

Freedom

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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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Family Relationships

Fiction

Reviews Titles:

Freedom

June's Books Plus Discussion



Graduation, students leaving town, the planning of summer trips and picnics, yes it's

that time of year again. If only the weather would comply. On June 5th, Jane Layman will lead our next Books Plus discussion about Jonathan Franzen's latest novel *Freedom*. This well-reviewed novel features Patty and Walter Berglund, pioneers of old St. Paul. Walter is an environmental lawyer concerned about the fate of warblers, and Patty is an ex-sports player, perhaps a little too competitive with her parenting.

Freedom's interwoven themes include the nature of love and commitment, our roles as neighbors, the rocky path of adolescence, and the need to protect nature. One of Patty's favorite books is Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. This novel brings war and peace to the family and to the neighborhood. Please join us for an interesting and thought-provoking discussion about a modern novel of ideas that is set in the Midwest.

For more information and for details on this and future programs, please see below.

Books Plus meets the first Sunday of each month. All are welcome. Join the discussion or simply come to listen.

****Please note the later date in July due to the holiday weekend.****

No registration necessary. Drop in.

2 p.m., First Sundays

June 5 - Freedom by Jonathan Franzen

Discussion Leader: Jane Layman

"Jonathan Franzen's new novel, *Freedom*, like his previous one, *The Corrections* is a masterpiece of American fiction. The two books have much in common. Once again Franzen has fashioned a capacious but intricately ordered narrative that in its majestic sweep seems to gather up every fresh datum of our shared millennial life." --New York Times Book Review

July 10 - The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks by Rebecca Skloot

Discussion Leader: Wendy Rubin

"Science journalist Skloot makes a remarkable debut with this multilayered story about faith, science, journalism, and grace. It is also a tale of medical wonders and medical arrogance, racism, poverty and the bond that grows, sometimes painfully, between two very different women - Skloot and Deborah Lacks - sharing an obsession to learn about Deborah's mother, Henrietta, and her magical, immortal cells." -- Publisher's Weekly

August 7 - The Art of Racing in the Rain by Garth Stein

Discussion Leader: Elizabeth Gray

"The Art of Racing in The Rain has everything: love, tragedy, redemption, danger, and--most especially--the canine narrator Enzo. This old soul of a dog has much to teach us about being human." - Sara Gruen, Author of Water for Elephants

Posted by sbowman on May 26, 2011

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