

Freedom



If you listen to politicians and talking heads speak, you'll instantly recognize that

"freedom" is a particularly powerful buzz word in American culture. Franzen achieved notoriety for a famous run-in with Oprah about his book The Corrections being included in her book club. He complained that this might scare men away from reading his book, so Oprah withdrew the nomination. In another bizarre twist, last fall a fan stole the author's eyeglasses and offered them for ransom. In this mega-novel of 562 pages, Franzen tackles the theme of what constitutes freedom in our closest relationships. He writes about a family, the Berglunds, who helped transform an old St. Paul neighborhood into a thriving community.

Patty and Walter are inveterate do-gooders. Patty babysits little Connie when her single mom goes out in heels and tight dresses for her date nights. Patty also bakes cookies and delivers them door-to-door in the neighborhood. Walter changes light bulbs, bikes to work throughout the Minnesota winter, and serves as a lawyer for an environmental organization. But all is not well in the Berglund household. Patty is an ex-basketball jock who early in life learned to compete and now her only competitive arena is that of her family. She loves her son Joey too much and her daughter Jessica not enough.

I enjoyed this book. The prose is artful, the structure not only draws you in, but is complex and similar to a symphony, in that it provides intriguing movements--narrated by various Berglunds, the cynical musician, Richard, and the passionate environmentalist Lalitha. In fact, this is the only book that I have ever read that I actually enjoyed while truly disliking the characters. Every single one of them is flawed and annoying. The one exemption is the Berglund daughter Jessica whose characterization is given short shrift by the author.

Walter, although a committed environmentalist (in his world view), devises a master plan to strip mine coal so that the land (now destroyed) can be converted into a forever sanctuary for his beloved cerulean warblers. Even in her fifties, Patty can't decide what to do with her life. Joey becomes an arms dealer until he sees the light. Jessica is good, so good, but hovers too quietly in the background. Richard is wickedly funny and has women falling all over him, but at heart the characters in this book aren't respected by their author. He's created them but has left them abandoned on the stage. Still I enjoyed this book--its scope, its politics, its great orchestral music.

For another man's take on an involved family drama, try Richard Russo's That Old Cape Magic ..

For a new novel by Franzen's late friend, try Pale King by David Foster Wallace.

Posted by Dory L. on June 8, 2011

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