

For Sunday, January 29, 2012

Good morning! This is Sean Campbell, and you are listening to “Reading Between the Lines,” brought to you by the Friends of the Homer Public Library.

Years ago I picked up Jonathan Franzen’s novel *The Corrections* because he rebuffed Oprah Winfrey. I applauded his brazen desire to not be lumped into what was, in his words, a “schmaltzy” collection of her immensely successful national book club. In other words, he thought his book was just too literary for the likes of Oprah and her followers. Franzen wasn’t the only one who thought *The Corrections* merited the distinction of literary fiction; he won a handful of prestigious awards, while being recognized for many others. Potentially the deluge of critical success ballooned his ego. Regardless, I sat down with his tome and spent many days enthralled with the Lambert family.

I was reminded of *The Corrections* this fall when a friend recommended it for our book club; quickly, I recalled the Lambert family and looked forward to the delicious venture into dysfunction. This time it was even more savory.

Franzen plunges into a midwestern family fractured by distance, as the Enid and Alfred's three children have fled the fictional town of St. Jude for the east coast. Yet the geographical divide only provides the setting for the dysfunction. The family patriarch, Alfred, suffering from dementia as a result of Parkinson's disease, while away his days seeking some semblance of control to his life. However, as he turns even further inward, it is apparent that the control he sought through silence, verbal abuse and isolation towards his family is elusive as he succumbs to this humbling disease. Meanwhile, his wife, Enid, obsesses with the image of the idealized family that she has sought to erect her whole life, that she knows does not exist, but that she doesn't hesitate to fabricate. As the story progresses, the incongruity between what Enid wants to believe and what is true for her children illustrates a rich irony. However, what makes Franzen's characterization so definitive is how he humanizes each; though Alfred's plight is tragic, his character is one of the most callous and stubborn in modern American fiction. Equally, as delusional as Enid is, her desire to bring her family together for one last Christmas is heartbreaking and tender.

And this excludes their seafaring cruise that finds Alfred wrestling with a nightstalking fecal demon and Enid sampling unregulated mood altering substances, not to mention their children. Franzen devotes epic chapters to each of the three Lambert children. He spares none from his rod of ruthless black humor. Gary, the oldest, seeks to be everything that his own family is not, which of course there is little doubt as to how that will turn out. Harkening to a younger version of his father, Gary augments callous stubbornness with paranoia and depression. Middle child Chip lacks the meanspiritedness of his big brother, but his self absorbed nature leads to his own destruction. A once promising tenure tracked professorship devolves into a scene in which an exorbitantly priced fillet of salmon that he shoplifts melts in his pants as he wanders the streets of New York City. Speaking of food, baby sister Denise rises up to the most sought after chef in the not so culinary capitol of Philadelphia, yet she seeks more sizzle in her life and ends up finding more than a steady paycheck offered by her employer and spouse. The philandering nature of this relationship may provide the most glaring example of deception, but it only reinforces what seems to be a Lambert trait.

Aside from genetics, what brings these five together is the hope of one last Christmas in St. Jude. Equally cohesive for the reader is the examination of America at the turn of this century. Franzen's characters provide a microcosm of the fractured nature of the country induced by economics, geography, aspirations, greed, globalization and technology. Yet amidst all of this dysfunction lingers the possibility for change or a correction; more specifically, for the Lambert's, it is self-realization that allows the characters to correct themselves and give a glimmer of hope for them as individuals, a family, and on a larger scale America itself. Another way to look at it is this, what allows them to change is that they are human, and this reminder that Franzen offers with tearful tragedy and biting humor is what great fiction past or present offers: a mirror into humanity.

As I am sure you are aware, the Library hours are Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Tuesday and Thursday 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Tune in next Sunday morning at this same time for "Reading Between the Lines" right here on KBBI 890, Homer!