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Theme Essay by Wendy Glaas

Family Dynamics Revealed—for the Price of a Paperback

When I first read Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, witnessing the way the mother in the repressed Lambert family manipulated her children and played them off against each other, it was a revelation. *Other moms did this too? Not just mine?*

I had a similar reaction seeing how Ginny, the eldest daughter of the Iowa farming family in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, let her aging father control and intimidate her, even in the course of his mental decline. *Oh my God, I know that pattern. I've* lived *that.*

The Corrections won the National Book Award in 2001. *A Thousand Acres*, a modern retelling of *King Lear,* was the 1992 winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Their literary qualities were what drew me at first. But I have returned to reread them for other reasons as well—the same reasons readers are sucked into any family novel, be it *One Hundred*

Years of Solitude, *Ordinary People*, *Anna Karenina*, or *Peyton Place*. We recognize aspects of our own family conflicts.

For me, Franzen and Smiley are adept at revealing how sibling alliances can shift and fray in adulthood. In *A Thousand Acres*, sisters Ginny, Rose, and Caroline come into conflict over how their father plans to divide up inheritance of the Cook family farm. In *The Corrections*, siblings Gary, Chip, and Denise clash over holiday plans, family finances, and their father's decline into Parkinson's disease and dementia.

The similarities with my family of origin are eerie. It's as if I'm observing a train wreck with my own parents and sisters wandering the tracks. But I'm not just a voyeur drawn to the scene of the same old accident. The value of reading family novels goes far beyond simple recognition. They help me feel less alone with the unsavory brew of anger, anxiety, despair, and love I've wrestled with all my life.

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My older sisters are two years apart, and I was born some time after them—much like youngest sister Caroline in *A Thousand Acres*. While I didn't view either of my sisters as a surrogate mother, I could often count on them to stick up for me, particularly against our mother, whose inconsistently doled-out punishments were often disproportionate to our crimes. When my sisters moved out of the house and made unconventional choices—what they studied at college, whom they dated, where they lived—I defended their decisions and tried to defuse our parents' disappointment.

I took it as an unspoken understanding that the three of us, sharing a common foe, would continue to stick together as we got older. However, our mother proved to be a formidable opponent, much like Enid in *The Corrections*. As middle son Chip realizes:

> Enid was skilled at playing her children off against each other…. [H]er praise was usually double-edged.

First, she gossips about younger sister Denise's husband ("*he is too OLD for her!*"), gushing to Chip about her pride in his academic career. Later, when Chip's career takes a downturn, she brags about Denise's professional success in front of him.

In *A Thousand Acres*, father Larry Cook initially cuts his youngest daughter out of his will when he feels his authority disrespected. But midway through the novel, she's become his ally in his legal struggle against her older sisters. As one of my sisters used to joke, "I guess it's my turn on the hot seat"—her term for which of us had fallen out of our mother's favor.

These two books skillfully dissect the festering resentments among siblings with unequal shares of parental favor and parent-care responsibilities, mirroring my own situation. In *The Corrections*, Gary, the oldest and most conventionally responsible sibling, feels frustrated that "people [like his brother and sister] could so happily drop out of the world of conventional expectations…. [I]t felt like a unilateral rewriting, to his disadvantage, of the rules of life."

Having two unconventional siblings myself—one nearly 4,000 miles away, the other living a more nomadic lifestyle—I recognized my feelings in Gary's words. While I had initially defended my sisters' lifestyle choices, I resented being the one left to deal with an increasingly erratic, paranoid parent. When Gary tries to tarnish his sister's "halo" by hinting to their mother that Denise isn't so perfect ("ask her if she's ever been involved with somebody married"), I couldn't help wondering if something similar happened in the winking "just between us" conversations my mom had with each of us in turn.

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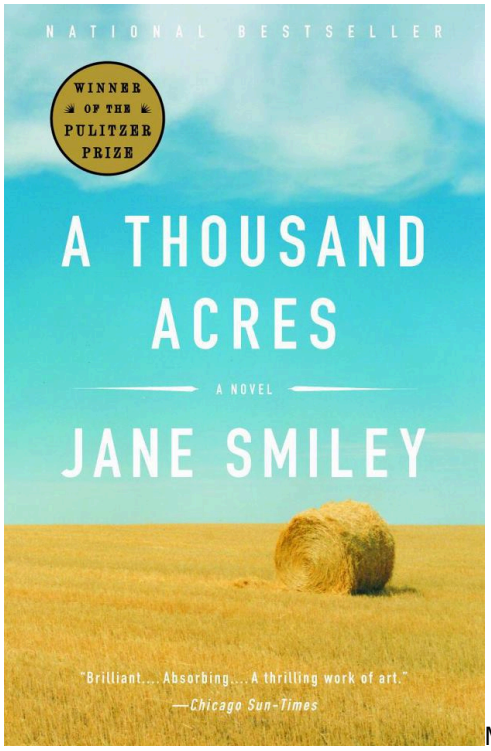

My mother may not have consciously planted seeds of resentment among us, but she was a master at it—to the point where divisions formed years ago still exist. Like Ginny, Rose, and Caroline in *A Thousand Acres,* we leave much unsaid to preserve our sometimes brittle peace. And old hostilities all too often bristle behind our words, as in this conversation Rose starts after Ginny ends a tense phone call with Caroline:

> 'What did *she* have to say?'
>
> 'Are you and Caroline having a fight?'
>
> 'You'll have to ask her that.'
>
> 'Well, I'm asking you.' Once in a while, I could pull some oldest sister rank.
>
> 'I didn't think we were.'

This conversation, in the wake of a paternal action that has sown sibling discord, made me itch with frustration. Witnessing the sisters' terse, elliptical conversations and how they leave Ginny uncertain as to where things stand, I thought, "Why can't they just *talk* to each other about what's really bugging them?"

And then I realized: Oh. That's just like me and my sisters.

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When we have to step in and take control of an elderly parent's life, it's easy for old family resentments to get stirred up. All the siblings in *A Thousand Acres* and *The Corrections* deal with this situation—often with competing ideas as to what course of action to take (and contrasting opinions as to whether the parent's dignity warrants consideration). As my siblings and I face off over the "What to do with Mom?" question, I find it oddly reassuring to watch the fictional Lambert and Cook families bat around that same hot potato.

Looking back over the choices she's made relative to those of her siblings, Denise in *The Corrections* expresses perfectly the confounded perspective of the kid who seems to be stuck with the potato burning her hands:

> It was as if, all along, she'd been conspiring to make herself available to nurse her parents.

Confounding also—and just as familiar to me—is the way becoming the custodian of a parent doesn't erase the old feelings of being the child in the relationship or the old dysfunctional patterns. As Ginny in *A Thousand Acres* says of her relationship with her cantankerous, aging father:

> My job remained what it had always been—to give him what he asked of me, and if he showed discontent, to try to find out what would please him.

Like Ginny with her father, I'd fallen into a pattern of cajoling my mother when she first started showing the telltale signs of Alzheimer's. I managed her moods and tried to find that magic, elusive thing that would soothe her. Even as an independent adult, no longer yoked to my parents' home or their financial support, I could still find my mother intimidating—in much the same way that Ginny experiences her father. "When my father asserted his point of view," she notes, "mine vanished."

Seeing how the childhood roles of the siblings in these books constrained their abilities to deal with their parents (and each other) in adulthood was eye opening for me. My mother is no longer the aggressive and controlling presence of my childhood, using "divide and conquer" tactics to keep my sisters and me under her thumb. Her advanced dementia has rendered her so docile and childlike that the staff at her assisted living residence view her fondly. "Your mother is always smiling!" they tell me. "She's such a doll."

And it's true. There's no shred of maternal antagonism left to her. So, now that she's no longer stirring the pot, there's no need for my sisters and me to continue to act within our limiting childhood roles. Could I have had this same realization in therapy? I expect so. But these novels have provided other bonuses as well, such as a window into other perspectives that expand my own.

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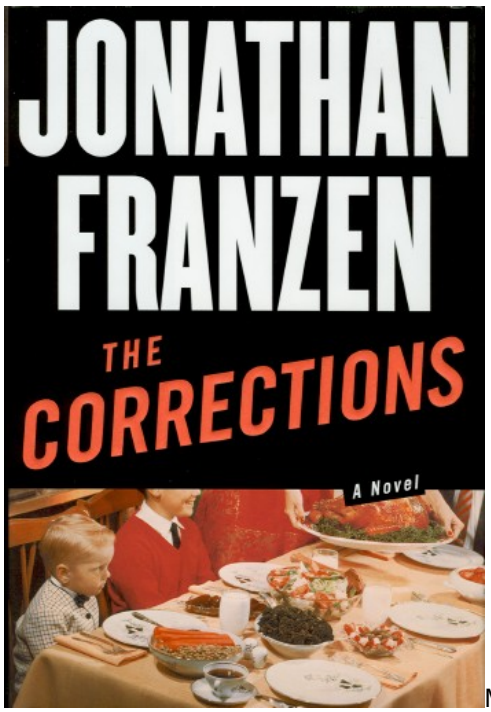
I've seen the word "neurotic" used to describe Enid, the matriarch in *The Corrections,* but to me, she's the figure I feel the most for. In a strange way, entering her world has given me a rush of belated compassion for my mother. Like my mother, Enid is prone to dramatic pronouncements and contagious anxiety. ("I'm thinking the important thing right now is *The Nutcracker*, to get nine tickets all together, because it sells out *so fast*, Gary, you wouldn't believe.") Pressure of this sort from my mother would set my teeth on edge. However, as a sympathetic reader, I see Enid as more deserving of pity than of resentment.



My mother was notoriously difficult in the days leading up to major holidays. It was easy to give wide berth to her irritation. But all she really wanted, like Enid with her family, was to have us all together for a day. Why isn't this something we could have given her more often, after we moved away?

Franzen's portrayal not only gives me more sympathy for my family members, it also engages my sense of humor with respect to situations I know all too well. When rereading the book recently, I laughed in recognition at the accusatory question Gary poses to his wife as Christmas approaches:

> Five days in St. Jude. You can't do that for a woman who, like you say, has nothing else in her life?

Watching Gary thrust this question at his wife, I am simultaneously on his side—his question echoes one in an email I am working on to my sisters—and appalled at his bullying tactics ("This is a marriage-ender!" he cries, moments later). Later in the book, I root for Denise's attempt to persuade Chip of the same Christmas visit, even as I recognize why Chip backs away:

> Christmas is hell, you know that. There's no worse time. You can tell Mom I'll come early in the new year.

Experiencing this messy familial tangle in fiction, I can enter into all sides of it and still maintain a safe readerly distance. The similarities to my own family drama are both illuminating and comforting—and the differences are even more comforting. They show me that, compared to these families, maybe my own isn't so badly off, after all. Sure, one of my sisters has unfriended me on Facebook, but at least none of us are making each other the type of gift concocted by one family member for another in *A Thousand Acres*: homemade sausages laced with poison.

In both books, death and the passage of time release the characters from the grip of family enmity that had seemed unbreakable. What remains is the connection, which Ginny describes as an inheritance "[l]odged in my every cell…. [E]ach vanished person left me something, and…I feel my inheritance when I am reminded of one of them."

Reading *A Thousand Acres* and *The Corrections* helped me realize that, even though my mother helped drive a wedge into my relationships with my sisters, her eventual passing may finally forge a peace among us, in our shared grief. Perhaps then we'll see each other not as the children we once were, but as the adults we've become.

Publishing Information

- *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley (Knopf, 1991).
- *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).

Art Information

- The Good-Naughty Book *[5]* (detail) by Blanche Fisher Wright; Project Gutenberg.

 Wendy Glaas is a contributing writer at *Talking Writing* and a member of the TW Advisory Board.

After reading Richard Yates's *The Easter Parade* on a recent vacation, she's taking a break from stories that feature sisterly relationships. Instead, she noted Mike Bechtle's *People Can't Drive You Crazy if You Don't Give Them the Keys* in an airport bookstore. While not a big fan of the self-help genre, she realizes that reading fiction can only go so far when it comes to coping with someone who pushes her buttons.

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