

## ANALYSIS

*The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981)

John Irving

(1942- )

“In essence it’s a family chronicle—a tale of generations of parents coping with children and siblings coping with each other. The chief parents are Win and Mary Berry of Dairy, New Hampshire, a couple brought together after high school at a seaside resort where, on summer jobs, they catch a glimpse of a joyous vocation (innkeeping). The Berry union produces five spirited and amusing children: Lilly, who becomes a successful novelist (her subject is childhood); Frank, who becomes a literary agent; Franny, who grows up to marry a black pro football player; John, the book’s narrator, whose passions include jogging and weight-lifting; and Egg, the youngest child, who’s killed in an accident at the age of seven. The story covers a quarter-century, beginning round about 1940, and the principal action takes place in three hotels, each called—for insufficient cause, I think—The Hotel New Hampshire. (The hotels are situated in New Hampshire, Austria, and Maine.)

Family dailiness—traditional sitcom material—is in nearly constant view throughout the novel. Father and mother tell stories about their youth to their children. Grandfather teaches grandson his special athletic skills. Mother intercedes when older siblings try to force their juniors into premature knowingness. Mother speaks out against slovenliness.... Children tease each other ferociously, engage in fist-fights, learn to work together in the family business, learn to drive cars, learn forbearance, find their affection for one another strengthened over time. And toward the end, children are seen taking up parental roles, caring for the elders whose hour as nurturers and protectors has begun to fade. Four of the eight family members with whom this book begins are gone at the end, but the survivors are close-knit, and a new Berry baby is on the way, assuring the continuity of the generations.

Simple, unsadistic stuff. But, as I’ve hinted, it’s conjoined with matter remote from everyday, and the combination creates surprising narrative rhythms and a sharply distinctive tone. *The Hotel New Hampshire* is structured as a succession of shrewdly prepared explosions of violence, each of which blends the hideous and the comic, and projects a fresh length of story line that hisses forward into the next blowup almost before the dust of the last has settled. A typical sequence runs as follows: Franny Berry is gang-raped by members of a prep school football team on Halloween; on the same day, her father, Win Berry, takes the family pet, an ancient Labrador named Sorrow who is dear to Franny but troublingly afflicted with flatulence, to the local vet to be put to sleep. Conscious of his fearfully violated younger sister’s need for the comfort of her pet, Frank Berry races to the animal hospital in hope of saving the beast. He’s too late, but he does recover Sorrow’s body, and, having earlier learned taxidermy in a biology course, resolves to stuff the dog and offer it to his sister as a gift. New narrative fuse lit and burning, obviously, and explosion is imminent. It occurs a chapter later, on Christmas Day. Stuffed and mounted in an ‘attack’ pose, hidden in an upstairs closet, Sorrow suddenly springs out at Grandfather Berry when the latter, working out with weights in his room, accidentally knocks open the closet door [and gets scared to death]....

We’re never in doubt of Frank Berry’s sympathy for his sister’s suffering, but the gags superimposed upon this sympathy do contort it. And comparable contortions abound elsewhere in the book’s action. The primary moment of catharsis occurs when Berry children, with aides, manage to terrify the rapists’ ringleader with a brilliantly staged threat that he himself will be raped by a bear. The book’s narrative crisis occurs when Father Berry handily smashes (with a Louisville Slugger) a ring of terrorists in the Austrian Hotel New Hampshire who are about to blow up Vienna’s opera house and take the Berry family hostage. Always. The sympathy and solidarity of the family members are in evidence—qualities placing the Berrys firmly in a world of light and affirmation. But often the visible deeds and spoken words verge upon the violently sadistic, or the black comic, or the melodramatically grotesque.

And the author's taste for incongruity affects characterization as well as action.... The Berry kids don't invariably sound 'normal and nice'... The children's sprightly R-rated obscenities decorate virtually every paragraph. Nor can it be said that these folks are untouched by deviance. Franny Berry is, for an interval, caught in a lesbian love affair. She and John Berry are in love with each other and consummate their incestuous passion in an extended sexual bout. Frank Berry is an out-of-closet homosexual given to expressions of glee in his aberrancy. Lilly Berry is a suicide. The entire family, furthermore, thrives on exposure to ills of the public world that more conventional families labor to avoid. Day in and day out in Vienna, the Berrys deal not only with a gang of terrorists (resident on one floor of their hotel) but with a sly, dirty-talking circle of prostitutes (resident on another floor of the place). They're beset both by racists and by enraged victims of racism..... Nightmare and sunshine simultaneously, once again....

Less bloody than *Garp*, *The Hotel New Hampshire* nevertheless is rich, from start to finish, in incongruous juxtapositions, and it offers genuine pleasures.... Early in the book the reader is nudged into noticing resemblances between the narrative proceedings at hand and those of a fairy tale—the only literary form that has ever satisfactorily tamed the horrible. Half-magical attachments between human and animal creatures (men and bears) hold our attention from the start. John Irving reflects time and again on dreams, wish fulfillment, happy endings. And in the touching final page, he steps forward to acknowledge that he and his reader have been living in a 'fairy-tale hotel,' spinning wish fulfillments: 'We give ourselves a sainted mother, we make our father a hero; and someone's older brother, and someone's older sister—they become our heroes, too. We invent what we love, and what we fear. There is always a brave, lost brother—and a little lost sister, too. We dream on and on: the best hotel, the perfect family...' Guided by the narrator, we intuit that this work (when the grotesque heaves into sight) is not only about the unbearable but about our instinct for refusing the unbearable—not only about the worst of life but about our capacity for willing away the worst. That intuition does much, throughout, to soothe our unease with contortions and contrarieties.

We're also soothed because a good deal of the worst in *The Hotel New Hampshire* really is willed away. A few dread events in the story—a plane crash, a blinding—are irreversible. But, as it turns out, they're exceptions to the book's rule. Brother and sister fall in love and sexually embrace—but their embrace is a means of canceling the memory of the cruel rape: before the end Franny Berry transcends her incestuous passion and her lesbian attachment, and gives herself fully to marriage, procreation, health. Frank Berry, self-absorbed homosexual, is led out of his enclosure into the sunlight of selflessly generous relationships with both siblings and elders. A young woman once so convinced of her ugliness that she went about the world in disguise is helped to discover her beauty, arrives at a positive view of herself, and becomes the means through which John Berry conquers his infatuation with his sister....

The racism and sexism that stalk the opening chapters bow in shame at the conclusion. Blacks and whites come together in harmony that is rooted in perception of their shared humanity. The brutalizing rapist Caliban who attacked Franny understands that he too must alter his ways. And—highly impressive utopian accomplishment—the terrible energy of rape comes to seem less real, less momentous, than the infinitely loving, patient process by which a rape crisis center brings about, in the abused, the rebirth of trust. We occupy, in other words, a world wherein nearly everything comes out as we should like, the formal and psychological sequences moving from tragedy to comedy, from despair to hope. And, to repeat, because we begin to feel, close to the start, the inevitability of that fairy-tale progress, the intermingling of destructive and nurturing elements just escapes the taint of arbitrariness."

Benjamin DeMott  
"Domesticated Madness"  
*Atlantic Monthly* 248.4 (October 1981)

"*The Hotel New Hampshire* is essentially the story of an oddball New England family, the Berrys. The parents are Winslow and Mary, both born in 1920, and the children include Frank (a grumpy, prudish boy who is incidentally homosexual), Franny (an outspoken, foul-mouthed, reckless, and warm-hearted girl), John (the novel's narrator, who goes in for wrestling and weightlifting), Lilly (an exceptionally serious child who stops growing at an early age), and Egg (a little boy who loves costumes). Win's father, a philosophical football coach called alternately Iowa Bob and Coach Bob, and a vile-smelling old labrador called Sorrow are also members of the household.

The novel begins with a rather charming and nostalgic flashback to the courtship of Win and Mary, who both have summer jobs at a resort hotel in Maine in 1939; there they encounter an Austrian animal trainer named Freud and his aging black bear known both as 'Earl' (from the sound of his growl) and 'State o'Maine.' Win buys the bear and gains the hand of Mary. Almost at once they begin producing their peculiar brood. The section ends with the death of old Earl, shot by a 'dumb kid' who did not realize that the bear was somebody's pet.

We leap ahead to the mid-Fifties. Win Berry, who has a fixation on hotels, quits his job as a prep-school teacher and converts a former girls' school into the first Hotel New Hampshire. The eccentricities of the hotel's staff, its furnishings (chairs from the former schoolrooms still screwed to the floor, tiny toilets and washbasins designed for very small girls, etc.), and its guests (among them a circus of dwarfs) are fully equal to those of the Berry family, who take up residence there. The fourteen-year-old John has an affair (limited to rainy mornings) with a blowzy waitress. Franny is gang-raped by three 'ringers' on the prep-school football team, led by an icily arrogant boy named Chipper Dove to whom she is perversely attracted; subsequently she is comforted to some degree by another teammate, a powerful and kindly black whose sister had undergone a similar experience. Smelly old Sorrow and Coach Bob meet their untimely ends. Sorrow is stuffed.

The next move carries the family all the way to Vienna, where Win, at the instigation of the old animal trainer Freud, takes over the management of a decrepit hotel and renames it the Hotel New Hampshire. But by this time the family is missing two more members, for Mary and Little Egg perish in a plane crash en route to Vienna; Sorrow, whose stuffed body was being carried along by Egg, floats to the surface of the sea. In Vienna we resume our acquaintance with old Freud, now blind, and meet another trained bear, who acts as Freud's seeing-eye and as a kind of bouncer at the hotel; the bear also speaks English, for she is in fact an unhappy, tough-talking, good-hearted lesbian named Susie, a Sarah Lawrence dropout who has taken to wearing a bear suit. There is much, much more: a terrorist plot to blow up the Vienna State Opera; the return of the now-famous Berrys to the United States, and the sudden emergence of tiny Lilly as a literary success; an episode of sibling incest; an elaborate revenge on Franny's rapist, Chipper Dove; the purchase of a third Hotel New Hampshire.... But enough has been given to indicate the extraordinary whimsicality of this novel and to suggest, to those who have read *Garp*, the many links connecting the two books.

Among these are incidents involving (in no particular order) performing bears, rape, mutilation, seedy Viennese hotels, Viennese prostitutes, wrestling, and sudden death. While reading *The Hotel New Hampshire*, I had to pause repeatedly to ask myself how a particular motif had been played before. What was achieved by the new variation? What, indeed, was Irving's purpose in constructing this Wagnerian nexus of subjects, images, and themes extending from one novel to the next? Take the matter of rape. 'I feel uneasy,' Garp wrote, 'that my life has come in contact with so much rape.' We are told that Garp himself would later write a novel which would have much to do with rape.' Meanwhile, in *Garp* itself, we are subjected to harrowing accounts of the rape of two pre-teenage girls (one of whom, Ellen Jamison [*sic*], has had her tongue cut out) and the attempted rape-murder of a young wife.

In *The Hotel New Hampshire*, not only Franny but also Susie the bear is a rape victim. There is much dialogue on the subject, Susie being particularly eloquent. 'Those thugs didn't just want to *fuck* you, honey,' she says to Franny, 'they wanted to take your strength away, and you let them.... Sweetheart! You have *minimized* the *enormity* of what has happened to you—just to make it a little easier to take.' To which Franny protests, 'Whose rape is it?... I mean, you've got yours, I've got mine....' And there is still a third victim in the novel—Sabrina, the beautiful young black woman who instructs John Berry in the art of kissing; she, we are told, was not only raped but had all her teeth knocked out. At the novel's end the third avatar of the Hotel New Hampshire is transformed into a rape crisis center directed by Susie the bear; as such it parallels the refuge for distraught women set up by Garp's mother Jenny in the preceding book....

Are we to assume that the rape of defenseless young girls, especially if accomplished by mutilation, has some special poignancy for Irving, arousing some private guilt for which repeated fictional atonement must be made? Presumably not—though both Garp and John Berry are made to go on at length about their abhorrence of the crime. It seems more likely that he is playing an elaborate literary game, teasing the

reader with hints of profound continuities underlying metamorphosis—Ellen Jamison is, after all, a reincarnation of the mythic Philomela and so, in thicker disguise, is Sabrina. Meanwhile, the multiplication of rapes has furnished no further insight into the nature—or the consequences—of sexual abuse. So it is with the other repetitions.

We are invited to take part in a game called ‘Count the Bears,’ beginning with the ‘liberation’ of those truculent, shambling, unpredictable mammals from the Schonbrunn Zoo (*Setting Free the Bears*), we can observe them riding motorcycles in both *Garp* and *The Hotel New Hampshire*, and in the latter we can actually watch one of them undergo a non-Ovidian metamorphosis into a truculent, lovably growling human female. The bear motif and the rape motif are pointed when Susie, wearing her bear suit, threatens Franny’s terrified rapist (Chipper Dove) with rape by a sexually aroused bear. But the significance of neither motif has been enhanced, and the whole episode is about as funny (or profound) as a fraternity initiation in high school.

Again and again *The Hotel New Hampshire* disappointed me by the perfunctoriness of its situations and their handling. That quality of jokey contrivance which initially put me off in *Garp* is painfully in evidence throughout the new novel. When, during an electricity blackout, an elderly patrolman switches on the ignition of his squad car at the very moment that the power comes back on, lighting up every window in the hotel facing him (*‘as if he had done it’*) and startling the old cop into a fatal heart attack, we may smile at the joke and register once again Irving’s predilection for sudden death; when, fifty pages later, Coach Bob, the philosophical grandfather, suffers a fatal heart attack at the unexpected sight of the stuffed dog Sorrow falling out of the closet, we are more likely to respond with an exasperated shrug. The incident has been too blatantly set up, made too predictable. How often can one be expected to respond to the play on the name Sorrow, which runs through much of the book?...

‘And one night, when we were watching a wretched melodrama on the TV...my mother said, ‘I don’t want to see the end of this, I like happy endings.’ And Father said, ‘There are no happy endings’.... So much for the tragic vision of life. The passage is typical of the prevailing juvenile tone of the novel, which is full of the bittersweet wisdom of a late-hour bull session interrupted from time to time by exploding firecrackers. Events of potentially great impact (young John’s sexual initiation by the much older waitress, the death of Mary Berry and Egg) are summarily treated, as if the mere statement that they have occurred will stimulate an appropriate (and automatic) response from the reader. Characters are for the most part glibly sketched in or else sentimentalized, as with the brace, handsome, generous, and sexy black athlete, Junior Jones, and his sister Sabrina; only Fanny seems to me successfully realized as a character, made touching by her boldness and vulnerability. A speeded-up, shorthand treatment of character and situation of course works in certain types of comic writing but not in a novel of such length and pretensions.

The ‘throw-away’ attitude toward the material is matched by the slackness of the style. Succumbing to what Henry James saw as a dangerous ‘looseness’ inherent in first-person narration, Irving allows his John Berry to go on and on, dully including quantities of inert and unredeemed detail.... Nowhere in *The Hotel New Hampshire* does the language have the confidence, the aphoristic precision, and the vivacity that are among the pleasures of *The World According to Garp*. As if aware of the stylistic inadequacies of the new book, Irving resorts to the use of literary crutches, quoting at length from the poems of Donald Justice and from the famous conclusion of *The Great Gatsby*, which makes Lilly burst into tears and declare that their father is a Gatsby, always in pursuit of the receding green light. The very rhythms of the end of *The Great Gatsby* are echoed in the final paragraphs of *The Hotel New Hampshire*: ‘So we dream on. Thus we invent our lives.... We dream on and on: the best hotel, the perfect family, the resort life. And our dreams escape us almost as vividly as we can imagine them.’ Unfortunately, the quotations and echoes serve only to emphasize the lameness of Irving’s own prose.

In this review I have, almost at the novelist’s invitation, used a good book—*Garp*—to belabor a poor one. Enough. John Irving is a talented and resourceful writer. I doubt that he has been misled by the hoopla, cover stories, etc., surrounding his latest production. I like to think that next time he will present us with something as exciting as *Garp*—and as different from that novel as he can possibly make it.”

Robert Towers

“Irving shifts fictional gears, writing his novel as a fairy tale, subordinating characterization to symbolic structure and, in so doing, evoking some basic storytelling patterns. Finding his own world moving ever closer to spiritual disintegration, and alarmed at the failure of much art to come to grips with that threat, Irving provides a setting of magic and dreams, from which to make a direct appeal to the soul and the imagination. His tale, then, builds to a transcendent vision of a family’s progress toward maturity, stability, and a measure of happiness.... *The Hotel New Hampshire*, more than any of the novels, concentrates on the family almost to the exclusion of history—insisting on the individual’s responsibility to himself and others and the necessity of integrating the various aspects of the personality. Achieving selfhood through a strong marriage and devotion to true parenting is presented as the best hope for triumphing over the forces of chaos and despair....

In *The Hotel New Hampshire* Irving returns to the world of ‘The Pension Grillparzer,’ shaping a wholly imaginative landscape. Both works [*Garp* and *Hampshire*] are narrated by central male characters and are essentially family stories. Both are about ways of viewing life: the world of childhood innocence is magical and full of wonders, as the child’s imagination is able to assimilate mundane occurrences as well as bears that ride on motorcycles or unicycles and men who walk on their hands. But even this vision does not remain ideal, for in Irving’s world the specter of death is always near. In ‘The Pension Grillparzer’ it appears in the form of the grandmother’s dream; in *The Hotel New Hampshire* a man in a white dinner jacket delivers cryptic warnings of death and destruction....

Irving’s vision is markedly different from Garp’s. In ‘Pension’ the final emphasis falls on doom and death because the narrator is too far removed from the imaginative gleam of his childhood to be able to see the world as other than ‘a doomed effort at reclassification’; this is a limitation in Garp’s vision as well. Irving, on the other hand, demonstrates in his fifth novel that reclassification can succeed. The conclusion of *The Hotel New Hampshire* reverts to the magical universe of the novel’s opening—a world where a bear may change into a woman and where the narrator and his family can triumph over death and recollected trauma. Irving goes beyond the Romantics in asserting the validity of the imagination and our ability to reclaim it even in adulthood—even in the world of ‘experience’.”

Gabriel Miller

*John Irving*

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Michael Hollister (2015)