INTRODUCTION



John Irving

(1942-)

John Winslow 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 was born to Frances Winslow Irving in Exeter, New Hampshire, on March 2, 1942. In 1961, he was graduated from Phillips Exeter Academy, the model for the Steering School in *The World According to Garp*, where his stepfather, Colin F. N. Irving, was treasurer and instructor of Russian history. There, he became a much better wrestler than he was a student; in fact, wrestling became a recurrent metaphor in his writing. He attended the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Vienna, Austria, before his graduation cum laude in 1965 from the University of New Hampshire. In 1967, he received a master of fine arts degree from the University of Iowa, where he studied with the novelists Vance Bourjaily and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

Irving's years as a bohemian student in Vienna, in 1963 and 1964, informed his first novel, *Setting Free the Bears*. Caged or trained bears are one of the strongest motifs in his fiction, a central image associated with primal nature, wilderness, and the soul. In this darkly picaresque novel of the 1960's, 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* 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* 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*, 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 by 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 excesses. 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*, idealizes the family in the way of a fairy tale. After its publication Irving was separated from his wife. The first chapter contains some of his best writing and recalls the romantic lyricism of F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Cider House Rules* 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* 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 points 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 (decadent) Postmodernist period of literary history. Others argue that *The World According to Garp*, especially, will long 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.

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