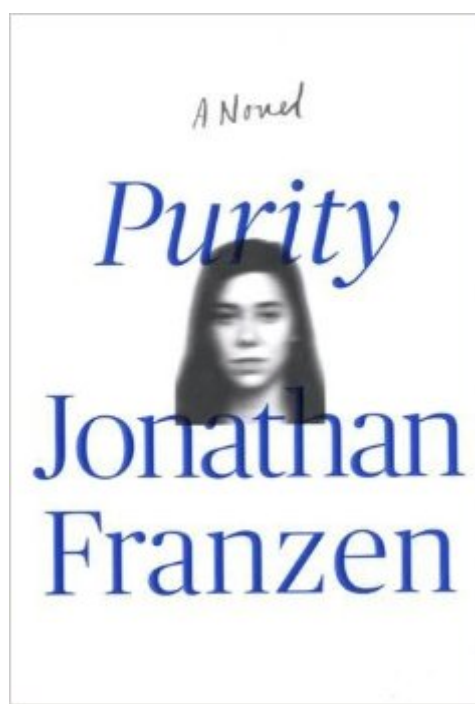


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Purity: A Novel



Synopsis

A magnum opus for our morally complex times from the author of *Freedom* Young Pip Tyler doesn't know who she is. She knows that her real name is Purity, that she's saddled with \$130,000 in student debt, that she's squatting with anarchists in Oakland, and that her relationship with her mother--her only family--is hazardous. But she doesn't have a clue who her father is, why her mother chose to live as a recluse with an invented name, or how she'll ever have a normal life. Enter the Germans. A glancing encounter with a German peace activist leads Pip to an internship in South America with The Sunlight Project, an organization that traffics in all the secrets of the world--including, Pip hopes, the secret of her origins. TSP is the brainchild of Andreas Wolf, a charismatic provocateur who rose to fame in the chaos following the fall of the Berlin Wall. Now on the lam in Bolivia, Andreas is drawn to Pip for reasons she doesn't understand, and the intensity of her response to him upends her conventional ideas of right and wrong. Purity is a grand story of youthful idealism, extreme fidelity, and murder. The author of *The Corrections* and *Freedom* has imagined a world of vividly original characters--Californians and East Germans, good parents and bad parents, journalists and leakers--and he follows their intertwining paths through landscapes as contemporary as the omnipresent Internet and as ancient as the war between the sexes. Purity is the most daring and penetrating book yet by one of the major writers of our time.

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Customer Reviews

It may sound strange to say so, but Jonathan Franzen has written one of those big blockbuster novels that you used to get in airports. The kind that can say: "From the slums of Oakland to the

jungles of Bolivia," or "Spanning a turbulent half-century from STASI-era East Germany to the age of WikiLeaks." Or perhaps "A story of murder and atonement and a daughter's search for the father she never knew." There is something big, bold, and Dickensian about this novel, which doesn't worry too much about plausibility and is just slightly over the top. Of course it is a modern novel too, written with the satirist's keen eye on the political scene, and with its full share of sex. Until it began to bog down around 400 pages in, I found it hugely absorbing to read and finished it in record time. Franzen notoriously rejected the popularizing power of Oprah Winfrey for his first novel on this scale, *THE CORRECTIONS*, but made amends with his second one, *FREEDOM*. Given a similar launch, it would be hard not to see *PURITY* as a popular best-seller too. But Franzen would shudder to be seen as a mere hack. He is an elegant writer, capable of magnificent prose. His social commentary seldom makes the mistake of being one-sided. And he is fiendishly clever, as unfortunately he reminds us once too often. Let me give examples of all three qualities:-- Here is a fine example of Franzen's lyricism and exquisite observation, the prelude to his final section, "The Rain Comes," (and surely a tribute to the famous opening of Dickens' *BLEAK HOUSE*): "Fog spilled from the heights of San Francisco like the liquid it almost was. On better days it spread across the bay and took over Oakland street by street, a thing you saw coming, a change you watched happening to you, a season on the move. Where it encountered redwoods, the most local of rains fell. Where it found open space, its weightless pale passage seemed both endless and like the end of all things. It was a temporary sadness, the more beautiful for being sad, the more precious for being temporary. It was the slow song in minor that the rock-and-roll sun then chased away." There are similar glories throughout the book.-- In an earlier section, Franzen etches an acid portrait of the Texas panhandle: "To drive east on Amarillo Boulevard was to pass, in quick succession, the high-security Clemens Unit prison complex, the McCaskill meat-processing facility, and the Pantex nuclear weapons plant, three massive installations more alike than different in their brute utility and sodium-vapor lighting. In the rearview mirror were the evangelical churches, the Tea Party precincts, the Whataburgers. Ahead, the gas and oil wells, the fracking rigs, the overgrazed ranges, the feedlots, the depleted aquifer. Every facet of Amarillo a testament to a nation of badass firsts: first in prison population, first in meat consumption, first in operational strategic warheads, first in per-capita carbon emissions, first in line for the Rapture. Whether American liberals liked it or not, Amarillo was how the rest of the world saw their country." Ouch! But what I really admire is that he doesn't leave it like that. In the next paragraph, he describes how the driver, an investigative reporter, "...still loved the whole state, not just San Antonio and the Gulf-softened winters and the burning green of the mesquite in spring but [...] the embrace of ugliness; the eager manufacture of

it; the capacity of Texan pride to see beauty in it. And the exceptional courtesy of the drivers, the enduring apartness of the old republic, the assurance of being a shining example to the nation."--

Franzen is a linguist, and the book is peppered with untranslated dialogue in Spanish and German, which is fine for conveying atmosphere but may annoy less fluent readers. In particular, he seems driven to show off his skill with German. One of the leading characters, a young dissident named Andreas Wolf, refers to himself as an "Assibrãuteaufreier." He translates it immediately afterwards, "a troller for sex with the antisocial," but the construction of the word is so peculiar that those not familiar with East German slang (as I am not!) might not even recognize it as a translation -- so why put in the German at all? Andreas creates a scandal by submitting a bilingual poem to a literary magazine. Called "Muttersprache / Mother Tongue" it is apparently an English poem with a parallel translation. But those who know German will see that the two do not match, and that the whole thing contains a scurrilous Oedipal theme. And those that pick up on the hint that comes only several pages later, will notice an obscene political statement woven into the opening letters of each line, German in the English version, and English in the German one. Brilliantly clever -- but who on earth is going to get all that without prompting?=====

As in his other big novels, Franzen writes in large sections of around 75 pages or so. Each occupies a different place and time, and for a while seems to concern different characters. So we have the engaging female protagonist, Pip (short for Purity) Tyler, living in a squat in Oakland, trying to pay off college loans while getting a life. Then we are in the old German Democratic Republic, with Andreas Wolf living in a church basement, counseling (and seducing) at-risk girls. Thirty years later, Andreas has become a world figure in the manner of Julian Assange, and Pip will join his team at a Shangri-La valley in Bolivia as an intern. One of her motives is that Wolf offers her research skills to help find her father; her mother lives as a recluse in the Santa Cruz Mountains and will tell her nothing about her past. One interesting thing about the structure is that successive sections jump back and forward in time, filling in details from other decades over the forty-year span. I found, however, that this eventually becomes annoying. The earlier parts of the book depend largely on character and action. But the last third bogs down into obsessively-dissected psychology, often expressed in terms of sexual conduct. My reaction to this is not prudish -- a good erotic scene is a pleasure -- but I fail to see much connection between the kind of sex a person prefers and his or her moral place in the world. Moral, yes. Purity is more than a given name; it is also of course Franzen's title and would-be theme. The main reason for Pip's mother's flight is her obsessive desire to free herself from anything that she considers tainted, even if it will plunge her and her daughter below the poverty line. Andreas heads an organization called The Sunlight Project, whose aim is to bring dirty secrets to light, but he himself has a dirtier

secret than anything that can be revealed in public. There is a lot of philosophical talk about whether the internet is inherently pure or dirty; these were the only parts I found myself skimming. The moral equation comes up again and again, but I felt it more as a Leitmotiv than as a theme to be teased out and developed. Even when Franzen steers this juggernaut to a more-or-less settled ending, it seems a little too easy, too little connected to the moral themes he has brought up at every opportunity. Near the beginning of the book, Pip is about to make love with a young man when she remembers she has left her condoms downstairs. On the way back up, she gets sidetracked by another resident in the squat. She returns to her room to find her date dressed and texting: "Coitus interruptus maximus! 62 min and counting!!" He doesn't know half of it; there will be 500 more pages to get through yet. But highly enjoyable ones. For the most part.

Having devoured Franzen's last two books with the frenzy of some sort of hungry woodland fox, I have absolutely no idea how PURITY happened or who let it happen. It is an amalgamation of everything everyone despises in indulgent, pretentious, 21st century "top tier" fiction, and a useless editorship, in blind servitude to a perceived "brand" that isn't there, and never was. I have virtually no idea how anyone could have liked this novel. On a sentence-by-sentence level, the book flows, but makes little sense. There is no plot, just the awkward smashing together of a lot of BIG IDEAS about TECHNOLOGY and PRIVACY and SEX and JOURNALISTIC INTEGRITY and FAMILY and FEMINISM meant to drive book groups to exhaustion in Connecticut towns that sound British, and at Park Slope dinner parties where the wine is Slovenian and the denim is raw. A big part of the problem is the book's inherent structure--sudden, unneeded, unwanted flashbacks, flash forwards (and maybe even a few that go sideways), in headache-inducing reader-unfriendly 40-60 page chunks with no chapter breaks. Franzen is so confident you won't be able to put this drivel down he felt he didn't need any. But every time I picked up the book again, I was in the middle of another flaccid, blustery TREATISE ON SOMETHING and I was lost in the narrative. Nothing stuck with me. By page 400, I had no idea what the story was about, what was happening, or who anyone was. There are SO MANY CHARACTERS, most of whom do so little, and propel nothing, and are so thinly sketched, they are hard to distinguish. There's Pip and Andreas of course, but then the names just keep coming--like blurry cars on a fast moving, never-ending train to literary hell. Annabelle and Tom and Anagrat and Leila and David and Collette and Leonard and Phylisha and Colleen and Stephen and Willow and Pedro and Petra...I mean, HOLY GOD. There are less characters in a Clive Cussler thriller. Who are all these people? I have no idea and I stopped caring. Focus. Precision. Clarity. Nuance. Compactness. None of these traits can be found in PURITY. It roars out

of control, and an out-of-control Franzen novel just kind of strips everything away revealing an author who suffers from Prophet Syndrome. Sample paragraph:"I never quite figured David out. He was fabulously good at making money, and he really did love Anabel, for many of the same reasons I did, but cruelty and the vengeance in giving her a billion unwanted dollars, and in naming the person she most hated as trustee, were unmistakable. I couldn't decide whether he intended to keep punishing her from beyond the grave, or whether he nurtured the sentimental hope that she might one day return and claim her birthright."Huh?With constantly-switching perspectives, dizzying and frustrating, not one of these characters ever manages to be remotely likable (Pip's initial rapport with Andreas that drags on for 50 pages has got to be one of the most inane, whiney, knife-across-a-plate scenes in modern literature) and their motivations for their actions are preposterous. Someone meets someone else (honestly, can't remember all the names) and five seconds later they're helping them exhume and move a dead body...what? WHAT?563 amateurish pages. There are thousands of other books that deserve your attention more.

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