Franzen ponders our freedom

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

Freedom

A Novel
By Jonathan Franzen
Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 576 pp. $28

Patty Emerson Berglund is a "lyrics-and-stories gal." She never tires of "cheating men and strong women and the indomitable human spirit."

Neither does Jonathan Franzen. In Freedom, his first novel since The Corrections, Franzen tells the story of Patty and Walter Berglund of St. Paul, Minn., two fundamentally decent people (with two kids, a straight-arrow and a screw-up) who "loved each other and brought each other daily pain."

A tour de force, Freedom should secure Franzen's reputation as one of the finest novelists of his generation. Like The Corrections, this black comedy combines social criticism and political satire. Through Walter Berglund, a lawyer and publicist for a conservation trust, Franzen laments and lambastes the animus that conservatives unleash at critics of the Iraq war; gay marriage; taxes and gas prices that are among the lowest in industrialized democracies; and Mexicans, "who cut their grass and wash their dishes."

If his liberal views are unexceptional, his fatigue at the "ugly rage" on the left as well as right seems spot-on. And his account of mountaintop-removal coal mining; "green employment"; privately funded efforts to save the cerulean warbler; the movement to limit population growth; and corrupt Bush-era military procurement policies is likely to make you laugh with tears in your eyes.

Franzen's beautifully written deconstruction of love, marriage, family, and the fragility of communication and human connection in contemporary America is probing and, at times, profound. Freedom, he reminds us, can generate an intoxicating, innocent, or not so innocent sense of entitlement. As it does in Joey Berglund, a high school student who
defies his parents and moves in with his girlfriend's family, next door.

Freedom, of course, can also generate conflict with a desire to address the needs of those you love. As well as anxiety, anger, disappointment, and self-pity.

Patty, a basketball star in college, who is attracted to rock-and-roller Richard Katz, Walter's best friend, believes for more than a moment that she's wasted her life as a housewife and mother.

Walter sometimes sees himself as a man without a controlling narrative, a "reactive pinball," impelled first in one direction and then another by "each new thing he encountered."

Perhaps, Franzen writes, with his tongue halfway in his cheek, the American experiment in self-government was "statistically skewed from the outset, because it wasn't the people with sociable genes who fled the crowded Old World for the new continent; it was the people who didn't get along well with others."

Franzen gives a resonance and a reality to these age-old debates about freedom and responsibility by setting them in the context of the sights, smells, and sounds of American popular culture. Kids who wear flip-flops, he has Patty observe, think "the world is their bedroom," making noise they can't hear because "they've all got their earbuds in," and taunting "uptight" adults, "who prefer not to look at people's bare feet on the subway."

More poignant, Franzen has Joey, his professional and personal life in crisis, "walk the humid streets of his bleak non-neighborhood" in New York City, throwing away, a few at a time, "the pennies of his innocence, the dimes and quarters of his self-sufficiency," with nobody to tell about his pain, least of all his parents but also his friends, who, to a man, "saw girlfriends as a senseless impediment to the pleasures they intended to spend the next ten years pursuing."

"This is potentially kind of a hard situation," Patty is wont to say. Like most readers, she prefers happy endings. And so, Jonathan Franzen will give us one. Or, more precisely, he'll give us the freedom to choose.

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