



dress to hide her identity after committing murder. She then has to deal with a forced marriage to a woman. In "Wapping Alice," a man masquerading as a female housemaid devilishly gets a man to marry "her." These tales of cross-dressing and homosexuality are tame and related humorously to avoid alienating Twain's fan base, but the characters are quite a departure from the chaste Becky Thatcher and Mary Jane Wilks. Feminists will be glad to see treatment of new themes from one of America's greatest writers but will probably wish he had carried them even further.

Twain is at his most interesting when examining religious issues, as in "Little Bessie." A small child wonders why a person is responsible for murder when God gave that person his or her murderous personality. Bessie asks, "Isn't *He* responsible?" The story "Eve's Diary" is a version of the Creation told from Eve's point of view. She finds Adam boring and stupid and quickly surpasses him in her abilities. However, the typical female stereotypes of women talking too much, crying easily, and finding pleasure in simple beauty are still present. Twain apparently couldn't let go completely of the Victorian mores of the time.

—Lauren Mitchell

The Corrections

by Jonathan Franzen (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 528 pages, \$26.00 cloth)

The heart of Jonathan Franzen's third novel is a fictitious midwestern town called St. Jude. For Catholics, St. Jude is the patron saint of lost or desperate causes, and it is difficult to imagine a group of characters more lost or desperate than the novel's Lambert family.

The family patriarch, Alfred, is battling diseases with names but no cures—Parkinson's and Alzheimer's—and his well-meaning but overbearing wife, Enid. Enid endures not only her ailing husband's demands but also her strained relationship with the couple's three adult children, Gary, Chip, and Denise.

Gary, the eldest, is a successful banker with a less successful family life; he fears that his wife is aligning his children against him. Gary's younger brother, Chip, is wallowing in depression as the novel opens, having just been fired from his tenure-track position as an English professor following an affair with a student. And Denise, the baby of the family, goes through a series of failed relationships with older men before finally taking up with her boss's wife.

Following a decade of novels and films filled with fathers portrayed as ineffectual at best and brutish at worst, *The Corrections* is a refreshing change. Alfred emerges as the hero, as we learn of the sacrifices he has made to protect Denise. This is an American middle-class family—no more, no less. There is no incest, no over-the-top physical or emotional abuse, no real villain of any kind. Despite the sometimes bizarre plot twists, *The Corrections* is a family drama much like the family dramas most of us know—stories of love and loss, hope and fear, faith and folly.

—Timothy J. Fox

Kleopatra

by Karen Essex (Warner Books, 352 pages, \$24.95 cloth)

This is not the clichéd Hollywood story of the femme fatale who bedded both Julius Caesar and his protégé Marc Anthony. Karen Essex, who obviously spent a great deal of time poring over the history of the region and developing her plot lines, presents the story of Kleopatra's childhood and adolescence. The book begins with the death of Kleopatra's mother, Kleopatra V Tryphaena, when the girl was just three years old. Palace intrigue, political maneuvering, and shrewd scheming ensue. Kleopatra's older half-sister Thea seduces the king, Auletes Ptolemy XII, and becomes the next queen. That's just the first royal shakeup in this precarious household, where words and actions seldom find them-

selves in agreement.

Essex focuses her story on the royal Ptolemy dynasty but places their situation within the larger context of the time. Rome rules the civilized world and battles constantly to subdue those outside its control. Egyptian freedom comes at a heavy cost—the Ptolemys constantly must acquiesce to Roman demands for money and manpower.

Generally, the story moves slowly, despite the intensity of the situation. The author spends too much time in the characters' heads, and consequently the characters think more than they interact. That said, *Kleopatra* is an enjoyable story. Most fascinating is the history lesson the reader picks up along the way. Part 2, which starts with Kleopatra and Caesar's first meeting, is due August 2002.

—Kathleen Strand

Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague

by Geraldine Brooks (Viking, 304 pages, \$24.95 cloth)

A *Wall Street Journal* reporter rambling through the English countryside stumbled across a marker for Plague Village. Her interest piqued, she visited the town and learned about a small community that went into voluntary quarantine in 1665 after being hit by the plague.

This event was the inspiration for *Years of Wonders* by Geraldine Brooks. The story is told in the words of Anna Frith, a young widow in this poor mining town who works as a maid in the rector's house. Anna has lived mostly a bleak and cruel existence, but through her friendship with the rector's wife, she receives the gifts of literacy and self-worth as she cares for her life's joy—her two young sons.

But when plague enters the village through a tainted bolt of cloth—starting at Anna's house—fear and hysteria set in, until the townspeople finally decide upon a quarantine to keep the disease from spreading throughout the countryside. Despite their instinct to flee, they agree to stay and watch nearly two-thirds of their families and neighbors die.

Brooks gives a frighteningly real and physical sense of the plague, including the bursting boils, putrid flesh, and imminent death. However, this book is just as much a story about a young woman struggling for survival in unimaginable conditions, as she grapples with grief, despair, love, jealousy, and eventually, hope. *Year of Wonders* is not just a story about the plague, it is novel of human triumph and feminist glory.

—Kim Reiss