12 CRITICS DISCUSS

John Irving

(1942-)

"Of the better known writers now at work, nearly all are at least occasionally guilty of emotional displacement. One is tempted to believe that bigotry is in, fair-mindedness and even humorous detachment out. The exceptions, of course, are a pleasure to encounter—writers like John Irving, whose humor never snipes with mere cruelty."

John Gardner
On Moral Fiction
(Basic Books 1978) 197-98

"*Setting Free the Bears* (1968) is about two young male lurking around Mitteleuropa on motorbikes, loving and leaving girls, becoming increasingly involved with each other, and committing themselves to no project longer-termed than that of raiding the Hietzinger Zoo, in Vienna, for the purpose of releasing caged animals. Two other novels preceded *Garp*, neither breaking new aesthetic ground. With *Garp* came revelation. That book's bravura array included several of the goriest scenes (a rapist carved to death in the act by his victim, for instance) yet contributed to our letters. But immediately adjacent to those scenes stood chapter upon chapter of domestic trivia—kitchen duty, kid-watching, and one wholly treasurable passage in which an anxious parent dares to observe, secretly, the performance of another parent to whom he has entrusted the care, overnight, of his young….

John Irving's love and squalor please us precisely because his authorial presence seems unsmudged by baseness—innocent, cheerful, bouncily energetic, at times incoherent, but always beyond reach of exploitative meanness….[However,] I also find the preoccupation with rape…disconcerting. And although the novelist Garp is explicit in warning us off from reviewers who utter such phrases, I'm obliged to declare that John Irving doesn't strike me as a writer of significant intellectual depth….And for me, his book's [*The Hotel New Hampshire*] frequent allusion to Scott Fitzgerald only underlines the fact that the example of that writer's moral penetration has been missed. Irving's work brings to mind lesser heroes—J. D. Salinger, Kurt Vonnegut, the Beatles. Like those performers at their best, this author is playful, tender, ebullient, by turns silly and sweet. And, most important, he has within him a strong idealizing tendency, which, at an hour when nothing is more…chic than despising the ideal, deserves regard as precious."

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

"To some extent Irving has…provided himself a literary self-defense. Not only are parallels obvious between his life and his work but between Garp's works and Irving's. *Setting Free the Bears* is partly an historical novel set in Vienna during World War II; *The Water-Method Man* is, in part, a novel about procrastination, the title of Garp's first book. The title of the second, *Second Wind of the Cuckold*, is a play upon a quote from Severin Winter which is repeated by the narrator at the end of *The 158-Pound Marriage*. Although exaggerated by Garp, the basic plot is the same in both books. By fictionalizing autobiographical material and then justifying his perspective within the fictionalization, Irving proffers an explanatory defense of his own work, particularly through his study of Garp's development as a writer….

John Irving's first four novels suggest that to him structure is nearly everything. All his novels are structurally complex, and they all incorporate remarkably similar settings and experiences, somewhat like those in Irving's own life. Writers, former wrestlers, New England colleges, Vienna, Iowa—we find them all in all the books. Similar characters appear in all four works, and the same characters also appear. The same aging but elegant Viennese prostitute, for instance, with a fur muff to hide her sparkling ringed fingers, appears in *The Water-Method Man* and *The World According to Garp*—only her name has been changed. Yet these novels are worlds apart, as different from each other as their main characters are from

the author. Irving uses his own experiences ruthlessly to create self-contained worlds within each novel—worlds of exaggeration populated with bizarre, sometimes absurd characters—in order to compel us to recognize the truths that underlie human existence. Regardless of the world in which we find them, the truths Irving magnifies are unchanging.

Certain aspects of his works suggest that Irving has not yet achieved his goal of writing a novel whose structure does not to some degree obfuscate his stories, and a story whose exaggerated effects do not to some degree negate the validity of the truths he wishes to expound. Irving has imposed an order upon the world in each of his novels which enables the character to live….Like Garp, Irving has been trying to find a personal vision, a way to tell his stories with his imagination and not his memory. In a large sense, the narrative techniques and perspectives that Irving employs in his first three books are all included in *The World According to Garp*, but the narrator in that novel is omniscient, unlike the others who are involved in the stories they narrate. Each of the earlier narrators presents a 'selective autobiography,' a story told through his own perspective, while the narrator of *The World According to Garp* presents a 'selective biography,' a story about a world and its inhabitants to which the narrator is virtually unrelated and about which he presumably has learned through such sources as Garp's unpublished writing….

A fine line can be drawn between writing fiction about fiction and writing fiction about writing fiction. In each of his works, Irving examines the relationship of a writer to his work, but he does it principally through describing the writer's life, not his work. Irving's fiction is obviously not the…kind of fiction associated with the French 'new novelists,' such as Robbe-Grillet, Duras, and even Beckett. Despite his remonstrations and attempts to espouse traditional literary values, Irving has up to now written a combination of modern and traditional fiction. In *The World According to Garp* he combines traditional storytelling and literary modes (chronological sequence, omniscient narration, and the epilogue) with modern [Postmodernist] techniques (writing-within-writing and self-reflexive narration). All four of his works contain writing which Irving uses to explain his own intentions and explicate his own text.

Like the village explainer, Irving seems to feel a need to justify his own narrative perspective in telling a story. He has not quite been able to divorce himself from the academic world—in which the didactic who tells a story to make a point then explains his point to make sure no one has missed it. In explaining himself, Irving resembles both the Victorian novelist ('dear reader') and the 'new novelist' who writes fiction about fiction. In each of his novels, he has imposed a structure upon his fictional world; his characters, then, explain the structure, question its validity, and proceed to search for a new structure, a personal vision of their own."

Michael Priestly
"Structure in the Worlds of John Irving"
Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction 23.1 (1981)

"Few writers have so vividly captured the critical and popular imagination as Irving has done. And if the notoriety and acclaim he has received are, in the nature of hero-worship, extreme, and quite likely to be tempered as time passes, they are nonetheless deserved. With only five published books, Irving has succeeded in creating a unique world and establishing a distinctive voice, and although the body of his work does tend to rework a limited range of familiar motifs, it is also marked by a readiness to experiment with form and symbolic structure….

Yet Irving is not interested in form as an end in itself; he does not experiment merely to play or to impress, and this sets him apart from many of his contemporaries….And if his world may strike some as too violent and sordid, others cannot help but note also his generosity, his expansiveness of spirit, and his insistence on the potential for achieving a productive and rewarding life….Despite his popularity, Irving's work has not yet received any sustained serious evaluation. Book reviews (like Irving's own world) have been excessive, either in praise or in condemnation….

The surface facts of John Irving's life can be found in his fiction, but it is a mistake to assume that his novels are, therefore, autobiographical….'I make up all the important things'….In Europe Irving affected a Bohemian life-style, traveling about on a motorcycle, meeting painters and writers, and continuing to wrestle, sparring with various Slavic opponents; these experiences are reflected in *Setting Free the Bears*

and *The 158-Pound Marriage*. In Europe he also met a man with an old trained bear, which would become a central image in many of his books….

John Irving's ideas about fiction are openly explicated in his novels and clearly defined in two essays, 'Kurt Vonnegut and His Critics' and 'In Defense of Sentimentality.' Concerned with and considerate of his readers, he wants to be widely read and feels that it is the writer's responsibility to tell a good story well. He is very much against the post-modernist tendency in fiction and criticism to promote what is 'difficult,' academic, and consciously 'important' over what is seemingly 'easy,' readable, and perhaps popular. In his fiction Irving deplores the contemporary novel's dedication to form rather than content, its tendency to place greater emphasis on structural complexity than on character and society….This tendency to prize the trendy and the stridently intellectual over more enduring values in fiction is taken up directly by Irving in his essay on Kurt Vonnegut, wherein Irving attacks those critics who dismiss Vonnegut as an artist because of the relative simplicity of his narratives….

Not only does a writer have the responsibility of clarity, but he must also be mimetic; the novel must have character and plot with which readers can identify and which are recognizable, as reflections of a tangible reality. And most important, the novelist must care enough about people to demonstrate in his fiction a commitment to life and to society, a feat to be accomplished only by writing about people, for people….He is deliberately excessive and baroque…[featuring] extreme personalities. The situations in which they are placed are often extreme ones, as well….Then, too, the violence that characterizes the novels is extreme in circumstance and effect in such episodes as the Garps' driveway accident, Siggy's crashing into the crate of bees, the shower of glass falling on the Winters' children in a bathtub, or the decapitations in the Akthelt and Gunnel saga. Irving believes in finding truth through exaggeration; his vision is thus extreme….'I think exaggeration is writing is simply a result of paying attention to the world around us'….

He also advocates sentimentality. In practice he unashamedly manipulates his audience, building up his audience's love for certain characters (especially in *Garp*), only to take them away abruptly, usually through violent death later in the novel. This is done quite self-consciously and deliberately, for Irving is very conscious of his role as entertainer and makes no attempt to deny or conceal the machinations of his storytelling. Irving greatly admires the willingness of Charles Dickens, one of his literary models, to indulge in sentiment, as well as his enormous generosity….Like Dickens, Irving consistently demonstrates a generous and vital concern for humanity, and unlike many of his contemporaries, his is an art of engagement, one concerned with man's public and private responsibility to himself and others….

John Irving's world…is an insular one; his heroes are generally enmeshed in private or familial problems, so absorbed in themselves, and the reader in them, that other dimensions cease to be very important. The 'real world,' in the form of actual historical or sociological events, does not intrude. Irving does not make reference to the events of his time to give his works background or to ground them in a precise historical framework, nor does he strive for strict sociological realism. With the exceptions of *Setting Free the Bears*, which is totally concerned with a particular historical moment, only *The 158-Pound Marriage* directly refers to a 'current event'—the narrator and his wife return to America on the day of John F. Kennedy's assassination.

Nevertheless, Irving's novels are very much products of their time, and if the reader is not clued in with specific references to history, there is yet enough 'felt reality' to give the novels a striking and dramatic sense of verisimilitude. The assassinations in *Garp* (especially that of Jenny Fields), the psychic dislocation of Fred Trumper, the descriptions of the artistic community of Greenwich Village, and the descriptions of the cinema verite of Ralph Packer in *The Water-Method Man*—all communicate a profound and sensitive impression of their time….Irving's novels regularly exhibit a cyclical, timeless quality that is most poetically developed in the return to primal beginnings in *The Hotel New Hampshire*, which begins and ends in a fairy-tale world….

Irving's universe is largely governed by mishap, violence, and the irrational. In *Garp* Irving concretizes this force, calling it the Under Toad, but it is, indeed, everywhere in his fiction. All his protagonists' lives are continually disrupted by minor annoyances, domestic squabbles, or psychological problems….Each of

Irving's novels contains at least one central violent episode, and two of them, *Setting Free the Bears* and *Garp*, are even dominated by death—virtually everyone dies by each novel's conclusion. The basic problem for Irving's characters is determining how to conduct their lives in the face of such chaos—how does one live in a world ruled by the Under Toad?…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….Most of Irving's characters…do achieve victory, reconciling themselves to family, society, and history and learning to recognize and to grapple with the Under Toad….Another means of such triumph is art, for most of Irving's earlier protagonists are writers….

The emphasis on the individual caught up in an absurd and irrational universe is the central theme of modern fiction….The concentration on forces rather than on individuals, and the lack of real engagement in characterization that is common to writers of that genre, are alien to Irving….Irving is actually closer to the existential vision of Camus than to the black humorists—his characters do choose and do act, and even if an action like setting free the bears seems a futile one, it serves as a way of combating the Under Toad by asserting the self….Unlike some contemporary novelists' attempts at rewriting history (E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*) in order to reshape it or transcend it—and in the process, reject it—Irving's historical novel is quite faithful to facts and events, for he does not want to turn away from history, but to confront it. In doing so, Irving concentrates on World War II, the event that is primarily responsible for the shaping of our age….History is intimately related to Irving's use of Vienna, which functions at the same time as a real and a symbolic place in his novels….a place of occupation, power, intrigue, poverty, and ruin….a place of moral corruption and destruction, where the norms of civilized behavior are blurred….Maine [is] always a restorative place in Irving's work….

All of Irving's novels are comic, and all of them contain sections that are marvelously funny….in Irving's world such laughter is therapeutic. An exuberant, playful spirit pervades all his novels…If Irving must cause his characters and readers much pain and sorrow, he is also extremely generous and forgiving, and if he insists that we face difficult and disturbing truths, it is only because we must know them to survive. Irving's generosity and his emphasis on freedom, laughter, and fun balance the harsher aspects of his vision and provide an important prescription for survival in this world."

Gabriel Miller
John Irving
(Frederick Ungar 1982) 1-24

"Leslie Fielder says that Irving's transition from the man who wrote *Setting Free the Bears*, *The Water-Method Man* and *The 158-Pound Marriage* to the man who wrote *Garp* is an extraordinary example of a writer consciously deciding to move from high art to low, or as Fielder perhaps more accurately labels the split, from minority writer to majority writer. Can we say then that Irving took a risk, gained popularity, lost some of his critical stature, and began to whine? Can we say that all this defense of Vonnegut and Dickens is really defense of an overly sensitive Irving, that his aesthetic theory is really not so much a theory as it is self-indulgence, not so much a rational effort to deal with serious questions about the nature of art as it is the easiest way to live with a self one doubts? If we do say these things, however true they may seem, I think we too easily dismiss the important role a writer like Irving and theories such as his can play in keeping the novel alive for people, not just for critics….

Irving's aesthetics are not merely author as spoiled whiner, but, more importantly, author as a sort of literary lifeguard….His methods in his own work point the way for what Irving sees as the solution to the problem of the 'new' fiction, that is, the self-reflective novel most often considered the high art novel today, the novel frequently about the novel's death that may with purpose and intention cause the very death it reflects. From his second novel, *The Water-Method Man*, through *The Hotel New Hampshire*, Irving builds into each book a character or characters who stand aghast at the new fiction….Young Garp, afraid he doesn't understand what new fiction is about, asks Tinch, his teacher—Tinch's stuttering reply, 'It's sort of fiction about fi-fi-*fic*tion,' reflects Irving's irritation as well as Garp's and Tinch's….

Even more clearly than does Vonnegut, Irving writes…soap opera. He says in an interview with Michael Priestly, 'Most good novels are intelligent soap opera.' In a postcard to his editor, the late Henry Robbins of Dutton, upon the completion of *Garp*, Irving says that book has 'all the *ingredients* [my italics]

of a X-rated soap opera'….Irving employs the sub-genre that best embodies the popular mindset of our time, uses soap opera, as his earliest American predecessors used the grossly sentimental, exaggerated form their public imposed upon them, to expand the boundaries of the novel to life size again, to combat the contemporary novel's anorexix tendencies. Such use of a widely accepted world view puts Irving into a tradition at least as old as Dante, whose simplicity, universality, and perpetual quality of being east to read T. S. Eliot attributes to use of allegorical method, which was the common, the popular way of looking at the universe in Dante's time.

Although Eliot saw modern writers as having the problem of working in a time without a universally accepted vision of the world, Irving, writing fifty years later, seems to have solved the problem, or tohave had it solved for him by a populace willing to embrace the world as soap opera. Dante was perhaps more fortunate in his audience than is Irving, but he was not any more responsible for creating it than Irving is guilty of creating his. At the same time Irving embraces older, nineteenth-century ideas of the novel ('I am really looking upon the novel as an artifact that was at its best when it was offered as a popular form. By which I probably mean the 19th century.')…

In moving from *Setting Free the Bears* through the three middle books to *The Hotel New Hampshire*, Irving seems to be moving further from overtly including the modernist techniques and questions to more subtly acknowledging their place in the world view….He differs from such writers as Gas, Pynchon, Barthelme, and Barth in that his fiction about fiction insists upon the life-force of the art. Irving almost bullies his novels into life. Fiedler sees these other writers, with the exception of Barth, as content to write for each other and those professors and second-year graduate students Irving so intensely dislikes. Barth, he says, in *Letters* at least recognizes that even novels about the death of the novel are dead. But none of this, not even Barth's recognition, provides an exit from the seemingly dead-end course fiction has been set upon. Irving himself does not deny the technical brilliance such writers can attain….

His aesthetic theory, his technique, his purpose for writing are life-affirming…less concerned with ethics (Gardner's theory) or aesthetics (the theories of new fiction) than with what Fiedler calls, by way of Longinus, ecstatics; that is, Irving wants to write novels which transcend all rhetorical rules in order to dissolve the normal limits of flesh and spirit."

Jane Bowers Hill
"John Irving's Aesthetics of Accessibility"
South Carolina Review 16.1 (Fall 1983)

"Irving has the rare distinction of having achieved both critical acclaim and huge commercial success. He sprang from relative obscurity to fame with *The World According to Garp*, which became a best-seller and received the American Book Award as the best paperback novel of 1979. It was made into a film, starring Robin Williams, in 1982. His next novel, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, was also a best-seller and was adapted for the screen….

Irving's years as a bohemian student in Vienna, in 1963 and 1964, informed his first novel, *Setting Free the Bears* (1968). Caged or trained bears are one of the strongest motifs in his fiction, a central image associated with primal Nature, wildness, and the soul. In this darkly picaresque novel of the 1960s, the popular ideal of freedom is expressed by a plot to set free all the animals in the Vienna Zoo, where a spectrum of primal human nature is suggested by the contrast between timid Rare Spectacled Bears and brutal Famous Asiatic Bears. In the background of this and all Irving's novels is World War II, when the Prussian bear was set free by Adolph Hitler.

In 1963, while taking a summer course in German at Harvard University, Irving met Shyla Leary, a student at Radcliffe and a painter who later became a professional photographer. They were separated when he left for Vienna; later, in August of 1964, they were married in Greece. They subsequently had two sons, Colin and Brendan, and family became the center of value in Irving's vision. His comic novel *The Water-Method Man* (1972) is about a doctoral student in literature at the University of Iowa named Bogus, who loses his family through his own folly, then matures in part through a trip to Vienna—as happens recurrently in Irving's novels.

Old Vienna teaches lessons in the dark realities of history and human nature. In *The 158-Pound Marriage* (1974) the narrator, a novelist and university teacher, loses his family through an experiment in mate swapping. Two of the sexual foursome come from Vienna and three end up there, leaving the American narrator behind, ironically, as the least perceptive of the four. Throughout his fiction, Irving shatters middle-class illusions of security with violence, pain, and sudden death, while affirming courage, stoical realism, moral responsibility (especially to children), and transcendence through imagination. The world is a dangerous place in his novels, especially at home.

With *The World According to Garp* (1978), Irving set free the bear of his own soul in a style baroque, agonized, and bravely comic. His fourth novel, a response to American feminism of the 1970s, it generated a mass cultural reaction characterized in the popular media as "Garpomania." Irving suddenly became a huge success, a cultural hero, and even a sex symbol. He appeared on the cover of *Time* (August 31, 1981) as the handsome "Garp Creator." *The World According to Garp* provoked extreme reactions, pro and con, that confirmed its vision of extreme conflict between the sexes. Some readers disliked the exaggeration and violence, others disapproved of the explicit sex, and many hated the satire of feminist excess. T. S. Garp is not Irving, but the novel does reveal the author in its tones and form, transcending autobiography while deriving its passion and satirical inspiration from what comes through as deeply personal.

Irving is a feminist in his public life, and the novel is feminist in a humanistic spirit that is critical of intolerance and fanaticism. Garp's mother becomes a celebrated feminist leader, while Garp, as a male, is made to feel like garp, or vomit. The first story Garp writes, "The Pension Grillparzer," is an allegory of how feminism is affecting society, represented by the pension; the male soul is represented by a trained bear who dies of mortification in a zoo. Though uneven in quality, the novel has a loosely allegorical form of great complexity.

Irving's next novel, *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981), idealizes the family in the way of a fairy tale. After its publication Irving was separated from his wife. *The Cider House Rules* (1985) is an allegorical polemic on the subject of abortion, as Irving continues to wrestle with moral and psychological problems important to his generation. *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989) details the Christlike actions of the eponymous Owen, a character so tiny that he can be lifted with one hand. Owen's efforts to keep his best friend, Johnny (also the narrator), from going to Vietnam point to the tragedy of that war and allow Irving room for philosophizing about an era.

Irving's detractors have charged that his fiction lacks the complexity and depth of Charles Dickens, his most comparable model, and that it is ordinary in style and often structurally faulty, contrived, and sentimental. For some academic critics, his traditionalism, generosity of spirit, moral sense, and belief in character and plot are out of fashion in a Postmodernist period of literary history. Others argue that *The World According to Garp*, especially, will outlast such criticism. Certainly, the unusual characteristics of Irving's novels are popular: emphatic storytelling, emotional power, likable characters, humor, wholesome sentiments, and hopeful endings."

Michael Hollister
Cyclopedia of World Authors II, Vol. 2
ed. Frank N. Magill
(Salem 1989) 762-63

"John Irving belongs to a small group of American writers whose work has inspired respect for the plainest of reasons—these people write a kind of fiction useful, as genuine art must always be useful, to spiritual need."

Terrence Des Pres
Writing into the Worm (1991)

"John Irving's *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981) begins with a story-telling father, telling 'Father's Story'….This Freudian plot of psychological development describes in particular the boy's fantasy of replacing his parents with others of higher social sanding, and his subsequent recognition that, while one's biological mother can be established, one's father is always uncertain; according to Freud, the boy's fantasies become erotic, as he imagines the 'secret love-affairs' in which his mother might have engaged in

order to conceive him or his siblings. The latter phrase, of course, represents just one feature of Freud's formulation concerning the filial relationship, the Oedipus complex….The figure of the family romance illuminates some of the central questions of Irving's fiction….Because Irving's answers tend to be contradictory, his fiction provides a useful field on which to explore oedipal conflicts….

It is this ambivalence toward the father's power that returns time and again in Irving's novels. In each case, Irving's efforts to imagine paternal origins—of either heroic or ironic dimensions—result in a text that points self-consciously to its own gaps, suppressions, and contradictions. As the central cipher and origin of all narrative in Irving's work, the father wields the power of the oedipal drama both to devise and delimit subjectivity. Irving's inclusion of the complementary phenomena of absent and invented fathers, whose influences both threaten and tempt adoption, maps out the anxiety in relation to paternal authority that also becomes visible in the larger context of Irving's self-placement within literary history. The orphan's romance of origin—the invented father whose control over the narrative of one's life is always absolute, benevolent, known, uncontested—is equivalent to the romance of the self-inventing artist who yet needs to feel that, like Prometheus, he has stolen the tools of his own self-invention….

Perhaps the most obvious sign of Irving's fictional self-reflexiveness is that every one of his seven novels includes within it at least one character who writes, whose writing is reproduced or at least described within the text, and in whose writing one can discern attempts to construct a linguistic 'reality' that may or may not accord with the 'reality' represented in the frame narrative…. While Irving's last two books, *The Cider House Rules* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, attempt to resist fictional self-consciousness, especially in their use of linear structure, both novels include references on the part of their narrators to how the narratives take their shape as well as self-references to Irving's other books…

Yet despite the fiction's reflexive play, Irving has indicated his opposition to the implicit philosophies and narrative modes of metafiction. Most obvious are the digs that appear in the novels themselves. Both *The Water-Method Man* and *The 158-Pound Marriage* satirize a writer of the 'new novel' named Helmbart, a virtual anagram for the names of two prominent metafictionists, John Barth and Donald Barthelme. In *The 158-Pound Marriage*, Helmbart turns up as a despicable lecher…In [various] pointed allusions, Irving seems to characterize metafiction, which tends to foreground its own technique, as incoherent, unfelt, and intellectually obscure….

He tends to use words like 'literary' pejoratively, making a distinction between 'real writers' and 'academic' writers and retrospectively disdaining the structural convolutions of a novel like [his own] *The Water-Method Man* as 'showing off.' In his essay 'Kurt Vonnegut and His Critics,' Irving disparages those writers—mostly unnamed, but clearly associated with metafiction—who prize an aesthetic of difficulty or obscurity, and he instead praises the old-fashioned virtues of readability, entertainment, and catharsis….He implies that the technical display of the 'new novel' is anything but entertaining or accessible. Irving's remedy for the illnesses of complexity and self-flaunting or hermetic technique is his return increasingly in his novels to the conventions of Victorian fiction….

The mode is comic realism, the material is what he terms 'intelligent soap opera,' and the master is Charles Dickens….Dickens' influence is most pervasive in the scope of Irving's canvases, the comic realism of his characters and plots, and his own willingness to exaggerate and to risk sentimentality or melodrama, especially in his more recent novels….Irving repeatedly formulates an apparently irresolvable opposition between Dickensian narrative and metafiction; as the examples here show, his undampened enthusiasm for one and his disparagement of the other are plain in many of his interviews and essays."

Debra Shostak
"The Family Romances of John Irving"
Essays in Literature 21.1 (Spring 1994)

"Readers are probably most familiar with Irving's…*The World According to Garp* (1978), which recounts the comic/tragic life of T. S. Garp, as he attempts to write fiction, protect his family, and come to grips with his own sexuality in the midst of the women's liberation movement. Irving's next two novels, *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981) and *The Cider-House Rules* (1985), recall *Garp* in their depictions of the

profound humor and simultaneous pathos of human life, and in *Rules* Irving broadens his vision by addressing the issues of abortion and adoption."

Philip Page
"Hero Worship and Hermeneutic Dialectics:
John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*"
Mosaic 28 (September 1995)

"In his novels, John Irving continues to experiment with a narrative voice that seeks to thwart deliberately his readers' expectations, to upset our notions of conventionality, and to blur the boundaries that linger between good and evil, right and wrong. From the life-affirming presence of the 'good, smart bears' in *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981) and Owen Meany's shrill voice of reason in *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989) to the convoluted sexual politics of *The 158-Pound Marriage* (1974) and the conspicuous proximity of the 'Under Toad' and the tragedy of the Ellen Jamesians in *The World According to Garp* (1978), Irving adorns his fictions with a host of ethical signifiers that challenge readers at every turn throughout his labyrinthine, deliberately Dickensian fictions.

Irving makes little secret of his affinity for Dickens and in particular for the Victorian writer's eye for complexity of narrative and literary character. In 'King of the Novels,' Irving writes that 'Dickens was abundant and magnificent with description, with the atmosphere surrounding everything—and with the tactile, with every detail that was terrifying or viscerally felt.' As with Dickens, because Irving loads his own narratives with considerable detail and description, he makes it virtually impossible for readers to render facile ethical decisions in the face of so much information about a given character's humanity. Irving self-consciously adopts the literary form of the Dickensian novel—with its multiplicity of characters, its narrative mass, its overt sense of sentimentality, and its generic intersections with such modes as the detective story—as the forum for constructing the fictions that intentionally challenge his readers' value systems. In short, for Irving the choice of the narrative form of the Dickensian novel represents an ethical move….To entertain one's readers is to capture their hearts and minds in such a way that draws them into the lives of characters who populate stories that truly matter within the larger narrative of our shared humanity….

Irving creates texts rich with the vibrancy and contrariness of existence, he portrays not only our 'spiritual need' but also ways of coping with that need. In fact, the very form of Irving's storytelling seems to suggest a means for coping spiritually, for it offers a process that brings no final answers but invites us to take part in an unforgettable journey. As he tells his story, Irving moves his readers beyond the present moment in the text into a deep history of both the characters in the story and the communities in which they live; he compels his readers to wrestle with the same ethical dilemmas that the story's characters must confront; he causes us to see and feel the joy, anger, and sorrow that inevitably visits itself upon the saints and sinners who populate the landscape of his fiction. Like the wrestler he was—indeed, he is—Irving deliberately weaves his tales into the emotional lives of his readers. Snaking his characters' arms around one another, he leaves us in the most improbable and compromising positions: entwined on the mat of his story, struggling not to be pinned by the weight of the lives we enter vicariously….

In his published interviews and memoirs, Irving laments the shift in contemporary fiction away from the actual world in which we live toward the world of metafiction….Irving's insistence that the novel as literary form should address 'something of human value' continues to determine many of his narrative practices, especially his use of the particular. By chronicling several major and minor characters' histories in his novels with an uncanny precision and attentiveness, Irving creates an ethical construct that for the purposes of this essay we shall refer to as 'characterscape'….

Irving's appropriation of the Dickensian form establishes—especially through its use of extensive narratological and characterological detail—an ethics of particularity in which a multi-perspectival history comes to bear upon our understanding of a given narrative situation. The Dickensian novel as literary mode demands that we see the ethical dimensions of the lives represented in the text as something that ethical 'rules'—whether they be the rules that dictate life in a cider house or rules that govern a promise between orphans—cannot adequately address. Using the abidingly fractious issue of abortion as the background for his story of an orphanage, Irving refuses to conclude his novel with any facile statement either for or

against abortion. Rather, as a storyteller he insists that any genuine contemplation about the abortion issue must take place within the context of human relationships, and, as a disciple of Dickens, he paints characterscapes of such layered detail that we see the conflicted nature of human resolution.

Only by providing his readership with fully realized portraits of humanity can Irving construct an adequate fictional tableau for narrating the moral dilemmas that trouble our society and the ways that we live now. As with Dickens, Irving intuitively recognizes that readers 'want catharsis, they want to be stretched and tested, they want to be frightened and come through it, they want to be scared, taken out of their familiar surroundings—intellectual, visceral, spiritual—and to be reexposed to things'."

Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack
"The Ethics of Storytelling in John Irving's *The Cider House Rules*"
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"John Irving's popularity began with his fourth published novel, *The World According to Garp* (1978). His two other large successes have been *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981) and *The Cider House Rules* (1985). *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989) did not attract Irving's full audience, yet seems to me his most ambitious work, though deeply haunted by his unsettled relationship to literary tradition. The 1990s saw some diminishment in Irving's formidable energies, and he seemed, at decade's end, to be more interested in movie-making than in fresh attempts at narrative fiction.

Rereading *The World According to Garp* twenty years later is a mixed experience, since the novel itself is a rather eclectic mix….As a story, it has singular exuberance, and remains readable, though essentially it is a period piece, as all of Irving's novels and stories seem fated to become. Broadly, there are two sorts of 'popular novelists.' The Grisham-King-Clancy-Crichton variety are not particularly 'literary.' John Irving, like Tom Wolfe, has serious aesthetic aspirations. Wolfe attempts to invoke Balzac and Zola, while Irving wants to enter the sphere of Dickens. Yet Wolfe remains an involuntary imitator of Hemingway [?], while Irving cannot cut loose from Scott Fitzgerald's prose style….In Dickens, the implausible almost always is made plausible by the storyteller's art. Irving desires that uncanny transformation, yet cannot achieve it. Dickens of course is too huge a paradigm, so it is more useful to contrast Irving to the late Iris Murdoch, who closely followed Dickens in exploiting coincidence and in risking the grotesque. Where Murdoch frequently makes her audacities work, Irving rarely does….

Gabriel Miller finds *The 158-Pound Marriage* to be derivative but interestingly enigmatic….Benjamin DeMott judges *The Hotel New Hampshire* to be comparable to Salinger, Vonnegut, and the Beatles, rather than to Irving's precursor, Scott Fitzgerald….Robert Towers finds *The Hotel New Hampshire* to be a lesser work than *Garp*…A defense of Irving is made by Jane Bowers Hill, for whom Irving, like Vonnegut, is a popular writer who seeks to transcend rules and limitations. This is akin to Raymond J. Wilson III, who finds in *Garp* a successful instance of Post-Modernism. Debra Shostak traces in Irving the family romance of influence-anxiety…Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack praise *The Cider House Rules* as a successful instance of a modern Dickensian novel."

Harold Bloom, ed.
Introduction
John Irving
(Chelsea House 2001) 1-2, vii

Michael Hollister (2014)