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Philip M. Weinstein

Swarthmore College, pweinst1@swarthmore.edu

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More Human Trouble

Philip Weinstein

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CURRENT BOOKS IN REVIEW

Nightingale changed her last name from its original *Nachtingale* because it would roll off students' lips more easily; by contrast her thoroughly assimilated brother, Marvin, retains the original European spelling. In an upscale Los Angeles neighborhood, he lives in a palatial house once owned by a silent-movie star—all of which gives Bea, who travels there, yet another chance to level upon him much the same withering criticism she had earlier heaped on Paris.

Among the more important loose ends that Bea ties up on her trips to Los Angeles is that of her ex-husband, Leo Coopersmith. Once dominated by his extra-large ego (he aspires to be an important composer) and the extra-large grand piano he left in their living room when he departed, Bea clears out space for herself both in the physical and spiritual senses of the word.

Threaded through the novel are intimations of the Holocaust: Lili, the older woman Julian falls for and later marries, is a survivor whose husband and young son were murdered during the war. She carries history with her, not only on her tattooed arm but in her very consciousness. As Bea becomes embroiled in the fate of her nephew, his spoiled and altogether American younger sister, and the mysterious Lili, she finds herself becoming proactive to the point of evading and even lying to her strong-willed brother. The result is a novel with recognizable flesh-and-blood characters and literary texture that places each paragraph under pressure and in control.

Foreign Bodies is at once an homage to the Jamesian novel and its own entity, for Ozick has freed

herself at last from the trap of a too rigid, frontal imitation. She addresses indirectly the oceans of blood that define the twentieth century, and in the process she discovers that the best way to imagine a Jamesian novel is to turn its social castes and equations upside down.

—Sanford Pinsker

MORE HUMAN TROUBLE

Freedom

by Jonathan Franzen

(Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010. 576 pages. \$28)

Although Jonathan Franzen has been laboring in the fields of fiction for some twenty-five years, he first appeared on the national radar in 2001 with the publication of *The Corrections*. The message of his third novel wasn't new, but Franzen delivered it with irresistible authority. An entire slew of domestic values prized and nurtured from the depression-ridden 1930s through the postwar 1950s was no longer viable. Steadfastness, prudence, self-discipline, obedience to the norms mirrored by one's neighbors' lives (or at least by the stories such neighbors told of their lives)—all this had become, for the younger generation, unbearable, and the struggle to throw it off, in Franzen's hands, is mind-bendingly funny. His prose is pitch perfect for the bitchy rhythms of family squabble. Franzen's best work seems to grow out of several lifetimes of penal/familial servitude.

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Now we have *Freedom*—a title that sounds America's most hackneyed value, the one that galvanizes our wars abroad and corrodes our peace at home. Franzen sounds out freedom in a range of percussive variations—freedom as a neurotic force field, both psychological in its inner workings and global in its outer effects. There is, first, the fantasized freedom of escaping from one's family. To be born into a family is a common enough fate, but for Franzen its constrictive consequences seem illimitable. Family is like Crazy Glue: a drop imposes lifelong bonding. Franzen's people are inextricably relational, floundering in relations both sought and inherited. Try as they might, they cannot penetrate deeper than their own social embeddedness and discover something free-standing and uniquely their own.

Few people grow up in *Freedom*, though this does not prevent them from begetting offspring. Inasmuch as immaturity seems radical rather than relative, Franzen is nonjudgmental. He explores dysfunction so compellingly because he sees no alternative to it. Being "good"—a good parent, a good child—remains mandatory but impossible. Freud's superego saturates Franzen's canvas. The backgrounded labor of Patty Berglund's shrink enables her revised sense of herself. More deeply backgrounded are the years, one suspects, of psychiatric counsel and imagination making this novel possible—making it liberatingly *funny*. No character Franzen attends to escapes the essential bourgeois commandment: Behave thyself! However hard they try, they fail. Every post-1950s zeitgeist they have listened to—and Franzen knows

them all: sex, drugs, rock music, far-out political and environmental groups—tells them to break free, break their parents' laws. No matter, deep down, the law still lodges in them, gnawing away, thwarted and vengeful.

It is therefore no surprise that illicit sex possesses a burning energy in *Freedom*, and Franzen is drawn to its capacity to derange its carrier. An animal endowment, sex is "prophetic"—it knows what it knows, and (like Freud's unconscious) it never forgets. If characters ignore the insistent sexual directives rising in them, the pain inflicted is unremitting. Written a decade later than *The Corrections*, *Freedom* "knows" that sex will not last forever. All the youthful humping seems shadowed by the coming autumn. In *The Corrections* the parents were distant enough from the younger writer's imagination to escape his sexual lens (it would have been too awful to visit Alfred and Enid in the bedroom). But *Freedom* explores sexuality from fifteen to fifty, as an urge fully (de)formative in the adults especially. It seems more frenetic and focused here—more plot-shaping—precisely because it will not last forever.

The brilliance of *Freedom* is often registered at the level of specific phrases and sentences. These are usually nihilistically perceptive: the mind behind these sentences is attached to (in need of defending) so little that would bias its grasp that it is able to enter (corrosively) the foibles of those it pursues and to show us what they do not (cannot) see about themselves. In Franzen's imaginary world we cannot help being wounded and wounding in turn. This involves

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a good deal of discomfort—heading toward shame—that ensues when one sees where one is and how one has made others pay for it. What is moving here is that Franzen really does take “nice” seriously—as though he wishes he were (but knows he isn’t) a nice person—yet sees “nice” as usually dishonest (a self-evading strategy) and always self-limiting. You can’t win by being nice. Interested in judgment, Franzen is very strong in not judging. That is perhaps his greatest strength as a comic novelist: life as spectacle, not proving ground.

Freedom is touching—not sentimental, but touching—as *The Corrections* was not. More human trouble is on display here, more heartache too—all of it recognizable (but it takes Franzen’s novel to make it recognizable), all of it implicitly the writer’s condition as well as his characters’ and (where the shoe fits) our own. At its core *Freedom* reveals that the only freedom we possess inheres in how we negotiate our endless array of constraints. Franzen’s humor and humanity derive from the terrifying truth—in our face all the time but evaded no less insistently—that our freedom and unfreedom are constitutive dimensions of each other.

—Philip Weinstein

A MAELSTROM OF DISCONTENT

Townie: A Memoir
by Andre Dubus III
(Norton, 2011. 388 pages. \$25.95)

Andre Dubus III is the son of the late Andre Dubus, a short-story writer of some distinction whose reputation continues quietly to grow. The elder Dubus was crippled when he was hit by a car in 1986, and he died of a heart attack, alone in his home, twelve years later. He had taught writing at Bradford College in northern Massachusetts, where he lived with his wife, Pat, and their four children, two boys and two girls, after being graduated from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in the mid-sixties.

By the end of the sixties Andre and Pat were divorced, and Andre was living with one of his female students. Cast adrift, Pat and the four Dubus kids began a rocky hand-to-mouth existence that would take them from one run-down former mill town to another along Massachusetts’s polluted Merrimack River in what must be as desolate a region of this country as anyone could imagine. *Townie* is the story of what that existence was like as told by the elder of the two sons, himself already a writer of some note, whose novel *The House of Sand and Fog* (1999) was an Oprah Winfrey selection and was made into a well-received film.

The relationship between father and abandoned son is at the heart of the story and is the best thing about the book. Andre III is seriously conflicted about his father. He loves him but has trouble admiring him, and he resents strenuously his father’s