What's his secret?

Righteous fury and old-fashioned storytelling fuel Jonathan Franzen's darkly funny novel, says *Duncan White*

PURITY
by Jonathan Franzen

576PP, FOURTH ESTATE, £20, EBOOK £12.99

★★★★☆

This novel contains multitudes: love, murder, marital terrorism, embarrassing sex, nasty sex, solo sex, the Stasi, internet leaks, missing nuclear weapons, missing fathers, overbearing mothers and a variety of interesting bowel disorders. What you won't find much of is purity. Just as Franzen's previous novel *Freedom* was really a book about inescapable constraint, so *Purity* is really a book about inevitable corruption (which makes it a considerably more enticing prospect).

Those who read *The Corrections* and *Freedom* will know how Franzen novels work: people, often well intentioned, launch themselves into the world with idealistic conviction (To be free! To be pure!) and are snapped back to misery by the tethers of family and society. His are blackly comic books about the souring of great expectations.

So meet Pip. She's a recent graduate with a lousy job and vast debts. She lives in a dive in Oakland and is in love with an activist called Stephen, "an older guy who not only didn't believe in money – as in US currency; as in the mere possession of it – but also had a wife". Like her Dickensian namesake, Pip does not know who her father is but hopes if she finds him, he might pay off her debt out of guilt.

Only Pip's real name is not Pip, it's Purity. Who could inflict such a name on a child? Her mother is a New Age recluse living in a cabin in the woods near Santa Cruz, where she spends her time working on her "Endeavour" (which involves a lot of breathing and sitting still). Not only is she an oppressively needy hypochondriac, but she also refuses to tell Pip who her father is: "Every so often, [Pip] felt the need to strain against the circumstantial straitjacket in which she'd found herself two years earlier, to see if there might be a little new give in the sleeves. And, every time, she found it exactly as tight as before."

Then Pip catches a break. Annagret, a beautiful young German radical, tries to recruit her for the Sunlight Project, a WikiLeaks-type organisation headquartered in Bolivia. The project is run by a charismatic transparency zealot called Andreas Wolf (a better-looking Julian Assange) who promises to use his hacking resources to help Pip find her father. She is flattered but reluctant; the Sunlight Project sounds "possibly cultish" and she can't abandon her mother, "the massive block of granite at the centre of her life". Then, in one of those scenes that Franzen does better than pretty much anybody, Pip comprehensively humiliates herself in making a pass at Stephen, the married man. Suddenly, anywhere but Oakland seems appealing.

Franzen is not a transparency zealot, however. He knows, like Aristophanes's Lysistrata, who persuades the women of Athens to refuse their husbands sex until they make peace with Sparta, that there is power in withholding. He ends that section of the novel without telling us of Pip's final decision. Indeed, the first three of *Purity*'s seven sections end with good old-fashioned cliffhangers. They are also mediated through different characters: the cumulative effect is thoroughly addictive. Switching voice and point of view to add a layered depth to his characters, drawing them both from the outside and the inside, is a technique Franzen has mastered in previous novels. He makes it look very easy. It isn't.

The second section takes us to East Berlin in the Eighties and a young Wolf helplessly addicted to onanism. There are self-conscious references to *Hamlet*: Wolf is approached by "a ghost" (actually a tramp) who claims to be his father, has an icky relationship with his mother and may or may not be mad.

Wolf is not just Hamlet, however; he's darker and dirtier than that, more like *Crime and Punishment*'s Raskolnikov in heat. In his 20s, he earns a reputation as a dissident for writing an indelicate poem insulting the GDR. He is protected from the Stasi by his influential parents but at the cost of them severing contact with him; he ends up living in the basement of a church, working as a counsellor for vulnerable adolescents. Through this work he meets Annagret (later Pip's recruiter). Wolf feels for her a purity of love that he hopes will allow him to escape his sinister thoughts and general ennui. That's when things start to get interesting.

The third narrative strand concerns Leila Helou, a star investigative reporter for *The Denver Independent*, and Tom Aberant, her editor. Leila is technically married to a past-his-best experimental novelist but she lives with Tom, himself the survivor of a traumatic, suffocating marriage.

All these characters stagger under the weight of the secrets they carry. At one stage Pip has a revelation: "She could see – she thought she could see – that what adults did was suck it up and keep their secrets to themselves. Her mother, a grey-haired child in so many ways, was an adult in this one regard at least. She kept her secrets and paid the price."

Grown-ups understand the importance of privacy; kids stick it all on Facebook. The analogy extends to Wolf and the Sunlight Project, who publish vast troves of data online without discrimination, as opposed to Tom and Leila at *The Denver Independent*, who publish only what they believe serves the public interest and only after rigorous fact-checking and corroboration of sources.

Franzen is well known for his rants about the assault on privacy in the digital age. Is the author himself not in danger of groping after a kind of purity here? Is this just polemic dressed up as fiction?

No argument is allowed to win, and nobody escapes complicity

If it is, then, as Franzen has argued elsewhere, it would be in violation of the contract with the reader that there be "no bait-and-switch going on, no instruction masquerading as entertainment".

Sometimes he does appear to violate the terms. The supermodel interns who float around Wolf's Bolivian base are painted with pretty broad strokes, as are the Occupy radicals who boast about their commitment to solidarity but won't share their beer. Late in the book, we meet a Silicon Valley venture capitalist who records every moment of his life so that he can live forever as data in the cloud. The character is already ridiculous, but Franzen also makes him a gun-happy paedophile.

Ultimately, however, Franzen the novelist trumps Franzen the polemicist. No argument is allowed to win; nobody escapes complicity; nobody is pure. The very idea that we need to toughen up and keep secrets is undermined by the way the story is being told: as a reading experience, *Purity* is all about the revelation of secrets. That's the contract: you keep reading, you get to find out. The old pleasure of trafficking in forbidden knowledge has not diminished.

This taps into what defines Franzen, in his own view, as a writer: the determination to go beyond "shame and fear" and dredge up the most raw and painful material from his own life. In interviews, he has said that he couldn't confront this stuff – his relationship with his parents, his failed marriage – in his first two books (*The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion*), but did so in his hugely successful third and fourth novels, *The Corrections* and *Freedom*.

In drafting both those books, he had to cut a character called Andy Aberant on the grounds that he was "too much like me". So when a Tom Aberant arrives in *Purity*, you know something's up. If you've also read Franzen's memoir, *The Discomfort Zone*, you'll notice dozens more little autobiographical correspondences (steroidal facial swelling; an argument about home heating), but it is Aberant's maddening, claustrophobic marriage that clearly dredges the deepest, and draws on Franzen's own "very hermetic marriage". These scenes are sublimely excruciating and, in the character of the wife, Franzen consolidates his reputation as the creator of some of literature's most compellingly irritating characters.

Some would include Franzen's public persona in that group. He is a grouch, even a misanthrope, who has somehow been perceived both as a snob and as a sell-out. He bangs on about privacy, but launches his books in a blaze of publicity. The things he says make people hate him, truly, viscerally (he once googled himself in 2001 – never again). He is *really* into bird watching. But when he can write novels as funny and furious as *Purity*, none of this seems to matter.

WESLEY MERRITT

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The leaderless jihad

Robert Colvile on a new age of global terrorism that is low-tech, homegrown and unpredictable

THE NEW THREAT FROM ISLAMIC MILITANCY
by Jason Burke

304PP, BODLEY HEAD, £13.99, EBOOK £6.99

★★★★☆

In March 2012, in the south of France, Mohammed Merah put on a helmet, got on a motorbike and began to kill. First, he killed soldiers: three off-duty paratroopers, two of them Muslim. A week later, he killed four more people at a Jewish school in Toulouse, including a rabbi and his two sons, aged six and three. The younger, already wounded, was shot dead as he tried to crawl towards his father. After French police tracked Merah to his flat and gunned him down in a firefight, they found that his extensive arsenal included three Colt 45s, two submachine guns, a set of body armour and a GoPro body-camera, with which he had filmed his every action.

When Jason Burke, a veteran foreign correspondent for the *Guardian* and *Observer*, wrote his 2011 book on Islamic terrorism, *The 9/11 Wars*, it seemed as if the threat from al-Qaeda might finally be on the wane. In its place, however, has risen a new movement, described by Western leaders in equally apocalyptic terms: the Islamic State, known as Isil. And instead of grandiose spectaculars such as 9/11, 7/7 or the Atocha bombings in Spain, we are confronted by the threat of "leaderless jihad" – unpredictable, low-tech, self-starting atrocities such as Merah's attacks in Toulouse, or the slaughter of Drummer Lee Rigby in Woolwich in 2013.

So which is the more pressing danger, al-Qaeda or Isil? For anyone who has explored Isil's history – outlined, for example, in *Empire of Fear* by the BBC reporter Andrew Hosken – there is no doubting its savagery, or its outsized ambition. Yet while Burke's new study of Islamic militancy offers an excellent account of Isil's rise, and its relationship to its half-parent, half-rival al-Qaeda, the "new threat" of his title refers in fact to something more nebulous: the ideology that inspires people like Merah to slaughter innocents in the name of Islam. The idea of home-grown extremism is not new. But Burke argues – convincingly – that its nature has changed. It is now a less organised, more sporadic threat. But it is also terrifyingly modern in its methods and, in many marginalised communities, increasingly embedded.

Today's Islamic terrorists are not, Burke says, "lone wolves", any more than their predecessors were. In virtually every case, they have drawn on support from militant networks overseas, often travelling abroad for training. Yet where the al-Qaeda of old would subject Western recruits to a rigorous curriculum of bomb-making and tradecraft, today's unholy warriors are usually just shown which end of an AK-47 is which and sent on their way with a pat on the back.

The bulk of their support, in other words, comes not from overseas sponsors, but a source closer to home. In case after case, Burke shows how young men who became killers were part of communities that subsisted on a diet of prejudice, ignorance and victimhood. Merah's older brother Abdelkader denied any involvement in the killings but told the police that he was "very proud" of his brother and regretted "nothing". Their sister Souad, although she later publicly condemned his acts, was filmed without her knowledge by a French television station saying she was "proud" of her brother, and that she "detested" Jews. To talk about terrorists such as Merah being "radicalised", says Burke, is as misleading as to claim their peers are "radicalised" into liking particular music or football teams.

But how did homegrown terrorism become so virulent? In the course of *The New Threat from Islamic Militancy*, Burke traces how the ideologues of terror argued first that murder in defence of their faith was permissible, then obligatory, then positively glorious. Even a decade or so ago, the sacrifice of civilians was seen as a necessary evil. Now slaughter is embraced for slaughter's sake, even if it is of fellow Muslims.

This global (and globalised) community of terrorists and sympathisers – what Burke calls "the movement" – is also frighteningly modern. Its disparate members speak the same language of bloodshed and hate on their internet forums and Twitter accounts – and use technology not just to talk to each other, but to publicise their work.

Burke describes how Osama bin Laden, in the days before 9/11, was forced to dispatch his rambling diatribes to al-Jazeera via VHS, where they lingered in the general in-tray. Compare that to Isil, with their YouTube-ready atrocities – or Merah, who edited the footage of his slaughter into

The next step is live-streaming: the ultimate in reality terrorism

an internet-friendly "greatest hits" package, complete with graphics and soundtrack. Such coverage not only emboldens supporters, but intimidates enemies. The next obvious step is live-streaming: the ultimate in "reality terrorism".

The question Burke sets himself in this book is simple: "Who are the people who are trying to kill us?" The only criticism is that he fails then to ask: "How do we stop them?" He lays out clearly the type of people who are drawn to the new form of extremism: undereducated, underemployed young men, trapped on the fringes. Yet he offers no suggestion as to how we can prevent them from coming to share the values that motivated Mohammed Merah, and so many others, to set about their grisly work. Without that, the virus can never be cured, only contained.

Robert Colvile's *The Great Acceleration* will be published by Bloomsbury next year

To order this book from the Telegraph for £14.99 plus £1.99 p&p, call 0844 871 1515

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Self-promoting: Mohammed Merah in 2012