

Three Reviews

Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections*. (NY: Picador USA, 2002), 592 pp., \$15.00, (paperback), fiction.

James Buchan, *The Persian Bride*. (Boston: Mariner, 1999), 343 pp., (paperback), fiction.

Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves*. (London: Doubleday, 2002), 709 pp., (paperback), fiction.

The Corrections is a robust, slightly frantic novel that explores familial and societal dissension and tensions. Through a third-person omniscient narrative voice, Franzen presents the separate yet intertwined tales of the Lambert family: parents Enid and Alfred, children Chip, Gary and Denise. These are stock characters placed in contrived, familiar situations. Chip is an academic who sleeps with a student and consequently loses his job. His dismissal is unlikely, because in real life a union or faculty association would grieve the matter while he continued to teach or was placed on suspension. However, the narrative demands that Chip be unemployed so he can experience particular misadventures. For being a successful businessman Gary must be punished, and so he is married to the obligatory unsupportive wife. Denise, a Daddy's Girl with a miserable sequence of failed relationships with men, naturally wonders if she is a lesbian. Their parents have their own predicaments. While studies show that the affliction senior citizens are concerned with most is arthritis, it's neither fashionable nor fertile enough for Franzen's attention. Instead, Enid pops pills and Alfred battles Parkinson's, a celebrity-kissed condition.

The novel offers one singular feature, the creation of a uniform Voice that appears in the speech of each character and in the narrative voice. Franzen writes internal monologues and dialogue in the same rhythms as the narrator's commentary. So thorough a technique raises the question of its purpose. It's definitely not meant to personalize Chip or Denise. It could be argued that a distinction of consciousness among the characters might be tantamount to the author experiencing a loss of vision and control. Perhaps a hint as to Franzen's intentions—and there must be a motive behind the Voice—resides in the remark by a minor figure. Commenting

on some incident, this government official says, in a familiar-sounding line, that it's "a tragedy rewritten as a farce." Clearly the Lamberts don't qualify for tragedy, since they don't possess noble birth, hubris, or represent a universal condition. Besides, Franzen would be familiar with the idea that tragedy is dead. Is the novel a social farce? Middle-class Midwesterners often are ridiculed, but the monotonous delivery and dull set pieces elicit only a wan smile. When nothing in a novel is respected, and when no character is respected, there aren't targets at which to aim. Satire ceases to exist, and comedy follows tragedy to the graveyard.

It's permissible to wonder if Franzen's creation of that Voice defeats whatever other purposes he had in mind. Consciously or unconsciously, a case is being built against the Lamberts and society in general, and the result is a total condemnation of them, it, and us. It would be odd if Franzen did not see that. Meanwhile, that narrative Voice you hear is literature barked through a dictator's megaphone.

In the aftermath of September 11, art was called upon again to express a country's sorrow, to make sense of death, to heal, to unify. Those urgent and basic needs turned *The Corrections* into a repository of unpromising and outdated attitudes which, bluntly put, come across as life-negating. By contrast, *The Persian Bride*, in which a young English teacher named John falls in love with Shirin, a student, in pre-Revolutionary Iran, allows for the possibility that hope can exist in cruel times, if people have strength and courage. Riveting, harrowing, this novel is a deft investigation of devotion shared by two people, and of faith and faithfulness. Judged on these grounds, the novel is partly a romance, but it is never sentimental or lachrymose. There is charity in the author's design, for he allows John, the narrator, and Shirin, the bride, to move freely, expressing themselves in dialogue that has depth and mystery. The characters' concerns, like Iran itself, are rendered in a graceful prose that captures the attention. At the same time, a simple plot propels the narrative forward, with the reader unsure of what will happen next.

The novel's depiction of Iranian culture and politics, as well as partial aspects of a suspense thriller mixed with an awareness of world politics, brings to mind Lawrence Durrell's

Alexandria Quartet. The sublime conclusion poetically captures a natural and comprehensible evolution of the narrator's soul, allowing room for the right amount of ambiguity so that readers can supply what happens according to individual desires. The combination of a sensitive handling of language—particular to each character—insight into how individuals respond in crises, the ability to convey a culture, while a fraught atmosphere is kept in place, is a rare and praiseworthy achievement. This novel is openhearted without being naïve or sugary. John's and Shirin's humanity is tested, weakened, and restored. While aware of the dignity each possesses, the reader never knows what may happen to it or what the characters will become. Buchan's success in handling varied elements encourages other fiction writers, especially males, to reinvestigate the range of emotions. *The Persian Bride* is proof that, though it can be risky, engagement with the world is not a reprehensible activity.

Similarly encouraging for what fiction can do is *House of Leaves*, a novel about a manuscript written around another manuscript dealing with a fictitious documentary film purporting to explore a cavernous space that is evident only from inside a house. There are comprehensive reworkings of several old and contemporary conceits used in scary stories: the beast which may be summoned into the real world through the reading of a manuscript, the existence of a labyrinth, the doom-laden and dysfunctional Navidson family that lives in a haunted house, the pseudo-hero with fascist traits, the *Blair Witch Project*-style documentary. Readers are expected to have at least some patience with games. There are codes and notes that divert one from the main text, sections that have to be read in a mirror, and pages where words appear at the edges or extend in from corners. The labyrinth exists in the content and in the shape of the material. Readers are led from one narrative to another, from the appendix entries to the index to the letters written by a madwoman, and each path contributes to the creation of a maze. The novel requires re-reading, to catch what was missed when a detour was taken, to revisit the palpable dread emanating from Johnny Truant, the main narrative consciousness, and to enjoy the dark humor. To add to the pleasure, Pantheon—or Danielewski, or both—includes a card listing web sites that invite online audience participation (one of which is www.houseofleaves.com).

Despite the inventiveness of the forms used, it might be said that *House of Leaves* is more clever than subtle. This is no strike against it. Some of its targets—academic writing, sexy scholarship, fiction writers who deploy footnotes—are obvious, and Danielewski occasionally overworks a joke. A reader may find the Navidson documentary a bit tiresome after a few hundred pages, but interest in it is rescued as the novel goes on. Those in search of complex characters will find one, Johnny Truant, but creating round characters isn't of prime importance to the author. Its style may appear pretentious, but, happily, *House of Leaves* is content to be a well-crafted entertainment for those who want fun with their literary challenges, and it rests squarely in the fine tradition of scary stories. Some readers may balk at its length, but this novel is economical in its tour through the many ways authors have played on our fears and catered to our wish to hear a terrifying tale. It is not so often that a first book unites structure and content so convincingly while leaving room for a reader to let his or her imagination act with abandonment. Every novel is a house made of leaves. Some novels are more capacious and welcoming than others.