

A Conversation with John Irving

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ABSTRACT: In an interview with John Irving, conducted via email in October 2008 for the *Nashville Scene*, Michael Ray Taylor asks the noted author questions about his current work, his literary legacy, the state of literature in America, and the value of Irving's graduate training at the Iowa Writer's Workshop.

"If you are lucky enough to find a way of life you love," John Irving once wrote, "you have to find the courage to live it."

And live it he has. The author of such best-selling novels as *The World According to Garp*, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, *Cider House Rules*, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*—not to mention his screenplay adaptation of *Cider House Rules*, for which he received an Academy Award in 2000—has become, perhaps more than any living writer, the sort of Novelist for whom the term was always capitalized a hundred years ago: a crafter of rich, complex books that not only chronicle the lives of the people who populate them, but of a generation, specifically Americans who came of age in the 1960s and '70s.

With the same obsessive drive he once brought to wrestling—a sport in which he competed until the age of 37—the 66-year-old writer has time and again mastered the "big" novel, shaping and revising each book over a period as long as five or six years before letting it go to, more often than not, immense popular and critical acclaim.

In the fall of 2008, Irving received the fifth Nashville Public Library Literary Award; previous recipients include the novelist John Updike and the journalist David Halberstam. In advance of a public lecture in Nashville connected with the award, Irving agreed to let me interview him via email for a cover story in the *Nashville Scene*, published Nov. 6. Writing from his home in Vermont just before the election, Irving shared candid insights on his forthcoming novel; on the state of American publishing; and on individuals as varied as Sarah Palin and Kurt Vonnegut.

Taylor: As you may know, Nashville Mayor Karl Dean has encouraged a "Citywide Read" of your work; several of your novels, such as *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, are often taught in literature classes. How's it feel to be required reading?

Irving: I know that the mayor of your city is a reader of my novels. He's invited me to work out with him in his gym, and given that he's a reader—it also helps that he's a Democrat—I'll probably take him up on it. It's ironic to me that the three of my eleven published novels most taught in A.P. English classes in high schools, and in colleges and universities, are the same three novels that have been banned in various schools—and in some libraries. (*A Prayer for Owen Meany* is the most frequently taught at the high-school level; *The Cider House Rules* and *The World According to Garp* get more exposure in colleges and universities.)

As for the “required” part—well, I have mixed feelings about that. I remember—this was mainly in high school—*hating* some of the novels I was required to read, though in most cases these required books introduced me to many of my favorite authors. In the area of Vermont where I live, I visit schools where my novels are taught; I’ve attended a fair number of A.P. English classes, just to talk to the kids and answer their questions. I’m lucky, as a writer, that I’ve always maintained a very young audience; that my novels are taught in courses, both in high school and at colleges and universities, helps to keep the age of my audience young. That matters more to me at sixty-six than it once did.

Taylor: In the epilog of *The World According to Garp*, one character says of Garp, “He was just beginning to write about the whole world again; he was just starting. And Jesus, Duncan, you must remember he was a young man! He was thirty-three.” Do you ever wonder if you should’ve let Garp the character survive—in the manner, for example, of Updike’s Rabbit, who made it to the fictional 1990—to comment on what the world has become in the 30 years since the book was released?

Irving: I’m past the age where I can realistically imagine writing a trilogy, which once interested me. I love Robertson Davies—his trilogies, especially. And I loved Lawrence Durrell’s *The Alexandria Quartet*, too; I read those four novels in the order in which they were written, and then in every conceivable order. (Maybe I was the right age, still a student, when they were first published.)

No, I never considered keeping Garp alive. That novel’s last sentence—“In the world according to Garp, we are all terminal cases”—was the first line I wrote of that novel. Garp has to die; it’s what the book is about, a double assassination of a mother and her son. More to the point: a woman who is killed by a woman-hating man and a man who is killed by a woman who hates men. That was where I saw the so-called sexual revolution going—to sexual polarization.

Characters do reappear in my books, but their names change. Fuzzy Stone (from *The Cider House Rules*), the orphan who dies prematurely of a respiratory infection, is a dead ringer for Owen Meany as a kid. I wrote the same physical description for both characters: that they looked embryonic, like creatures born too soon; that their veins were blue; that the light passed through their ears. (They looked doomed, in other words.) I admire what Updike and Roth have done with reappearing characters, but I write all my novels to an ending, which I know before I begin; I write last sentences first. I’m taking aim at that last sentence when I write the first chapter. Also, my novels are more plot-driven than Updike’s and Roth’s. A novel is first and foremost a *story*; you have to end it.

However, think of how many times there’s an older, larger, stronger, sexually overbearing woman—someone who seems like a threat to the younger, smaller, less sexually experienced male character; yet she ends up being the male character’s protector, and/or his conscience. This would include Melony in *Cider House*, Hester in *Owen Meany*, Nancy in *A Son of the*

Circus, Doris Clausen in *The Fourth Hand*, and especially Emma in *Until I Find You*. (There are *three* such women in the new novel; these characters are all the same!)

Taylor: Three years ago, when *Until I Find You* was published, *The New York Times* published an article in which you comment on the novel's parallels to your own life and the emotionally wrenching process that writing it proved to be. Will your next book be as personal? Has writing it exacted a similar toll?

Irving: I'm a slow processor. I wrote my Vietnam novel, "Owen Meany," 20 years after the war; I needed to wait that long to know what about that period of time still made me angry. I purposely set my abortion novel back in the '30s and '40s—just to distance my story from the current politics surrounding the abortion subject, and to make the novel have the authority of an historical document. Similarly, I wrote my most autobiographical novel—about my childhood, my premature sexual experience, my missing and undiscussed father—when I was already in my late fifties (when I began *Until I Find You*); I was in my sixties when I finished the book.

Until I Find You would have been a very different novel if I'd written it when I was still living through the consequences of my childhood, and of my life as a teenager, or even as a young man in his twenties or thirties. But I was long past those times; I could make up more of the story, I could take many more liberties—I could *exaggerate*, which is what novels do so well. You cannot *build* on your past experiences in fiction if you are still muddling through those experiences—you need some hindsight.

This new novel is not the parallel to my life that *Until I Find You* was. It's also 50,000 words shorter than *Cider House*, 81,000 words shorter than *Owen Meany*, and a whopping 110,000 words shorter than *Until I Find You*. I began this new one, my twelfth novel, in January 2005; I delivered the manuscript to my editor in September of this year. That's fast for me, but this is a novel I could have written several novels ago—I've known the main characters and the story for more than fifteen years. I just kept writing other novels first. This one needed a political moment in time to enhance the ending; I was just waiting for such a moment, a low point. I was pretty confident that one would come.

I would say, of the eleven published novels, that only two of them are "political"—*Cider House* and *Owen Meany*. This new one—*Last Night in Twisted River*—is my third political novel, my third of twelve. But it is not *obviously* political in the ways that I would say *Cider* and *Owen* are.

Taylor: Last month *New York* magazine published an article suggesting nothing but increasing gloom for the publishing industry. Many others have bemoaned the seemingly simultaneous death of the book review, which is vanishing from the country's newspaper pages at an alarming rate. Have people simply stopped reading, or has the industry gone somehow awry?

Irving: Magazines and television are cheap and constant alarm mechanisms. Publishing has been imitating (or trying to imitate) the movie business for so long that I'm surprised anything

reputable about publishing has survived—barely. But the problems with publishing have nothing to do with people reading less; publishing's problems have everything to do with publishers growing greedier—trying to sell *more* books instead of publishing better ones.

I would be a hypocrite to bemoan what you call the simultaneous death of book reviewing; I see that death as no loss. If more book reviewers chose to write about books they liked, instead of trying to pose as smarter than the authors they are reviewing—whose books they put down—well, maybe people would be more interested in reading book reviews. Once you begin to dislike a book, or its author, you're no longer able to illuminate that book.

Readers haven't stopped reading. When *The World According to Garp* was a hardcover bestseller—and it never climbed very high on the hardcover lists—I think that you could be bestseller on the showing of 40,000-60,000 copies. Such a number wouldn't even make the lists today. I sell more books, in more countries, each time a new book is published. Overall, *Owen Meany* is first, worldwide; *Cider House* is second; *A Widow for One Year* is third. After that, I can't remember the numbers. And look at who the bestselling *literary* authors are, in all languages: not just me but also Garcia Marquez, Umberto Eco, Günter Grass, Salman Rushdie. These writers don't write short novels; they don't write easy-to-read novels, either. Many of the novels that are critics' darlings are short, and virtually unreadable—and not very widely read. But I don't see real readers diminishing in numbers. The culture continues to lower itself; there are many distractions that draw nonreaders or faint-hearted ones away from books, but serious authors weren't likely to hold those readers' attention for long. Look at how many readers J.K. Rowling has found! She's not easy-to-read, either; those young readers, when they outgrow Harry Potter, will be looking for other complicated, challenging stories.

A couple of summers ago, I gave a reading in Radio City Music Hall with Stephen King and Ms. Rowling. Naturally, half the audience was hers—King and I may have shared the other half between us. Stephen and I had never read to so many twelve-year-olds! It was a challenge for us to find something suitable. I can't tell you how many letters I got afterwards—from *kids*. They had never heard of me, they were there to see Ms. Rowling, but on the evidence of that small exposure, they were going to read everything that I had written, and everything that Mr. King had written, too. *Hundreds* of letters from kids; I know King got them, too. This was heartening. Just because the culture of TV and movies is in decline, and publishing seeks to imitate the movie business, don't count readers out. They're everywhere. They may not be a part of the great majority, but an inquiring intelligence and a truly good education and a global point of view aren't part of the great majority, either. Readers will always do just fine.

As for nonreaders, let them have their diversions—they wouldn't be good readers, anyway!

Taylor: You have noted in previous interviews that American bestseller lists—unlike those in Europe—seldom hold literary novels, and when they do, those books tend to not stay on the lists for long. Can anything be done to save literary fiction in the United States?

Irving: Only three of my novels have been No. 1 on *The New York Times* hardcover bestseller list: *The Cider House Rules*, *A Widow for One Year* and *The Fourth Hand*. In the U.S., it seems to get harder and harder to compete with the junk on bestseller lists; the junk factor is high in England, too. I live part-time in Canada—my wife is from Toronto—and the Canadian bestseller lists are more like the lists you see in Europe (everywhere *except* England; the bestseller lists in Ireland and Scotland are more literary than the list in England, too.) The culture in Canada and Europe is very book-and-author oriented—not so in the U.S. In Europe and in Canada, writers are expected to speak out politically—to be active in interviews, and everywhere in the media, in talking about more than their novels. It’s just the opposite here: writers are discouraged from expressing their opinions about politics or the society. We’re expected to talk about our books, a little, and then shut up about everything else. Why? Don’t creative minds have creative ideas? Look at this woeful election process we have been undergoing. There’s been more interesting *and truthful* stuff about the election on *The Daily Show* and on *Saturday Night Live* than what we’ve seen on the so-called news shows. We have become so politically correct that we must present a counter argument to every opinion expressed in the news. Why? Do we not trust people to have minds of their own? Does every issue have an *equal* counter argument? (Of course not!)

What does it say about us as a culture that a couple of *comedy* shows on TV are smarter and more incisive, politically, than the back-and-forth meandering that passes for “in-depth coverage” on CNN or MSNBC?

The bestseller list in the U.S. doesn’t only reflect what we read. That list is a reflection of how backward we are as a culture. We are anti-intellectual, we don’t value the arts, and we don’t sufficiently support education. President Bush made sounding stupid actually *comforting* to many Americans. Look at the rush of instant identification that many Americans felt for Governor Palin; she was mean, she was poorly informed, she spoke badly. I said to my wife, after watching Palin’s debate with Senator Biden, that I could only think of one question that woman might not duck—one she actually might answer, even with enthusiasm. Here’s the question. I have never field-dressed a moose, but—in my deer-hunting days—I have field-dressed deer, and I would have liked to ask the perky Alaskan if the process is more or less the same. (Only a lot bigger!) I could easily imagine Gov. Palin’s eyes brightening; an onslaught of pre-orgasmic winking might have ensued. “Ya know,” she might have begun, “ya just gotta make a big slit from the critter’s brisket to its crotch, and ya gotta reach way the heck up and grab hold of the rectum. Ya can’t let the feces fall out and get all over the meat, ya know. But there’s really nothin’ to it. It’s just a moose—it’s not a *Russian*, or somethin’!” I think that pretty much covers what the governor might say in answer to that question, except that she probably wouldn’t use the *feces* word—if ya know what I mean.

In short, there’s more wrong with this country than we don’t read.

Taylor: What was the most recent book you read, and what was your opinion of it?

Irving: I'm always reading more than one book at the same time. It takes a long time to finish a book that way, but since I'm only reading books that I am really enjoying reading, I don't mind how long it takes to finish them. I'm reading Jay Parini's *Promised Land: Thirteen Books That Changed America*. It's about the books that have had an historical impact on this country—not too many novels among them! Parini is a novelist and biographer I admire, and this is a gorgeously written book. I'm also reading Ron Hansen's new novel, *Exiles*—about the shipwreck that inspired Gerard Manley Hopkins to go back to writing poetry. Hansen has written some elegant historical novels—*The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* among them. And I am reading Edmund White's *Hotel de Dream*—what White calls “a New York novel.” It's also historical: about Stephen Crane, who is dying, dictating a novel to his wife—about a boy prostitute in New York in the 1890s. It's a novel-within-a-novel, and it's flawless. I love Edmund White. Every time I read a new book of his, I am reminded of a previous book of his, which I then reread. I've interrupted *Hotel de Dream* to reread White's novel *A Boy's Own Story*, which I love, and White's autobiography *My Lives*. He's a wonderful writer. We're the same age, and I remember when I first read *A Boy's Own Story*—in the early 1980s—and I thought that the novel spoke much more to me about a boy coming of age (even though it's about a *gay* boy coming of age, and I'm not gay) than *The Catcher in the Rye* ever did. I reread *The Catcher in the Rye* recently, and it doesn't hold up at all; it's just not very well, or very consistently, written. But *A Boy's Own Story* is beautifully wrought, and fiercely defiant; I could reread that novel every year and find something terrific I had missed in a previous reading.

I believe Edmund White is one of the best writers of my generation; he's certainly the contemporary American writer I reread more than any other, and the one whose next book I look forward to reading most.

Taylor: In 1982, when I was 21, I wrote to the novelist Vance Bourjaily to tell him my plan to leave law for writing, as one of his characters had done. He wrote back, urging me to stay in law school, noting that only one of his former students had actually “stepped up to a slot machine when it was loaded and primed to pay off”—and that one student was you. Bourjaily said that your early novels, though very good indeed, were not significantly better than your Iowa classmates'—they just seemed to strike the right chord at the right time—and that you would likely agree with that assessment. Do you? In what ways do you think your experience at Iowa shaped your later career?

Irving: I would agree with Vance Bourjaily, who was a kind and caring teacher: I don't think I had more talent than any of several of my fellow students at the Iowa Writers' Workshop; nor was there evidence of more talent in my first three novels. By the time I got to *Garp*—my fourth novel—I had learned how to compose a novel, to consider the whole story before I began, to follow a grand scheme. These are issues of learning a craft, of studying the architecture of storytelling—also, not a matter of talent, and certainly not an intellectual process. I am a hard worker, and I recognize that repetition—the necessary concomitant to having something worthwhile to say—works in novels the way refrains and choruses work in music. And with *Garp* I got lucky: I became self-supporting, which meant that I could spend

seven or eight hours a day writing. I am a full-time writer; that really matters. You can be more ambitious about something when it's all you do. I always say (in answer to the question "Which is your favorite among your novels?") that, of my twelve novels, any of the last seven is better made—better constructed, better written (better language), better thought-out, better planned—than any of the first five, which would include *The World According to Garp*. I think I really didn't hit full stride as a storyteller until my sixth novel—*The Cider House Rules*—and I've known more about what I'm doing ever since.

Iowa meant a lot to me—both as a graduate student and, later, as a teacher in the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Not only Vance helped; Kurt Vonnegut was also my teacher, and he became a lifelong friend. I was really lucky to meet those men when I did—and to know Kurt for so many years, especially. Sometimes, I find myself starting a letter to Kurt—or picking up the phone to call him. It's always a blow to remember that he's gone.

God of the Slide Guitar
A biography of Duane Allman stirs rock memories

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SKYDOG: THE DUANE ALLMAN STORY
By Randy Poe (Backbeat Books, 314 pp., \$16.95)

Every suburban neighborhood has one: a garage band of teenagers who practice on the weekend at decibel levels sure to get the cops called. In my neighborhood in Ormond Beach, Florida, the band was called The Escorts, but my mother called them "those Allman boys." She employed the same tone of voice a contemporary mother might use to say, "those al Qaeda boys." They had long hair. They were rumored to drink. They were always tearing around on loud motorcycles, always in some kind of trouble at the high school. It was 1965, a time when even first graders were allowed to wander the town at will, but Mom told me in no uncertain terms to stay away from the house down the street where those Allman boys practiced.

But one Saturday, I wound up there anyway. The band member who lived there (it had to have been Escort drummer Maynard Portwood or bassist Van Harrison, but I can't be certain which) had a younger brother and sister close to my age. I was playing in their front yard, when the older brother asked us if we wanted to come over to the beach and watch them practice. Without telling my mother or anyone else, I piled into a station wagon with them, and off we went to a rambling Victorian beach house miles away, where, sure enough, I could see those Allman boys up close and personal.

In my house, the record player was always on in the evening, playing Broadway cast recordings, Perry Como, Dean Martin, Mitch Miller and once in a great while Chet Atkins or Frank Sinatra. There was nothing close to rock, not even Elvis. Whenever someone mentioned rock music, my father would say, for decades afterward, "Can't get no, ain't got no, don't want