Discussion questions and topics for *The Corrections*

As threatened, here are lots of detailed topics. I hope they aren't tedious, but rather (Denise-inspired metaphor alert) will provide you with a smorgasbord of ideas to whet your appetite for discussion. Be good, now; turn to the dishes below only after you've finished the novel. Pick and choose the topics that most interest you. Many are inspired by the kinds of reactions and questions that Swarthmore students have had when the novel's been taught here.

I hope you liked the book. I think it's a masterpiece (and a success Franzen may well have trouble matching again, if his recent forays into non-fiction are any indication). For those who would like further reading, I recommend first Franzen's collection of essays *How To Be Alone*, particularly "Why Bother?," a meditation on why one would write long, complex novels in an era that's supposedly marking the death of the novel and of reading in general. And of course his earlier two novels, *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion*.

My other advice is, don't be side-tracked into discussing the Oprah controversy. It's a waste of your Google time. Both Oprah and Franzen came off very badly in the exchange—her arrogance and pettiness was surely matched by his. Of course, he'd gone from obscurity and poverty to Fame and TV Opportunities in only a few weeks, and with his Swarthmore education it's hardly surprising that he expressed skepticism about how writers and artists get treated on TV, including Oprah's show (even if she IS one of the few celebrities who actually promotes reading). But to bite the hand that offers to feed you: how un-American in this age of American Idol worship! Of course, it's also possible to read the whole brouhaha very cynically, as an example of Franzen's clever marketing instincts: how to get an Oprah Boost for the book without having to endure appearing on Oprah's show.

For those who would like to listen to students reading a passage from *The Corrections* and commenting on it, here are two addresses to use to access the podcasts, from my Fall 2006 and 2007 Honors seminars.

http://blogs.swarthmore.edu/students/engl116_f06/category/franzen/

http://blogs.swarthmore.edu/students/engl116_f07/category/franzen/

Enjoy!

–Peter Schmidt

Many readers, especially those who have had to care for a parent or spouse with a disabling and eventually fatal disease, responded very strongly to this novel's portrait of the effect Alfred Lambert's Parkinson's has on his wife and family. Franzen himself has said that this part of the book was inspired by his father's own illness and death, though it's not simply autobiographical. Franzen took great care to have us experience the illness as *Alfred* does, even while he also allows us to see it from the "outside," from others' points of view. Discuss any aspect of this topic that you'd like, from whether reading this book made you understand your own experiences better, to how this novel shows why a materialist and "quick fix" and "me first" culture like our own has trouble dealing with mortality and the obligations it places on loved ones.

Family—can't live with them, can't live without them. Many older readers with grown children (or friends with grown children) may very well recognize in Gary the kind of child with whom they are all too familiar: he's knowing and self-righteous, supremely confident that HE's the realistic one and the parents who raised him have become idiots unable to face facts. Yet Enid and Alfred, in their own different ways, also can see the frightened child inside Gary, the terror his own depression causes him as he impersonates his version of being a responsible adult. How well do you think this novel portrays basic kinds of misunderstandings parents and children may have—the accusations, long-buried resentments, and tensions that can come flying to the surface in an instant, especially during family get-togethers? How well does this novel capture how each generation, when young, thinks it will "correct" the mistakes their parents made? Taking another angle, do you think the novel's portrait of family ties is too negative? Or is it, brilliantly and brutally (and comically), just being honest? Don't just look at negative interactions between parents and children, or rivalries among the siblings as to who can be the "worst" or "best" child. In what ways do these family members also acknowledge their bonds and express their love, despite their difficulties?

Give a snapshot summary of all 5 primary characters in the book: what scenes most reveal their personalities to you, their strengths and weaknesses, their self-knowledge or lack of it, the ways in which you find them comic or tragic or both? In what ways do they stay the same? Change?

What role do minor characters play in this novel? Choose 1-2 and discuss how their interactions with one of the Lamberts reveal something we couldn't otherwise know.

"Depressed? He was not depressed. Vital signs of the American economy streamed numerically across his many-windowed television screen" (222). Characters in this novel (as described to us by the narrator) frequently use economic analogies to define emotional states, the value of things, etc. Choose any brief section of the book and look for references to economics (money, market exchanges, competition, etc.). Then consider how we should interpret such references. In the above example, for instance, Gary uses Dow upticks and the perceived strength of American capitalism to reassure himself that he's not depressed, that spiritual malaise or terror about his deteriorating relations with wife and children is impossible in the midst of such positive energy.

Franzen's narrative sympathetically reproduces how Gary thinks, but doesn't it also impart an ironic *distance* that raises skeptical questions towards which Gary for the moment is deaf and blind and afraid to face? For instance, we can see that such "vital signs" hardly answer Gary's fears; they merely cover them up. The book is full of such tragicomic moments, it seems to me. Find some of your own and discuss whether 1) these moments are "in character" with the Lambert family member featured, and 2) how they represent larger problems with American materialism and spiritual malaise.

You are a marriage counselor who knows Gary and Caroline's marriage as well as we readers do, including how they use their children in a tug of war or power struggle between themselves. What would you advise Gary and Caroline to change in order to improve their relations with each other and with their children? Why? Show examples of the symptoms (or problems) you think they must face. What's the relation between Gary's treatment of his new family and how he understands his identity as a son in his mother's and father's family?

To a large extent, Alfred Lambert is a dying icon of America's old industrial economy and the work ethic that built it. It's no accident that Alfred's mental decline is paralleled with the dismantling of the railroad network he helped create. Find examples of how Franzen parallels Alfred's work (or his various obsessive projects, now that he is unemployed) with his mental state, then use this to discuss your own assessment of his character, his strengths and weaknesses. Include in your discussion an assessment of Alfred's treatment of Enid and his children: does his understanding of how he should perform as a husband and father "fit," in your view, with his professional identity? Consider, for instance, the hilarious and heart-breaking dinner table punishment scene (when Chip must stay at the table until he finishes his meal—sound familiar?), or Alfred's strange attitude toward sex, where his desire for Enid can only be aroused if she is passive, more prey or victim than partner (cf. 240, etc). But consider also Alfred's refusal to assent to Gary's plan involving his patent rights: what so disgusts Alfred about this plan? Does this refusal fit with his character, or is it a sign of his decline?

Drugs: they're ever-present in this novel, as pervasive as money (and perhaps also instilled, the characters hope, with the miraculous power to cure what ails us). What different kinds of drugs are there, and addictions, matching each of the different characters? How are physical ailments merged with psychic ones, and vice versa? How are Cures shown to be diseases in themselves? How well do you think the characters confront their addictions or understand its causes? You should define "drugs" quite broadly to answer this question, but don't miss the hilarious and sobering way the novel parodies drug names and drug ads. Our increasing dependency on drug cure-alls treat the body as a machine that can, within limits, be fixed. We are all grateful for drugs that eliminate suffering. But what about when drugs *cause* unnecessary suffering? And what does a materialist conception of the body do to our sense of humanity, including questions of moral choice and responsibility?

The basement of the Lambert house: the dangerous depths where all the Lamberts' dreams of prosperity and happiness succumb to entropy. For their basement proves

impossible to order: shelves spill over with infinite examples of failed projects, the decay of newness and hope, the limits of energy and memory itself. It also becomes the hiding-place of guilty secrets, nightmares, despair. Where once things had all the promise of Enid's beloved Advent calendar, signifying the prospect of happiness and rebirth, now the basement seems sagging under the burden of its opposite, infinite decay. How well does this book capture the tragicomedy of how much *stuff* American accumulate? Discuss Franzen's lists of the things to be found in drawers and other storage spaces in American homes. What role does the Lambert's basement play in key scenes in this novel? You might also want to consider how Franzen sardonically uses other icons of suburban middle-class Well-Being: the barbeque patio and tools; TV and other electronics and other equipment, from tools to appliances; the bathroom; the dining room table; the kitchen; etc.

Crossing borders and rethinking history has been a theme of all the works we've read so far. What are some examples of border-crossing and the effects it has in this novel? Hint: don't just consider the role of national borders (such as Chip's trip to Lithuania), but all kinds of other borders or lines demarcating different sorts of spaces, like the interior spaces in a house, urban vs. suburban spaces, commercial space (like aisles in supermarkets) vs. private spaces, the cruise ship as a setting, the role hiding spaces play throughout the book, etc. In short, this is a question about setting: consider how setting can play an important role in a scene, not just the characters on its "stage."

The powerful last sentence of the novel—"[Enid] was seventy five and she was going to make some changes in her life"—gives a whole new (and perhaps more hopeful) meaning to its title, *The Corrections*. It could be argued that of the book's five characters, three—Enid, Chip, and Denise— undergo significant positive changes in their characters and become cured of anhedonia, that symptom of depression which is the inability to experience pleasure in normally pleasurable things. Not coincidentally, these three are also the characters who, unlike Gary, learn to value their family bonds and ties; they even come in their own quirky ways to express love for each other and forgive faults. Each of these characters near the novel's end also has a moment of crisis—of abjection and absolute humiliation—that, instead of destroying them, makes them stronger and more tolerant and loving. What moments are these? Why are they so transformative? Hint: could it be Chip's experience trying to get out of Lithuania, or Enid's with the debacle of her reunion? Denise's in my opinion may be the most important for the meaning of the entire novel: what IS the significance of that carving under the bench in the Lambert basement, and why is it so important to her when she realizes that her father *protected* her from knowing that he knew about it? "He'd saved her privacy," Denise says to herself (522): at this moment Denise learns that her sense of independence was a gift from her father; it isn't just something she willed into being on her own, despite her family. This discovery of interdependence has profound moral significance in a novel in which all the characters are driven by their very American sense of self-entitlement, their will to autonomy, their Me-first attitude.

Would you also agree that, as a result of these changes, Enid, Chip, and Denise begin to treat each other (and others) differently? Or do you feel that these 3 characters are

deluding themselves once again in the novel's final scenes (and therefore there's been no "correction")? Look for evidence for and against your view. If you believe these characters have grown, how convincingly does Franzen depict their change and its causes? Each of these characters late in the novel also performs what appear to be several significant acts of caring and compassion—inspired by empathy for another, not merely judgment of them. What are these acts, in Enid's, Chip's, and Denise's cases? Hint: one example of what I mean is Chip's refusal of his father's plea to help him commit suicide. But Chip's late interactions with Denise seem different too, and for me indicate that he's changed for the better. Discuss your examples and conclusions and compare them with those of others in your group. In a novel in which the characters have occasionally acted with sadistic cruelty towards others and then deluded themselves about what they have done, the prospect that such people may heal may seem particularly unrealistic. But that is the risk Franzen takes: he wants to show us, unsparingly, their worst, then raise the possibility of hope.

Do you agree that Gary is the one character who doesn't experience a kind of healing & rebirth at the end? Sure, he undergoes changes: his hassling of Enid over a "debt" eases into just joking, he takes up a new (an absurdly retro?) hobby, miniature railroading, etc. But such changes hardly seem equivalent to those of his brother and sister. In many ways, he's still money- and status-obsessed, still in power struggles with his family and his past, still tormented and defensive and bordering on sadistic (like how he treats the checkout girl at the store because he resents having to buy a shower stool for his father….) But perhaps you read Gary in the final chapters differently?

Franzen has written that one of the things he was trying to do with *The Corrections* was to use all of the techniques of postmodern fiction to write a novel of Victorian proportions about the importance of family. Postmodern irony is easy, he said, but hard it is getting readers to *care* for characters and see how everyone's fate is connected. Many of us feel that Franzen's portrait of a multigenerational family does not have many precedents in American fiction—particularly since the novel doesn't clearly side with one or a few characters against all the others, as other contemporary family fiction often does (consider Updike or especially Roth; Franzen thinks both are greatly overrated). In his skill with family histories, Franzen might be closer to other contemporary figures like Anne Tyler or (as we will see) Gish Jen—both of whom also make us experience many points of view, not just a few or one. Can you think of other, earlier American novelists who provide a precedent for this novel? It could also be said that the ambition of *The Corrections* is best measured against the great nineteenth-century British figures: Austen, Dickens, Trollope, George Eliot (insert other favorites here) – or other great moralists of fiction, such as Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. How would you compare *The Corrections* to such classic earlier writers for whom family and national histories were inseparable? (Remember the famous opening line of *Anna Karenina*? "All happy families are alike; all unhappy families are unhappy in their own way"—a Tolstoian truism that I'm not sure whether the Lamberts prove or disprove.)

End of topics. Phew.

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PS: Want to visit a piece of turf that's become important in U.S. literary history? As well as seeing Thoreau's Walden, or Dickinson's Amherst house, or Keroauc's Big Sur, or Hughes' Harlem, why not during your next trip to Swarthmore visit the sumptuous Crum Ledge Lane faculty apartments behind the new Mullan Center, near the Fieldhouse? They are the model for the "Tilden Ledge Lane" apartment so beloved by Chip (cf. p. 34); Franzen stayed in one of these during a stint teaching fiction writing at the College in 1991. (And yours truly lived in #7 for my first 7 years here.) PPS: The other details involving Chip's shenanigans while an assistant professor are parodying events that were not uncommon at many small liberal arts colleges (and other institutions) in the 1990s or at other periods; they're not specific references to Swarthmore.