

Gushing Over the Good Stuff

by Joel MEGGS

Book: *The Corrections*
Author: Jonathan Franzen
Publisher: Harperflamingo

The Corrections is everything a contemporary novel about the family should be and so much more. Author Jonathan Franzen packs as much material as he can into this 570 page novel. There is so much going on in this book that one wonders what Franzen has left for subsequent novels.

The book focuses on the Lambert family, which consists of father Alfred, mother Enid, and their three children, Chip, Gary and Denise.

In many ways, the book is about Enid, the mother, who is consistently let down by her children and husband. She is a mid-westerner with simple family values, who is constantly concerned with what others think of her failing family. Enid writes the year-end form letter to all her friends and feels the need to lie and exaggerate about the state of her family. But what we as readers learn from following the children's lives is that the Lamberts are not alone in their dysfunction. The contemporary family is simply where dysfunction and inadequacy resides.

Enid's husband Alfred, always reclusive and workaholic in the past, is now in the early stages of Parkinsons and Alzheimers. Her son Chip, a professor, is involved in an Internet scam in which he is "selling" Lithuania to investors as "Lithuania Inc, a for-profit nation state." Gary is plagued by his own dysfunctional family in which his wife and kids are constantly conspiring against him, setting up surveillance in his kitchen under the auspices of a "hobby," and using his depression against him. And Denise jumps back and forth between hetero- and homosexuality as a habitual home-wrecker.

In a world this wrought with inadequacy and affliction, medication plays a big role, always lingering in the background of the plot. New drugs, Aslan and Corectall, claim to

have properties that can potentially relieve all these forms of suffering. But an exchange between Chip and his student-lover, proves these drugs' professed qualities are probably false:

"This is? Some kind of Ecstasy?"

"No. Mexican A."

"What does it do?"

"Nothing and everything."

The Corrections is structured in a way that it follows each of the different children separately, making continuity a difficult thing to figure out at times. Each character's life is so interesting that each almost warrants its own novel. But the novel is at its best when they are forced to deal with each other and their parents.

The main significance of the title is that all the characters supposedly govern their lives as corrections of their parents. But in this rebellion, they invite entirely new failures, failures that are immensely entertaining for the reader.

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The Corrections can be enjoyed on different levels. Chip's manuscript and Alfred's hallucinations have many allusions, many of which went over my head. It is a very smart book.

What's interesting is that Oprah wanted to have this on her book club. I would very much like to have seen her discuss this disturbing and bleak look at the contemporary fami-

ly; perhaps she could have brought Dr. Phil in on the discussion. It is a fairly graphic novel sexually, and far from the heart-warming, sentimental writings of Oprah book club favourites like Jane Hamilton or Maeve Binchy. I definitely would have set my VCR to hear them discuss Alfred's hallucinations of walking, talking feces.

There's a lot going on in *The Corrections*; Franzen is an extremely imaginative writer. In fact, it demands a second reading. Franzen comments (equivocally) on many facets of our contemporary world in a way that is sometimes bewildering, but most times wildly entertaining.

This is by far the most engaging, entertaining, and impossible-to-put-down book I've read for quite a while.

Movie: *The Shipping News*
Director: Lasse Hallström
Distributor: Miramax

It seems that Hollywood is pumping out a lot of movies these days that are over two and a half hours. Most of them have been excruciatingly hard to sit through, but *The Shipping News* was one of those movies that, when the credits started to roll, I wished would go on for another hour.

The movie, adapted from Annie Proulx's award-winning novel, follows the life of Quoyale, a sad-looking, hapless man. He is an ink setter for a small town paper. He happens into the slutty Petal (Cate Blanchett) and falls in love. The two have a child together, but clearly Petal isn't ready to settle down, and takes off, leaving Quoyale alone to raise Bunny. Not long after this, Quoyale learns of his parents' deaths. When a long-lost Aunt (Judi Dench) shows up, she persuades him to move to Newfoundland with Bunny, the land his parents hailed from but on which he has never stepped foot.

Upon arriving, Quoyale is thrust into reporting for the local newspaper. Though he has no prior

experience as a reporter, he seems to have a natural affinity for the job. However, adjusting to Newfoundland's harsh terrain proves to be even more difficult than Quoyale anticipated, as he and bunny attempt to eke out an existence in this isolated community of unique characters, with a million stories and skeletons in every closet. The same reporting instincts which endears Quoyale to his editor and gets him put on the shipping news beat, also unearths truths about his ancestors' past that horrifies him. But, as he soon discovers, everyone in this town has secrets, and it is better to let sleeping dogs lie.

There is not a weak link in this movie. The Newfoundland scenery is absolutely stunning. The atmosphere of the film is just so perfect for a story that is infused with old, creaky houses and ghosts from the past. The performances are excellent, especially from Julianne Moore, who, if I hadn't known, I would have thought was an actual Newfoundlander. Resident Canadian Gordon Pinsent is magnificent as the weathered Newfoundlander who can't be shocked.

If you want a movie that will warm your heart, is intelligent, and full of characters that you will be sorry to see go, then *The Shipping News* is your flick. It is a fantastic story, masterfully told, and whether or not it is completely faithful in its depiction of Newfoundland, it will have you planning a trip to The Rock. One person I saw the movie with was actually ready to move there!

While I have never read the book (I plan to now!), the people sitting behind me at the theatre said the movie was pretty faithful to the novel. Though she is not actually from Newfoundland, Proulx's depiction of Newfoundland is more endearing than any I've ever seen on CBC. The characters seem so real and so likable (even the unlikable ones!), one really is moved to believe that Newfoundland, despite its harsh climate, is the best place on earth.