Families disrupted

by Gordon Houser in the November 21, 2001 issue

Tolstoy's dictum that "each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" is played out in each of these fine novels. The dysfunctional family in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* mirrors the dysfunctions of the wider society. In this, his third novel, Franzen pulls off a hat trick, successfully combining domestic drama (à la John Updike), black comedy (à la Philip Roth) and postmodern satire (à la William Gaddis)--with just a hint of Thomas Pynchon's social paranoia.

This ambitious work portrays the Lambert family, presenting each family member's perspective in separate sections. Alfred and Enid Lambert live in the suburbs of St. Jude, a Midwestern city. Their three children have all moved east. Gary, the oldest, is a prosperous banker in Philadelphia. Denise, the youngest, is the workaholic chef of a trendy restaurant in the same city. Chip, the middle child, recently fired from a college teaching position for having an affair with a student, pretends to be a writer and lives in New York off money he's borrowed from his sister.

Whether Enid will succeed in getting her entire family together for Christmas in St. Jude "one last time" is the question around which the plot revolves. What could be more American? Franzen employs his gifts for humor and description as he skewers not only the kitsch of Enid's Americana possessions but Albert's oppressive, controlling silence, Gary's greed and inability to stand up to his neurotic wife, Denise's sexual confusion and Chip's academic pretensions. Franzen's characters seek desperately to escape their crises and "make corrections." What could be more American than the eternal optimism that we can always improve our lot?

A book this ambitious and large will have flaws, but this novel's intricate structure and exquisite writing overcome the slow beginning and the occasional too-long flourishes of description. By the end, the reader feels changed and--the ultimate compliment--doesn't want the story to end.

In a manner very unlike Franzen's, Nobel prize-winner Nadine Gordimer moves her story along with understated scenes, in a staccato style that dispenses with quotation marks or long sentences. Julie Summers, a South African white from a

well-to-do family, meets an Arab mechanic when her car breaks down. Like predatory animals, cars surround and menace her: "She feels hot gassy breath. Steel snouts and flashing teeth grilles at her face."

The mechanic, who calls himself Abdul, repairs her car. Eventually they become lovers, though the love seems to come mostly from Julie. He is an illegal alien and must soon leave the country. Though Julie has an unhappy relationship with her divorced (and remarried) parents, she nevertheless uses her connection with her father to try to keep Abdul from being deported. But nothing works. Though their relationship is a dance of uncertain steps, Julie insists on marrying Abdul and going back with him to his ancestral village in the desert.

As she has in her other works, Gordimer mines the complexities of South Africa, but here she moves outward to the complexities of the global community, where people seek refuge from poverty and hopelessness by going to more prosperous countries. She juxtaposes Abdul's desperate desire to escape economic chaos with Julie's desire for stability and a loving family.

The Pickup, with its connotation of one-night stands, is about the longing for home. Julie and Abdul seek to leave their families and forge some new connection. The surprising ending leaves everything up in the air, as befits our unsettled age, while hinting at some future hope.

Sue Miller's *The World Below* is the most accessible of these three books. Her narrative, too, deals with family disruption. Catherine Hubbard, 52 and twice divorced, inherits her grandparents' house in Vermont after her grandmother, Georgia, dies. She takes a leave from her teaching position in San Francisco and moves into the house.

There she finds her grandmother's old diaries, from which she gradually pieces together the story of Georgia's stay at a tuberculosis sanitarium when she was 19. As Catherine learns about what happened there and about how Georgia's eventual marriage to her doctor came about, she discovers the parallels between her life and her grandmother's. Miller deftly interweaves each woman's story. Catherine learns to understand her grandmother as she makes the transition to becoming a grandmother herself.

In a significant though perhaps too obviously symbolic scene, the teen-aged Catherine and her grandfather, fishing on a nearby lake, see buildings below the

surface. Later a friend and would-be lover tells her she couldn't have seen this but must only have imagined it, a dismissal that proves crucial to their relationship. When Catherine rediscovers the lake and assures herself of the reality of this hidden world, she thinks, "There it was again, sad and mysterious. Grand somehow. Grand because it was gone forever but still visible, still imaginable, below us."

Miller captures that feeling of connection with one's past, the desire to know what one cannot fully know, the need to find strength from those who preceded us, and hope in those who come after us. And she presents the effusion of grace in our daily lives--a grace that too often eludes us.