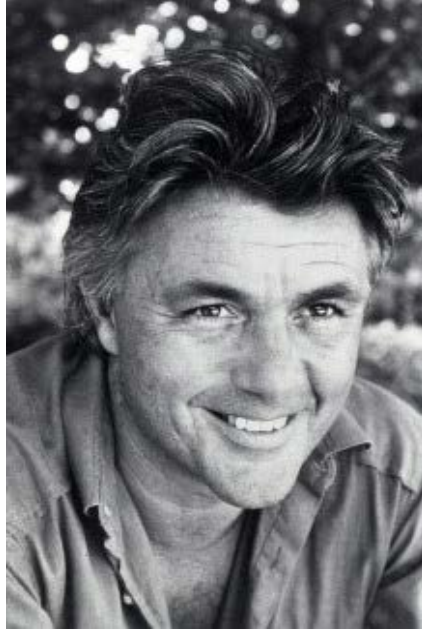


102 QUOTATIONS



John Irving

(1942-)

John Irving wrote the sensational blockbuster satire of Feminism that landed him on the cover of *Time* magazine, *The World According to Garp* (1978). Irving is a male feminist liberal whose relationship to the movement is like that of a loving son to a mother who is “out to get him.” Garp is a name that evokes how Feminists felt about men—like vomiting. Irving satirizes the fanatical extremism and murderous hatred that killed sympathy for Feminism and polarized the sexes. In the 1970s it took great courage for a man to write such a Politically Incorrect book. Thereafter the Feminists in publishing were largely successful in censoring any more books like *Garp*. Irving is a popular and often funny comic novelist and screenwriter in the tradition of Dickens whose narratives rise from Realism into moralistic fairy tale.

ORDER OF TOPICS: missing father, family, Freud, wrestling, education to writing, comic novels, popular culture, Postmodernism, Postmodern fiction, Feminism, radical Feminism, Feminist writing, Political Correctness, Marxism, literature, American literature, memory, preparing to write, writing, his novels, critics:

MISSING FATHER

No adult in my family would ever tell me anything about who my father was. I knew from an older cousin—only four years older than I am—everything, or what little I could discover about him.

As a child, when something is denied you—when there is a subject that is never spoken of—you pretend it’s for the best. But when I was denied information about someone as important as my actual father, I compensated for this loss by inventing him.

FAMILY

To each other, we were as normal and nice as the smell of bread. We were just a family. In a family even exaggerations make perfect sense.

I've taken some pleasure in being sort of a homebody. It's one of the things that appeals to me, or that did appeal to me when I was teaching, that I simply didn't have to be as absent as a lot of parents have to be, and I liked that.

I write repeatedly—against my will—of those things I fear most happening. Losing a loved one, losing a parent, losing a child. I'm in terror of losing a child. It's never happened to me, but I am clearly compelled to write about it over and over again, and in a way I think, psychologically at least, this says more about me autobiographically as a novelist than the fact that Danny Angel goes to the Iowa Writers Workshop and has Kurt Vonnegut as a teacher, which I also did.

“T.S. Garp continues the infuriating male mythology: the good man is the bodyguard of his family.”

There are few things as seemingly untouched by the real world as a child asleep.

FREUD

I'm a great fan of Freud.... I don't part company with him at all. I'm very old-fashioned and only modestly educated, and I also have grudges that are more personal than intellectual. For example, I know that it's more intelligent to like Jung—at least my more intelligent friends tell me that it's a mark of my only elementary education that I should be so fond of Freud and so lacking in sympathy for Jung, but I remember just a couple of things about Jung, and the thing that prejudices me against him is how *badly* he treated Freud.

Freud was a real guesser, and in that sense I take him as, D.H. Lawrence called him, another kind of novelist.... Sigmund Freud was a novelist with a scientific background. He just didn't know he was a novelist. All those damn psychiatrists after him, they didn't know he was a novelist either.

WRESTLING

The sport of wrestling...I became involved with at the age of 14.... I competed until I was 34, kind of old for a contact sport. I coached the sport until I was 47. I think the discipline of wrestling has given me the discipline I have to write.

Ted Seabrooke, my wrestling coach, had a kind of Nietzschean effect on me in terms of not just his estimation of my limited abilities, but his decidedly philosophical stance about how to conduct your life, what you should do to compensate for your limitations. This was essential to me, both as a student—and not a good one—and as a wrestler who was not a natural athlete but who had found something he loved.

You know, people think you have to be dumb to skip rope for 45 minutes. No, you have to be able to imagine something else. While you're skipping rope, you have to be able to see something else.

I feel more a part of the wrestling community than I feel I belong to the community of arts and letters. Why? Because wrestling requires even more dedication than writing because wrestling represents the most difficult and rewarding objective that I have ever dedicated myself to, because wrestling and wrestling coaches are among the most disciplined and self-sacrificing people I have ever known.

EDUCATION TO WRITING

When I was in prep school—14, 15—I started keeping notebooks, journals. I started writing, almost like landscape drawing or life drawing. I never kept a diary, I never wrote about my day and what happened to me, but I described things.

As anyone knows, an M.F.A. program isn't graduate school, it's fucking around, unless you're using your time well to do your own work, which I did—I didn't read anything in graduate school, I didn't learn anything, I worked on my own work.

I had been a student in Vienna, and one of the neat little things I had found out was about that zoo. It was a good debut novel for me to have published. I was 26 or 27 when it was published. I already had a kid and would soon have a second.

Hemingway went to Paris to write well about Michigan; he'd come back to Ketchum, Idaho, and he'd write well about Europe.

I suppose I'm proudest of my novels for what's imagined in them. I think the world of my imagination is a richer and more interesting place than my personal biography.

There's no reason you shouldn't, as a writer, not be aware of the necessity to revise yourself constantly.

If you are lucky enough to find a way of life you love, you have to find the courage to live it.

You can't learn everything you need to know legally.

Half my life is an act of revision.

COMIC NOVELS

I take people very seriously. People are all I take seriously, in fact. Therefore, I have nothing but sympathy for how people behave—and nothing but laughter to console them with.

Whatever I write, no matter how gray or dark the subject matter, it's still going to be a comic novel.

POPULAR CULTURE

I think the early days of rock and roll were a liberating experience, and the form that it has taken, the—I think—genuinely sadomasochistic forms that it has taken to punk, etc., has been openly hostile toward old people....a *young* mean-spiritedness, where there's a whole group of young people now who really want to gross out, as they would say it in their own vernacular, as many people of the so-called conservative generation as possible. This is open hostility—it's like the polarization between the sexes: like men marching against women and women marching against men.

POSTMODERNISM

What everybody wants is for the president to bring up their children.

Parents can't control their kids anymore. I don't think the gulf between how the parental generation lived and the values they had and the values that young people today have—I don't think that gulf has ever been wider, in this country. And a precedent, of course, for where it was wide, was Nazi Germany in the thirties, when the kids were, many of them, violent Bolsheviks and many more of them brown shirts, who *ratted* on their own parents' loyalty to the right. I don't think the kid in this country feels that he's had representation in the government since Kennedy died—it's the last time kids were interested in politics, in any kind of felt way. And it seems to me that this conservatism that's happening in this country has not so much to do with political conservatism as moral conservatism.

POSTMODERN FICTION

Well, I think Leonard Michaels falls into a category of a kind of minimalism—it's art that's more intellectualized than *realized*.

This seems to me to be largely an anti-intellectual position, to say that only writers worth diddly-squat are those people who are writing sentences in such an immaculate and pristine fashion that of course they're no longer interested in narrative or character, blah-blah-blah....

Think of the reduction in the pleasures that the novel can give us if we have to say that Barth and Gass and Barthelme are the only people who are doing it right, and everybody else should get off the ship—I don't want *anybody* to get off the ship.

We must not confuse the intellect with a desire for elitism. Elitism, it seems to me, is *not* an intellectual position—it's a snobbism.

An intellectual must be of the opinion that our literary culture is better for having them both around in it—[John] Gardner for his sloppiness, and [William] Gass for his considerable lack of substance.

"The new fiction is interested in language and in f-f-form, I guess," Tinch said. "But I don't understand what it's really about. Sometimes it's about it-it itself, I think."

Anyone who's really tried to write strenuously knows that it's *much* more difficult to be clear than it is to be hard to understand; *anybody* can be hard to understand.

FEMINISM

Garp believed in his mother.

She was simply for allowing women to live their own lives and make their own choices.

Thus full of sympathy, he was a soft touch in the real world.

Garp had become the weakest sort of liberal: he would evaluate no one.

Jenny's status as a political figure was due largely to a general, hazy misunderstanding of Jenny.

Jenny Fields was quite firm in her intolerance of men in general and soldiers in particular.

One striking difference she might have seen between clams and people was that most people had some sense of humor, but Jenny was not inclined toward humor.

One day, Jenny Fields thought, she would like to have a baby—just one. But the trouble was that she wanted as little to do with a peter as possible, and nothing whatsoever to do with a man.

"My mother," Garp wrote, "was not romantically inclined."

"My mother seemed to need an enemy," Garp wrote. "Real or imagined, my mother's enemy helped her see the way *she* should behave... She was no natural at motherhood; in fact, I think my mother doubted that anything happened naturally."

Mom was out to get me.

[Mrs. Ralph] actually completed a Ph.D. in comparative literature and was eventually tenured by a large and confused English Department whose members were only unified by their terror of her.

Her colleagues detected that she felt herself superior to them. Nobody's colleagues appreciate this.

RADICAL FEMINISM

They were an inflammatory political group of feminist extremists who often detracted from the extreme seriousness of other women, and other feminists, around them.

"That damn lesbian crowd," Roberta said to Garp. "They're trying to make your mother into something she isn't."

“I sometimes think that’s what Mom is for,” Garp teased Roberta. “She makes people happy by letting them think she is something she isn’t.”

“They’re making victims of themselves,” Jenny had said, “and yet that’s the same thing they’re angry at men for doing to them.”

It was madness that had killed Jenny Fields, his mother. It was extremism. It was self-righteous, fanatical, and monstrous self-pity.

[Poor Percy was] an androgynous twerp...with a face like a ferret and a mind completely sodden by spending nearly fifteen years in diapers.

They really resent the entire *society*.

FEMINIST WRITING

Fiction has to be better made than life.

How a book was written never mattered to Jenny.

I think the autobiographical inclination is one of the least fruitful sources for fiction, or one of the most *abused*.

The autobiographical basis---if there even was one---was the least interesting level on which to read a novel.

Garp’s work was progressively weakened by its closer and closer parallels to his personal history. As he became more autobiographical, his writing grew narrower.

Political true believers...were always the sworn enemy of the artist—who insisted, however arrogantly, on the superiority of a *personal* vision.

He rejected the idea that art was of any social value whatsoever—that it could be, that it should be. The two things mustn’t be confused, he thought; there was art, and there was helping people.

I do not appreciate Susan Sontag’s fiction; I don’t know whom she’s writing for—friends, I think, dinner-party conversation.

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

The destruction of art by sociology and psychoanalysis.

The university or the academic community in general represents a very *narrow* view of literature.

This is the way I see the terrorist, as the contemporary fascist spirit, a kind of born-again Nazism—this incredible self-importance, this incredible self-righteousness...to *educate*, to *correct*...

They force you to be like them—or else you’re their enemy.

This is how I help the neighborhood, I thought: I drive mad men madder.

Nothing is equal.

MARXISM

This is Marxism. It’s leveling everything by decimating what works.... It’s that vindictive. “We’ve suffered, and now we’re going to take money from your kid and watch you squirm”.... There’s a minority which is an open target in this country which no one protects, and that’s rich people.

The belief in an idea to the extent that human beings caught outside or on the other side of that idea are simply expendable—it's the ultimate triumph of a kind of sophomoric Marxism, something that is fascistic in method but vaguely mystical in justification.

LITERATURE

I've always been a fan of the 19th-century novel, of the novel that is plotted, character-driven, and where the passage of time is almost as central to the novel as a major minor character, the passage of time and its effect on the characters in the story.

I went to a sort of old-fashioned school that thought that the English novel and the Russian novel were vastly superior to the American novel, and I still think so, in the nineteenth century at least.

Of a writer's work, it is the fairy-tale quality of their work that I enjoy...I mean, I love *Anna Karenina* more than *War and Peace*, I love *First Love* more than *Hunting Sketches* or *Fathers and Sons*.

AMERICAN LITERATURE

I love the work of John Cheever...I don't think there's been a better writer of short stories since Chekhov.

I, for one, am not intimidated by European culture, and in terms of its contemporary output, I'm hardly intimidated by its literature. I think the best literature being written in the world right now is being written in this country—certainly the best literature in English. Britain really should stop pulling rank on us—they haven't had writers to match ours for some time.

MEMORY

Your memory is a monster, you forget—it doesn't. It simply files things away. It keeps things for you, or hides things from you—and summons them to your recall with a will of its own. You think you have a memory, but it has you!

PREPARING TO WRITE

When I feel like being a director, I write a novel.

Sometimes that's a year, sometimes it's 18 months, where all I'm doing is taking notes. I'm reconstructing the story from the back to the front so I that know where the front is.

I spend about two to three months planning the path of the book in my head before I write the last sentence of the novel.

I don't want to begin something, I don't want to write that first sentence until all the important connections in the novel are known to me. As if the story has already taken place, and it's my responsibility to put it in the right order to tell it to you.

And I don't mean only that I have to know what happens. I mean that I have to hear the actual sentences. I have to know what atmosphere the words convey.

I am remembering a story that has already happened.

There's no reason you should write any novel quickly.

WRITING

You've got to get obsessed and stay obsessed.

And I find—I'm 63, and my capacity to be by myself and just spend time by myself hasn't diminished any. That's the necessary part of being a writer, you better like being alone.

Writing a novel is actually searching for victims. As I write I keep looking for casualties. The stories uncover the casualties.

The characters in my novels, from the very first one, are always on some quixotic effort of attempting to control something that is uncontrollable—some element of the world that is essentially random and out of control.

I don't go out of my way to find or invent things that are bizarre. It just seems to me that I notice more and more how commonplace the bizarre is.

More than a half, maybe as much as two-thirds of my life as a writer is rewriting. I wouldn't say I have a talent that's special. It strikes me that I have an unusual kind of stamina.

The building of the architecture of a novel—the craft of it—is something I never tire of.

Good habits are worth being fanatical about.

HIS NOVELS

The one that I thought was going to be a bestseller, and still think should have been, is *The Water-Method Man*. The most likely candidate for being widely read and enjoyed than *Garp*—it's a more enjoyable book. It's the only one with a so-to-speak happy ending.

[*The World According to Garp*]: An artfully disguised soap opera.

[*Garp*] was raggedly put together...it's a *patched-up* book.

The young Garp goes to Vienna to become a writer, but what happens to him is he goes to someplace to realize what it is he wants, that is, he wants to be married and love someone. He goes somewhere to notice that the pursuit of sex without love is a kind of specter that is riddled with death.

The Hotel New Hampshire comes most directly...out of "The Pension Grillparzer" part of *Garp*... I wanted to go through a series of hotels, each one progressively less of a real hotel and more of something else.... And it's a fairy tale, then, to me, too, because it's operating most wholly on a symbolic level.... This is a book that very symbolically uses hotel, rape, dream, bears. The second bear is no real bear, it's the bear in us, or something.

I hope the ending of *The Hotel New Hampshire* is more spiritually uplifted than any of the books so far. And yet I think it's also one of the saddest.

What I did, was I took those kids on a tour of what to me is Old World and New World decadence. I can think of no greater form of old decadence than prostitution—noble, old decadence.

I guess I'm most pleased with *The Hotel New Hampshire* of the five books so far, in that, when I say it's the most fairy tale to me and I'm therefore the most pleased with it, what I mean is that it seems to me the most complete unto itself.

It is a book that takes me the furthest away from social realism, which I've never had much fondness for, but in the case of *The World According to Garp*, it was necessary that I commit myself to a fair amount of it—more than I would choose.

CRITICS

I have a pretty thick skin, and I think if you're going to be in this business, if you're going to be an actor or a writer, you better have a thick skin.

You don't want to dwell on your enemies, you know. I basically feel so superior to my critics for the simple reason that they haven't done what I do. Most book reviewers haven't written 11 novels. Many of them haven't written one.

Some of the quotations above are excerpted from
"An Interview with John Irving"
John Irving, by Gabriel Miller
(Ungar, 1982)

