

*Purity* and what does it mean to be good?

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Someone recently questioned my feminist credentials, when I picked up Jonathan Franzen's new novel, *Purity*. Upon further investigation, I found out my cross-examiner was harboring the book as well.

I understand the critiques against Franzen. His characters are often feminist or *not* feminist. And they're equally annoying or complex. But I like that feminism takes on different shades of dark and is fully dimensioned in his work.

The other criticism is that when Franzen writes about family relationships and friendships with emotional depth, he's applauded for his great wisdom. When women write about the same subjects, they are relegated to "chick lit."

We have that same phenomenon in religious writing. When men write about an existential/spiritual crisis, it has gravitas and we talk about our own "dark night of the soul." When women write the same sort of work, we say she needs more theological education and a strong prescription of Paxil.

So, I get it. But I still read St. John of the Cross and I still read Jonathan Franzen.

*Purity* wrestles with goodness, and the moral choices we make in our current world. Through a handful of characters, Franzen presents a vivisection of our essential struggles. What set *Purity* apart from *Freedom* (Franzen's last novel), is that the characters are mostly likeable. Even when you don't like their choices, they're sincerely trying to be good humans. I thought that's what made them charming, but my theory broke down with the cloying Annabel, who could not see the vast cruelty she inflicted with her manipulating moral superiority.

Pip (whose real name is Purity) is working out how to be a good person with student loan debt and dead end jobs. Through her perspective, we wrestle with the ethical conundrums of Occupy, the housing crisis, and the 99 and 1 percents.

Andreas begins by trying to be good in a privileged East German family, but his mother provided him a corrupted moral compass. When Andreas takes shelter in the basement of a church, he becomes the most debased. Then he spends the rest of his life simultaneously hiding his secrets and exposing others'. There is a twisted goodness in his hypocrisy. Andreas longs for relief from his guilt, he yearns for confession, but since his narcissism has convinced him that he serves a greater good, he turns the spotlight on other people.

As a Julian Assange character, Andreas personifies the ethical dilemmas of the Internet—pornography, invasion of privacy, truth telling, and self-obsession. He presents questions of our existence. (What is more real? Our Internet personae or what we do when no one is looking?) He struggles with sexual consent and much bigger issues that I can't get into without spoiling. My biggest complaint about Andreas (and the book) is that he could have used some more development as a techie. It seemed implausible that he could have done Assange-like leaking relying mostly on the computer skills of interns.

Leila contrasts with Andreas, because she is a good, old-fashioned boots-on-the-ground, Pulitzer-winning journalist. Leila sets forth the battle between old media and new. In her relationships, her moral failings are also her triumphs. She cannot leave her disabled husband even as her love resides somewhere else.

Tom, who seems cozy and relatable, because (unlike the rest) his section is in first person. Yet, he is the least interesting. He takes on the moral struggles of his friends and lovers—animal cruelty, modern farming practices, burying secrets, journalistic integrity, and the systemic evil of great wealth—but he never seems to be a true believer in any of it. He is like clay being formed and shaped by other people's molds. Although he becomes more engrossing as he and Andreas take a twisted relationship that evoked Patricia Highsmith's *Strangers on a Train*.

[Ismael Garcia](#), my ethics professor, used to tell us that the most difficult ethical problems are not between good and evil, they are between good and good. And that is that is what Franzen explores—all the shadowy corners of earnestly trying to be good in our time.