



## Freedom: A Novel

By Jonathan Franzen

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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.

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# Freedom: A Novel

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## Freedom: A Novel By Jonathan Franzen Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

**Amazon Best of the Month, August 2010:** "The awful thing about life is this:" says Octave to the Marquis in Renoir's *Rules of the Game*. "Everyone has his reasons." That could be a motto for novelists as well, few more so than Jonathan Franzen, who seems less concerned with creating merely likeable characters than ones who are fully alive, in all their self-justifying complexity. *Freedom* is his fourth novel, and, yes, his first in nine years since *The Corrections*. Happy to say, it's very much a match for that great book, a wrenching, funny, and forgiving portrait of a Midwestern family (from St. Paul this time, rather than the fictional St. Jude). Patty and Walter Berglund find each other early: a pretty jock, focused on the court and a little lost off it, and a stolid budding lawyer, besotted with her and almost burdened by his integrity. They make a family and a life together, and, over time, slowly lose track of each other. Their stories align at times with Big Issues--among them mountaintop removal, war profiteering, and rock'n'roll--and in some ways can't be separated from them, but what you remember most are the characters, whom you grow to love the way families often love each other: not for their charm or goodness, but because they have their reasons, and you know them. --Tom Nissley

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. 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.

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

### The Big Theme: Freedom--or Darwinian Survival?

"One of the ways of surrendering freedom is to actually have convictions," Franzen told *Time* magazine (8/12/10). "And a way of further surrendering freedom is to spend quite a bit of time acting on those

convictions." Certainly, the novel's title announces its big theme--what freedom means to ideology, family, career--and the picture is not pretty. Patty, who recounts the Berglunds' past in a third-person autobiography, reflects that "all she ever seemed to get for all her choices and all her freedom was more miserable." It turns out that Franzen, too, thinks that America's obsession with personal liberty is illusory and ruinous. Even more tragic, Darwinian competition defines freedom: Richard and Walter compete for Patty, and Patty and Walter compete for their children's love, for example. Certainly, wrote *Slate*, "everyone in the novel comes to rue freedom, their own and others'." Many critics thought this leitmotif truly reflects modern American life. But a few called it heavy-handed. "Unfortunately," noted the *Washington Post*, "the novel doesn't offer its themes so much as bully us into accepting them with knife-to-the-throat insistence." Then again, that kind of "insistence" is Darwin for you.

### **The Approach: A Tolstoyan Perspective**

"Given his book's scope and its repeated allusions to *War and Peace*," noted the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "Franzen seems intent on writing a full-throated 19th-century-style novel--the personal played out against the backdrop of history"--9/11, the war in Iraq, late free-market capitalism, suburbanization, profiteering, wildlife conservation, and gentrification. Yet while his wide lens allows him to use the Berglunds as a filter to explore contemporary America, Franzen keeps his characters' messy tensions in sight and absorbs "Tolstoy's astonishing capacity for [individual] empathy" (*Slate*). Franzen turns his characters' private lives into public discourse as well: through the Internet, blogging, and YouTube, the Berglunds broadcast their concerns until their "personal crises are thus framed as a microcosm of a national obsession with freedom and global pre-eminence" (*Wall Street Journal*). Could Franzen, as *Slate* suggested, be "the Tolstoy of the Internet era"?

### **The Result: How Does It All Stack Up?**

Nine years have passed since the publication of *The Corrections*, and almost every critic made the inevitable comparison. "Here's another Midwestern family, another surgical exploration of the spent body and wretched soul of America, another ... inquiry into the paradox of being human," said the *San Francisco Chronicle*. A few opined that Franzen breaks little new ground with *Freedom*, and the *Washington Post* went so far as to call it "stale." Others thought that the novel "sharpens the focus of [Franzen's] investigations, avoiding the excesses of the earlier novel" (*Los Angeles Times*), and that, more tenderly and soberly, it walks the line between social satire and realism. "Franzen's characters still fail here, and fail spectacularly, but the writer's final instinct, having given complex life to the Berglunds, is now to catch them when they fall ... where once he would have mocked," wrote the *Telegraph*. Most agreed that Franzen has evolved as a novelist since *The Corrections*--and that *Freedom* is equally enjoyable, "equally dire" (*Slate*).

"[To] do something new is not to develop a form for the novel that has never been seen on earth before," Franzen told *Time* magazine. "It means to try to come to terms as a person and a citizen with what's happening in the world now and to do it in some comprehensible, coherent way" (8/12/10). Critics agreed that *Freedom*, heralded as a Great American Novel, offers a crystal clear portrait of our times, for better or for worse, and that, like *The Corrections*, it is a sweeping canvas of contemporary American life. Through richly nuanced characters whose large and small concerns we all recognize (from recycling batteries and using cloth diapers to wrestling with values), Franzen delves deep into the disturbed state of American life and its denizens, "confused, searching people capable of change and perhaps even transcendence" (*New York Times*). They may not all be likable, but they're human. Many critics thought Patty--and her autobiography--one of the most compelling, wrenching characters in recent literature. And there are few prose stylists as masterful: "Love him or hate him ... you've got to admit [Franzen is] an extraordinary stylist, America's best answer to Martin Amis," wrote the *Washington Post*.

Of course, with a novel built with such great expectations, criticism was inevitable, even from reviewers who professed to be enthralled with the work. A few took issue with what they described as Franzen's superior tone and dialogue, which sometimes "lapses into filibuster" (*San Francisco Chronicle*) and threatens to undermine the novel's liberal politics. Some also faulted Patty's manuscript, which plays an important role in chronicling the source of the Berglunds' problems, as inconsistent, confusing, and acerbic. A few far-fetched

plots (including Joey's involvement with a corrupt, Halliburton-like corporation) confounded others. But most disturbing of all, perhaps, is Franzen's bleak view of human nature. "The only way to get through hell, Mr. Franzen suggests, is to resign yourself to living there," noted the *Wall Street Journal*. But classic works--those destined to live long lives on our bookshelves--always raise questions about the questions they raise. To sum it up: "If *Freedom* doesn't qualify as a Great American Novel for our time, then I don't know what would" (*Telegraph*).

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Robert Carlson:**

Information is provisions for folks to get better life, information these days can get by anyone from everywhere. The information can be a know-how or any news even a huge concern. What people must be consider while those information which is in the former life are difficult to be find than now is taking seriously which one is acceptable to believe or which one typically the resource are convinced. If you receive the unstable resource then you obtain it as your main information you will see huge disadvantage for you. All those possibilities will not happen inside you if you take *Freedom: A Novel* as the daily resource information.

#### **Lyman Johnson:**

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#### **Angeline Allison:**

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#### **Wilma Tovar:**

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