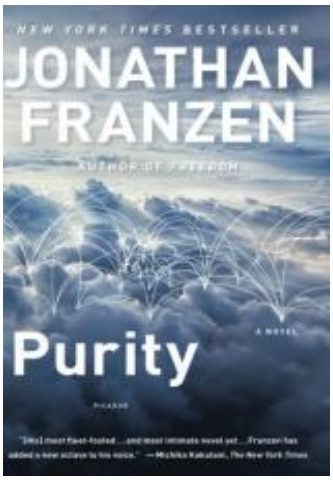
ReadingGroupGuides
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Purity

by Jonathan Franzen



About the Book

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.

Discussion Guide

Introduction

In PURITY --- an epic novel of youthful idealism and disturbing realities --- the acclaimed author of THE

CORRECTIONS and FREEDOM vividly imagines a world of journalists and leakers, Germans and Californians, mega-wealthy titans and homeowners in foreclosure. As she tries to navigate adulthood, Purity ?Pip? Tyler embarks on a quest to discover her father?s identity --- and to pay down her $130,000 student-loan debt. Squatting with anarchists in a house in Oakland, she is led to the Sunlight Project, an organization whose goal is to expose the secrets of high-profile hypocrites from around the globe. The project is the brainchild of a charismatic, possibly unhinged provocateur who came of age in East Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall. As Pip immerses herself more deeply in his group, she tests the limits of her resilience, bringing to light unexpected truths about the quest for truth itself.

A masterwork by one of the major writers of our time, PURITY raises important questions about a broad range of contemporary concerns, from surveillance to sexuality. We hope that the following discussion topics will enrich your reading group?s experience of this daring magnum opus.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. From the Sunlight Project to Purity Tyler herself, how is purity defined throughout the novel? Are any of these definitions realistic, or are they steeped in youthful idealism? What is at the root of the characters? impurities?

2. The epigraph quotes a scene in *Goethe?s Faust* in which Mephistopheles (the Devil) says, ?I am part of that power which eternally wills evil and eternally works good.? How does this notion of simultaneously benevolent and sinister intentions play out in PURITY? Who are the novel?s most powerful characters? How is their power derived: Through secrets? Money? Integrity?

3. How would you have answered Annagret?s questionnaire, featured in the first chapter? What do Purity?s responses say about her?

4. Life in East Germany under the scrutiny of the Stasi is continually contrasted with Western freedoms, yet the West is also a breeding ground for corruption. What does PURITY ultimately tell us about humanity?s capacity to exploit, and to redeem?

5. How are sex and trust interwoven in PURITY? In the novel, is there a difference between the way men and women pursue their desires?

6. Discuss the novel?s images of mothering, especially between Katya and Andreas, Clelia and Tom, and Penelope and Purity. What accounts for the volatility in these relationships?

7. In their quest to expose the truth, are Tom and Andreas equally admirable? Is Leila?s investigative journalism on nuclear warheads more useful than the Sunlight Project?s leaked emails? Are the real-world hackers Julian Assange and Edward Snowden heroes?

8. Was Andreas right to bludgeon Horst on Annagret?s behalf? How do his motivations compare to those of Tom?s father when he rescued Clelia?

9. How did your opinion of Anabel shift as you read about her from different points of view? Is she insane or noble --- or both?

10. Like Purity, the Pip who inhabits Charles Dickens?s GREAT EXPECTATIONS faces quandaries of hidden identities and tainted money. How do the dilemmas of the Information Age compare to those of the past?

11. Under what circumstances would you turn down a billion-dollar trust fund? What do we learn about the characters through their perceptions of money and justice (such as Dreyfuss?s housing situation, which becomes a priority for Purity)?

12. What does the closing scene tell us about irreconcilable differences? What enables Purity to do better than her parents?

13. Which subplots in PURITY give voice to timeless dilemmas? How does the novel advance the notions of fate and obligation explored in Jonathan Franzen?s previous books?

Author Bio

Jonathan Franzen is the author of six novels, including THE CORRECTIONS, FREEDOM and PURITY, and five works of nonfiction, most recently FARTHER AWAY and THE END OF THE END OF THE EARTH, all published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. He lives in Santa Cruz, California.

Critical Praise

?Franzen has created a spectacularly engrossing and provocative 21st-century improvisation on Charles Dickens?s masterpiece, GREAT EXPECTATIONS?. PURITY will be one of the most talked about books of the season.?

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