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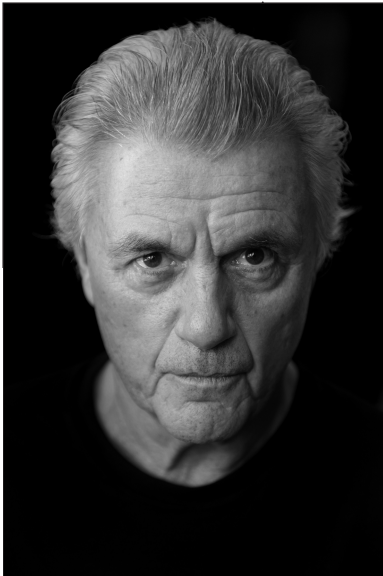


Meet John Irving

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO GARP, which won the National Book Award in 1980, was John Irving's fourth novel and his first international bestseller; it also became a George Roy Hill film. Tony Richardson wrote and directed the adaptation for the screen of *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1984). Irving's novels are now translated into thirty-five languages, and he has had nine international bestsellers. Worldwide, the Irving novel most often called "an American classic" is *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989), the portrayal of an enduring friendship at that time when the Vietnam War had its most divisive effect on the United States.

In 1992, John Irving was inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame in Stillwater, Oklahoma. (He competed as a wrestler for twenty years, until he was thirty-four, and coached the sport until he was forty-seven.) In 2000, Irving won the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay for *The Cider House Rules*—a Lasse Hallström film that earned seven Academy Award nominations. Tod Williams wrote and directed *The Door in the Floor*—the 2004 film adapted from Mr. Irving's ninth novel, *A Widow for One Year*.

In One Person (2012) is John Irving's thirteenth novel. ☺



Jane Sobel

My Favorite First Sentence

I MAY ONE DAY write a better first sentence to a novel than that of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, but I doubt it. I have a feeling for first sentences, and I've written some pretty good ones. As is my habit, however, I wrote the last sentence of *The World According to Garp* before I wrote the first one. "But in the world according to Garp, we are all terminal cases." The actual first sentence isn't bad. "Garp's mother, Jenny Fields, was arrested in Boston in 1942 for wounding a man in a movie theater." It works. After all, the primary function of a first sentence is to make you keep reading.

The first sentence of *The Cider House Rules* also has some staying power. "In the hospital of the orphanage—the boys' division at St. Cloud's, Maine—two nurses were in charge of naming the new babies and checking that their little penises were healing from the obligatory circumcision." The juxtaposition of naming baby boys and examining their penises has a certain charm, and many readers will wonder (rightly) why the circumcision is "obligatory."

The first sentence of *A Son of the Circus* is enhanced by the subtitle to the first chapter, which is tempting all by itself—Blood from Dwarfs. The first sentence merely serves to deepen the mystery. "Usually, the dwarfs kept bringing him back—back to the circus and back to India." ►

My Favorite First Sentence (*continued*)

And my 2001 novel, *The Fourth Hand*, offers a traditional first sentence of the keep-reading kind. “Imagine a young man on his way to a less-than-thirty-second event—the loss of his left hand, long before he reached middle age.” The reader is forewarned that a grisly accident is about to happen; few readers will look away from grisly accidents.

The greatest of all accidents, of course, is an accidental death, which brings me back to the first sentence of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. “I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice—not because of his voice, or because he was the smallest person I ever knew, or even because he was the instrument of my mother’s death, but because he is the reason I believe in God; I am a Christian because of Owen Meany.”

The semicolon helps, but the clause that follows it was a risk; doubtless there were some readers who’d had it up to here with Christians and stopped right there. I don’t blame them. In the United States today, there is an excess of Christian bragging—too many holier-than-thou zealots in politics, too much righteous indignation in God’s name—but that’s another story. What makes the first sentence of *A Prayer for Owen Meany* such a good one is that the whole novel is contained in it.

I never write the first sentence until I know all the important things that happen in the story, especially—and I mean *exactly*—what happens at the end of the novel. If I haven’t already written the ending—and I mean more than a rough draft—I can’t write the first sentence.

For example, the idea that Owen Meany is God’s instrument, or that he believes he is—and so does the narrator—is specifically connected not only to Owen’s diminutive size but to the illusion of his weightlessness. That image of how the children can lift Owen over their heads in Sunday school—how he is light enough so they can easily pass him back and forth when the teacher is out of the room—is not only as near to the beginning of the novel as I could find a place for it; that image is echoed at the end of the novel, where Owen’s seeming weightlessness is interpreted to mean that he was always in God’s hands.

But the penultimate paragraph of the novel is naturally the passage I wrote *first*. “When we held Owen Meany above our

heads, when we passed him back and forth—so effortlessly—we believed that Owen weighed nothing at all. We did not realize that there were forces beyond our play. Now I know they were the forces that contributed to our illusion of Owen’s weightlessness; they were the forces we didn’t have the faith to feel, they were the forces we failed to believe in—and they were also lifting up Owen Meany, taking him out of our hands.”

I added the last paragraph, only two sentences long, a day later. “O God—please give him back! I shall keep asking You.”

I didn’t arrive at the first sentence (“I am doomed to remember . . .”) until a year or eighteen months after that.

The origin of that Sunday school image is autobiographical, in part. I was home for Christmas one year—home being Exeter, New Hampshire, the year being 1983 or ’84. I spent the better part of one night with some childhood friends. I hadn’t seen them in years. Morosely, we were remembering our friends who had been killed in Vietnam, or who had returned from the war so badly damaged that they would never recover from it. In addition to these casualties, we included those friends whose lives had been forever changed—in some cases, ruined—because of what extreme measures they took *not* to go to Vietnam.

The list was depressing; it being Christmas was strangely interwoven with the sadness. Suddenly one of my friends mentioned a name that drew a blank with me—a Russell somebody. Either I never knew him or I didn’t remember him.

Then another of my friends reminded me that, in Sunday school, we used to lift up this little boy; he was our age, about eight or nine, but he was so tiny that we could pass him back and forth over our heads. It enraged him, which was why we did it. It might even have been my idea. At least it was the opinion of my friends that I was the first one to have picked up Russell whatever-his-name-was.

I remembered him instantly. He and his family moved away, long before we were teenagers. I’d had no further contact with him, but someone had heard he’d been killed in Vietnam. I was amazed. I said one of the stupidest things I’ve ever said.

“But he was too *small* to go to Vietnam!” ▶

My Favorite First Sentence (*continued*)

My friends looked at me with pity and concern.

“Johnny,” one of them said, “I presume he *grew*.”

That night I lay awake in bed, pondering the “What if . . .” that is the beginning of every novel for me. What if he *didn’t* grow? I was thinking.

At Owen Meany’s burial, one of Owen’s Sunday school classmates remembers how easy he was to lift up. “He was so *light*—he weighed nothing at all! How could he have been so light?”

Because God already had His hands on him—that’s how.

Because of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, many of my readers assume I am “religious.” I go to church only occasionally—like a lot of people, I believe in God in times of crisis. But I have had no religious “experience”; I’ve never been a witness to a miracle. The reason *A Prayer for Owen Meany* has a first-person narrator is that you can’t have a religious experience or witness a miracle except through the eyes of a believer. And the believer I chose, Johnny Wheelwright, has been so tormented by what happens to his best friend that he is more than a little crazy—as I expect most witnesses to so-called miracles are. Both Johnny Wheelwright’s anger and his craziness are inseparable from what he saw.

The other religious question I am asked about the novel—second only to “Are you a believer?”—is “Do the capital letters mark Owen Meany as a Christ figure, sort of like those red-letter editions of the Bible?”

Sort of, yes. To have Owen speak in red letters might have been too expensive for my publishers, but I also thought the capitals would be more irritating than red letters. Owen’s voice *is* irritating, not only because of how it sounds but because of how *right* he is. People who are always right, and are given to reminding us of it, are irritating; prophets are irritating, and Owen Meany is decidedly a prophet.

Because I don’t start a novel until I know the ending, every novel of mine is predestined. In *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, it was not that much of a stretch to make the main character aware (to some degree) of his own predestination. After all, I am *always* aware of

the predestination of my characters. In Owen's case, he bears the terrible burden of foreseeing his own death. His tenacious faith tells him that even his death—like his size, like his voice, like practicing the shot—is for a reason.

Separate from the Vietnam background and the apparent religious miracle, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* is also a novel about the loss of childhood, which I thought was best signified by the loss of a childhood friend. People are always losing things in my novels—not just, as Johnny Wheelwright does, a finger and a mother and a best friend.

In my first novel, *Setting Free the Bears*, another best friend is lost—stung to death by bees! In my second and third novels, *The Water-Method Man* and *The 158-Pound Marriage*, two marriages are lost and a third appears to be mortally compromised. In *The World According to Garp*, both an eye and a penis are lost—not to mention a child's life, and a mother's, and even the life of the main character. In *The Hotel New Hampshire*, more children die—and another mother, and a grandfather, and a terrorist, and even a bear and a dog. In *The Cider House Rules*, there are too many casualties to count; and since a major-minor character in *A Son of the Circus* is a serial killer, suffice it to say that death abounds. I needn't mention *A Widow for One Year*—four deaths and another murderer. And the eponymous fourth hand in *The Fourth Hand* is not a hand at all; it is, rather, the phantom pain the main character feels in his missing left hand, which he has lost *twice*.

Of course, all good writers repeat themselves, but when repetition is as specific as a sentence, it is usually unconscious.

My first physical description of Owen Meany gave me pause. I loved it, but it sounded like something I'd read before. It struck me as unoriginal; it was so familiar that I worried I was plagiarizing someone. Here is the sentence. "He was the color of a gravestone; light was both absorbed and reflected by his skin, as with a pearl, so that he appeared translucent at times—especially at his temples, where his blue veins showed through his skin (as though, in addition to his extraordinary size, there were other evidence that he was born too soon)."

The sentence struck me, the day I wrote it, as *too* familiar. ►

My Favorite First Sentence (*continued*)

I was sure it was plagiarism. I showed the suspicious sentence to my wife.

“Have you ever read anything like that?” I asked her.

“Sure,” she said. “In *The Cider House Rules*.”

I had plagiarized myself. I went to find the source—my description of the dying orphan Fuzzy Stone. “In the daylight Fuzzy seemed almost transparent, as if—if you held him up to a bright enough source of light—you could see right through him, see all his frail organs working to save him.”

In retrospect, I wouldn’t change a word in either sentence. I conclude that repetition is the necessary concomitant of having anything worthwhile to say.

What was *my* Vietnam experience? readers of *A Prayer for Owen Meany* ask. I was married and had my first child when I was still in college. I went from 2-S, a student deferment, to 3-A, married-with-child. I was virtually ineligible for the draft. (I might as well have cut off my trigger finger.) This effectively removed me from my generation; I stood apart and watched. My friends, in their late teens and early twenties, faced my generation’s most agonizing decision: go to Vietnam or do something drastic in order not to go there.

My eldest son, Colin, spared me the decision, although I wouldn’t have agonized over it. I would have gone. Not because I believed in the war—on more than one occasion, I demonstrated against it. And not because I felt an obligation to my country—not then, not in the case of *that* war. But I would have gone to Vietnam for worse reasons—namely, because I knew I wanted to be a writer and I was curious to see and be in a war.

Before I was married and had a child, I’d even enrolled in the Reserve Officers Training Corps. I wouldn’t have gone to Vietnam just because I was drafted; I’d already signed up. But it just wasn’t to be.

As for Vietnam, and all the rest, I take Johnny Wheelwright’s view of the 1960s—“precious little irony.” And I take Owen Meany’s view of television; it seems even truer now. Much of the self-seriousness and lunacy in the world is, in Owen’s words, “MADE FOR TELEVISION.”

Twelve years later, this observation is taken to greater extremes in *The Fourth Hand*; yet in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, the death of Johnny's grandmother is a precursor to the vacuousness of what's on television today. "The night she died, Dan found her propped up in her hospital bed; she appeared to have fallen asleep with the TV on and with the remote-control device held in her hand in such a way that the channels kept changing. But she was dead, not asleep, and her cold thumb had simply attached itself to the button that restlessly roamed the channels—looking for something good."

At the time, in 1989, it seemed a fairly unusual way to die. Nowadays, I suspect, more and more people are dropping off that way. And we're still looking for something good on television. We won't find it. There's precious little on TV that can keep us awake *or* alive.

Ever the prophet, Owen Meany was right about television, too. 

More from John Irving

SETTING FREE THE BEARS

It is 1967 and two Viennese university students want to liberate the Vienna Zoo, as was done after World War II. But their good intentions have both comic and gruesome consequences, in this first novel written by a twenty-five-year-old John Irving, already a master storyteller.

THE WATER-METHOD MAN

The main character of John Irving's second novel, written when the author was twenty-nine, is a perpetual graduate student with a birth defect in his urinary tract—and a man on the threshold of committing himself to a second marriage that bears remarkable resemblance to his first. . . .

“Three or four times as funny as most novels.”
—*The New Yorker*

THE 158-POUND MARRIAGE

The darker vision and sexual ambiguities of this erotic, ironic tale about a ménage à quatre in a New England university town foreshadow those of *The World According to Garp*; but this very trim and precise novel is a marked departure from the author's generally robust, boisterous style. Though Mr. Irving's cool eye spares none of his foursome, he writes with genuine compassion for the sexual tests and illusions they perpetrate on one another; but the sexual intrigue

among them demonstrates how even the kind can be ungenerous, and even the well intentioned, destructive.

“Irving looks cunningly beyond the eye-catching gyrations of the mating dance to the morning-after implications.”

—*Washington Post*

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO GARP

This is the life and times of T. S. Garp, the bastard son of Jenny Fields—a feminist leader ahead of her times. This is the life and death of a famous mother and her almost-famous son; theirs is a world of sexual extremes—even of sexual assassinations. It is a novel rich with “lunacy and sorrow”; yet the dark, violent events of the story do not undermine a comedy both ribald and robust. In more than thirty languages, in more than forty countries—with more than ten million copies in print—this novel provides almost cheerful, even hilarious evidence of its famous last line: “In the world according to Garp, we are all terminal cases.”

“The most powerful and profound novel about women written by a man in our generation. . . . Like all extraordinary books, *Garp* defies synopsis. . . . A marvelous, important, permanent novel by a serious artist of remarkable powers.” —*Chicago Sun-Times*

THE HOTEL NEW HAMPSHIRE

“The first of my father’s illusions was that bears could survive the life lived by human beings, and the second was that human beings could survive a life led in hotels.” So says John Berry, son of a hapless dreamer, brother to a cadre of eccentric siblings, and chronicler of the lives lived, the loves experienced, the deaths met, and the myriad strange and wonderful times encountered by the family Berry. Hoteliers, pet-bear owners, friends of Freud (the animal trainer and vaudevillian, that is), and playthings of mad fate, they “dream on” in a funny, sad, outrageous, and moving novel.

“A hectic, gaudy saga with the verve of a Marx Brothers movie.”

—*New York Times Book Review*

More from John Irving (*continued*)**THE CIDER HOUSE RULES**

First published in 1985 by William Morrow, *The Cider House Rules* is John Irving's sixth novel. Set in rural Maine in the first half of the twentieth century, it tells the story of Dr. Wilbur Larch—saint and obstetrician, founder and director of the orphanage in the town of St. Cloud's, ether addict and abortionist. It is also the story of Dr. Larch's favorite orphan, Homer Wells, who is never adopted.

"[Irving] is among the very best storytellers at work today. At the base of Irving's own moral concerns is a rare and lasting regard for human kindness."
—*Philadelphia Inquirer*

TRYING TO SAVE PIGGY SNEED

Here is a treat for John Irving addicts and a perfect introduction to his work for the uninitiated. To open this spirited collection, Irving explains how he became a writer. There follow six scintillating stories written over the last twenty years ending with an homage to Charles Dickens. This irresistible collection cannot fail to delight and charm.

"Hilarious. Highly enjoyable stories with zany plots and unforgettable characters, made all the more readable by Irving's silky smooth prose."
—*The Independent*

A SON OF THE CIRCUS

"Dr. Farrokh Daruwalla, reared in Bombay by maverick foes of tradition, educated in Vienna, married to an Austrian and long a resident of Toronto, is a fifty-nine-year-old without a country, culture or religion to call his own. . . . The novel may not be 'about' India, but Irving's imagined India, which Daruwalla visits periodically, is a remarkable achievement—a pandemonium of servants and clubmen, dwarf clowns and transvestite whores, missionaries and movie stars. This is a land of energetic colliding egos, of modern media clashing with ancient cultures, of broken sexual boundaries."
—*New York Newsday*

“*A Son of the Circus* is comic genius. . . . Get ready for Irving’s most raucous novel to date.”
—*Boston Globe*

THE IMAGINARY GIRLFRIEND

The Imaginary Girlfriend is a candid memoir of the writers and wrestlers who played a role in John Irving’s development as a novelist and as a wrestler. It also portrays a father’s dedication—Irving coached his two sons to championship titles. It is an illuminating, concise work, a literary treasure.

“The nearest thing to an autobiography Irving has written. . . . Worth saving and savoring.”
—*Seattle Times*

A WIDOW FOR ONE YEAR

Twenty years after *The World According to Garp*, John Irving gave us his ninth novel, *A Widow for One Year*, about a family marked by tragedy. Ruth Cole is a complex, often self-contradictory character—a “difficult” woman. By no means is she conventionally “nice,” but she will never be forgotten. Ruth’s story is told in three parts, each focusing on a critical time in her life. When we first meet her—on Long Island, in the summer of 1958—Ruth is only four. The second window into Ruth’s life opens on the fall of 1990, when she is an unmarried woman whose personal life is not nearly as successful as her literary career. She distrusts her judgment in men, for good reason. *A Widow for One Year* closes in the autumn of 1995, when Ruth Cole is a forty-one-year-old widow and mother. She’s about to fall in love for the first time.

Richly comic, as well as deeply disturbing, *A Widow for One Year* is a multilayered love story of astonishing emotional force. Both ribald and erotic, it is also a brilliant novel about the passage of time and the relentlessness of grief.

“By turns antic and moving, lusty and tragic, *A Widow for One Year* is bursting with memorable moments.”
—*San Francisco Examiner-Chronicle*

More from John Irving (*continued*)**MY MOVIE BUSINESS**

After two producers, four directors, thirteen years, and uncounted rewrites, the movie version of John Irving's acclaimed novel *The Cider House Rules* at last made it to the big screen. Here is the author's account of the novel-to-film process. Anecdotal, affectionate, and delightfully candid, *My Movie Business* dazzles with Irving's incomparable wit and style.

"Writing a novel is like swimming in the sea; writing a film is like swimming in the bath. . . . This short, amiable book is John Irving's personal history of seeing—or not seeing—his novels made into movies. . . . The book digresses charmingly and effortlessly into related subjects. There is a beguiling memoir of his grandfather, an eminent surgeon; a brilliant and passionate argument for the freedom of women to choose abortion . . . observations on the origins of his novels, and so on. . . . Irving remains coolly objective, and it is clear why: he is a novelist, first and foremost, and his attitude toward the movie business is informed by this security and certainty. . . . Irving has done us [writers] proud."
—*New York Times Book Review*

THE FOURTH HAND

While reporting a story from India, New York journalist Patrick Wallingford inadvertently becomes his own headline when his left hand is eaten by a lion. In Boston, a renowned surgeon eagerly awaits the opportunity to perform the nation's first hand transplant. But what if the donor's widow demands visitation rights with the hand? In answering this unexpected question, John Irving has written a novel that is by turns brilliantly comic and emotionally moving, offering a penetrating look at the power of second chances and the will to change.

"A rich and deeply moving tale. . . . Vintage Irving: a story of two very disparate people, and the strange and unexpected ways we grow."
—*Washington Post Book World*

UNTIL I FIND YOU

“According to his mother, Jack Burns was an actor before he was an actor, but Jack’s most vivid memories of childhood were those moments when he felt compelled to hold his mother’s hand. He wasn’t acting then.” So begins John Irving’s eleventh novel, *Until I Find You*, the story of the actor Jack Burns. His mother, Alice, is a Toronto tattoo artist. When Jack is four, he travels with Alice to several Baltic and North Sea ports; they are trying to find Jack’s missing father, William, a church organist who is addicted to being tattooed. But Alice is a mystery, and William can’t be found. Even Jack’s memories are subject to doubt.

Jack Burns is educated at schools in Canada and New England, but he is shaped by his relationships with older women. Mr. Irving renders Jack’s life as an actor in Hollywood with the same richness of detail and range of emotions he uses to describe the tattoo parlors in those Baltic and North Sea ports and the reverberating music Jack heard as a child in European churches.

The author’s tone—indeed, the narrative voice of this novel—is melancholic. (“In this way, in increments both measurable and not, our childhood is stolen from us—not always in one momentous event but often in a series of small robberies, which add up to the same loss.”) *Until I Find You* is suffused with overwhelming sadness and deception; it is also a robust and comic novel, certain to be compared to Mr. Irving’s most ambitious and moving work.

“Bittersweet . . . moving.”

—*People*

LAST NIGHT IN TWISTED RIVER

In 1954, in the cookhouse of a logging and sawmill settlement in northern New Hampshire, an anxious twelve-year-old boy mistakes the local constable’s girlfriend for a bear. Both the twelve-year-old and his father become fugitives, forced to run from Coos County—to Boston, to southern Vermont, to Toronto—pursued by the implacable constable. Their lone protector is a fiercely libertarian logger, once a river driver,

More from John Irving (*continued*)

who befriends them. In a story spanning five decades, *Last Night in Twisted River* depicts the recent half-century in the United States as “a living replica of Coos County, where lethal hatreds were generally permitted to run their course.” What further distinguishes *Last Night in Twisted River* is the author’s unmistakable voice—the inimitable voice of an accomplished storyteller.

“Absolutely unmissable. . . . [A] big-hearted, brilliantly written and superbly realized intergenerational tale of a father and son.”
—*Financial Times*

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