

Jonathan Franzen and the Future of the Novel:
Embracing Change to Hold Onto Tradition

by

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For my parents.

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Abstract

In this thesis I examine the work of Jonathan Franzen in an effort to propose that his novel, *The Corrections*, successfully responds to the challenges that contemporary society poses to authors. Even as the Media has latched onto the idea that the novel is failing in its role as a medium of expression, Franzen's novels have made him into an international sensation. I focus my discussion on Franzen's two most recent novels, *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, and I compare the two in an effort to show that *The Corrections* is better suited for a contemporary audience. I argue that by embracing the contemporary moment, *The Corrections* is able to hold on to traditional literary values, and thereby presents us with a probable path down which the development of the novel will travel.

In my first chapter, I examine *The Corrections* and *Freedom* in terms of characterization, portrayal of family, and use of politics. I argue that *The Corrections* uses these elements more effectively than does *Freedom*, and that it is therefore the more successful project of the two. *The Corrections* also exploits the structural versatility of the novel that Mikhail Bakhtin theorizes upon, which implies that the novel has the ability to be molded to effectively appeal to its contemporary audience.

I propose in my second chapter that the commoditization of the novel and the pressure to maintain a public persona are two challenges presented to contemporary authors. I will explicate Franzen's rocky relationship with the Media, as well as his relationship with trends in contemporary literature, in an effort to show that the production of a novel has the potential to affect its content. I then endeavor to show that the need to maintain a public persona puts pressure on contemporary authors to appear to be authentic, which speaks to Sarah Brouillette's claim that contemporary literature is obsessed with authenticity. I attempt to show that the different circumstances surrounding the production of *The Corrections* and that of *Freedom* accounts, at least in part, for some of the differences between the two novels.

In my third chapter, I argue that *The Corrections* is better suited to its contemporary audience than is *Freedom*. Using Zadie Smith's essay, "Two Directions for the Novel," as a model, I will attempt to show that *Freedom* is self-conscious to the point of being alienating, while *The Corrections* is engaging by virtue of the fact that it appears to be unselfconscious. I conclude this chapter by suggesting that while *Freedom* is a well-written novel, its style is not suited to its contemporary audience as successfully as is the style in *The Corrections*. The implication here is that so long as the novel is adapted to its audience, it can maintain its relevance in society.

The novel's success as a medium of expression depends on its ability to understand its audience. My hope is to show that *The Corrections* has this ability, and it thereby provides a convincing model for the future development of the novel.

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter 1 – Structural Flexibility: Franzen and the Novel	13
Chapter 2 – The Challenges of Professional Authorship: Franzen as an Author	32
Chapter 3 – Evolving With the Audience: Franzen and the Reader	57
Conclusion	70
Works Consulted	73

Introduction: Franzen Gives Us a Model for the Future

“The novel may thus serve as a document for gauging the lofty and still distant destinies of literature’s future unfolding.” – Mikhail Bakhtin¹

On November 14, 2001, Jonathan Franzen novel *The Corrections*, which was published in 2001, won the National Book Award for Fiction. The award is given to a single author each year, and fellow recipients of this highly sought after title include William Faulkner, Philip Roth, Alice Walker and John Updike—the standard for the National Book Award is set high. Franzen has incited quite a stir in the literary world. He has written four novels, a collection of essays, a memoir and regularly contributes to newspapers and magazines, both literary and nonliterary. *The New Yorker* has named Franzen as one of the “Twenty Writers for the 21st Century,” and in 2010 Franzen was featured on the cover of *Time*, making him the first American author to make the cover since Stephen King. Moreover, *Freedom* has been publicly praised by many esteemed public figures, ranging from President Barack Obama to actress Natalie Portman. Clearly, Franzen’s work has made an impression on contemporary American society, as these awards are just a sampling of the many honors that Franzen has achieved. However, this notoriety is not completely the product of praise. On the contrary, Franzen has attracted as much negative attention as he has positive. For every review that names him among the greats, another calls him an elitist snob—a claim that is subject to question, but not entirely without foundation, given his hesitancy toward allowing his name to be associated any label that does not seem “literary” in his view. The combined effect of these

¹ Taken from Mikhail Bakhtin’s essay, “Epic and Novel.”

praises and criticisms has contributed to Franzen's position as a very influential author in contemporary society. This thesis aims to show that Franzen's approach to the craft of writing has the potential to shape the future development of the American novel.

In order to fully understand Franzen's approach toward writing, one must first gain a bit of understanding about Franzen's upbringing and personal life, as his personal experiences make frequent appearances in both his writing.² Franzen, who was born in 1959, grew up in Webster Groves, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis. In his memoir, *The Discomfort Zone*, which was published in 2006, he tells us that he was awkward and nerdy as a child. He tells us about his interest in Charles Schultz, the artist of the "Peanuts" cartoons, and how deeply Schultz' work moved him. Though of course the memoir is written in retrospect, it is fitting (and amusing) to imagine a young, awkward Franzen with his nose in a book, trying to figure out what exactly Charlie Brown is getting at. After completing his childhood in Webster Groves, Franzen went on to attend Swarthmore College, where he earned a degree in German. He then studied at the Freie Universität in Berlin as a Fulbright scholar. Franzen also worked in a lab at Harvard University's Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences. After he completed school, Franzen moved to New York City. He was married in 1982 to a woman who is also a writer, but they separated in 1994

² My claim that knowledge of Franzen's personal story enhances a reader's understanding of his work is based on the fact that Franzen has made a point of publicizing the circumstances of his upbringing and his reflections upon these circumstances. He has offered readers the opportunity to get a sense for what motivates his writing, which suggests that he considers this type of literary analysis to be relevant. I will discuss the different implications that arise from such authorial candidness, and the social factors that could be driving this openness in Chapter 2.

and are now divorced. Franzen currently splits his time between the Upper East Side of New York City, and Boulder Creek, California.

From the beginning of his career, Franzen gained a great deal of attention for his writing, though he did not fully step into the spotlight until he published *The Corrections* in 2001. It is useful to think of his writing career in relation to the publication of this novel, as the reception that it received changed the course of Franzen's career. Prior to this event, Franzen published two other novels. In 1988, he published his first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City*. The novel deals with the phenomena of political conspiracy and financial trouble through the lens of a single family located in St. Louis, Missouri. The novel was generally well received, which placed Franzen on the radar in the literary world. Reviewers began to pay attention to Franzen, and in 1988, he was awarded the Whiting Writers' Award.³ *The Twenty-Seventh City* showed the public that Franzen had talent, and created the expectation that he was likely to produce more laudable work during his career as a writer. Four years later, in 1992, Franzen published his second novel, *Strong Motion*. This novel follows its two young protagonists, Louis Holland and Renée Seitchek, through their investigation of a string of earthquakes that have recently hit the Boston area. Again, Franzen's novel met with a mostly positive response, though there were those critics who did not feel that his second novel displayed the same caliber of writing as his first. Readers and critics who were not entirely impressed by *Strong Motion* frequently cited the novel's many intertwined plots as the source of their

³ The Whiting Writers' Award is awarded annually to ten emerging writers. The award is presented by the Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation to writers who display a great deal of "accomplishment and promise" ("Whiting Writers' Award" n.p.).

disappointment. A typical response appeared in a review in *The New York Times*: “Though it is more steadily and earnestly realistic in tone than “The Twenty-Seventh City,” the narrative here is marred by the unlikely contrivances that link up the many plots and themes” (Rubins 2). Along similar lines, a review in the *Los Angeles Times* claims that one of the connections that Franzen depicts “seems too tightly and forcedly contrived” (Eder 1). However, this same reviewer later says of the characters in this novel, “Their interior monologues are eruptions or dreams; rarely do they act as connections... this is Franzen's way of bringing us to them. We experience them as we experience people in real life” (Eder 2). A mixed review of this nature suggests that Franzen’s work, too, is mixed; it contains both flashes of brilliance and room for improvement. One thing emerges as certain though: Jonathan Franzen has ambition.

Franzen’s life changed completely when he published *The Corrections*. He was transformed from a talented but not widely noticed author, to a literary superstar whose face appeared on the cover of *Time*. Even before the novel was published in the beginning of September of 2001, the literary community was buzzing about the book. For example, a Canadian reviewer referred to *The Corrections* as “[a novel] to be published in the U.S. in the fall, [that] was being touted as the ‘book of the fair’” as early as June of 2001 (Richler 1). In July, a reviewer for *Booklist Online*⁴ claimed that the novel was “ferociously detailed,

⁴ The American Library Association has been publishing *Booklist*, a book review magazine, for over 100 years now. The original intent of the magazine was to provide libraries with the information necessary to make informed decisions when purchasing books, although students and recreational readers use the magazine as

gratifyingly mind-expanding, and daringly complex and unhurried” (Seaman 1947). The novel was eagerly anticipated, and its popularity spread widely; the novel topped multiple bestseller lists, both nationally and internationally, by the fall of 2001. Oprah Winfrey selected *The Corrections* as one of her Book List picks, although Franzen’s negative reaction to her endorsement led her to rescind her offer to have him appear on her talk show.⁵ The hardcover sales alone exceeded one million copies, with the book having been translated into more than thirty-five different languages. The novel was nominated for a plethora of different literary awards and honors, and was the recipient of the National Book Award in 2001, and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 2002.⁶ *The Corrections* was overwhelmingly successful, and it set the bar high for Franzen’s future work.

Jonathan Franzen’s latest novel, *Freedom*, which was published just last year, made quite a stir in the literary community as well. The novel debuted at number one on the *Time* bestseller list, and it was in conjunction with its release that Franzen made his appearance on the cover of *Time* (“Jonathan Franzen: Award-winning novelist, *The Corrections & Freedom*” n.p.). In the August 19, 2012 edition of *The New York Times* “Sunday Book Review,” Sam Tanenhaus refers to the novel as “a masterpiece of American fiction” (Tanenhaus 1). In 2011, Franzen was the

well. *Booklist Online* is an online database associated with the magazine, which contains over 135,000 book reviews.

⁵ The significance of this event will be explicated in Chapter 2.

⁶ The James Tait Black Memorial Prizes, established in 1919 in honor of James Tait Black, a partner at the Scottish publishing house of A & C Black Ltd., are some of the most prestigious awards given to books written in English, and are the oldest literary awards in Britain. Past award winners include D. H. Lawrence, Nadine Gordimer, Cormac McCarthy and Zadie Smith (“James Tait Black Prize Winners: About the Awards” n.p.).

recipient of the John Gardner Fiction Book Award⁷ and the Heartland Prize⁸ for his writing in *Freedom*. Oprah also selected *Freedom* to appear on her Book List, and this time Franzen accepted her invitation to appear on her show. However, unlike *The Corrections*, *Freedom* was not nominated for the National Book Award. The news that Franzen's second novel did not receive the critical acclaim of his first was shocking to many. The online edition of *The Boston Globe*, for example, published an article about the event—or nonevent as it were—titled, “Franzen’s ‘Freedom’ gets snubbed” (Greenlee 1). Franzen’s fans expected his fourth novel to be as prestigious as his third, and therefore expected it to be awarded similar honors. What is striking about the fact that *Freedom* did not meet with as much success as did *The Corrections* is that the novels have many shared features. Both novels follow a nuclear family as its members face various challenges, both take place in a contemporary setting, and both connect the characters to their respective settings through politics. Furthermore, each novel contains elements that are characteristic of Franzen’s sense of humor, such as dry wit and wordplay. If the two novels have so much in common, and the media praised *Freedom* so highly, then why is it that *The Corrections* was awarded higher honors? This thesis will seek to answer this question in pursuit of its larger goal: to propose that *The Corrections* is a novel that embraces the challenges presented by contemporary society, and in doing so, it is

⁷ The John Gardner Fiction Book Award was established in honor of John Gardner, who was a professor who taught creative writing at Binghamton University, which is the organization that sponsors the award. Past award recipients include Jane Smiley and Tobias Wolff (“Binghamton University John Gardner Fiction Book Award” n.p.).

⁸ The Heartland Prize, which was established in 1988 by *The Chicago Tribune*, is awarded annually to one book in the category of fiction, and one in the category of nonfiction. Past recipients of this award include Aleksandar Hemon and Alice Sebold (“2011 Chicago Tribune Heartland Prize Winners” n.p.).

able to hold on to traditional literary techniques, and thus the novel presents us with a convincing model for the future development of the novel.

While *The Corrections* and *Freedom* each present us with a reasonable model for the novel, this thesis would like to propose the idea that *The Corrections* is a more successful model in the context of contemporary American society.⁹ In order to attempt to make such a claim, I will address several questions: What are the differences between *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, and how do these differences affect the success of these novels relative to one another? How do publicity and media attention affect the craft of writing, and is it possible that these factors are in some way responsible for the observable differences between *The Corrections* and *Freedom*? How does Franzen negotiate the various challenges presented by contemporary society, and what does his approach to these problems lend to the future development of the development of the novel? It is my hope that by answering these questions, I will be able to present a valid argument in favor of *The Corrections* as a model for the future of the novel, in response to the idea currently being circulated by the Media that the novel may be “failing,” or may soon “fail,” in its role as a medium of expression. Writers and publishers alike express the fear that the novel may be losing its relevance as a medium, and I will attempt to show that Franzen’s *The Corrections* provides evidence to the contrary of this fear.

⁹ This thesis focuses on the relationship between *The Corrections* and contemporary American society by virtue of the fact that Franzen is and American author. Though both *The Corrections* and *Freedom* were successful abroad as well, the specifics of the novels’ international reception are outside of the scope of this thesis. I will at times refer to British authors, and to trends in contemporary Western society so as not to exclude the idea that Franzen’s work is relevant to non-Americans, but I will not be analyzing the possibility of this relevance.

My first chapter will focus on the specific differences between the two novels, and what makes *The Corrections* a more successful novel than *Freedom*. As was mentioned above, the novels share several important characteristics, but present these features differently. First, I will argue that *The Corrections* is successful in terms of character development, its portrayal of family, and its entrance into contemporary political discussions. I will endeavor to show these three novelistic devices, as well as the novel's tone, are well suited to Franzen's characteristic authorial techniques—using the microcosm of the family to illustrate political phenomena, and incorporating his own sense of humor into a novel—and that thus the novel is a successful project. During this discussion, I will use Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the novel as a fluid genre, which he explains in his 1981 essay, "Epic and Novel," to show that part of Franzen's success with *The Corrections* is due to his exploitation of the novel's structural flexibility. Furthermore, I will explain Franzen's theory of the reader, which he explains in his 2002 essay, "Mr. Difficult," and apply it to his writing. Next, I will evaluate *Freedom* in terms of its characterization, portrayal of family, and presentation of politics in order to highlight the extent to which this novel diverges from *The Corrections* with respect to these features. I would like to demonstrate that Franzen's approach to the novel in *Freedom* does not mesh as well with his usual style of characterization and sense of humor, and therefore this novel is not as convincing as is *The Corrections*.

My second chapter shifts gears to examine the challenges faced by contemporary authors. In this chapter, I will analyze the conditions in which Franzen, as a contemporary author, writes his novels. This thesis will propose that

two important challenges faced by contemporary authors are the commoditization of the novel, and the commoditization of the author's public persona. The novel's commodity status means that it can be sold and purchased within a capitalist economy; a novel is assigned monetary value based on circumstances of economic supply and demand. Participation in a capitalist market introduces competition into the craft of writing: authors must compete with each other in order to sell as many novels as they can. The competitive nature of the craft has created the idea that we are in search of the next "Great American Author," as he or she will produce the next "Great American Novel." The phrase is as ambiguous as it is singular, and it puts pressure on authors to produce novels that are "great" in their own estimation, with the hopes that readers and critics will agree. In his book, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History*, which was published in 2005, Moretti suggests that patterns and trends among novels of a similar time period can inform us about that time period. Using Franco Moretti's approach, I would like to show that aspirations of greatness underpin the trends that contemporary literature is currently experiencing, particularly the trend among contemporary authors to write novels that are experimental in form, and the tendency of authors to write very long novels. I will attempt to evaluate the ways in which Franzen fits into the second of these trends, but pushes back upon the first, and what this shows about his approach to the craft of writing. Just as an author's work is commoditized, an author's public persona is commoditized by the Media, in the sense that it is assigned value based on how likeable and authentic that the persona seems. An author's public persona is the version of that author from which readers usually

form their opinions of the author, which means that this persona gets associated with his or her work. In order to evaluate the affects of both types of commoditization, I will be using professor and theorist, Sarah Brouillette's, broad approach to the study of literature, which she explains in her book, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*, which was published in 2011. Brouillette considers the production and marketing of a novel to be part of the story of that novel, and includes in her analysis of a novel all of the writing that is connected to it, including pieces such as endorsements, the preface, blubs on the back cover, and interviews, as well as just the content of the novel. I will evaluate Franzen's reluctance toward appearing on Oprah Winfrey's talk show in 2001, keeping in mind Brouillette's claim that the production of a novel affects it as a possible explanation for Franzen's hesitancy to associate his novels with labels and endorsements that he has not created. Last, I will explain Brouillette's claim that there exists in contemporary literature an obsession with authenticity. She argues that authors are expected to maintain credible public personae, that they experience anxiety as a result of this expectation, and thus authenticity has come to be a dominant theme in contemporary literature. I will evaluate Franzen's responses to these various pressures, and I will propose that his frequent publication of autobiographical writing is evidence of his anxiety about his public identity. This thesis hopes to suggest that the increase in fame that Franzen experienced between the publication of *The Corrections* and the writing and production of *Freedom* may have influenced the content of the latter novel.

The third chapter will present the largest claim of this thesis: *The Corrections* experiences greater success than does *Freedom* because it is better suited to the contemporary audience for which it is written. This chapter is centered about Zadie Smith's essay, "Two Directions For the Novel," in which Smith presents us with two competing models for the type of novel upon which the future development of the genre will be modeled. She claims that the historical moment of which we are part is not particularly welcoming of the novel in general, and that therefore the survival of multiple, opposing models for the genre is unlikely. For Smith, a novel that is not only aware of its social circumstances, but properly adapted to these circumstances, would provide us with a plausible model for the future. Specifically, she argues that contemporary society has become obsessed with authenticity, and that this obsession leads to anxiety within the novel. I will propose that *The Corrections* successfully navigates the problem of authenticity, which makes it a novel that is well suited to the skeptical, postmodern audience for which it is written. Though I will explain in detail what I mean by "postmodern" later in this thesis, what I am mainly referring to is a tendency toward skepticism. Postmodernism is marked by a hesitancy to trust appearances, which ties in directly with the obsession with authenticity that Brouillette and Smith observe. This dubiousness that seems to pervade contemporary society is something that affects the craft of writing, in terms of authorship and readership, and authors can either embrace it, or resist it. *The Corrections* seems to be aware of possible skepticism on the part of the audience, but does not spend a great deal of time trying to convince the reader that it knows. The novel simply tells its story, making use of tools such as relatable characters and

humor to connect with the reader. *Freedom*, on the other hand, is anxious about the potentially skeptical reader, and so it works too hard to convince the reader of its authenticity. The novel is written in lyrical realism, a style that purports to be objective, and reminds us of the politics that shape the characters to the point that these characters become static and unlikable. These novels present us with two possible methods for dealing with the problem of authenticity, and this thesis will attempt to show that *The Corrections* has a better method.

If *The Corrections* can, in fact, be considered successful in its ability to respond to and navigate the challenges that contemporary society poses to the novel, the implication is that the novel is a relevant medium of expression in contemporary society. Perhaps certain types of novels are, or will become, less relevant, but due to its unique structural flexibility, the novel can always be adapted to a new audience. *The Corrections* displays the novel's adaptability, and in so doing, it provides us with a probable model for the future direction of the novel.

CHAPTER 1

Structural Flexibility: Franzen and the Novel

“People wonder why the novel is the most popular form of literature; people wonder why it is read more than books of science or books of metaphysics. The reason is very simple; it is merely that the novel is more true than they are.” – G. K.

*Chesterton*¹⁰

The novel is a most difficult genre to define. How long does a novel have to be? Are novels meant to be funny, realistic, fantastical, harsh, or some combination thereof? What kind of a story ought the novel to tell? These are just a few of the many questions for which one would be hard-pressed to give a single answer. Mikhail Bakhtin suggests that it is so difficult to define the novel because the task is impossible: the novel’s form is always evolving, and so it defies definition. In “Epic and Novel,” Bakhtin explains what makes the novel so distinct from other genres. He begins by defining ancient genres as “completed genres” (“Epic and Novel” 3). He is referring here to genres that have been handed down to us in a well-defined form that is no longer in the process of evolving, such as the epic. He emphasizes the fact that while such genres can be studied and used in the form that we know them, they are not structurally malleable. He goes on to explain that the novel, on the other hand, is not completed, and is therefore still able to be molded. He says of this phenomenon, “Studying other genres is analogous to studying dead languages; studying the novel, on the other hand, is like studying languages that are not only alive, but still young” (3). Bakhtin sees the novel as a genre that is not yet complete

¹⁰ From Chesterton’s 1905 book, *Heretics*.

in its formation, and may never be done forming, which means that it has a potentially infinite capacity for change. The novel's lack of structural parameters means that there are very few rules dictating how a novel ought to be written, and thus no two novels look alike.

Displaying the wide structural variety within the genre are Franzen's two most recent novels, *The Corrections* and *Freedom*. While novels share several key features, they are quite different. Both novels are set in contemporary society, both tell the story of a single family unit, and both display Franzen's interest in politics, and his sense of humor. Franzen customarily uses the microcosm of the family to attempt to illuminate larger social mechanisms in contemporary society. Both of these novels tell the story of a single family, and connect the members of these families to various political and social phenomena of the contemporary Western world. Both novels also contain the wit and wordplay that are so characteristic of Franzen's writing. However, while elements that are central to Franzen's personal style appear in each novel, the stylistic differences between the novels cause these common features to function quite differently in each. *The Corrections* and *Freedom* are significantly different in terms of characterization, presentation of family, and use of politics. My goal is to show that *The Corrections* is the more successful novel of the two because it facilitates a connection between novel and reader through the use of characters that are simultaneously personable and symbolically significant, a positive portrayal of family, and effective incorporation of politics.

The Corrections: A Novel Whose Elements are in Harmony

The Corrections tells the story of a Midwestern family, the Lamberts, as its members attempt to maintain closeness despite physical and ideological differences. The novel takes place over the timespan of about a year during the late twentieth century. The elderly parents, Enid and Alfred, struggle to maintain their accustomed lifestyle while learning to cope with Alfred's Parkinson's disease. The three Lambert children have all moved to the east coast, and maintain varying levels of contact with the other members of their family. The oldest child, Garry, enjoys both material success and a beautiful family, yet suffers from depression and alcoholism. The middle child, Chip, is a failed academic whose distinct lack of moral compass leads him into multiple deplorable situations, starting with an affair with one of his students and ending with his involvement in an investment fraud in Lithuania, after he decides to do business with a Lithuanian crime boss. Chip is the main character in the novel, though Franzen writes from other characters' points of view at different points throughout the text. Denise, the youngest of the Lamberts, is an immensely talented chef in Philadelphia who loses her most promising job when she has affairs with both the restaurant's owner and his wife. Enid is increasingly horrified by what she perceives and her children's abandonment of their conservative, Protestant upbringing. Yet, Enid's fear is not without foundation: Chip sleeps with a student while he is a university professor, Gary drinks like a fish and has almost no faith in his family's love, and Denise knowingly acts in a way that could break up a marriage. Despite the seeming hopelessness of these characters, they manage to come together as a family at the end of the novel. The family is reunited on Christmas morning, at Enid's desperate request, and the Lamberts are

forced to make realizations about Alfred's declining condition and the less appealing realities of their own lives. Chip has an epiphany about the meaning of his own life, and Enid, the most ideologically rigid character in the text, comes to terms with Denise's nontraditional sexuality. The novel ends with the idea that the characters have been shaped but not broken by their various hardships, and that people have the potential to correct aspects of themselves that lead them to feel ashamed or dissatisfied.

Among *The Correction's* greatest assets is its successful exploitation of the structural openness of the novel, which, according to Bakhtin, lends the novel the ability to incorporate other genres. Bakhtin explains that the novel can then make use of these other genres in various ways. He is particularly interested in the idea that the novel can use one genre to comment on another. He says, "The novel parodies other genres (precisely in their role as genres); it exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language; it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, reformulating and re-accentuating them" (5). He is arguing that a novel's use a particular combination of genres is in itself a form of criticism; a novel comments on these genres, and how they can be used as literary devices within the novel. *The Corrections* manipulates genres in just this way. Chip Lambert's story is structurally very similar to an epic tale. Chip journeys away from his home and family in pursuit of the promise of economic prosperity in Lithuania. This journey could certainly be categorized as a "quest," much like those that epic heroes, such as Aeneas or Odysseus, embark upon in their respective epics. However Chip, unlike these heroes, is the quintessential

anti-hero: he has an affair with a student, he uses recreational drugs, he abandons his family, and he implicates himself in an international business fraud.

Furthermore, instead of returning from his travels with the spoils of war, Chip returns with few material possessions other than the clothes on his back, and essentially no tales of glory. By placing an anti-hero in the role of epic hero, *The Corrections* satirizes the genre of epic. The novel plays one genre off of the other in order to highlight certain things about each. The ancient Greeks used epics in order to identify with their allegedly heroic ancestors; the epic was meant to glorify the past. In the case of *The Corrections*, however, we do not particularly want to identify with Chip, until possibly the very end of the novel when he returns home to his family. In this way, the novel criticizes the phenomenon of romanticizing human capacity in the way that the epic did, and members of contemporary society still do. To criticize the epic is to criticize the tendency to reminisce about the “good old days,” and to be nostalgic for simpler times rather than evaluate the problems that we face during the contemporary moment, and *The Corrections'* use of genre serves such a critique.

Although the novel satirizes general tendencies in humanity, it presents individual characters that are likeable, or at least sympathetic. The characters are flawed, and may not *always* be likeable, but we are generally privy to the circumstances surrounding their bad behavior when it occurs. We see that these characters' flaws have origins, which makes them a bit easier to sympathize with. Gary, for instance, struggles with alcoholic tendencies as a result of his depression. There is a particularly uncomfortable scene in which Gary becomes intoxicated

while trying to cook dinner for his family. We first observe him on drive home after an emotionally taxing day, during which he is looking forward to seeing his wife, Caroline. When he gets home, she is distant and uninterested in conversing with him. Then, while preparing to cook dinner, the narrator tells us that “[Gary] upended the vodka bottle over a shaker of ice and brazenly let it glug and glug, because he...had nothing to be ashamed of in relaxing after a hard day’s work” (*The Corrections* 226). This description displays very clearly that Gary is unhappy with his choice to consume alcohol, yet he does so anyway. The situation only becomes more desperate from there: “Because Caroline and Caleb had paid no attention to him when he made the first martini, he now made a second, for energy and general bolsterment, and officially considered it his first,” and then finally, “In plain view of his entire family he made a third (officially second) martini and drank it down. Through the window he observed that the grill was in flames” (226). This description of Gary’s drinking evokes emotions of sympathy or pity, rather than total disgust at his behavior. Furthermore, Gary’s drinking subverts the expectations that are generally associated with the stereotype of the alcoholic father. Alcoholic fathers are typically depicted as blustering, and even violent figures. Though Gary cuts his hand in an attempt to trim the hedge, he displays none of these stereotypical qualities. In fact, the way that he begins drinking somewhat sheepishly during the act of cooking is stereotypically feminine, if anything. Perhaps the gender role reversal of the situation also contributes to Gary’s unhappiness. Franzen prompts the reader to see past Gary’s actions to their possible underlying causes, which makes the character sympathetic rather than deplorable. The

unhappiness that leads Gary to drink does not necessarily excuse his behavior, but it does make it more understandable. Any sympathy that the reader feels for him creates an emotional link between reader and text, which tends to make the reader more deeply engaged with the characters and the novel.

This emotional connection between text and reader speaks to one of Franzen's two models for the reader that he explains in his critical essay, "Mr. Difficult," which he calls the Contract model. In the Contract model, "a novel represents a compact between the writer and the reader, with the writer providing words out of which the reader creates a pleasurable experience" ("Mr. Difficult" 240). In other words, reading a novel entails a relationship between the author and the reader. Franzen goes on to say that under the Contract model, "The discourse here is one of pleasure and connection," (240). According to Franzen, Contract readers read with the expectation that they will feel a connection to the novel. In *The Corrections*, the sympathetic characters foster this connection. The fact that Franzen writes in a way that appeals to the Contract reader suggests that the Contract model is one that he values, and that establishing a connection with the reader through his use of likeable, sympathetic characters is important.

Though their relatable nature is important, the function of the characters in *The Corrections* extends beyond their personal narrative. Franzen uses the microcosm that he depicts in the novel to connect the novel to social and political problems that exist in contemporary society. The character of Alfred Lambert, for example, is both sympathetic as an individual, and a character that brings the novel into the realm of contemporary politics. Alfred suffers from Parkinson's disease,

and is therefore losing control over his body and his mind. Two of his children, Gary and Denise, attend a seminar for a corrective drug called “Corecktall.” They attend the seminar initially because the drug is produced by the Axon Corporation, which is the same company that had previously underpaid Alfred for the patent on a compound that he developed. The connection between Alfred, a man who works out of a homemade lab in his basement, and the Axon Corporation, which is one of the big players in corporate America, gestures toward the phenomenon of corporate expansion. When Axon offers Alfred an unreasonably low sum of money in exchange for his patent, they devalue his role in the company. On a symbolic level, this interaction represents the extent to which large corporations are able to control individuals in contemporary America. Furthermore, it nods at the possibility that individuals allow their control to be taken, as Alfred accepts Axon’s offer. By connecting Alfred to these larger social issues, Franzen expands the possible implications of the novel drastically.

Although Gary and Denise initially attend the seminar on Corecktall because Gary wants to get into contact with someone who can try to see that his father is fairly compensated, their interest shifts to the drug itself. It occurs to Denise that the drug may be able to help their father, so they listen carefully during the seminar. Corecktall is advertised as having the potential to be a “cure not only of these terrible degenerative affliction but also of a host of ailments typically considered psychiatric or even psychological. Simply put, Corecktall offers for the first time the possibility of renewing and *improving* the hard wiring of an adult human brain” (*The Corrections* 187). In a single sentence, Franzen has brought the novel into several

conversations that exist entirely outside of the novel. The novel critiques the idea that such a medication could possibly do all that it promises by presenting the topic in a facetious, overstated way. Furthermore, Franzen employs wordplay in the form of the drug's name, "Coreck tall," in order to poke fun at the notion that there could be such with such an all-encompassing ability. Coreck tall supposedly treats medical problems that are labeled as "psychiatric or even psychological," which suggests that the drug is meant to replace the more traditional therapeutic models for working through such problems. The implication here is that certain qualities are unacceptable for a person to have, and that such undesirable traits ought to be corrected. Alfred is the perfect character to serve as this symbol, because it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between his disease and his personality traits. In the manner characteristic of people suffering from a degenerative brain disorder, Alfred's words and actions often range from taxing to obnoxious for those around him. However, it is difficult to blame him for being rude, because this rudeness could be a symptom of his disease. Therefore, a drug like Coreck tall would wipe out both the problems that are disease-related symptoms, and the personality problems that may just be part of Alfred's nature. Franzen prompts the reader to consider where he or she draws the line between a failing in the hardwiring of a person's brain, and a trait that is simply part of a person's nature. Alfred could be acting out because his brain is beginning to fail him, or he could be acting out because he has an obnoxious streak—or perhaps the answer lies somewhere between these two possible explanations. By including a character whose personal struggle with Parkinson's disease illuminates so many social and political issues, Franzen brings

to the novel into the arena of large ideological issues, and thereby encourages the reader to engage with these issues.

Engaging with ideological issues fits with the second of Franzen's two models for the reader: the Status model. In the Status novel, the value of a novel depends upon its ability to provoke serious thought in the reader. Furthermore, in Franzen's Status model of readership, difficulty is desirable. Franzen says, "From a Status perspective, difficulty tends to signal excellence" ("Mr. Difficult" 241). Perhaps unexpectedly, like the Contract model, the Status model for readership suggests that reading should be a pleasurable experience. However, in this case, pleasure is derived from navigating difficulty within a novel: "Pleasure that demands hard work, the slow penetration of mystery...is the pleasure most worth having" (241). *The Corrections* engages with this model of readership by including characters that have symbolic relevance. While the story of Alfred's personal struggle might appeal most to the Contract reader, the implications about medicalization that are entailed in his story might appeal most to the Status reader. Because the characters in *The Corrections* are both personable and symbolically relevant, they have the potential to appeal to both types of readers. In this way, *The Corrections* accounts for the possibility that different people read for different reasons, without suggesting that any single reason is more important than another. Franzen's use of dually significant characters suggests that he wants his novel to connect with readers, but he leaves it up to them to decide what the source of this connection will be.

Perhaps *The Corrections'* most successful aspect is its portrayal of the American family. The members of the Lambert family are flawed, and at times they

let their flaws dominate their actions. Chip sleeps with one of his students, even though he hates himself for doing it. Denise has an affair with her boss, and then with her boss' wife, Robin, and ultimately rejects the affection of both individuals. Enid forces Alfred to go on a cruise vacation with her, even though he is not up to the challenge, as evidenced by the fact that he falls overboard during the trip. As was previously mentioned, Gary resorts to alcoholism as a method for coping with his depression. Yet, despite all of their flaws, and harmful tendencies, the Lamberts come together at the end of the novel. With the exception of Alfred, whose mental health deteriorates until he eventually passes away, all of these characters attempt to change their behavior. Denise finally breaks off her relationship with Robin when she says, "I'm sick of watching myself be cruel to you" (506). She recognizes that she has gotten into a destructive pattern with Robin, and takes control of her actions. Immediately after Denise makes this decision, she flies back home to St. Jude. Similarly, when Chip's Lithuanian business deal falls apart, he returns home. Gary has a more difficult time dealing with his problems, but he still makes an effort to return home. Though the gathering is not without its arguments, the entire family is united at the end of the novel for their celebration of Christmas.

The most touching example of both family solidarity and personal transformation is arguably that of Enid. Throughout the novel, she harps on Denise about not having a husband, not having children, and more generally not living the type of life that Enid so desperately wants her to live. She neither approves of nor understands the fact that Denise is attracted to women, and it seems as though the two will never be able to see eye to eye on the issue. Therefore, it is an incredibly

significant moment when Enid, who values her good standing among her circle of friends above most things in life, willingly risks this good standing in order to suggest that it is unfair to criticize people based on their sexuality. She puts defending her daughter's lifestyle before maintaining her good social standing, which is, for Enid, the strongest endorsement of family that exists. The end of *The Corrections* leaves the reader with a picture of a family that has come together, despite its members' imperfections, into a genuine family group. Franzen allows his readers to believe that even in a setting as fragmented as contemporary America, family bonds can remain strong, if only people put a little effort into their maintenance.

Freedom: A Novel Whose Elements are in Discord

Freedom also follows a single family, though over a span of several decades rather than several months. The Berglunds family is a seemingly ideal liberal American family, complete with a father who rides his bike to work every day and a mother who brings cookies to the neighbors simply because she felt like baking. The novel is set in urban St. Paul, Minnesota, during the last decades of the twentieth century, culminating around the beginning of the Obama administration. We learn from Patty's autobiography, which she writes as a form of therapy, that Walter and Patty Berglund met during their undergraduate careers at the University of Minnesota. Patty was a star basketball player who hung out with people who were both troubled and troublesome, while Walter was an honest, kindhearted nerd. Patty finally decided to date Walter after she was unable to attract the

attention of his indie-rocker roommate, Richard Katz. Katz will reappear later in the novel, and we learn that Patty never relinquished her feelings for him. However, in the early stages of their adult lives, Patty is the quintessential housewife, and Walter is a passionate environmentalist. The Berglunds have two children, Jessica and Joey. In the beginning of the novel, the Berglund family appears to be perfect on the surface, but their neighbors can sense that there is something awry.

The family unravels throughout the novel, at times slowly and at times explosively, until none of the family members are speaking to one another. For example, Joey ends up rejecting his family's liberal values when he moves in with a conservative neighbor, and ends up working for a corrupt business that sells defective equipment to military suppliers in the Middle East. Joey ultimately reconciles with his family, and works for Walter's sustainable coffee business. Walter and Patty's marriage deteriorates steadily and falls apart completely when Patty has an affair with her former love interest, Richard Katz. Patty and Walter separate, and Patty becomes involved in short-lived relationship with Katz. Walter becomes involved with his attractive young assistant, Lalitha, who is helping him on his campaign to build a songbird preserve in West Virginia. When Lalitha is killed in a car accident, Walter is devastated and retreats to his family's lakeside house in Minnesota. His behavior becomes odd and obsessive, particularly regarding birds; he habitually pesters his neighbors for allowing their housecats to roam free and hunt songbirds. Meanwhile, Patty has been living alone in Brooklyn, and eventually comes to realize how empty her life is without her family in it. She tracks down Walter, and convinces him—despite his anger and utter confusion—to take her back

and start their relationship again. Walter eventually agrees to try again, and the couple moves to Patty's home in Brooklyn. They turn the lake house into a bird sanctuary, and name it in memory of Lalitha. The novel ends in roughly the same place that it began, with Walter and Patty giving the appearance of being an ideal couple, but in a way that does not quite seem to be real.

Before I proceed any further with my argument, I must make one point clear: although I would like to show that *The Corrections* is a more successful novel than is *Freedom*, my purpose in drawing such a distinction is not to suggest that *Freedom* is a failure. On the contrary, *Freedom* is well-written, and, as mentioned above, was critically well received. My purpose is to use *Freedom's* shortcomings to highlight *The Corrections'* successes, in my endeavor to show that *The Corrections* is a convincing model for the future of the novel.

Stylistically, *Freedom* is not particularly well matched with Franzen's sense of humor. Where his dry wit meshes with the tone and style of *The Corrections*, it is at odds with the style and tone in *Freedom*. *Freedom* is written in the style of lyrical realism, which is a style that purports to be objective. Realism endeavors to present the reader with a picture of life as it actually is, without romanticizing it or commenting on it subjectively. Lyrical realism endeavors to do the same thing, but through the use of lyrical, almost poetical language. A useful feature of the style of lyrical realism is that it has the potential to paint a very accurate picture of contemporary American life. However, descriptions that are *too* accurate entail the possibility of creating discomfort for the reader, particularly when humor is added into the mix. For example, *Freedom* presents a convincing, and arguably very

accurate, picture of the phenomenon of liberal guilt. Franzen first introduces the idea through a neighbor's characterization of the Berglunds: "To Seth Paulsen...the Berglunds were the super-guilty sort of liberals who needed to forgive everybody so their own good fortune could be forgiven; who lacked the courage of their privilege" (7). Because the novel is written in the style of realism, it is difficult to tell whether the tone of this description is meant to be serious, or facetious. On one hand, the idea is coming from the Berglunds' conservative next-door neighbor. Therefore, it would be easy to assume that it is his description of liberal guilt that is being mocked, not the actual phenomenon of liberal guilt. However, the novel then spends its next 555 pages showing us all of the ways in which Patty and Walter fit Seth Paulsen's stereotypical characterization. In the context of the novel as a whole, Seth's snarky comment loses its humorous edge; it is too accurate to be truly funny.

The biggest problem with *Freedom* is arguably the fact that it presents us with characters that are difficult to sympathize with. For example, Patty is selfish and jealous throughout the novel. Though she tries to give the appearance of being content in her role as a homemaker, she is actually quite competitive. Her obsessively competitive nature shows itself when her son, Joey, starts dating the next-door neighbors' daughter, Connie. Patty refuses to endorse the relationship, referring to Connie as a "sneaky little competitor," and her bad attitude quickly drives Joey away (*Freedom* 150). She hates the idea that Joey could possibly reject her after all that she has done for him, and ends up taking out her anger on Walter. She has an affair with Walter's best friend from college, Richard Katz, which leads to Patty and Walter's separation. Walter, however, is just as deplorable in his

behavior. Though he never actually cheats on Patty, mainly out of a sense of duty, he wants to cheat on her with Lalitha, and the two become romantically involved as soon as his marriage falls apart. During the time that Patty and Walter are separated, Walter takes out his anger on his neighbors, and becomes a nuisance to those around him. Furthermore, we see little character development throughout the story. Patty and Walter end up very much in the same place that they began: Patty plays the role of housewife, and Walter plays the role of concerned liberal. The fact that they are so static renders them very unappealing, and potentially difficult to relate to.

Even the supporting characters in the novel seem to lack a basic sense of humanity. We learn, for instance, that Patty was raped as a teenager. When she told her parents about the event, they downplayed the seriousness of the situation in an effort to maintain a friendly relationship with the parents of the boy who raped Patty. Her father says to her, “Look...Honey. I know it’s horrendously unfair. I feel terrible for you. But sometimes the best thing is just to learn your lesson and make sure you never get in the same position again...Let it, ah. Let it drop” (*Freedom* 47). Their reaction is in stark contrast with Enid’s decision to defend Denise at the end of *The Corrections*. If Enid’s choice symbolizes the strength of family bonds, Patty’s parents’ choice symbolizes the opposite. The fact that Patty’s parents are unwilling to compromise their social status, even for the sake of their own daughter, does not paint a good picture of family. Another character of questionable morals is Richard Katz. Katz shows little remorse for his terrible treatment of women in the novel, particularly his treatment of Patty. He repeatedly rejects Patty’s advances when she

is single, only to sleep with her once she is married to Walter. Katz does eventually dedicate one of his musical albums to Walter as a way of acknowledging that he had made a mistake. However, he never apologizes to Walter directly, which can be interpreted as a sign of weakness, or at least a lack of fortitude. The novel spends so much time trying to propose that insincerity pervades contemporary society that it ultimately ends up neglecting the humanity of its characters. Without characters that are sympathetic, the novel forgoes its ability to connect with readers on the emotional level. Because the characters in *Freedom* do not display the same duality as do the characters in *The Corrections*, they do not have the same potential for forming a connection between novel and reader, which ultimately makes *Freedom* run the risk of being a difficult novel for a reader to connect with.

As the above examples indicate, *Freedom's* portrayal of family is not at all optimistic. Even when the family is reunited at the end of the story, the picture is still fragmented and difficult to believe. Patty forms a new relationship with her children, as does Walter, but they do so independently of one another. We get nothing of the cohesiveness contained in the final image of the Lambert family in *The Corrections*. When Patty and Walter finally do resurrect their marriage, the novel suggests to us that they fall into their old destructive habits, rather than create new, healthy ones. Patty wins over the neighbors with her hospitality, and Walter maintains his status as an avid environmentalist. In *The Corrections*, the Lamberts spend Christmas together, and we see a great deal of personal development occurring on the parts of the individual family members. In *Freedom*, the Berglunds are united very much in the same way that they were in the beginning of the novel.

The final image of Patty and Walter suggests that they are still not completely honest with one another. When a neighbor asks Patty if they will be visiting their lake house after they move to New York, “[Patty’s] face clouded and she said that this wasn’t what Walter wanted” (*Freedom* 561). Patty’s reaction is possibly indicative of the couple’s failure to work out their problems, as it is clear that they do not agree about the best way to use the lake house. Though the couple has made the decision to try to save their marriage, this final scene suggests that the decision came not from a place of personal growth, but from a sense of duty toward the institution of marriage. *Freedom* leaves us with an image of tension, which dashes any hopes that the reader may have had for a positive portrayal of the American family. While *The Corrections* leaves us with a sense of forward progression, *Freedom* leaves us with a sense of reverting back to old habits, whether or not the habits are good.

The extent to which these two novels are different is intriguing. It is perhaps useful to think of *Freedom* as having been written in opposition to *The Corrections*, in the sense that it pushes back upon many of the techniques displayed in the earlier novel. Where *The Corrections* is facetious and cheeky in its presentation of life’s ugliness, *Freedom* strives to show readers this ugliness in an objective, realistic way. *The Corrections* presents us with dynamic, believable characters that are brought together into an imperfect but cohesive family unit by the end of the novel, while *Freedom* presents us with characters more like caricatures than real people, who remain emotionally distant from one another even when they are reunited at the end of the novel. This stylistic shift could be nothing more than Franzen’s desire to

try his hand at different styles of writing. However, it is equally possible that the circumstances surrounding the writing and production of each of the novels influenced the change. I will now turn my attention to the context in which contemporary novels are written, and the particular challenges that Franzen addresses in this context.

CHAPTER 2

The Challenges of Professional Authorship: Franzen as an Author

“Publishing a book is like stuffing a note into a bottle and hurling it into the sea. Some bottles drown, some come safe to land, where the notes are read and then possibly cherished, or else misinterpreted, or else understood all too well by those who hate the message. You never know who your readers might be.” – Margaret Atwood¹¹

In this chapter of my thesis, I focus on the challenges faced by contemporary authors, particularly the challenges associated with the sale and promotion of their work. Novelists must play the dual role of artist, and producer in the capitalist literary market, and I aim to show that sometimes these roles are in tension with one another, and that this tension has affected both Franzen’s relationship with the public, and his work. From the point of view of an artist, autonomy is appealing.¹² Autonomy allows the artist to work freely, without worrying about whether he or she has produced novel that will attract certain “types” of readers, certain publishers, or certain endorsements. However, autonomy is totally counterproductive to an author’s goal to sell his or her work. The key to selling a novel is making consumers want to buy it, which renders autonomy an impossibility. Autonomy ends at the moment when an author decides that he wishes to publish his novel, because signing with a publisher associates the author with that publisher. The author’s independence only decreases from this point, if he

¹¹ Taken from Margaret Atwood’s acceptance speech for 2010 American PEN Literary Service Award, as quoted in *The Daily Beast* (Atwood n.p.).

¹² I am referring here to the sort of autonomy that would allow an author to work at his or her own pace, and according to his or her own vision of the novel. This autonomy by no means has to extend to the author’s writing style, although Franzen has said that he personally likes to work in complete isolation.

chooses to work with editors, cover designers, publicists, and people who could endorse the novel. Then the process of promoting the novel begins, which involves reaching out to potential readers and potential vendors. The more connections that an author makes, the more she has to sell her novel. Today, the process of promoting a novel is faster than ever before, due to the ever-increasing speed of technology. This speed can be helpful to an author as it facilitates quick and easy communication between the author and the members of her editorial and promotional team. However, advances in technology also present contemporary authors with substantial challenges that can end up complicating the author's already complicated role as independent artist and participant in a capitalist market.

Technology affects the craft of writing novels in several ways. The various media generated by technology add competition within the entertainment industry. For a novel to be successful, it must be able to compete for attention with movies, television shows, and the plethora of forms of entertainment available on the Internet. As these forms of entertainment become widely available online, people can access them very easily; a person only needs an Internet connection, and he or she is connected instantly to an infinite number of films, television shows, news stories, and various types of video clips.¹³ In addition to creating new media that are in competition with the novel, technological advancement has altered the dynamics of the literary market. Books can be distributed and discussed more

¹³ Though this statement does depend upon the assumption that a person has access to an Internet device, which implies an economically privileged place in society, issues of class are outside of the scope of this thesis.

quickly than ever before. Readers become privy to reviews, especially online reviews, at a rate practically simultaneous with their publication. Furthermore, the advent of the Internet has given amateur reviewers a means to post their views about books in a public forum; a person need only click on the “Ratings and Reviews” tab on the product information page for a novel to get the collective and individual feedback of fellow readers. Social media, particularly blogs, Facebook and Twitter, make it easy to advertise and discuss novels in a constantly updated public space. These media also facilitate the anticipation of the release of a novel. For example, managers of Facebook fan pages can post updates and countdowns about an upcoming novel, even if the author of that novel does not choose to update the public about his or her progress. Through factors such as these, contemporary authors are offered the potential for absolutely boundless self-promotion, and absolutely no privacy. Making a living as an author in contemporary society is no easy task.

The infinite potential for connectedness that is offered by the Internet has transformed the literary market into a global literary market. Of course, books have been traded overseas for centuries, but never before has this process been so easy or so widespread. People are able to order books online and ship them overnight. The circulation of translated texts has never been easier. Upon the introduction of eBooks, the Kindle, Google Books, Project Gutenberg, and any number of other online book sources, readers can download a novel with the click of a button. The global nature of the literary market puts even more pressure on authors to promote their work. Authors now have to choose whether or not to promote their work in

multiple countries, which means that they spend even more of their time and energy on matters of advertising and production. Therefore, while the Internet may speed up daily tasks and communications that novelists must make, it ultimately creates more work, as it expands the global literary market for which authors are producing novels.

There are many methods and models with which to approach the contemporary author, but I will be focusing on two main problems that they face: the necessity of participating in the global literary market, and contemporary culture's current obsession with authenticity. When an author enters into the global literary marketplace, he or she becomes a producer, and his or her novels become commodities. In order for a product to succeed in a capitalist market, it must in some way outdo the other products with which it is in competition; there must be a demand for a product in order for it to survive. Therefore, contemporary authors are all on a mission to produce a novel that will hold up, and hopefully even surpass, the competition. The Media has dramatized this trend with its proclamations that our society is in search of the next "Great American Author," who will produce the next "Great American Novel." The Media does not do a good job of defining what these phrases actually *mean*, but it does a spectacularly good job of creating a lot of hype around the term. I would like to show that it is the ambiguity surrounding the word "great" that fuels certain trends that are currently being played out in contemporary literature, namely the trends of experimental form, and very lengthy books. Franco Moretti presents a useful method by which to study these trends. In his book, *Maps, Graphs, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History*, Moretti claims

that looking for patterns and trends between novels written in the same time period can tell us a great deal about that period. His approach to literature is unique, and perhaps somewhat unexpected, because it is very quantitative. He gathers data sets from various texts, which can take the form anything from a statistic representing the use of a certain genre during a time period, the number of times a certain work appears in novels written in the same year. His method is founded upon the idea that such data provides literary scholars with an objective basis upon which to base their subjective interpretations. He makes it very clear that data collection is not his entire method, but a step in the process of interpreting literary history. He says, "Quantitative research provides a type of data which is ideally independent of interpretations...and that is of course also its limit: it provides *data*, not interpretation" (Moretti 9). He refers to his method as "distant reading," and poses the question, "What literature would we find, in 'the large mass of fact'?" that we collect in our quest to understand literary trends (3). Though contemporary trends are still in the process of forming and evolving, Moretti's method of distanced reading can still be applied to contemporary literature in an effort to understand the state of the novel as it exists now. I will be employing this method as I attempt to show how Franzen's work fits in with that of his contemporaries.

In an attempt to understand one trend in particular that Franzen and his fellow contemporary authors are experiencing, the trend of making authenticity central to the novel, I look to Sarah Brouillette. She views authorial anxiety, which is produced by numerous pressures faced by contemporary authors, as the cause behind authenticity's predominance as a theme in contemporary literature. She

argues in her book, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*, that the production and marketing of a novel are part of its story. She says, "...the material aspects of a text, including its format, cover, packaging, and typography, as well as the general field in which it is situated, comprised of the institutions of literary production, dissemination, and reception, are more than merely context of the work's conception and realization. Instead they are *textual* in their own right...the social production of literature often translates into literature itself" (2). She calls upon her reader to consider the impact that these elements that accompany a novel have on the readership of that novel; her approach to studying literature could best be summarized as, "think outside the book."

In order to study the effects that production has on authorship, Brouillette analyses various pieces of writing that accompany a text, but are external to the text itself. She uses French literary theorist, Gerard Genette's concept of "paratextuality" to connect the production of a text to the text itself. She says, "...Genette emphasizes the connections between things like titles, formats, interviews, reviews, and blurbs, and the 'text itself' that those elements accompany. A work's overall paratext is a key constraint on how it will be read and understood" (2). Brouillette urges readers to recognize that any piece of paratext that is read or observed in conjunction with a novel will affect the reading of that novel. Furthermore, she argues that paratextual elements that associate a novel with other entities, particularly entities that already have their own reputations and social significances, can be a source of anxiety for authors. This phenomenon gives a possible explanation for Franzen's guarded attitude toward his work. More broadly, as Brouillette observes, it helps to explain

the frequency with which authenticity is a theme in contemporary literature. The pressures that are placed upon contemporary authors are numerous, and evaluating the way that Franzen handles them could provide some insight into the significant differences that exist between *The Corrections* and *Freedom*.

The Novel as a Commodity: Pressures Presented by the Capitalist Market

Participating in the global literary market posits the author in the role of the producer, and the reader in the position of consumer, and the novel as the product. In a capitalist setting, producers compete with one another to sell their products, and those who meet the most success are those who understand their consumers. Authors create webpages and Facebook pages, schedule book readings and signings, conduct interviews to connect with readers and potential readers. As authors are generally not trained in the fields of marketing and public relations—Franzen certainly seems to lack such training—they employ publicists, agents, and sometimes both to help them market their novels. Brouillette speaks to just how ingrained that capitalist production has become in the craft of writing: “...no contemporary author could easily continue a romantic tradition of opposition to commodification, expressing a privileged elite disdain for material motivations” (73). She considers commodification to be an inescapable part of the profession of writing, which causes her to be skeptical of the notion that an author could successfully be opposed to it. One need only to look at Franzen’s rocky relationship with the public to see just how apt Brouillette’s observation is: opposing commoditization is by far the path of most resistance.

The paratext of Jonathan Franzen's novels is as extensive as it is interesting. The combination of Franzen's talent, fame, and personality quirks frequently places him in the media spotlight. One of the most notable aspects of the paratext surrounding Franzen's novels is the hype that they received leading up to their publication. The build up to Franzen's first two novels was no different from that which precedes most novels. There was a bit more talk about *Strong Motion* than *The Twenty-Seventh City*, but none of the national and international hype that surrounded his second two novels. It is useful to compare the different points in the production process at which *The Corrections* and *Freedom* began to receive vast amounts of attention. As it had been nearly ten years since Franzen published his previous novel, *Strong Motion*, so he was fairly off the radar when *The Corrections* was published. There was some anticipation leading up to the publication of *The Corrections*, but the real explosion of attention occurred once the book was awarded the National Book Award in November of 2001. As the award is given to only one work of fiction each year, it makes perfect sense that the recipient of the award would spark a great deal of attention. In addition to this most prestigious award, the novel was also named "Best Book of the Year" by the *New York Times Book Review*, and was the recipient of the Salon Book Award in the category of fiction.¹⁴ These second two awards illustrate the power that the media has over readership. The *New York Times Book Review* is one of the most well known sources for book reviews in the United States, and Salon.com has its own prestige as a source for

¹⁴ *Salon Magazine* awards the Salon Book Awards annually to authors in the categories of fiction and nonfiction. The awards go to authors whose books are, in the award committee members' estimation, most enjoyable to read (Miller n.p.).

cultural news, as it was the first completely online magazine. By November of 2001, Franzen had the attention of both the top literary critics in the nation, and the top cultural publications. So how did Franzen handle being in the spotlight?

Although critics loved him, Franzen managed to alienate quite a few people during his rise to fame. The most notable instance of Franzen's trouble with public relations is his alleged fall-out with Oprah Winfrey in September of 2001. Winfrey chose Franzen to be the 42nd author to appear on her show to discuss his novel on September 24, 2001. By October of 2001, however, Oprah cancelled Franzen's appearance based on comments he made to the media expressing discomfort with having the Oprah's Book Club logo on the cover of *The Corrections*. In an article written about the incident in the *Oregonian*, for instance, Franzen is quoted as saying, "I see this as my book, my creation, and I don't want that logo of corporate ownership on it" (Baker 1). This comment taken on its own is contentious, but not particularly harmful. In fact, the sentiment at the heart of this statement, the sentiment that the commodification of art ruins its integrity, is neither uncommon nor new. Franzen's public relations error was not that he expressed a desire that his art remain untainted by capitalism, but that he chose to make this statement in reference to a beloved public figure. Because Oprah is widely known for her acts of generosity and interest in expanding the appreciation of the arts, particularly literature, to question the purpose of her approval can only run the risk of stirring an adverse public reaction. Because he was dealing with Oprah, Franzen's comments came across as an elitist writer spitting out a silver spoon, rather than a humble writer courageously defending the independent artist. Were his comments

made in the abstract as opposed to directed at Oprah, he could just as easily have been touted as the hero of the independent author. However, his decision to defend his artistic integrity against someone whose blessing would cause the sales on his novel to skyrocket rubbed the literary community the wrong way.¹⁵ One publisher said of the incident, “It’s like watching someone commit suicide!” (Bernard n.p.). This comment shows both the magnitude and the permanence of Franzen’s decision to make his qualms with associating with Oprah public. His reputation will forever include “The Oprah Incident,” for better or for worse.

An intriguing aspect of Franzen’s rejection of Oprah’s endorsement is that he did not want the “Oprah’s Book Club” seal to appear on the cover of his book. When asked why he was so averse to having the Oprah “sticker” placed on the cover of *The Corrections*, Franzen said, “It’s not a sticker, it’s part of the cover...They redo the whole cover. You can’t take it off” (Baker 1). Franzen’s choice to make his negative feelings about Oprah’s Book List so public may have been in questionable taste, but . The cover is not technically part of the contents of the novel, yet it affects the novel’s readership significantly.¹⁶ Though he does not articulate it directly, Franzen’s fear is

¹⁵ Even with the cancellation of Franzen’s appearance on Oprah’s talk show, sales of *The Corrections* increased enormously once she chose the novel for her list. After Oprah chose the novel for her Book List, Franzen’s publisher, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, ordered 680,000 more copies to be printed. Franzen’s agent, Jeff Seroy, attributes an impressive 500,000 of those copies to Oprah’s blessing (Bernard n.p.). The profit derived from these 500,000 copies is estimated at around two million dollars (Bernard n.p.). Franzen did not even have to accept Oprah’s endorsement to feel its effects; the enormity of her influence on American society is simply astounding.

¹⁶ I draw a distinction between the cover and the “contents” of the novel in a simplistic way here to emphasize the different between the “inside” and “outside” of the novel, so to speak. Of course, elements of a novel such as its title and the cover illustration can be taken into account in an analysis of the novel. However, in this

gestures toward a belief in Karl Marx's notion of commodity fetishism. The underlying idea of commodity fetishism is the claim that commodifying an object separates the value of the object and its physical properties. Marx defines commodity fetishism thusly in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*:

The value-relation between the products of labor which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connexion with their physical properties and with the materials relations arising therefrom...This I call the Fetishism that attaches itself to the products of labor, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. (Marx 83).

Marx sees separating the physical reality of a product from its market value as a distraction. Instead of simply focusing on the product itself, consumers now focus on its contents and its market value as two separate aspects of the product.

Furthermore, consumers develop certain expectations about the product based on its market value, and the way that the product is marketed. When Franzen says that the sticker is "part of the cover," he is pointing out that the production of his novel is inseparable from its contents when the novel is marketed in a capitalist market.

Readers who purchase a novel with the "Oprah's Book Club" seal on its cover are purchasing a "brand," or a "type" of novel, that is expected to fit a certain mold, it would seem therefore that Franzen is reluctant (or even resistant) to have his work pressed into the Oprah mold.

case it is useful to treat the two elements of the text separately in order to illuminate the power of the cover as a marketing tool.

Oprah's Book Club was established in 1996 in order to increase readership, with the underlying principle that reading is valuable, and therefore books have market value. Oprah endorses authors and publishing companies who she sees as having the potential to touch readers in a meaningful way. The Book Club is both capitalist and philanthropic in nature. Part of Oprah's mission is to increase sales for the books of chosen authors, and part of it is to increase readership even among readers who cannot afford to purchase books. According to her website, Oprah's Book Club has distributed thousands of her selected novels, which have been donated by publishers, to schools, public libraries and community college libraries. What Franzen and Oprah share is the belief that reading is important; what they do not share is the belief that commoditizing the novel is the best way to achieve this goal. In the October 12, 2001 article in *Oregonian*, Franzen states, "The reason I got into this business is because I'm an independent writer, and I didn't want that corporate logo on my book" (Baker 1). Franzen's independence as an artist is of utmost importance to him, and he views associating himself with Oprah as encroaching upon this independence. He values his creative autonomy, and is very protective of it. Furthermore, he is of the opinion that literature is something that should be enjoyed for its own sake. In an interview he conducted prior to the publication of *The Corrections*, he says of literature, "This uselessness is intrinsic, of course, and that's part of art's charm," (Atrim 4). Given that this is Franzen's view of literature, it is no wonder that he does not want his novel to be associated with Oprah's Book Club. She uses her celebrity status to commoditize the novels that she picks for her Book List, with the intention of encouraging more people to read these

novels. Franzen considers his status as an independent writer to be an integral part of his craft, and therefore he is opposed to associating his work with Oprah's message. As Professor Lucy Hartley says, Franzen very much views himself of the "custodian of his own work," and he takes this role very seriously. He wants his work to be associated with him, and him alone.¹⁷ He values artistic autonomy, and wants the style of the marketing of his novels to reflect this view.

Though he could have been more tactful in expressing his hesitation about accepting the corporate label, Franzen was not unjustified in his worry that corporate affiliation would affect the readership of his novel. In an October 2001 article in *The New York Times* titled "On the Dust Jacket, to O or Not to O," a bookstore manager recounts, "A young woman came in here yesterday and made me search for a copy of 'The Corrections' without the Oprah logo," said Keith McEvoy, manager of the Shakespeare & Company bookstore in the West Village. "I couldn't find one, and she left in a huff to buy it somewhere else." (Corcoran 1). In this instance, the Oprah seal had a *negative* affect on sales. Even though this incident is a single event, which is statistically insignificant, it indicates that when Franzen claimed that the logo would attract only a certain type of reader, he was not completely out of line. Though the numbers indicate that Oprah's approval produced an enormous increase in sales—as indicated by the figures in footnote 15—her approval does have the potential to alienate readers, as well. Adding to the sense that Franzen's hesitation was not unfounded, we might take the response of

¹⁷ I would like to credit Professor Harley for helping me to clarify my thoughts regarding this aspect of Franzen's relationship with the public, and especially his guarded attitude toward the Media.

Maria Grasso, a television executive, who said that Oprah's seal "makes [her] feel mainstream to be reading an Oprah book" (Corcoran 1). Grasso goes on to say, "I don't want people to think that I have no idea about literature or that I sit home and watch TV all day." (1). These instances indicate that people have anxieties and insecurities about the seriousness of their reading that are so deep that they are unwilling to read a book whose corporate affiliation might prove that it is not so serious. Maria Grasso's comment in particular symbolizes contemporary society's obsession with authenticity, which appears here in Grasso's desire to appear to society an authentic reader who selects her reading material without the help of the media. The next section of this chapter entails a more thorough discussion of the place that authenticity holds in contemporary society.

The way that the media latched onto this incident highlights the polarizing effect of sensationalist headlines. Various newspapers and magazines referred to the alleged argument between Franzen and Oprah as a "feud" or a "quarrel," despite the fact that no actual fighting took place. The media industry, too, is a capitalist market. Therefore, the papers and magazines that sell the most copies rise to the top of the industry. In order to sell as many copies as possible, writers and editors choose catchy, attention-grabbing titles—titles that are designed to cause a stir. Those writers who make their money by writing *about* Franzen, and other important contemporary novelists, exploit the very tendency that Franzen so abhors: they are selling their content with the title. Franzen seems to be very uncomfortable with the thought that people would purchase his book simply because they saw an "Oprah's Book Club" sticker on the cover. Journalists and

reporters, however, can capitalize on the tendency for people to read articles with attention-grabbing titles. Therefore, they choose titles that tend to play on some sort of insecurity or anxiety that exists in society. Oprah's fame makes her name a buzzword in and of itself, and any article that suggests a feud with Oprah will peak a lot of people's interest. On a deeper level, however, the distinction symbolizes the feud between "popular novels" and "literary novels" that pervades, or at least seems to pervade, the literary community. The idea that a novel is either "fun" or "serious," but not both, is so problematic because it presents authors with a double-edged sword. If an author chooses to cater to the masses and appears to be writing with the main intention of making money, he is seen as selling out. If an author rejects an opportunity to increase sales and promote her work, she is seen as being an elitist. In October of 2001, an online literary news site called MOBYlives published a discussion about Franzen titled "Too Cool for Oprah." There exists a tendency to equate a desire for artistic integrity with snobbery, and Franzen's choice to question his inclusion on Oprah's Book List put him solidly in the snob camp in the eyes of the public.

In addition to separating an individual novel's intellectual value from its market value, the commoditization of the novel problematizes the literary word in another way: it places authors in competition with one another. Whether they are actively competing with each other to write the greatest novel of the moment, or they are competing only by virtue of the fact that other authors are also trying to sell books, all contemporary authors are participants in the competition to sell the most of their product. The desire to write a book that sells pushes authors to write books

that are in some way new and different; books that will catch the Media's attention.¹⁸ On one hand, the novel is the ideal medium with which to chase such ambition, as it has so few structural parameters. As Bakhtin's theory of the novel proposes, the extent to which the form of the novel can evolve is practically limitless, and therefore authors are not confined by convention if they seek to write something new. On the other hand, the push to write a novel that breaks from tradition puts a great deal of pressure on authors to write novels that are new and exciting, which has the potential to cause them anxiety. Competition can either inspire creativity, or foster anxiety, and because it is inherent in the profession of writing novels, authors must learn how to respond to it.

The entire problematic, competition-crazed, Media-driven environment in which contemporary authors are writing can be located in one, unattainable idea: the next "Great American Novel." Simultaneously romanticized and workmanlike, this catchphrase only further problematizes the already challenging environment in which novelists are writing. The Media suggests that American society is in search of such a novel, but it has failed to establish what a Great American Novel would actually look like. Perhaps this ambiguity stems from the origins of the phrase. The term, "Great American Novel," is derived from the title of American Civil War author, John William DeForest's, 1868 essay, which deals with the formation of an American identity, and the difficulties entailed in trying to come up with a single identity that

¹⁸ I do not mean to suggest that authors who write attention-grabbing novels are not genuine in their artistic expression. It is entirely feasible that an author whose book causes a stir writes with no intention other than writing the best book that he or she possibly can. Therefore, I do not wish to question artistic integrity, but to examine the interplay between capitalism and the push to write novels that sell.

captures the essence of being American. In the essay, he claims that authors have come close to writing such a novel, but have not actually been able to do so (DeForest n.p.). The fact that the term has its roots in a discussion of unrealized possibility is fitting, since contemporary literary critics and scholars are still unable to fully define what would qualify a novel as being a Great American Novel. Does the novel need to be “great” in terms of caliber or size? What constitutes an “American” novel when the country is so regional? The ambiguity of these terms makes it easy to demand a great deal from authors, without really being able to define what it is that we want. Therefore, when novels do come along that are very well received, it is difficult to decide whether or not they fit the bill for the next Great American Novel. We can see this confusion in the case of Franzen. *Time Magazine* refers to Franzen as a “Great American Novelist” in the August 2010 issue, which features Franzen on its cover. The author of this article also refers to *Freedom* as a candidate for the status of Great American Novel in conjunction with the like of Norman Mailer and John Updike (Grossman 4). Furthermore, Franzen has expressed a desire to write novels that grapple with big political concepts, which some critics have interpreted as the ambition to write the next Great American Novel (Bernard n.p.). However, there has been no overwhelming consensus that Franzen has actually done it; that he has actually written The Next Great American Novel. Effectively, the Great American Novel is more of a symbol for collective American identity, or perhaps collective American experience, than a specific set of qualifications toward which authors can gear their efforts. The fact that the Media touts is as a concrete status that a novel can conceivably achieve is what makes the term so problematic,

and what makes it a source of anxiety for authors. The way that the Media uses the phrase suggests that it is a status that the novel could, and potentially will, reach, if only an author comes along who is skilled enough to write it, which puts even more pressure on contemporary authors.

I propose that the pressure associated with the alleged quest to write the next Great American Novel contributes to some of the trends that contemporary literature is currently experiencing. Particularly, I propose that the ambiguity surrounding the word “great” manifests itself in two trends that are currently being played out: contemporary are often experimental in form, and they are often very long. Though experimental form is not unique to contemporary literature, it is certainly one of its defining features. Moretti’s approach of distanced reading is a useful way to take stock of these trends; accumulating a set of examples that fit into a trend allows for the interpretation of the trend. For example, several of the recently published, critically acclaimed novels are experimental in terms of their use of genre. Michael Chabon’s 2000 novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, for instance, contains elements of the epic and of the comic book adventure. David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*, which was published in 2004, contains elements of fantasy and science fiction. Although the “literariness” of the series is a subject of debate, I would be remiss not to include J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, as it has carved out a place for magical realism in the global literary market.¹⁹ Other novels are experimental in terms of their form and structure. Jonathan Safran Foer’s

¹⁹ David Mitchell and J.K. Rowling are British authors, but because *Cloud Atlas* and the *Harry Potter* series made such significant impacts in the American literary market, it seems relevant to include their work here.

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, published in 2005, uses illustrations and even photographs to tell its story. Very recently, novels have begun to be published only online, which opens up a whole new set of structural possibilities. The other trend among contemporary novels is that they tend to be very long. *The Corrections* is an impressive 586 pages, and *Freedom* is 576 pages. Franzen's earlier novels are lengthy as well; *The Twenty-Seventh City* spans 517 pages, and *Strong Motion* is 508 pages. Other lengthy contemporary novels include *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, which is 639 pages long, and Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex*, published in 2002, which spans 544 pages. Contemporary authors seem to be interested in testing the limits of the novel, whether in terms of form or length.

These trends in the novel seem to be related to the idea of the Great American Novel. It would be bold, and probably inaccurate, to suggest that every author listed above chose to test the limits of the novel because he or she intended to write the next Great American Novel. However, looking at the patterns in hindsight has the potential to show us how contemporary authors are commonly thinking about the novel, and what types of novels would be successful in the contemporary literary market. Moretti believes that there is a direct link between competition in the literary market and the trends that occur in the novel. He says that authors "are all competing for the same, limited market niche, and their meanderings through morphospace²⁰ have probably a lot to do with a keen desire to outdo each other's inventions" (77). In Moretti's view, the novel's commodity status very much affects its artistic status; authors attempting to write novels can succeed in a

²⁰ Morphospace is an evolutionary term that refers to the possible form and structure of an organism, which is in this case the novel.

limited market place, which means that they must attempt to write novels that can stand up to competing novels. Therefore, according to his theory of the novel, trends in contemporary literature have the potential to show us how contemporary authors commonly conceptualize the Great American Novel, or at least how they conceptualize a novel that will succeed in the literary market place, because artistic choices are at least partially influenced by competition. Some authors seem to envision creative form as the key to success, while others seem to think that it is length. Franzen falls into the category of authors who seem to consider length to be an important feature of the novel. Although he does incorporate epic and satire into *The Corrections*, his novels are basically traditional in their form; Franzen seems to value traditional literary technique over experimental form. Perhaps his tendency to write long novels is influenced by the pressure to write the next Great American Novel. Whether the source of this pressure is internal, in the form of personal ambition, or external, in the form of Media hype, is difficult to judge. In the case of Franzen, it is conceivable that both types of pressure influence him, though it is impossible to know for sure. Broadly speaking the pressure to write the next Great American Novel can be thought of as the pressure to write the novel that rises to the top of the literary market. It is a phenomenon that gives credence to Brouillette's claim that the production and marketing of a novel is part of the story of that novel, and displays the effects that the commodification of the novel can have on the craft of writing.

The Author as a Commodity: The Pressures Presented by the Media

As Franzen's relationship with the Media readily demonstrates, a second challenge that accompanies professional authorship is the challenge of the constructing and maintaining a public persona. Brouillette claims that the contemporary author's need to maintain a public self amounts to a major source of anxiety for the contemporary author. Selling a novel more often than not entails self-promotion on the part of the author, and in order to successfully self-promote their work, authors must become public figures. Being a public figure opens a person up to public scrutiny, which is a pressure to which Franzen has not always responded well. He seems to be just as protective of his identity as an author as he is of his novels. Unfortunately for someone like Franzen, who seems to be fundamentally opposed to the commoditization of literature and identity, authorial image is of great interest to the Media, especially when it makes for a good story.

If the global literary market has made the novel into a commodity, the Media has made authorial identity into a commodity. Just as novels generate revenue for authors and publishing companies, stories about authors generate revenue for journalists and literary publications. In order to sell as many copies of their stories as possible, journalists may choose to depict authors in a way that makes them seem as interesting as possible to potential readers, which means that sensational, controversial stories get more attention than average stories. Therefore authors often come to be known by the details of their careers that stand out, rather than the details that characterize their careers most accurately. For instance, as mentioned in the previous section, Franzen has come to be known by his unfortunate run-in

with Oprah. Franzen's permanent association with the Oprah incident is just one example of how an author's public identity is created, or at the very least affected, by the Media. The Media's control over an author's image is powerful, because it is this image that becomes associated with his or her work. Brouillette argues that authors tend resist public personae that have been ascribed by the Media, since these are generally the images from which readers gain their knowledge of authors. Therefore, an author's public persona becomes associated with his or her work, even if that author had little or nothing to do with the creation of that persona. Brouillette says, "As their books reach a variety of audiences with conflicting tendencies and interests, writers are unable to determine how exactly the attachment between authorial persona and text is constructed or received" (4). Authors typically try to make it so that the public images that become associated with their novels are accurate representations of who they are as people, and what they want to stand for as artists. In other words, Brouillette claims that authors strive to maintain their authenticity.

Authenticity has become a thematic obsession in contemporary literature. This trend is not particularly unexpected, since authenticity has also become a focal point of contemporary culture. Postmodernism has instilled in society a tendency not to take anything at face value. This skepticism appears in the world of literature, but is by no means confined to that realm of culture—the influence of postmodernism is far reaching. For example, society tends to be particularly skeptical of public figures, such as politicians, and certainly not without reason. From President Nixon's Watergate scandal, to President Clinton's affair, to

presidential candidate Newt Gingrich's exceptionally loose reading of the marriage contract, American politicians certainly tend to embody the postmodern ideal that things are not always wonderful as they first appear. Contemporary art sustains this postmodern skepticism.²¹ *Up In The Air*, a recently produced film based upon Walter Kim's 2001 novel, questions the authenticity of the main character's philosophy toward life, and portrays his emotional development as this philosophy fails.²² The film even goes so far as to question the authenticity of an affair between the main character and a married woman—a phenomenon that is by nature inauthentic. Popular contemporary music is completely obsessed with authenticity and questioning appearances—one need only to consider the names of Eminem's most popular songs to see that authenticity is central in the music industry, too: "My Name Is," "The Real Slim Shady," and "The Way I Am" are just a few of his titles centered on authenticity and identity.²³ The song, "The Real Slim Shady," is particularly relevant to postmodernism as it is a critique of the practice of writing songs requested by producers with the explicit intent of topping the charts. Clearly,

²¹ The question as to whether art creates culture or reflects culture is certainly relevant in this instance. One could easily defend either the argument, or come up with another theory entirely. However interesting the relationship between art and culture is, it is beyond the scope of the thesis. The thesis proposes that the trends in each run parallel, but does not attempt to evaluate the relationship between these trends.

²² *Up In The Air*, released in 2009, was directed by Jason Reitman, and starred George Clooney. The film is based on Walter Kim's novel, *Up In The Air*. The film was very well received, and was the recipient of six Academy Award nominations, according to the official website for *Up In The Air*. The film complicates the family idyll by suggesting that a permanent place of residence is not necessary for a happy life. Its tone is doubly skeptical, as it questions our notion of "family," and then questions this skepticism.

²³ "My Name Is" was released in 1999, "The Real Slim Shady" in 2000, and "The Way I Am" in 2000.

the notion of authenticity and the need to appear authentic are causing a fair amount of anxiety in contemporary society.

Brouillette refers to this obsession with authenticity as an “authenticity crisis.” Authors, as promoters of their own work, must necessarily become public figures. Brouillette claims that this facet of their careers fosters a feeling among authors that “their agency is subsumed” (Brouillette 4). In this context, Franzen’s choice to publish so much critical and autobiographical work can be viewed as his way of taking control of his public persona. Every piece of personal information that Franzen makes public eliminates an opportunity for the Media to speculate about an aspect of Franzen’s life. For instance, Franzen published his collection of essays, *How To Be Alone*, just one year after he published *The Corrections*. While all of the essays in the collection are relevant to Franzen’s work, the essay, “Mr. Difficult” stands out as an instance of Franzen responding directly to Media buzz. The essay is written in response to a particularly angry letter from a reader, who refers to Franzen as a “pompous snob, and a real ass-hole” (“Mr. Difficult” 239). Franzen seems to take the criticism to heart, as it prompts him to write a lengthy essay about his genuine love for the reading literature, which entails a defense of the concept that reading should be a pleasurable experience. Franzen spells out his values publically, in what seems to be an effort to beat the Media to the punch in terms of creating his public persona. Of course the media can critique and question his self-presentation, but the fact that he has made so much of his own ideology public in his own words lends him some agency. The commodity status of his novels and the Media’s control over his public persona are conditions of his role as a contemporary

author that Franzen cannot change. However, his choice to engage with the public seems to signal a willingness to embrace his role as a contemporary author.

Franzen may not love the conditions surrounding the production of novels, but he does love the novel, and so he attempts to navigate the challenges of professional authorship in order to continue with his craft.

The commoditization of novel and the author's role as a public figure are two challenges that Franzen, like any contemporary author, has had to deal with during his writing career. The fame that Franzen experienced as a result of the success of *The Corrections* significantly increased the pressure to which he was subjected during the time that he was writing and producing *Freedom*. As was mentioned in the introduction, the publication of *Freedom* was a highly anticipated in the literary community. Given the hype surrounding the production of *Freedom*, and the anxiety that Franzen has expressed regarding the commodification of his work, it seems reasonable to propose that the added pressure under which Franzen wrote his latest novel may have impacted the content of the novel. In the next chapter, I will examine the possibility that anxiety resulting from Franzen's role as a contemporary author contributes to the self-consciousness that can be observed in *Freedom*.

CHAPTER 3

Evolving With the Audience: Franzen and the Reader

“From the very beginning, then, the novel was made of different clay than the other already completed genres; it is a different breed, and with it and in it is born the future of all literature” – Mikhail Bakhtin²⁴

So far this thesis has evaluated Jonathan Franzen’s two most recent novels, and his place in society as a contemporary author. The first chapter dealt with Franzen’s two most famous novels, *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, and argued that *The Corrections* is the more successful project of the two. While both novels are well written, *The Corrections* is able to be both personally and politically engaging in a way that *Freedom* is not. The second chapter sought to illuminate some of the particular challenges that are posed to contemporary authors. Authors writing in today’s global literary market must compete with one another in order to sell their novels, and they must become public figures in order to promote their work. Authors’ work and their public images are commoditized, which heightens their anxiety about remaining authentic as artists and, more broadly, as individuals. In order to make this suggestion, I turn to the writing of Zadie Smith.

In her critical essay, “Two Directions for the Novel,” Zadie Smith lays out two opposing models for the Western novel, which she envisions as two possible routes down which the novel could be heading. She uses two contemporary novels, *Netherland*, by Joseph O’Neill, and *Remainder*, by Tom McCarthy, to exemplify these

²⁴ Taken from Bakhtin’s essay, “Epic and Novel,” (39).

models. *Netherland* is the story of a Dutch stock analyst who moves from London to New York with his family in the wake of the 9-11 terrorist attacks. The protagonist wants desperately to fit into New York society, and does his best to realize this desire. *Netherland* is written in the style of lyrical realism, and deals with the themes of family, politics, and identity formation (Smith 73). The novel was published in 2009, and received several honors, including the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction.²⁵ *Remainder* is about an unnamed protagonist of sorts, to whom Smith refers as the “Enactor,” who is recovering from a traumatizing head injury, which had put the Enactor in a coma for months (84). The head injury has wiped out much of the Enactor’s memory, so even the most mundane of actions requires intense concentration and precision on his behalf. He becomes obsessed with trying to experience life “authentically,” and continually reenacts scenes from his past, of which he has only vague memories, in order to experience them authentically. *Remainder*, too, is written in the style of lyrical realism, though not quite in the usual fashion. As Smith points out, McCarthy relies upon repetition and the accumulation of ideas, rather than lilting lyrical language (84). The novel was published in 2006, and was the recipient of the Believer Book Award in 2008.²⁶ Smith uses each novel to illustrate what she sees as the most probable potential routes down with the future of the novel can travel. She argues that *Remainder*, reveals new spaces into

²⁵ The PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, which was established in 1949 by William Faulkner, is a national prize awarded annually to the best works of fiction that have been published by American authors during that year (“Award For Fiction” n.p.).

²⁶ The Believer Book Award is awarded annually by *The Believer* magazine. The award is given by the editors in order to acknowledge “the strongest and most underappreciated’ novels of the year,” (“The Believer Book Award” n.p.).

which the novel can move, and therefore presents us with the more convincing path forward for the novel of the future.

Smith's characterization of *Netherland* is very applicable to *Freedom*. Her main criticism of *Netherland* is that it tries too hard to convince its reader of what it is attempting to accomplish, which is exactly the trap that *Freedom* falls into. She argues that the novel is overly self-conscious, which is a fair characterization of *Freedom*, as well. She describes *Netherland* as "the post-9/11 novel we hoped for," but she does not mean this as a compliment (Smith 73). She says of *Netherland*, "It is perfectly done—in a sense, that's the problem. It's so precisely the image of what we have been taught to value in fiction that it throws that image into a kind of existential crisis, as the photograph gifts a nervous breakdown to the painted portrait" (73). In other words, the novel tries too hard to show the reader what it is doing; its focus on effectively conveying its content overpowers the content itself. In effect, the focus on accurate presentation posits authenticity at the center of the novel. This tendency is present in *Freedom* as well. Particularly in the characterization of the Berglunds, Franzen is painstakingly precise in making sure that Patty and Walter fit the mold for the particular "type" of liberals that they are. He presents a very honest, unblinking look at view characters, as one would expect in a novel written in the style of realism. However, taking an unblinking look at characters who remain largely unchanging has the effect of presenting characters as symbols rather than individuals. As I suggested in Chapter 1, Patty reads more like a symbol of the oppressed mother who never lived out her dreams than like an actual, dynamic woman. Similarly, Walter fits the stereotype for the guilty liberal—the

liberal who seeks to save the world out of a sense of duty rather than a love of humanity—to a t. Even if the characters are not entirely static, they come across as stock characters when they never break out of their molds, and they are presented in a realistic way. As Anis Shivani, an author writing a book review for *The Huffington Post*, says of *Freedom*, “We already *know* these characters, as soon as Franzen has started putting them on the page” (Shivani, 6). The novel works very hard to convince us that the Berglunds are, in fact, exactly what they appear to be. The novel’s preoccupation with authenticity has the potential to make the reader focus on authenticity, and it thereby creates the very problem that it tries so desperately to evade.

Making authenticity so central to the novel only exacerbates the problems that already surround the issue of authenticity. In my second chapter, I attempted to illustrate the connection between pressure put on writers by the media to maintain an authentic public image, and the near obsession with authenticity that is being played out in contemporary literature. Authors are transformed into public personae by the media, and are then expected to adhere to these ascribed identities, or else prepare themselves for the unpleasant epithets of “fake” and “inauthentic.” Such an environment fosters overstated, obsessive characterization such as that which we find in *Freedom*. Just as Franzen is thrust into the spotlight and expected to maintain a consistent, believable identity, so are the Berglunds. In a realist novel, it is expected that the characters are believable and realistic. In *Freedom*, consistency seems to have been equated with believability, which has the opposite effect than that which is expected from a realist novel. From the neighbor’s

characterization of the Berglunds as guilty liberals in the very first pages of the book, to Walter's choice to convert the family's lake house property into a songbird preserve in the closing scene, the novel constantly reminds us that the Berglunds' actions are largely driven by an overwhelming sense of liberal guilt. A comment that Smith makes about *Netherland* speaks to this tendency: "It's a novel that wants you to know that it knows you know it knows" (Smith 75). We certainly know that *Freedom* knows what liberal guilt is. What we do not know is whether or not to believe in the Berglunds. If the characters are so perfectly drawn out, what is it about *Freedom* that makes them so difficult to believe in?

Smith answers this question with regard to *Netherland* by suggesting that the novel's style, lyrical realism, is ill-suited for a contemporary audience, and therefore the novel is not as successful as it could be. Realism aims to show the reader something about the world in a way that is believable because it parallels the reality of the situation. Lyrical realism aims to accomplish this goal using poetic, descriptive language in the process. Such a style is difficult to present to a postmodern audience full of individuals who have internalized the skepticism of postmodern authors like William Gaddis and Kurt Vonnegut. Even people who have not read any contemporary novels will have been exposed to postmodern skepticism, as the influence of postmodernism extends far beyond the world of literature. As I discussed in Chapter 2, anyone who participates in Western culture, be it watching MTV or reading the *New York Times*, is exposed to the messages of postmodernism, meaning that skepticism is a part of contemporary ideology by virtue of the fact that it is so predominant in society. Therefore, a contemporary

audience is a distrustful one, and such distrust is only heightened by the media's tendency to latch onto issues of authenticity. Given the degree of skepticism permeating society, writing a novel in the style of realism is a risky endeavor. This is not to say that realist novels will always fail. Many critics loved *Freedom*, and a fair amount of them liked the book better than *The Corrections*. However, realism does bring the question of authenticity into discussions of a novel that utilizes this style, and therefore fans the flames of the authenticity crisis. It is particularly telling that Zadie Smith, an author who employs realism in her own work, questions the practicality of the style in a contemporary setting. She says of lyrical realism, "I have written in this tradition myself and cautiously hope for its survival, but if it's to survive, lyrical realists will have to push a little harder on their subject" (Smith 81). Put simply, Smith does not write the genre off entirely, but she does recognize its shortcomings as it currently tends to be used.

A major weakness in *Freedom*, which stems from its use of realism, is that the novel questions its own ability to convince the reader. This tendency becomes most apparent in situations where the novel bumps up against the confines of realism, and has no choice but to plow forward. Walter's lengthy discussions of politics clearly display this problem. There is a scene in which Walter is describing the mechanics of overpopulation to Katz, and asks, "Are you bored yet?" (*Freedom* 214). It is as though Franzen is nervous that he is boring the reader with all of the details concerning the mechanics of overpopulation, and he wishes to apologize for doing so. He has made politics a conversation topic for the characters in the novel, which means that the politics are dished out to the reader in a conversational manner—

which can lose its appeal quickly. Walter's description of overpopulation goes on for five pages, which makes the novel feel a bit preachy and informational in its aim. Franzen seems to be aware of this shortcoming, so he points it out to the audience. Walter's suggestion that the monologue might be boring has the effect of someone saying, "Don't judge me, but..." before he or she speaks. The novel is trying too hard to convince us that it knows both what it is talking about, and what audience might think about what it is talking about, that it gets in its own way. The writing in this section is not, in fact, bad, but the self-consciousness with which it is presented urges the reader to judge it negatively when he or she might not have done so if Walter's monologue were delivered without any self-deprecation. Franzen plants the same seeds of doubt regarding the ability of lyrical realism to reach a contemporary audience that Zadie Smith brings up in her essay. Both authors seem to be at the same time nostalgic for the days when lyrical realism was the style in which people wrote, and aware of the fact that it is not so effective on an audience that is distrustful of anything that claims to be authentic.

The Corrections attempts to dodge the authenticity bullet through the use of satire, and I suggest that the novel is arguably successful in doing so. As I proposed in my first chapter, *The Corrections* satirizes the genre of epic in order to critique the phenomenon of romanticizing the past. The combination of these moments of satire and Franzen's own sense of humor instill within the reader the idea that *The Corrections* is not a novel that takes itself completely seriously. Therefore, situations that are difficult to believe in *Freedom* could be totally acceptable in *The Corrections*, because hyperbole makes sense in the context of a satire. Each novel

contains an unlikely scenario in which a main character gets wrapped up in a business deal of questionable legality. In *The Corrections*, Chip becomes involved with a Lithuanian crime boss, Gitanas, through his ex-girlfriend, Julia, who also happens to be married to Gitanas. Chip totally rejects the liberal ideals by which he lived as an academic, and travels to Lithuania with Gitanas, where they defraud foreign investors until they get caught. After narrowly escaping with his life, Chip returns home to his family. In *Freedom*, Joey moves out of his house and in with the neighbors, who are both very conservative and seemingly uneducated. Joey moves in order to both escape from and retaliate against his mother's overprotective ways. He then pursues a subcontract with a company that is selling broken and outdated parts for supply vehicles in the Iraq war, and uses the money to pay for his education at the University of Virginia. His Republican politics continue to move farther right when he becomes exposed to his college roommate's father's neoconservative politics. After he makes a \$900,000 profit off of his dubious business deals with military supply truck companies, Joey eventually becomes guilty and gives away the money, and reconciles with his parents. On the surface, the two stories are fairly similar. Both Chip and Joey reject their liberal principles in favor of republican ones, and in so doing, they sever ties with their families.²⁷ Furthermore, each character embarks on a journey that could certainly be classified as implausible in the process of rejecting his values; Chip hops on a plane to Lithuania, and Joey completely snubs his family and moves next door. Each scenario is fairly

²⁷ I should point out that it is not his choice to embrace capitalism that causes Chip to sever ties with his family. On the contrary, Chip's parents are politically conservative people. It is his choice to physically distance himself from his family by moving to Lithuania that so drastically changes their relationship.

unlikely given the contexts of their respective novels. However, this unlikelihood functions very differently in the two novels due to their different styles, with the result that it works with *The Corrections* and against *Freedom*.

Everything about the way that Chip's Lithuanian adventure is presented in *The Corrections* pointedly functions to make the situation seem absurd. First, the mob boss, Gitanas, is the husband of Julia, the woman who recently dumped Chip. When Chip meets Gitanas, the narrator observes, "In almost every respect—coloration, shape of head, height and build...Gitanas looked more like Chip than anybody Chip could remember meeting" (*The Corrections* 107). The oddity of two unrelated people being so similar in appearance heightens the absurdity of the entire situation, and cues the reader that this element of the novel is satirical. In the context of satire, the entire situation makes sense; this part of the story is meant to seem unrealistic, because it is tongue in cheek. Therefore, the reader is not under pressure to question the authenticity of the situation, since the tone at this point is facetious. The novel's flippancy continues as Gitanas describes himself as a "governmental entrepreneur," and then explains that this is possible in Lithuania due to their large number of annual elections: "Elections are our biggest industry. We have three or four elections a year. Elections are our biggest industry. We have the highest annual per capital output of elections of any country in the world. Higher than Italy, even" (109). This humorous bit functions as a reminder not to take Gitanas too seriously. He is a foil for Chip in the most literal sense, in that they look the same, and he is involved in an entirely ridiculous moneymaking scheme.

The situation is satirized, so it does not have to be held to the standards of realism in terms of believability, and so the scene is effective as part of the novel.

The unrealistic scenario involving Joey in *Freedom*, however, functions entirely differently. Because *Freedom* is written in the style of lyrical realism, it is assumed that events in the novel are meant to be taken at face value. However, Joey's course in life is anything but typical, which makes it difficult to believe. During one of his vacations from college, Joey visits his friend, Jonathan, in New York. Jonathan's father offers Joey a job on the spot, which leads Joey to become involved in the questionable military supply truck industry. We see Joey conduct business that takes him to international locations, such as Paraguay and Buenos Aires. He becomes responsible for dealing with large sums of money, some of which are in the six-figure range. Although the idea that Joey could end up in such a situation is not completely outside of the realm of possibility, it certainly breaks from the typical experience of an American college student. As has been mentioned, *Freedom* is a novel that seems to be particularly self-conscious about its own credibility. Therefore, it would be reasonable for a reader to assume that Joey's journey is meant to be credible. However, it is difficult to interpret such an atypical series of events as authentic. The emphasis on authenticity that pervades *Freedom* has the potential to suggest to readers that they, too, ought to be concerned with authenticity, and readers are thereby more likely to question the credibility of a scenario that seems unlikely to occur in reality. Once again, the novel creates the very problems around authenticity that it tries so hard to avoid.

Both *The Corrections* and *Freedom* are aware of the potentially skeptical audience for which they write, and each novel grapples with the problem in its own way. *The Corrections* endeavors to avoid the question of authenticity, or at least acknowledge it, through its use of humor. The novel is playful in its use of genre, and generous in its use of wit. These elements work together to present *The Corrections* as a novel that does not take itself too seriously. I do not mean to suggest that the novel is not a serious project. On the contrary, as I attempted to demonstrate in my first chapter, the novel deals with very serious subject matter. What I am suggesting is that the novel employs devices such as humor and believable, sympathetic characters as a defense against postmodern skepticism. *Freedom*, too, is aware of its potentially skeptical audience. However, this novel attempts to head off skepticism by explaining itself to the reader. *Freedom* seems to be so self-conscious of its role as a novel that it is unable to simply tell its story. It has become preoccupied with its own authenticity, which has weakened its credibility.

My hope, as my thesis nears its conclusion, is that I have been able to show that *Freedom* is, at least in part, a manifestation of Franzen's reluctance toward grappling with contemporary society. His anxiety about his role as an author seems to have crept into the pages of this novel, just as Brouillette and Smith suggest that such an anxiety might. *Freedom* works obsessively to show its reader that it is self-aware, with the result instead that novel comes across as being very self-conscious. The novel attempts to do the work of interpretation for the reader, and thereby it gets in its own way; it tells when it would be better served to show. Perhaps the

need to self-identify that appears in this novel is linked to Franzen's need to self-identify as an author. As was stated in the previous chapter, Franzen is made very uncomfortable by the thought of having his artistic authenticity subsumed by the media. I propose that Franzen's own self-consciousness comes through in *Freedom*, and renders the novel ineffective as a contemporary novel. *Freedom's* tendency to tell the reader what it is doing right only serves to point the reader toward what it might be doing wrong, and thus the novel is a casualty of its own obsession with authenticity.

On a more positive note, I propose that the success of *The Corrections* is derived from the fact that the novel embraces the challenge of writing for a contemporary audience, which in turn allows the novel to hold on to traditional literary techniques. The novel accounts for the possibility of the dubious reader, who may be questioning of the novel's authenticity, by presenting readers with characters with whom they can sympathize, incorporating satire and humor, and using politics in a way that does not interfere with the novel's artistic ability. The novel engages with postmodern skepticism without becoming consumed by the fear of it. *The Corrections* shows that the novel's unique versatility as a genre allows it to be molded into whatever form is best suited to its contemporary moment. Furthermore, *The Corrections* adapts itself to its contemporary audience through the effective use of the traditional literary techniques listed above. By embracing the challenges of the contemporary moment, *The Corrections* is able to hold onto traditional literary values as it moves the genre of the novel forward. In writing such a novel, Jonathan Franzen has provided us with a convincing possible next step

in the future development of the novel. I look forward to the possibility of seeing this development play out.

Conclusion

“Fiction is the most fundamental human art. Fiction is storytelling, and our reality arguably consists of the stories we tell about ourselves.” – Jonathan Franzen²⁸

The fact that Franzen’s novels have been so well received by both critics and recreational readers suggests that Franzen’s writing provides us with something unique. *The Corrections* displays the novel’s capacity to be adapted to a changing society, and in so doing it gives us a potential model for the future development of the novel. Although *Freedom* does not quite measure up to *The Corrections* in terms of its suitability for contemporary society, it is not without merit. Both novels received numerous awards, and hundreds of thousands of copies of each have been sold so far—clearly Franzen’s writing has created a niche for itself in contemporary culture. What is striking is that this niche does not seem to be confined to any single group of readers. In some ways his novels are part of “high culture” in that they are lauded and discussed in highly esteemed publications. In other ways (much to Franzen’s dismay) the novels are part of “popular culture,” as they are lauded by celebrities in the entertainment world and passed around book clubs. Franzen’s work seems to have the capacity to be relevant for all kinds of readers, which gestures toward the possibility the novel is a medium of expression that can appeal to all sorts of people.

Intriguingly, despite the widespread popularity of Franzen’s novels, none of them has been made into a film. Take the example of *The Corrections*. Producers have been working on making a film adaption of *The Corrections* since 2001, and the

²⁸ Taken from Franzen’s essay, “Mr. Difficult,” (258).

project still has no definite end in sight.²⁹ The fact that the novel has not been adapted to film speaks for itself: there is something about this novel that cannot be captured in film. Even if a future film adaptation of the novel is produced, the fact that it has taken so long to come to fruition when other novels are adapted to film all of the time indicates that *The Corrections* has some quality about it that makes it difficult to translate into another medium of expression. *The Corrections* reminds us, then, that the novel is a medium of expression that has withstood the test of time, and continues to withstand the competition posed by the film industry. What, then, does the novel offer that other expressive media cannot?

What the novel gives us is the ability to be alone without being lonely. Reading a book is an isolated endeavor. A person can read near other people, she can even read the same book at the same time as others around her, and she can talk about a book with others. However, during the actual process of reading, there exists a one-on-one relationship between reader and text, which cannot be expanded to include other people.³⁰ Therefore, a person who in the process of reading a book is alone, but he or she is alone with the *novel*. To be alone with a novel is to be free of the outside world, which allows a reader to become part of the

²⁹ Scott Rudin is the producer who originally optioned the film rights for *The Corrections* in 2001, and he will be an executive producer on the HBO drama series that is alleged to air sometime in 2012. Rudin originally wanted to adapt the novel to a film, but was unsuccessful in doing so. Noah Baumbach is the screenwriter and director of the project, and Franzen is said to be a co-producer. According to various online movie blogs and magazines, Ewan McGregor has signed up to appear in the pilot episode of this HBO adaptation. We shall see what actually comes of these rumors in the near future.

³⁰ This relationship would be complicated in the case of reading aloud as a group, but since it is not a common practice in American culture, the exception is not relevant to this thesis.

world of the novel. This world, the world that exists at the point of connection between reader and novel, is a unique space that cannot be recreated in any other form. It is a space peopled by characters that are at once a product of the author's imagination, and of the reader's; the world of the novel is both consumed and created entirely within the reader's mind. The world of the novel will surely continue to evolve, as change is part of its nature, but it will never disappear, so long as we have authors who seek to preserve it. Perhaps Jonathan Franzen's model will direct this evolution, and perhaps not. Either way, the success of Franzen's work shows that an enthusiasm for reading continues to thrive in contemporary American society, which means that the novel has an audience, and thus all that is necessary for the its continued development in the years to come.

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