trying to find simple problems, simple situations—man tries to prove to his wife that he's not depressed; fun-loving woman goes on luxury cruise with intermittently demented husband—and then inhabit them as fully as possible. Pruning back or reining in are unpleasant tasks. Once a story's constraints are established, though, you face the vastly more enjoyable task of layering as much of life into it as you possibly can. What's always struck me about Robert Frost's remark about free verse—that it's like tennis without the net—is that playing tennis without a net is difficult, frustrating, and basically not fun. I've tried it. It's not fun. Constraint is our friend.

Each orbit of the book has minor characters who seem as though they might resurface but don't. Is that just one of the liabilities of writing a large book? Or is it an intentional attempt at a certain realistic randomness?

I admire the tidy Beatles, but I'm more of a Rolling Stones man. I like some messiness around the edges.

More than any other contemporary novelist, except maybe Richard Powers, you have used your fiction to explore alternate careers: city government, seismology. How did you pick jobs for the characters in "The Corrections"? Were there some jobs that you considered but discarded?

Well, I wish I'd discarded Chip's job as a



university professor before it got locked into the story, because trying to do something fresh with such a familiar job gave me no end of trouble. I had all sorts of thematic reasons for settling on the jobs I did, and it took me a while to get over my resistance to giving Denise the glamour job of high-end cook; I don't like glamour jobs in novels. But basically, when I let go of my social-novel ambitions, I was at pains to find other ways of introducing depth and breadth. Looking at a variety of professional milieus was one of them.

Chip's chapters verge on the kind of satire practiced by David Lodge. Denise's chapters are less hermetic, partly because her sexual choices seem more emotionally consequential. How hard was it to get the tones to work together? Were there times when you felt they were clashing too much?

Tone was the single hardest problem I had to solve. I'm by no means the only fiction writer who'll tell you this. Tone is everything. And tone is delicate—hard to find, easy to lose—so I have a superstitious aversion to saying much about it. But I was never worried about clashing, no.

Do you have a favorite of the main characters? Are there any who you feel didn't work out the way you would have liked?

I love all five of the major characters more or less equally, but I'll admit to a particular affection for Gary, because he knows himself the least and is, for a lot of readers, the hardest to love.

Talk a little bit about the famous diagram that has been mentioned in the *New York Times* and elsewhere, the diagram that blueprints the novel. How big is it? Is it on normal paper? Will you be selling it on Ebay?

Oh, that diagram. There are always diagrams. Diagrams are one of the five hundred things I do to avoid actually thinking, feeling, and writing. I tend to make diagrams, in graphic form, after the fact, for reassurance that things are working the way I want them to. I believe the particular diagram you're referring to is in pencil on eight-and-a-half-by-eleven-inch paper.

Lots of people have mentioned drugs, and the way they function as the most complex and pernicious example of correction in the novel: little pills that can turn you into a slightly different person. That topic has been addressed by other authors, but mostly by young, trendy authors: "The Corrections" is one of the best examples I can remember about the effect of drugs on the elderly. Did this come from the experience of having elderly parents?

You seem to be implying that I missed my chance to be a young, trendy author, and I'm sure you're right. But I do have a particular sympathy for older people—the result, maybe, of my parents' having had me late in life, and of my feeling like an old person myself, always too conscious of the ways in which my body is wearing out, always unhealthily aware of death's proximity. I know about anxiety, in other words, and anxiety is one of the keynotes of old age.

Some aging novelists, Philip Roth in particular, seem to be doing some of their best work in their later years. Others, like Heller, just faded away. What's your feeling about looking down the road at the next three or four decades and trying to keep doing what you have been doing?

Oh, God, what to say? I guess I can say that I don't mean to keep doing what I've been doing but rather to do something different each time. I feel fortunate to be allowed to write novels at all, to be doing this with my life, and because it feels like a privilege or a gift, rather than a job, I don't feel a lot of time pressure. I used to feel pressure, because I used to imagine that the novelist was chasing current events, but I don't so much anymore. I want to write as many good, original books as I can, but even just three more would feel like a lot. I'm not temperamentally of the get-this-clunker-out-and-move-on-to-the-next-project school. I'm more like, Well, let's try to get this one right.

So, as the Beatles once sang, time is on your side.

I think you mean the Kinks.

You have talked about novels as an alternative to movies and television. You have also sold the movie rights to "The Corrections." What do you know about the film that might emerge from this process?

I think books and television are more in opposition than books and movies are. I love movies, I think about movies, I'm influenced by movies. I love TV, too, but mainly as a means of procrastinating. Solitude, reflection, complexity, doubt—these aren't generally considered TV values, but they're values that matter to me. If I ever buy a TV, it will be mainly to watch sports. As for the movie version of the book, I'm excited by the prospect, excited that we seem to have a director and a writer already, and very happy that I have no responsibility to the project beyond an invitation to consult. I would love to see Paul Newman as Alfred. I'd like to see actors doing some of the funny lines. My hope is that the movie would be good qua movie, which is to say: very different from the book.

Finally, why did *USA Today*, in its review of the book, refer to Denise as Caroline?

Well, and why do many people think that Alfred's name is Albert? I'm bad with names myself. I'm sure there are dark psychological reasons. ♣

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