

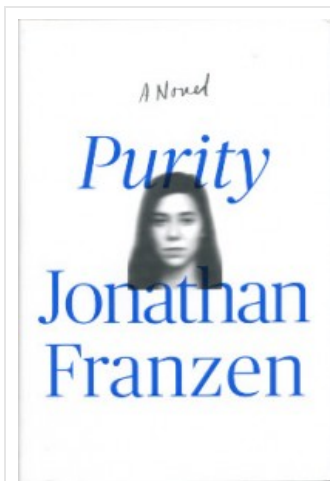


# 100 Percent Franzen

*Purity's* swirling plot and love 'em or hate 'em characters are pure Franzen.

*Jan Castro*

NOVEMBER 30, 2015 | PAGE BY PAGE: BOOK REVIEWS



## **Purity**

Jonathan Franzen

(Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015) 576 pages

Reading the opening pages of *Purity* reminds me what I did not like about *Freedom* (2010). Jonathan Franzen's characters always have obsessions and character flaws that split open, like crevasses, trapping other characters inside. Also, concept titles like *Freedom* and *Purity* seem, and are, as 19<sup>th</sup> century as Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861). Dare I foresee countless shadows, perhaps including hardships, unwise travel, and unforeseen wealth that will connect Dickens's and Franzen's Pips? Franzen's Pip, nicknamed by a teacher but named Purity, is the female character living in a run-down, soon-to-be-repossessed house in Oakland, California. I've just begun to read, but Franzen has already hammered me over the head about Pip's looming \$130,000 college loan debt in contrast to her \$21,000 salary for her unsavory job. I agree that this debtor situation often happens to people who can least afford it, so even though Franzen offers no supporting details—what college, what loan program—he has a good dilemma.

One opening scene compares Pip's childhood cabin in Felton, California, and the Oakland house where she, a few odd fellows, and a couple are living illegally:

“Unlike Stephen and Marie, who came from good middle-class Catholic families, she's barely even lowered her station in going from her mother's little cabin to Thirty Third Street, and her student debt was functionally a vow of poverty ... she *did* have an ambition, if not a plan for achieving it. Her ambition was not to end up like her mother ...”

Just as Pip is about to seduce a boy, Jason (names often have correspondences: think: golden fleece) in whom she is interested, the seduction is interrupted, the narrator unconvincingly imparts, because her condoms are in the downstairs bathroom and not upstairs in her tiny third floor bedroom. She is further waylaid from her tryst by a German guest, Annagret, who is supposedly a peace activist but who is really a spy sent to recruit Pip for the Sunlight Project, an underground operation to expose “truth” that will pay Pip to be an intern. Before the chapter ends, Annagret has managed to chat with Pip for over an hour, Pip's potential lover flees, Pip fails to seduce the married housemate Stephen whose wife has just left him, has a fight with her boss at Renewable Solutions, has a fight with her mother, and has both researched Sunlight leader Andreas Wolf in Bolivia and begun an email exchange with him. They even trade secrets.

The next huge chapter takes place in East Germany and fills us in on Andreas' back story, including his father's high position in the East German bureaucracy, and the ways that his mother and the socialist state screwed with his young mind. Andreas' poem “Mother Tongue” gets him expelled from his university, so he ‘counsels’ and seduces young girls while living in a church basement. Andreas is around 20 when East Berlin opens to the western world, and this is his ‘star’ turn: as he is sneaking out of the offices of the East German secret police after stealing his criminal files, he tells TV cameras: “This is a country of festering secrets and toxic lies. Only the strongest of sunlight can disinfect it!” Thus, the media save him from being apprehended by the secret police and Andreas' Sunlight Project is born.

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## like crevasses, trapping other characters inside.

The back stories of Tom and Lelia follow this back story; they are an investigative team leading DI, the Denver Independent, which Tom runs thanks to the millions given to him by his ex-wife's father after she has run away and disappeared. Readers already know that Andreas has sent Pip from Bolivia to spy on Tom and Lelia, but the couple think she is an intern coming from Oakland. When Tom unexpectedly (and without consulting Lelia first) invites Pip to live with them, this throws Lelia into a confusion about whether or not she needs to spend more time with her husband Charles, who is a wheelchair-bound failed novelist and curmudgeonly 'truth-teller.' Lelia loves and cares for Charles more than he cares for her. This chapter ends on a surprising note when Tom goes on a 'date' with Pip while Lelia is out of town and discovers a secret about Pip that even Pip doesn't know. This information scares Lelia and makes her feel left out.

Again going back in time, we find Pip at Los Volcanes, a remote, beautiful jungle area of Bolivia where Andreas Wolf runs The Sunlight Project. Like her mother, she has a keen olfactory sense, and she explores the natural world for about a week before Andreas shows up. Purity cannot identify with the well-heeled researchers at this hacker's think-tank. The stolen warhead plot they are probing, which Pip brings to Lelia, seems too ridiculous to merit the space and time anyone spends on it. Then, in a hotel bar, the Sunshine leader Wolf tells Pip a dark secret which she promises never to tell even as she cautions Andreas that she is an unreliable confidante. He also tells her that Tom, an American whom he met in a bar in Berlin, is the only other person in the world who knows his secret. Andreas later asks Pip to find out whether or not Tom has shared his secret with anyone. In Denver, Pip helps Andreas install spyware on Tom's computer.

About two-thirds through the novel, readers are taken even further back in time to a chapter titled "[le1o9n8aOrd]" which opens in Tom's voice, "My affair with Anabel had begun as soon as our divorce decree came through." This is Tom's account of making love with Anabel a couple of times after their divorce; Anabel cuts up his condoms the last time (second condom joke). He blames his infatuation with Anabel, the daughter of a billionaire capitalist, on *his* dysfunctional parents. Anabel has a sensuous figure and a berating, ultra-paranoid personality. As readers already know, Tom later lives with Pip in Denver and does not plan to reveal his secret to her.

Except for the chronological reverse order of the novel, the story is plot-driven, and much more occurs before all of the confusing strands in the opening pages come together. This novel's main characters are variously involved in the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the leaking of classified materials, and the rise of both mega-dollar business and deep investigative reporting worldwide. At the center of all of the action is a young girl raised in rural California who attended an unnamed college. Pip leads readers into a future that seems saner and happier than her crazy experiences in the novel. Franzen's characters' extreme behaviors and afflictions do not negate a valid skepticism that 'holier than thou' people and organizations may be hiding secrets and/or hiding behind their sterling appearances.

Franzen's strength is probing concepts we have been raised to emulate or strive for. In chasing after a concept less real than Snow White, Franzen's women often behave like men on caffeine or steroids. In one paragraph, out of the blue, Lelia spouts a line about Peyton Manning that has no relation to anything else in the novel. Did Franzen name Lelia after the heroine in George Sand's first novel? She's a strong character, as is Pip. Pip behaves like a contrarian, a Socratic wiseass able to stand up to the "charismatic" Andreas Wolf. Andreas, Tom, and most of the men have, curiously, been damaged by some of their relationships with women. Why does Andreas tell Pip his darkest secret? Will she discover who her father is? The question of how secrets can either fester or come out is treated on practically every page of the novel. Pip is the future, using her resources to help herself and others. Nature plays a healing role as well—the lush jungle settings in Bolivia and the bird sounds native to California add music and poetry to the madcap voices in *Purity*.

This is Franzen's best novel to date. I question why Franzen gave Jason's Facebook girlfriend the same name as Pip's original name. Also, Franzen addresses the relativity of the concept purity but doesn't show how purity faces off with real evil. Richard Ford's *A Piece of My Heart* (1976) is my model for fiction with a huge amount of pure evil, and Ann Patchett's *State of Wonder* (2011) shows how the virtuous Marina faces off against the evil Dr. Swenson—who *never understands how evil she is*. It seems to me that, like Dr. Swenson's lies and betrayals in *State of Wonder*, most evil-doers act with forethought and are *not* burdened by guilt. Incidentally, Marina reads *Great Expectations* to Dr. Swenson near the end of Patchett's novel. Franzen's murder scene is notable for the ways that guilt immediately devastates the killer and stays with him. Andreas and Anabel have deep psychological problems but neither is mainly evil. *Purity* ends up being Pip's search for her identity, as well as a wide-ranging exploration of the degree to which the Internet is a totalitarian purveyor of endless data and personal information that may or may not be used to harm us—i.e., just as bad or worse than the 1980s East German apparatus for determining those loyal to the state. 📧

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

#### Jan Castro

Jan Garden Castro, [www.jancastro.com](http://www.jancastro.com), is author of *The Last Frontier* (poetry) and books on Sonia Delaunay and Georgia O'Keeffe. Her monthly "in the studio" blog is at [sculpture.org](http://sculpture.org). She is co-curator of "New Ways of Seeing: Cultural Hybridity & Aesthetic Liberty," at the Dorsky Gallery, New York, May 3-July 12, 2015.



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