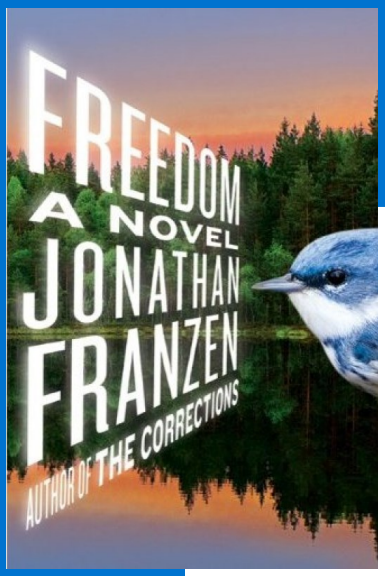

Freedom
Jonathan Franzen

Book Summary

Freedom
Jonathan Franzen, 2010
Farrar, Straus and Giroux
562 pp.
ISBN-13: 9780312600846

Patty and Walter Berglund were the new pioneers of old St. Paul—the gentrifiers, the hands-on parents, the avant-garde of the Whole Foods generation. Patty was the ideal sort of neighbor, who could tell you where to recycle your batteries and how to get the local cops to actually do their job. She was an enviably perfect mother and the wife of Walter's dreams. Together with Walter—environmental lawyer, commuter cyclist, total family man—she was doing her small part to build a better world.

But now, in the new millennium, the Berglunds have become a mystery. Why has their teenage son moved in with the aggressively Republican family next door? Why has Walter taken a job working with Big Coal? What exactly is Richard Katz—outré rocker and Walter's college best friend and rival—still doing in the picture? Most of all, what has happened to Patty? Why has the bright star of Barrier Street become "a very different kind of neighbor," an implacable Fury coming unhinged before the street's attentive eyes?

In his first novel since *The Corrections*, Jonathan Franzen has given us an epic of contemporary love and marriage. *Freedom* comically and tragically captures the temptations and burdens of liberty: the thrills of teenage lust, the shaken compromises of middle age, the wages of suburban sprawl, the heavy weight of empire.

In charting the mistakes and joys of *Freedom's* characters as they struggle to learn how to live in an ever more confusing world, Franzen has produced an indelible and deeply moving portrait of our time.

(*From the publisher*.)

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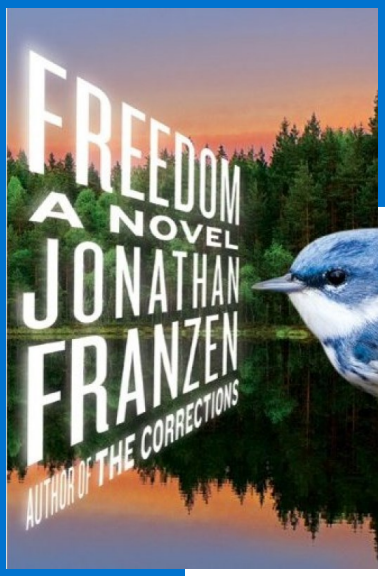

Freedom
Jonathan Franzen

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Author Background

- Birth—1959
- Where—Western Springs, Illinois, USA
- Education—B.A., Swarthmore College; Fulbright Scholar at Freie Universitat in Berlin, Germany
- Awards—National Book Award; Whiting Writer's Award; American Academy's Berlin Prize; Granta, one of "Best American Authors Under 40.
- Currently—New York, New York

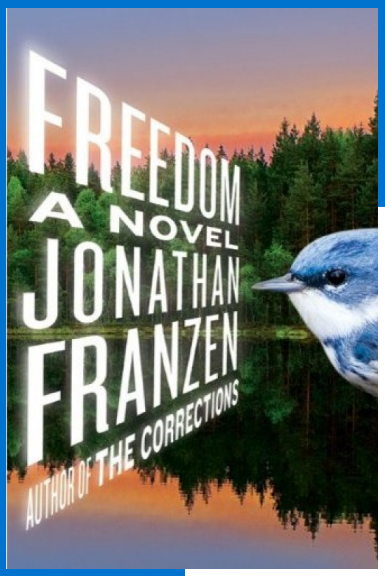
Until his award-winning novel *The Corrections* was published in the fall of 2001, Jonathan Franzen was probably best known for a somewhat dyspeptic 1996 essay he wrote for Harper's entitled "Perchance to Dream." In it, Franzen decried the state of modern American fiction and, by association, that of his own career.

Part of Franzen's frustration may have stemmed from the reception of his first two novels, *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988) and *Strong Motion* (1992). Although both books showcased his formidable literary skills and earned respectful praise from critics, neither one sold well. He won a Whiting Writer's Award for City and, in 1997, the British literary magazine Granta named him one of the 20 best American novelists under the age of 40. Still, major recognition seemed to elude him.

All that changed with *The Corrections*, a sprawling tale of American family dysfunction that was immediately acclaimed a "postmodern masterpiece." At long last, Franzen had found his voice, emerging from the pressure of trying to emulate his literary heroes Don DeLillo and William Gaddis. The *New York Times Book Review* called the novel "marvelous"; The *New York Observer* called it "brilliant"; and the *Boston Globe* called it "smart and boisterous and beautifully paced." In short, *The Corrections* put Franzen on the literary map.

A month later, Franzen's star lost some of its lustre, when he became embroiled in a public relations fiasco. Kingmaker Oprah Winfrey selected *The Corrections* for her popular Book Club, but when the author expressed his discomfort with the endorsement, the show quickly withdrew its certification. A vilified Franzen hastened to explain himself, the book was re-Oprahcized—and in a final salvo, Franzen wrote about the entire experience in a widely read *New Yorker* piece that only served to compound the controversy. As the line from his book goes, "What made corrections possible also doomed them." No matter; what Franzen lost in Oprah's esteem he gained in untold sales from the publicity, and *The Corrections* went on to win the National Book Award.

In 2002, a collection of Franzen's cultural criticism (including the famous Oprah piece and a reworked version of "Perchance to Dream") appeared under the title *How to Be Alone*, reaffirming his status as a writer of elegant nonfiction; and in 2006, he forayed into memoir with *The Discomfort Zone*, a self-lacerating look at his youth, his family, and the forces that shaped him into a writer.
(*From Barnes & Nobel*.)



Freedom
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Book Groups @ Blue Mountains Library

Discussion Questions

1. Jonathan Franzen refers to freedom throughout the novel, including the freedom of Iraqis to become capitalists, Joey's parents attempt to give him an unencumbered life, an inscription on a building at Jessica s college that reads *Use Well Thy Freedom*, and alcoholic Mitch, who is a free man. How do the characters spend their freedom? Is it a liberating or destructive force for them? Which characters are the least free?

2. *Freedom* contains almost cinematic descriptions of the characters dwelling places, from the house in St. Paul to Abigail's eclectic Manhattan apartment. How do the homes in *Freedom* reflect the personalities of their occupants? Where do Walter and Patty feel most at home? Which of your homes has been most significant in your life?

3. As a young woman, Patty is phenomenally strong on the basketball court yet vulnerable in relationships, especially with her workaholic parents, her friend Eliza, and the conflicted duo of Richard and Walter. What did her rapist, Ethan Post, teach her about vulnerability? After the rape, what did her father and the coaches attempt to teach her about strength?

4. What feeds Richard and Walter's lifelong cycle of competition and collaboration? If you were Patty, would you have made the road trip with Richard? What does *Freedom* say about the repercussions of college, not only for Walter and Patty but also for their children?

5. How would you characterize Patty's writing? How does her storytelling style compare to the narrator s voice in the rest of the novel? If Walter had written a memoir, what might he have said about his victories, and his suffering?

6. Which tragicomic passages in *Freedom* made you laugh? Which characters elicited continual sadness and sympathy in you? How does Franzen balance poignant moments with absurdity?

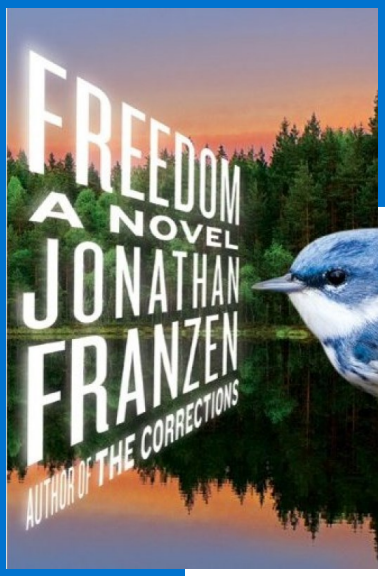
7. Discuss the nature of attraction, both in the novel and in your own experience. What does it take to be desirable in *Freedom*? In the novel, how do couples sustain intense attraction for each other over many phases of their lives?

8. Does history repeat itself throughout Walter's ancestry, with his Swedish grandfather, Einar, who built roads, loathed communism and slow drivers, and was cruel to his wife; his father, Gene, a war hero with fantasies of success in the motel business; and his mother, Dorothy, whose cosmopolitan family was Walter s salvation? What do all the characters in the novel want from their parents? How do their relationships with their parents affect their relationships with lovers?

9. After her father s death, Patty asks her mother why she ignored Patty s success in sports, even though Joyce was a driven woman who might have relished her daughter's achievements. She doesn't get a satisfactory answer; Joyce vaguely says that she wasn't into sports. Why do you think Patty did not garner as much attention as her sisters did? How did your opinion of Veronica and Abigail shift throughout the novel? Does Patty treat Jessica the same way her parents treated her?

10. How is Lalitha different from the other characters in the novel? How does her motivation for working with the Cerulean Mountain Trust compare to Walter's? Does Walter relate to the cerulean warbler on some level?

11. What accounts for the differences between Joey and Jessica? Is it simply a matter of genes and temperament, or does gender matter in their situation?



Freedom
Jonathan Franzen

Discussion Questions (continued)

12. What does Joey want and get from Jenna and Connie? What do they want and get from him?

13. Did Carol and Blake evolve as parents? What sort of life do you predict for their twin daughters?

14. Near the end of the novel, Franzen describes Walter s relationship with Bobby the cat as a sort of troubled marriage. Was their divorce inevitable? When Patty is eventually able to serve as neighborhood peacemaker, even negotiating a truce with Linda Hoffbauer, what does this say about her role in Walter's life? Does she dilute his sense of purpose and principle, or does she keep him grounded in reality?

15. How would you answer the essential question raised by Walter's deal with the Texas rancher Vin Haven: What is the best way to achieve environmental conservation?

16. Consider the novel s epigraph, taken from Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. The lines are spoken by Paulina in the final act, after she learns the fate of her dead husband. She receives the news while surrounded by happy endings for the other characters. The most obvious parallel is to Walter, but who else might be reflected in these lines?

17. What unique truths emerge in *Freedom*? In what ways does this novel enhance themes (such as love and commitment, family angst, the intensity of adolescence, and the individual against the giant corporate, governmental, and otherwise) featured in Franzen's previous works, including his nonfiction?

(*Questions issued by publisher*.)

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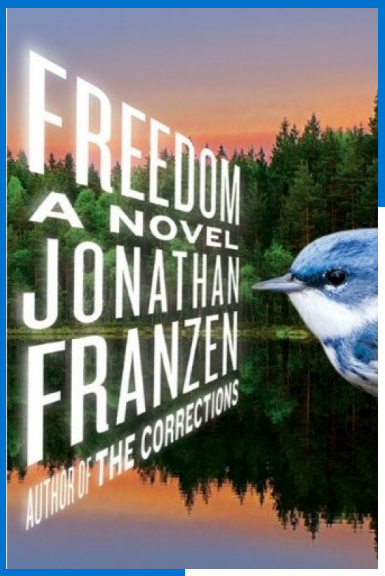

Freedom
Jonathan Franzen

Reviews

Jonathan Franzen's galvanic new novel, *Freedom*, showcases his impressive literary toolkit—every essential storytelling skill, plus plenty of bells and whistles—and his ability to throw open a big, Updikean picture window on American middle-class life. With this book, he's not only created an unforgettable family, he's also completed his own transformation from a sharp-elbowed, apocalyptic satirist focused on sending up the socio-economic-political plight of this country into a kind of 19th-century realist concerned with the public and private lives of his characters.... Franzen has written his most deeply felt novel yet—a novel that turns out to be both a compelling biography of a dysfunctional family and an indelible portrait of our times.
New York Times

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.... Like all great novels, *Freedom* does not just tell an engrossing story. It illuminates, through the steady radiance of its author's profound moral intelligence, the world we thought we knew.
New York Times Book Review

Freedom, his new book, and *The Corrections*, its predecessor, are at the same time engrossing sagas and scathing satires, and both books are funny, sad, cranky, revelatory, hugely ambitious, deeply human and, at times, truly disturbing. Together, they provide a striking and quite possibly enduring portrait of America in the years on either side of the turn of the 21st century.... His writing is so gorgeous.... Franzen is one of those exceptional writers whose works define an era and a generation, and his books demand to be read.
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

A lavishly entertaining account of a family at war with itself, and a brilliant dissection of the dissatisfactions and disappointments of contemporary American life... Compelling.... *Freedom*, though frequently funny, is ultimately tender: its emotional currency is both the pain and the pleasure that that word implies.... A rare pleasure, an irresistible invitation to binge-read.... That it also grapples with a fundamental dilemma of modern middle-class America—namely: Is it really still OK to spend your life asserting your *unalienable* right to the pursuit of happiness, when the rest of the world is in such a state?—is what makes it something wonderful. If Freedom doesn't qualify as a Great American Novel for our time, then I don't know what would.... The reason to celebrate him is not that he is doing something new but that he is doing something old, presumed dead—and doing it brilliantly. Freedom bids for a place alongside the great achievements of his predecessors, not his contemporaries; it belongs on the same shelf as John Updike's *Rabbit*, Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Philip Roth's *American Pastoral*. It is the first Great American Novel of the post-Obama era
Telegraph (*UK*)

It's refreshing to see a novelist who wants to engage the questions of our time in the tradition of 20th-century greats like John Steinbeck and Sinclair Lewis.... [This] is a book you'll still be thinking about long after you've finished reading it.
Associated Press

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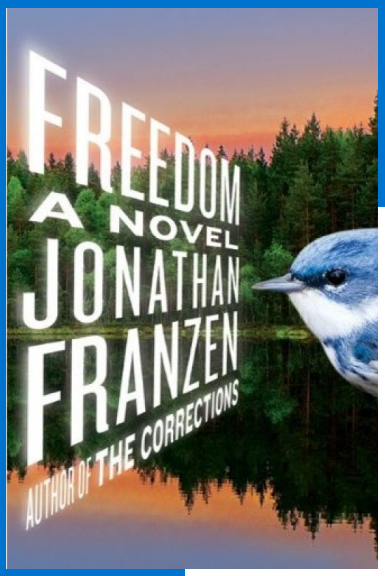

Freedom
Jonathan Franzen

Reviews (continued)

Nine years after winning the National Book Award, Franzen's *The Corrections* consistently appears on "Best of the Decade" lists and continues to enjoy a popularity that borders on the epochal, so much so that the first question facing Franzen's feverishly awaited follow-up is whether it can find its own voice in its predecessor's shadow. In short: yes, it does, and in a big way. Readers will recognize the strains of suburban tragedy afflicting St. Paul, Minn.'s Walter and Patty Berglund, once-gleaming gentrifiers now marred in the eyes of the community by Patty's increasingly erratic war on the right-wing neighbors with whom her eerily independent and sexually precocious teenage son, Joey, is besot, and, later, "greener than Greenpeace" Walter's well-publicized dealings with the coal industry's efforts to demolish a West Virginia mountaintop. The surprise is that the Berglunds' fall is outlined almost entirely in the novel's first 30 pages, freeing Franzen to delve into Patty's affluent East Coast girlhood, her sexual assault at the hands of a well-connected senior, doomed career as a college basketball star, and the long-running love triangle between Patty, Walter, and Walter's best friend, the budding rock star Richard Katz. By 2004, these combustible elements give rise to a host of modern predicaments: Richard, after a brief peak, is now washed up, living in Jersey City, laboring as a deck builder for Tribeca yuppies, and still eyeing Patty. The ever-scheming Joey gets in over his head with psychotically dedicated high school sweetheart and as a sub-subcontractor in the re-building of postinvasion Iraq. Walter's many moral compromises, which have grown to include shady dealings with Bush-Cheney cronies (not to mention the carnal intentions of his assistant, Lalitha), are taxing him to the breaking point. Patty, meanwhile, has descended into a morass of depression and self-loathing, and is considering breast augmentation when not working on her therapist-recommended autobiography. Franzen pits his excavation of the cracks in the nuclear family's facade against a backdrop of all-American faults and fissures, but where the book stands apart is that, no longer content merely to record the breakdown, Franzen tries to account for his often stridently unlikable characters and find where they (and we) went wrong, arriving at—incredibly—genuine hope.
Publishers Weekly

"Use Well Thy Freedom": this motto, etched in stone on a college campus, hints at the moral of Franzen's sprawling, darkly comic new novel. The nature of personal freedom, the fluidity of good and evil, the moral relativism of nearly everything—Franzen takes on these thorny issues via the lives of Walter and Patty Berglund of St. Paul. With two kids, a Volvo in the garage, and a strong social conscience, the Berglunds allow their good deeds to be tinged with just a hint of smugness (which eventually comes back to haunt them). Weaving in and out of their lives is old college friend Richard Katz, low-level rock star and ultra-hip antihero. Time goes by, the kids grow up, betrayals occur, and the thin line between right and wrong blurs. Fully utilizing their freedom—to make mistakes, confuse love with lust, and mix up goodness and greed—the Berglunds give Franzen the opportunity to limn the absurdities of our modern culture. Granola moms, raging Republicans, war profiteers, crooked environmentalists, privileged offspring, and poverty-bred rednecks each enjoy the uniquely American freedom to make disastrous choices and continually reinvent themselves. *Verdict*: As in his National Book Award winner, *The Corrections*, Franzen reveals a penchant for smart, deceptively simple, and culturally astute writing. Highly recommended. —*Susanne Wells, P.L. of Cincinnati & Hamilton City*
Library Journal

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