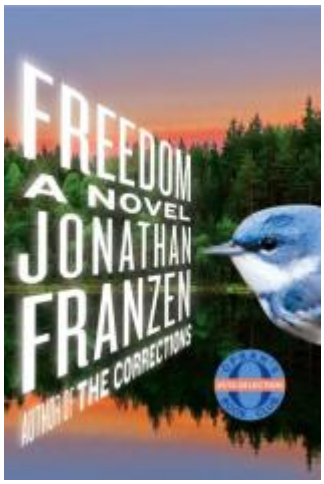
Freedom

by Jonathan Franzen



About the Book

Patty and Walter Berglund were the new pioneers of old St. Paul --- the gentrifiers, the hands-on parents, the avant-garde of the Whole Foods generation. Patty was the ideal sort of neighbor, who could tell you where to recycle your batteries and how to get the local cops to actually do their job. She was an enviably perfect mother and the wife of Walter's dreams. Together with Walter --- environmental lawyer, commuter cyclist, total family man --- she was doing her small part to build a better world.

But now, in the new millennium, the Berglunds have become a mystery. Why has their teenage son moved in with the aggressively Republican family next door? Why has Walter taken a job working with Big Coal? What exactly is Richard Katz --- outré rocker and Walter's college best friend and rival --- still doing in the picture? Most of all, what has happened to Patty? Why has the bright star of Barrier Street become "a very different kind of neighbor," an implacable Fury coming unhinged before the street's attentive eyes?

In his first novel since THE CORRECTIONS, Jonathan Franzen has given us an epic of contemporary love and marriage. Freedom comically and tragically captures the temptations and burdens of liberty: the thrills of teenage lust, the shaken compromises of middle age, the wages of suburban sprawl, the heavy weight of empire. In charting the mistakes and joys of Freedom's characters as they struggle to learn how to live in an ever more confusing world, Franzen has produced an indelible and deeply moving portrait of our time.

Discussion Guide

1. Jonathan Franzen refers to freedom throughout the novel, including the freedom of Iraqis to become capitalists, Joey's parents' attempt to give him an unencumbered life, an inscription on a building at Jessica's college that reads USE WELL THY FREEDOM, and alcoholic Mitch, who is "a free man." How do the characters spend their freedom? Is it a liberating or destructive force for them? Which characters are the least free?

2. Freedom contains almost cinematic descriptions of the characters' dwelling places, from the house in St. Paul to Abigail's eclectic Manhattan apartment. How do the homes in Freedom reflect the personalities of their occupants? Where do Walter and Patty feel most at home? Which of your homes has been most significant in your life?

3. As a young woman, Patty is phenomenally strong on the basketball court yet vulnerable in relationships, especially with her workaholic parents, her friend Eliza, and the conflicted duo of Richard and Walter. What did her rapist, Ethan Post, teach her about vulnerability? After the rape, what did her father and the coaches attempt to teach her about strength?

4. What feeds Richard and Walter's lifelong cycle of competition and collaboration? If you were Patty, would you have made the road trip with Richard? What does Freedom say about the repercussions of college, not only for Walter and Patty but also for their children?

5. How would you characterize Patty's writing? How does her storytelling style compare to the narrator's voice in the rest of the novel? If Walter had written a memoir, what might he have said about his victories, and his suffering?

6. Which tragicomic passages in **Freedom** made you laugh? Which characters elicited continual sadness and sympathy in you? How does Franzen balance poignant moments with absurdity?

7. Discuss the nature of attraction, both in the novel and in your own experience. What does it take to be desirable in **Freedom**? In the novel, how do couples sustain intense attraction for each other over many phases of their lives?

8. Does history repeat itself throughout Walter's ancestry, with his Swedish grandfather, Einar, who built roads, loathed communism and slow drivers, and was cruel to his wife; his father, Gene, a war hero with fantasies of success in the motel business; and his mother, Dorothy, whose cosmopolitan family was Walter's salvation? What do all the characters in the novel want from their parents? How do their relationships with their parents affect their relationships with lovers?

9. After her father's death, Patty asks her mother why she ignored Patty's success in sports, even though Joyce was a driven woman who might have relished her daughter's achievements. She doesn't get a satisfactory answer; Joyce vaguely says that she wasn't into sports. Why do you think Patty did not garner as much attention as her sisters did? How did your opinion of Veronica and Abigail shift throughout the novel? Does Patty treat Jessica the same way her parents treated her?

10. How is Lalitha different from the other characters in the novel? How does her motivation for working with the Cerulean Mountain Trust compare to Walter's? Does Walter relate to the cerulean warbler on some level?

11. What accounts for the differences between Joey and Jessica? Is it simply a matter of genes and temperament, or does gender matter in their situation?

12. What does Joey want and get from Jenna and Connie? What do they want and get from him?

13. Did Carol and Blake evolve as parents? What sort of life do you predict for their twin daughters?

14. Near the end of the novel, Franzen describes Walter's relationship with Bobby the cat as a sort of troubled marriage. Was their "divorce" inevitable? When Patty is eventually able to serve as neighborhood peacemaker, even negotiating a truce with Linda Hoffbauer, what does this say about her role in Walter's life? Does she dilute his sense of purpose and principle, or does she keep him grounded in reality?

15. How would you answer the essential question raised by Walter's deal with the Texas rancher Vin Haven: What is the best way to achieve environmental conservation?

16. Consider the novel's epigraph, taken from Shakespeare's **The Winter's Tale**. The lines are spoken by Paulina in the final act, after she learns the fate of her dead husband. She receives the news while surrounded by happy endings for the other characters. The most obvious parallel is to Walter, but who else might be reflected in these lines?

17. What unique truths emerge in **Freedom**? In what ways does this novel enhance themes (such as love and commitment, family angst, the intensity of adolescence, and the individual against the giant --- corporate, governmental, and otherwise) featured in Franzen's previous works, including his nonfiction?

Author Bio

Jonathan Franzen is the author of four novels (FREEDOM, THE CORRECTIONS, STRONG MOTION and THE TWENTY-SEVENTH CITY), a collection of essays (HOW TO BE ALONE), a personal history (THE DISCOMFORT ZONE), and a translation of Frank Wedekind's SPRING AWAKENING, all published by FSG. He lives in New York City and Santa Cruz, California.

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Publication Date: September 27, 2011
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 608 pages
Publisher: Picador
ISBN-10: 0312576463
ISBN-13: 9780312576462