In One Person

John Irving, 2012
Simon & Schuster
425 pp.

Summary
A New York Times bestselling novel of desire, secrecy, and sexual identity, In One Person is a story of unfulfilled love—tormented, funny, and affecting—and an impassioned embrace of our sexual differences.

Billy, the bisexual narrator and main character of In One Person, tells the tragicomic story (lasting more than half a century) of his life as a "sexual suspect," a phrase first used by John Irving in 1978 in his landmark novel of "terminal cases."

In One Person is a poignant tribute to Billy’s friends and lovers—a theatrical cast of characters who defy category and convention. Not least, In One Person is an intimate and unforgettable portrait of the solitariness of a bisexual man who is dedicated to making himself "worthwhile." (From the publisher.)

Author Bio
• Birth—March 2, 1942
• Where—Exeter, New Hampshire, USA
• Education—B.A., University of New Hampshire; M.F.A., Iowa Writers' Workshop
• Awards—American Book Award (Garp); Academy Award, Best Screenplay (Cider House)
• Currently—lives in Vermont

It was as a struggling, withdrawn student at Phillips Exeter, the New Hampshire prep school where his stepfather taught Russian history, that John Irving discovered the two great loves of his life: writing and wrestling. Modestly, he attributes his success in both endeavors to dogged perseverance. "My life in wrestling was one-eighth
talent and seven-eighths discipline," he confessed in his 1996 mini-memoir *The Imaginary Girlfriend*. "I believe that my life as a writer consists of one-eighth talent and seven-eighths discipline, too."

Certainly, patience and stamina have served Irving well—in both wrestling (he competed until he was 34, coached well into his 40s, and was inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame in 1992) and writing. His first book, *Setting Free the Bears*, was published in 1968 to respectable reviews but sold poorly. Over the course of the next ten years, he wrote two more unsuccessful novels (*The Water-Method Man* and *The 158-Pound Marriage*).

Then, in 1978, Irving hit the jackpot with *The World According to Garp*, a freewheeling comic saga incorporating motifs he would revisit many times over—feminism, adultery, violence, grotesquerie, and an overriding sense of impending doom. *Garp* received a National Book Award nomination and became an instant cult classic. It also paved the way for a string of bestsellers, including *The Hotel New Hampshire*, *The Cider House Rules*, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, and *The Fourth Hand*, to name a few.

While none of his novels are strictly autobiographical, Irving has never denied that certain elements from his life have seeped into his books, most notably the pervading "presence" of his biological father, John Wallace Blunt, a man Irving never knew. Raised by his mother and a stepfather he loved dearly, Irving had denied for years any curiosity about his absent parent, but the figure of the missing father haunted his writing like a specter. In 2005, he laid the ghost to rest with the publication of *Until I Find You*, a searing story that took shape slowly and painfully over the better part of a decade. Writing the novel also allowed the author to wrestle with a closely guarded secret from his past—just like the novel’s protagonist Jack Burns, Irving was sexually abused as a preteen by an older woman. In an eerily timed coincidence, while he was crafting the novel, Irving was contacted by a man named Chris Blunt, who identified himself as the son of Irving’s biological father. Twenty years younger than Irving, his half-brother told Irving that their father had died in 1995. Although Irving was devastated by the experience, he now feels as if he is able to turn the page and move on.

In addition to his novels, Irving has also written a collection of short stories and essays (1995’s "Trying to Save Piggy Sneed") and several screenplays, including his Oscar-winning adaptation of *The Cider House Rules*. He chronicled the experience of bringing his novel to the screen in the 1999 memoir *My Movie Business*.

**Extras**

- Irving struggled in school with a learning disability that was probably undiagnosed dyslexia. Today, he considers it something of a blessing. Forced to read slowly, he savored each word and literally fell in love with language and literature.

- In a 2001 interview with the now-defunct *Book* magazine, Irving confessed, "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."
• Although the results have been mixed at best, film versions have been made of several Irving novels, including The World According to Garp, The Hotel New Hampshire, and The Cider House Rules, which won for Irving a Best Adapted Screenplay Oscar. In addition, the movie Simon Birch was loosely based on A Prayer for Owen Meany, and the first third of Irving's novel A Widow for One Year became the acclaimed film The Door in the Floor.

• One of Irving's great literary influences was Kurt Vonnegut, his teacher and mentor at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. The two writers remained close friends until Vonnegut’s death in 2007.

• Irving has two tattoos: a maple leaf (in honor of his Canadian wife) on his left shoulder, and the starting circle of a wrestling match on his right forearm.

• The influence of Charles Dickens is evident in Irving’s novels, sprawling epics with huge casts of colorful, eccentric characters and lots of complex plot points that crop up, disappear for hundreds of pages, then resurface unexpectedly. He writes voluminously and in great detail; he refuses to use a computer; and he begins at the end, writing the last sentence of each novel first. He describes himself as a craftsman and claims that he owes his success more to rewrites, ruthless editing, and infinite patience than to artistic genius. (*Bio from Barnes & Noble.*)

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**Book Reviews**

*In One Person* gives a lot. It’s funny, as you would expect. It’s risky in what it exposes....Tolerance, in a John Irving novel, is not about anything goes. It’s what happens when we face our own desires honestly, whether we act on them or not.

**Jeanette Winterson - New York Times Book Review**

*In One Person* gives a lot. It’s funny, as you would expect. It’s risky in what it exposes....Tolerance, in a John Irving novel, is not about anything goes. It’s what happens when we face our own desires honestly, whether we act on them or not.

**Ron Charles - Washington Post**

It is impossible to imagine the American—or international—literary landscape without John Irving.... He has sold tens of millions of copies of his books, books that have earned descriptions like *epic* and *extraordinary* and *controversial* and *sexually brave*. And yet, unlike so many writers in the contemporary canon, he manages to write books that are both critically acclaimed and beloved for their sheer readability. He is as close as one gets to a contemporary Dickens in the scope of his celebrity and the level of his achievement.

**Time**

His most daringly political, sexually transgressive, and moving novel in well over a decade.

**Vanity Fair**

Prep school. Wrestling. Unconventional sexual practices. Viennese interlude. This bill of particulars could only fit one American author: John Irving. His 13th novel (after *Last Night in Twisted River*) tells the oftentimes outrageous story of bisexual novelist Billy Abbott, who comes of age in the upright 1950s and explores his sexuality through two decadent decades into the plague-ridden 1980s and finally to a more positive present day. Sexual confusion sets in early for Billy, simultaneously attracted to both the local female librarian and golden boy wrestler Jacques Kittredge, who treats Billy with the same disdain he shows Billy’s best friend (and occasional lover) Elaine. Faced with an unsympathetic mother and an absent father who might have been gay, Billy travels to Europe, where he has affairs with a transgendered female and an older male poet, an early AIDS activist. Irving’s take on the AIDS epidemic in New York is not totally persuasive (not enough confusion, terror, or anger), and his fractured time and place doesn’t allow him to generate the melodramatic string of incidents that his novels are famous for. In the end, sexual secrets abound in this novel, which intermittently touches the heart as it fitfully illuminates the mutability of human desire.

*Publishers Weekly*

What is “normal”? Does it really matter? In Irving’s latest novel (after *Last Night in Twisted River*), nearly everyone has a secret, but the characters who embrace and accept their own differences and those of others are the most content. This makes the narrator, Bill, particularly appealing. Bill knows from an early age that he is bisexual, even if he doesn’t label himself as such. He has “inappropriate crushes” but doesn’t make himself miserable denying that part of himself; he simply acts, for better or for worse. The reader meets Bill at 15, living on the campus of an all-boys school in Vermont where his stepfather is on the faculty. Through the memories of a much older Bill, his life story is revealed, from his teenage years in Vermont to college and life as a writer in New York City. Bill is living in New York during the 1980s, at the height of the AIDS epidemic, and the suffering described is truly heart-wrenching. Irving cares deeply, and the novel is not just Bill’s story but a human tale. *Verdict:* This wonderful blend of thought-provoking, well-constructed, and meaningful writing is what one has come to expect of Irving, and it also makes for an enjoyable page-turner. —Shaunna Hunter, Hampden-Sydney Coll. Lib., VA

*Library Journal*

Billy Dean (aka Billy Abbott) has a difficult time holding it together in one person, for his bisexuality pulls him in (obviously) two different directions. Billy comes of age in what is frequently, and erroneously, billed as a halcyon and more innocent age, the 1950s…. Billy also starts to have conflicted feelings toward Elaine, daughter of a voice teacher…. We also learn of Billy’s homoerotic relationships with Tom, a college friend, and with Larry, a professor Billy had studied with overseas. And all of these sexual attractions and compulsions play out against the background of Billy’s unconventional family…. Woody Allen’s *bon mot* about bisexuality is that it doubled
one's chances for a date, but in this novel Irving explores in his usual discursive style some of the more serious and exhaustive consequences of Allen's one-liner.  

*Kirkus Reviews*

**Discussion Questions**

1. "Goodness me, what makes a man?" asks Miss Frost. What makes a man, or a woman, in *In One Person*? Discuss, with reference to as many characters as possible.

2. What are some of the different meanings of the title *In One Person*?

3. "All children learn to speak in codes." What are some of the codes people speak in the book, and how well do the characters master them?

4. What does John Irving's choice of epigraph to the novel tell you?

5. What is the importance of other works of literature—*Madame Bovary*, *Giovanni's Room* or *The Tempest*, for example—in this novel? What kind of reading list is it?

6. Who is your favourite character in the novel, and why?

7. Compare and contrast *In One Person* with other recent works on related themes: you could look at *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides, or the movie *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, or *The Crying Game*, for example. What do all these works have in common, and how do they differ? What are they addressing in our society and in our time?

8. "You're a solo pilot, aren't you, Bill... You're cruising solo—no copilot has any clout with you," Larry Upton tells Billy. Is this a fair assessment?

9. In what ways is *In One Person* a book about family?

10. Plays are important to *In One Person*. What do the performances of Shakespeare and Ibsen add to the book? What other kinds of acting and performance are highlighted in the novel, and why?

11. Sex is notoriously hard to write well about—there's even a "Bad Sex Award" in Britain for the worst example that comes to light each year. How does John Irving get around the pitfalls of writing about sex?

12. Billy tells us that writers are people who make up stories, and at times he forgets details of his own story. Do you trust him, as a narrator? Why, or why not?

13. "My sexual awakening also marked the fitful birth of my imagination." What are the links between creativity (specifically writing) and sex in *In One Person*?
14. Why do so many characters in *In One Person* have difficulty pronouncing strange, foreign or important words?

15. Do you find this a shocking book? What in particular is challenging or disturbing about it? What is John Irving trying to make his readers confront?

16. As a novel, what does *In One Person* contribute to society’s ongoing debates about sexuality, gender and identity?

17. How do you feel at the end of the book?

18. Will you recommend *In One Person* to your friends? Why, or why not?

(Questions issued by publisher.)
About the Author

Full text biography:

John Irving (American novelist)

Birth Date: 1942

Known As: Irving, John Winslow, Blunt, John Winslow, Jr., Blunt, John Wallace, Jr.

Place of Birth: United States, New Hampshire, Exeter

Nationality: American

Occupation: Novelist

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Awards:

Rockefeller Foundation grant, 1971-72; National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, 1974-75; Guggenheim fellow, 1976-77; National Book Award nomination, 1979, and American Book Award, 1980, both for The World According to Garp, named one of ten "Good Guys" honored for contributions furthering advancement of women, National Women's Political Caucus, 1988, for The Cider House Rules, inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame as an "Outstanding American," 1992, Academy Award for screenplay based on material previously produced or published, 1999, for The Cider House Rules, 25th Lambda Literary Awards bisexual literature prize (tied), 2013, for In One Person.

Personal Information:


Career Information:


Writings:

NOVELS

• The 158-Pound Marriage (also see below), Random House (New York, NY), 1974.
• The World According to Garp, Dutton (New York, NY), 1978.
• The Hotel New Hampshire, Dutton (New York, NY), 1981.
• A Widow for One Year, Random House (New York, NY), 1998.
• Last Night in Twisted River, Random House (New York, NY), 2009.
• In One Person, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 2012.

OTHER

• Trying to Save Piggy Sneed (collection), Arcade (New York, NY), 1996.
• The Imaginary Girlfriend: A Memoir, Random House (New York, NY), 1996.


Media Adaptions:

The World According to Garp was released as a film by Warner Brothers/Pan Arts in 1982, starring Robin Williams, Glenn Close, and Mary Beth Hurt, featuring cameo performances by Irving and his sons. The Hotel New Hampshire was released as a film by Orion Pictures in 1984, starring Rob Lowe, Jodie Foster, and Beau Bridges. The Cider House Rules was adapted for the stage by Peter Parnell and produced in Seattle, WA, 1996, and was again adapted for the stage by Tom Hulce and produced by the Dramatists Play Service in New York, NY, 2001; also released as a film, starring Tobey Maguire, Charlize Theron, and Michael Caine, by Miramax, 1999; Simon Birch, based on Irving's A Prayer for Owen Meany, was released as a film by Buena Vista Pictures in 1998: The Door in the Floor, based on Irving's A Widow for One Year, was adapted as a screenplay by Tod Williams and published by Ballantine, 2004, and the corresponding film was released by Focus Features in 2004. The Pension Grillparzer, based on portions of The World According to Garp, was adapted for the stage by director Mollie Bryce and produced in Hollywood, CA, 2004. Irving's novels have been adapted as audiobooks by Random Audio.

Sidelights:

Novelist John Irving is praised as a storyteller with a fertile imagination and a penchant for meshing the comic and the tragic. Irving is perhaps best known for his critically acclaimed best seller The World According to Garp, which sold more than three million copies in hardback and paperback following its 1978 publication. The novel achieved a cult status--complete with T-shirts proclaiming "I Believe in Garp"--and received serious critical attention, the two combining to propel the novel's author "into the front rank of America's young novelists," according to Time contributor R.Z. Sheppard.

Though a contemporary novelist, Irving's concerns are traditional, a characteristic some critics have cited as distinguishing Irving's work from that of other contemporary fiction writers. Dictionary of Literary Biography writer Hugh M. Ruppersburg, for example, wrote that "the concerns of Irving's novels are inherently contemporary. Yet often they bear little similarity to other recent fiction, for their author is more interested in affirming certain conventional values--art
and the family, for instance—than in condemning the status quo or heralding the arrival of a new age. ... What is needed, [Irving] seems to suggest, is a fusion of the compassion and common sense of the old with the egalitarian openmindedness of the new.

Irving's values are reflected in The World According to Garp, a work he described in Washington Post Book World as "an artfully disguised soap opera." "The difference is that I write well," Irving added, "that I construct a book with the art of construction in mind, that I use words intentionally and carefully. I mean to make you laugh, to make you cry, those are soap-opera intentions, all the way." A lengthy family saga, the novel focuses on nurse Jenny Fields, her illegitimate son, novelist T.S. Garp, and Garp's wife and two sons. The World According to Garp explicitly explores the violent side of contemporary life. Episodes involving rape, assassination, mutilation, and suicide abound, but these horrific scenes are always infused with comedy.

"A true romantic hero," According to Village Voice reviewer Elliot Fremont-Smith, Garp is obsessed with the perilousness of life and wants nothing more than to keep the world safe for his family and friends. Ironically then, Garp is the one who ultimately inflicts irreversible harm on his children, illustrating Irving's point that "the most protective and unconditionally loving parents can inflict the most appalling wounds on their children," explained Pearl K. Bell in Commentary. While Garp is obsessed with protecting his family and friends, his mother's obsession involves promoting her status as a "sexual suspect"—a woman who refuses to share either her life or her body with a man. Through her best-selling autobiography A Sexual Suspect, Jenny becomes a feminist leader. Her home evolves into a haven for a group of radical feminists, the Ellen James Society, whose members have cut out their tongues as a show of support for a young girl who was raped and similarly mutilated by her attackers. Both Garp and Jenny eventually are assassinated—she by an outraged antifeminist convinced that Jenny's influence ruined his marriage and Garp by an Ellen Jamesian convinced he is an exploit of women because of a novel he wrote about rape. Discussing these characters in a Publishers Weekly interview with Barbara A. Bannon, Irving remarked: "It mattered very fiercely to me that [Garp and Jenny] were people who would test your love of them by being the extremists they were. I always knew that as mother and son they would make the world angry at them."

Critics have noted that The World According to Garp demonstrates a timely sensitivity to women—a recognition of Irving's growing women's liberation movement of the late twentieth century—because it deals sympathetically with issues such as rape, feminism, and sexual roles. Nation contributor Michael Malone wrote: "With anger, chagrin and laughter, Irving anatomizes the inadequacies and injustices of traditional sex roles. ... The force behind a memorable gallery of women characters—foremost among them, Garp's famous feminist mother and his English professor wife—is not empathy but deep frustrated sympathy." A similar opinion was expressed by Ms. contributor Lindsy Van Gelder, who admitted admiration for Irving's ability to explore "feminist issues from rape to sexual identity to Movement stardom—minus any Hey-I'm-a-man-but-I-really-understand self-conscious fanfare."

Despite its fairy tale-like qualities, Irving's The Hotel New Hampshire also explores adult issues like incest, terrorism, suicide, freakish deaths, and gang rape, all infused with the novelist's trademark macabre humor. A family saga in the tradition of The World According to Garp, The Hotel New Hampshire spans nearly four generations of the troubled Berry family. Headed by Win, a charming but irresponsible dreamer who is ultimately a failure at innkeeping, and Mary, who dies in the early stages of the novel, the Berry family includes five children: Franny, Frank, Egg, Lilly, and John, the narrator. While Egg perishes along with his mother, the remaining children are left to struggle through childhood and adolescence. Irving reflected on the Berry family in New York, saying that The Hotel New Hampshire "takes a large number of people and says in every family we have a dreamer, a hero, a late bloomer, one who makes it very big. one who doesn't make it at all. one who never grows up. one who is the [B.S.] detector, the guide to practicality, and often you don't know who these people will be. watching them in their earlier years."

The Berries, along with an array of subsidiary characters—human and animal—eventually inhabit three hotels: one in New Hampshire, one in Vienna, and one in Maine. According to Irving, the hotels are symbols for the passage from infancy to maturity. "The first hotel is the only real hotel in the story," stated Irving in New York. "It is childhood. The one in Vienna is a dark, foreign place, that phase called adolescence, when you begin leaving the house and finding out how frightening the world is. The last one is no hotel at all. ... It is a place to get well again, which is a process that has been going on throughout the novel."

Following such a phenomenally successful work, *The Hotel New Hampshire* naturally invited comparisons to its predecessor: "There is no question in my mind it's better than *The World According to Garp,*" Irving maintained in New York. "It certainly is every bit as big a book, and it means much more. It's a more ambitious novel symbolically but with a different point of view, deliberately narrower." Irving nevertheless anticipated that critics would reject the novel; and, in fact, critics' opinions largely fulfilled Irving's dismal prediction. In the *Saturday Review* Scot Haller wrote that *The Hotel New Hampshire* "could not be mistaken for the work of any other writer, but unfortunately, it cannot be mistaken for Irving's best novel, either. It lacks the urgency of *Setting Free the Bears,* the bittersweet wit of The 158-Pound Marriage, the sly set-ups of Garp. The haphazardness that afflicts these characters' lives has seeped into the storytelling, too."

Time reviewer Sheppard offered the view that, unlike Garp's story, "John Berry's story is not resolved in violent, dramatic action, but in a quiet balancing of sorrow and hope. It is a difficult act, and it is not faultless. The dazzling characterizations and sense of American place in the first part of the novel tend to get scuffed in transit to Europe. There are tics and indulgences. But the book is redeemed by the healing properties of its conclusion. Like a burlesque *Tempest,* *Hotel New Hampshire* puts the ordinary world behind, evokes a richly allusive fantasy and returns to reality refreshed and strengthened."

Originally intended to be a saga of orphanage life in early-twentieth-century Maine, Irving's sixth novel, *The Cider House Rules,* instead became a statement on abortion. The issue of abortion arose during Irving's research for the novel when he learned that abortion played a large role in orphanages at the time. Evoking the works of Victorian novelists such as Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë, Irving's *The Cider House Rules* is set in an orphanage in dreary St. Cloud, Maine, where the gentle, ether-addicted Dr. Larch and his saintly nurses preside lovingly over their orphans. Larch also provides illegal but safe abortions, and although he is painfully aware of the bleak existence many of the orphans endure, he does not encourage expectant mothers to abort. As he puts it: "I help them have what they want. An orphan or an abortion." One unadopted orphan in particular, Homer Wells, becomes Larch's spiritual son and protege. Larch schools Homer in birth and abortion procedures in the hope that Homer will one day succeed him at the orphanage. When Homer comes to believe that the fetus has a soul, however, he refuses to assist with abortions. A conflict ensues, and Homer seeks refuge at Ocean View apple orchard, located on the coast of Maine.

The book's title refers to the list of rules posted in Ocean View's cider house regarding migrant workers' behavior. Several critics acknowledged the significance of rules, both overt and covert, in the lives of the characters. Toronto *Globe & Mail* contributor Joy Fielding, for example, commented that *The Cider House Rules* "is all about rules: the rules we make and break, the rules we ignore, the rules we post for all to see: the invisible rules we create for ourselves to help us get through life; the absurdity of some of these rules and the hypocrisy of others, specifically our rules regarding abortion." *New York Times* reviewer Christopher Lehmann-Haupt similarly noted that Dr. Larch follows his own rules and that "the point—which is driven home with the sledgehammer effect that John Irving usually uses—is that there are always multiple sets of rules for a given society. Heroism lies in discovering the right ones, whether they are posted on the wall or carved with scalpels, and committing yourself to follow them no matter what."

Despite the multiplicity of rules and moral codes explored by Irving, critics tend to focus on abortion as the crucial issue of *The Cider House Rules.* They have expressed different opinions, however, concerning Irving's position on the abortion issue. Time contributor Paul Gray commented that *The Cider House Rules* "is essentially about abortions and women's right to have them," and Susan Brownmiller described the work in *Chicago Tribune* as "a heartfelt, sometimes moving tract in support of abortion rights." *New York Times* Book Review writer Benjamin DeMott offered this view: "The knowledge and sympathy directing Mr. Irving's exploration of the [abortion] issue are exceptional. Pertinent history, the specifics of surgical procedure, the irrefusable sorrow of guilt and humiliation, the needs and rights of children—their weight is palpable in these pages."

The novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany* examines the good and evil—especially the capacity of each to be mistaken for the other. Irving's Christ-like hero knows his destiny, including the date and circumstances of his death. Small in size but large in spirit, Owen Meany has a distinctive but ineffable voice caused by a fixed larynx, and throughout the novel, Irving renders Owen's speech in upper case—suggested to him by the red letters in which Jesus's utterances appear in the New Testament. Believing that nothing in his life is accidental or purposeless, Owen professes himself an instrument of God and his sacrifices result in the gradual conversion of his best friend, and the book's narrator, Johnny
John Irving (American novelist) - About The Author - Books and Authors


In a Time article, Sheppard pointed out that "anyone familiar with Irving's mastery of narrative technique, his dark humor and moral resolve also knows his fiction is cute like a fox." Sheppard suggested that, despite its theological underpinnings, A Prayer for Owen Meany "scarcely disguise[s] his indignation about the ways of the world," and actually represents "a fable of political predestination."

More bizarre characters and situations await readers of Irving's A Son of the Circus. Dr. Farrokhk Farrokhbarwa is an Indian-born orthopedist who lives in Canada but makes periodic trips to India to work at a children's hospital, conduct genetic research on circus dwarfs, and write second-rate screenplays. While it is packed with characters and motifs that have come to be seen as characteristically Irving, A Son of the Circus nevertheless disappointed some reviewers. "The quirkiness with which the author customarily endows privileged characters is ... scarce here," observed Webster Johnson in Times Literary Supplement. "In fact, Farrokhbarwa and the rest incline towards the lackluster: any colour derives chiefly from the composite incidents which entangle them." Bharati Mukherjee wrote in Washington Post Book World that the novel is Irving's "most daring and most vibrant. And though it is also his least satisfying, it has a heroic cheekiness. ... But its very energy and outrageousness make it compete with rather than complement the tragic story of people. ... Irving India-surfs himself into exhaustion until the subcontinent becomes, for the reader as well as for one of his characters, neither symbol nor place, but a blur of alarming images."

Ruth Cole is the protagonist of A Widow for One Year, a novel that explores the nature of fiction writing through several of its characters. When the novel opens on Long Island in 1958, four-year-old Ruth witnesses the dissolution of her parents' marriage, which has suffered under the strain of the tragic death of the couple's teenage son in a car accident before Ruth was born. Each of her parents drowns their pain in different ways: her father with women and alcohol, and her mother by turning their suburban home into a shrine for her dead sons. After Ruth's mother has an affair with her husband's teenage assistant, she abandons both her husband and daughter. Eddie O'Hare, the object of Ruth's mother's affections, looks back on the affair years later, writes a novel about the romance, and becomes part of Ruth's literary circle.

The second two sections of the book take place in the 1950s, where tragedy continues to follow Ruth. Now an adult, she finds her father in bed with her best friend, a betrayal that ultimately results in her father's suicide and a spiteful sexual encounter for Ruth that turns violent. She also becomes a famous author, loses her husband, writes a novel called A Widow for One Year, and becomes embarked in the seamy side of Amsterdam during a book tour held where a serial killer is on the loose. Despite its complex plot, A Widow for One Year is, at its core, an exploration of writers and writing. The prominence of writers in the story, Michiko Kakutani explained in the New York Times, is "to make some points about the ordering impulses of art and the imaginative transactions made by artists in grappling with the real world."

A Widow for One Year met with generally favorable reviews. Although Candra McWilliam described the novel in her New Statesman review as a book "in which too many women, alas, behave like men," she complimented Irving's "themes of bereavement and creativity, of love between young men and older women, of widowhood and human hope reborn." Kakutani noted that while the novel is full of unbelievable coincidences and characters that border on caricature, Ruth is a "complex, conflicted woman" and Irving's "authoritative narrative steamrolls over the contrivances, implausibilities and antic excesses... to create an engaging and often affecting fable, a fairy tale that manages to be old-fashioned and modern all at once." William H. Pritchard, writing in the New York Times Book Review, called A Widow for One Year one of Irving's best, commenting that "the writing is very much of the surface, strongly, sometimes even cruelly, outlined, unfriendly to ambiguity and vacillation. secure in its brisk dispositions of people and place."

In The Fourth Hand, Irving's farcical tendencies are again at play. While a television reporter is on assignment covering a circus in India, his hand is eaten by a lion, the tragedy recorded on live television. The victim, Patrick Wallingford, is a handsome man, prone to affairs with women who had cruised through life on his charm. Now he is known as the Lion Guy and, instead of drawing attractive women, he becomes a magnet for more offbeat characters. A recently widowed Green Bay, Wisconsin, woman, after her husband is killed in a freak accident, wants Patrick to have her husband's hand. In return, however, she requests visitation rights with the hand and the opportunity to be impregnated by Patrick.

A deal is struck, and the anorexic and excrement-obsessed Dr. Zajac of Boston announces that he will perform the world's first hand transplant. Irving uses the character of Patrick to parody the empty world of television news broadcasting and the media's undying fascination with gruesome destruction. In the end, however, Irving turns the story into a tale of love's powers of redemption.

Recognizing Irving's trademark idiosyncratic characters and unlikely scenarios, along with his frequent themes of family and morality, several critics pointed out that The Fourth Hand treads ground that is too familiar. Paul Gray wrote in Time that the novel "offers the same mix of the macabre and the moral that Irving's army of admirers has come to expect" but maintained that theapped Patrick cannot hold readers' interest. "Faced with a virtual cipher at the center of his tale, Irving works energetically to create distractions around the edges," Gray explained. Other critics had more appreciation for the novel's storyline. "Irving's worlds are ludicrous in the most appealing way and expertly sentimental at the same time," noted Doug McClellan in Library Journal. "And his approachable language can be both musical and magical."

Bonnie Schiedel, writing in Chatelaine, called The Fourth Hand "downright weird ... but also funny and brazenly original," while Caroline Moore in Spectator summarized the symbolism inherent in the novel's title: "It is the phantom 'fourth hand' of the imagination which ... can bridge the gap between voyeurism and compassion, sensationalism and empathy." 

Until I Find You, published in 2005, is Irving's longest novel to date. Edward Nawotka, reviewing the book in People, observed that while it is the author's heaviest tome, "it's also the most intimate story he's ever told." The main character, Jack Burns, spends his life searching for his father. Burns's mother, Alice, a tattoo artist, leads him around the world during his childhood in an attempt to locate the boys' father, a Scottish organ player, but to no avail. As Burns grows older he picks up the search again, only to uncover dark truths. A reviewer for Library Journal noted that the novel is a "more contemplative journey than his previous works ... requiring some patience and reflection."

Danny, a writer, and his father, Dominic, become fugitives in Last Night in Twisted River after Danny accidentally kills his father's girlfriend, Jane. Danny is only twelve years old when he mistakes Jane for a bear and attacks her with a pan. The story begins in a New Hampshire logging town in 1954, and it stretches on for fifty years as father and son evade the law. Together, they travel through Vermont, Toronto, and Iowa. The story "with its chain of violence, can be viewed as a grim comment on the world's love affair with guns and, more broadly, on their country's determination to bludgeon other nations into doing its bidding." Nina Caplan in New Statesman.

Like many of Irving's novels, Last Night in Twisted River was met with an ambivalent critical reception. "Irving's skill as storyteller is impressive," a New Yorker critic noted, but the novel "is marred by too much sentimental sprawl." Stephen Morrow, writing in Library Journal, found that "Irving's latest is interesting, funny, and original—but also self-indulgent and highly digressive, with more backstory than story." However, Caplan felt that "Irving's fluency is astonishing. He renders incidental detail riveting and extraneous explanations—of which there are many—absorbing."

Set in the mismannered "innocent" era of the 1950s, In One Person follows Billy Abbott, a boy raised by a single mother coming into his bisexuality as he progresses through a series of crushes and love affairs. Told by his teacher that there are no wrong people to have a crush on, Billy falls for and has varying degrees of success with his best male friend, other men, his teenage gal pal, older women, his own stepfather, and a transsexual. At the all-male boarding school Favorite River Academy in a small logging town in Vermont, Billy similarly has a crush on a macho wrestling champion Jacques Kitteridge and on town librarian Miss Frost, whom Billy is slow to realize was once a man. At the academy, some boys must play female roles in their productions of Shakespeare plays, just like Billy's grandfather had done. Yet his grandfather preferred to wear women's clothing off the stage as well. Billy relishes his chance to play Ariel in The Tempest. As Billy grows through the years, he moves to New York in the 1980s when the devastation of AIDS takes many of his friends and former lovers. When Irving ends the book with Miss Frost declaring, "Please don't put a label on me—don't make me a category before you get to know me!" the message he is trying convey becomes clear.

In an interview in Economist, Irving explained his choice of giving a voice to a bisexual male lead character for his novel "I find my way into a lot of characters by thinking 'what would that be like?' The character of the sexual misfit—someone out of step with what society's expectations of sexual relationships are—is very familiar to me. With its 'generosity of spirit' the book 'is boldly conceived and energetically executed. If it occasionally lacks plausibility in both plot and period—the reaction to Billy's sexual proclivities of some of his family and classmates seems rather wishful thinking for
1960s America—its heart is very much in evidence and very clearly in the right place," according to a contributor to Spectator reviewer Peter Parker. In One Person is "a defiant response to the increasingly regressive and reactionary currents that persist on the U.S. political scene and continue to darken its horizon. This is a novel that reaffirms the centrality of Irving as the voice of social justice and compassion in contemporary American literature," declared Steven Hayward in the Toronto Globe & Mail. A writer in Kirkus Reviews observed: "Irving explores in his usual discursive style some of the more serious and exhaustive consequences" related to Woody Allen's comment that bisexuality doubles one's chance for a date.

Trying to Save Piggy Sneed collects Irving's non-fiction works: memoirs, short stories, and homage pieces. The Imaginary Girlfriend: A Memoir details Irving's career as an amateur wrestler and coach and touches on his development as a writer, while other essays present homage to authors Gunther Grass and Charles Dickens. The fiction section includes "Pension Grillparzer"—which originally appeared in The World According to Garp—and five other short stories. In the New York Times Book Review, Sven Birkerts stated that Trying to Save Piggy Sneed "shows how one of our most widely read novelists fares in what he might consider a triathlon of lesser events. What we find, in this order, are disappointment, confirmations and surprises."

Because of these visual imagery and action, many of Irving's novels have been adapted for film, sometimes on the basis of the novel's own screenplay. Irving's quest to adapt The Cider House Rules for film is the subject of My Movie Business: A Memoir, which was published in tandem with the film's release in 1999. The book also covers adaptations from Irving's other novels—even from scripts that he did not write—and his experience writing his first screenplay for Setting Free the Bears. Along the way, he elaborates on his pro-choice stance, the history of abortion in the United States, and his grandfather's career as an obstetrician.

As Irving explains in My Movie Business, the story of producing the film adaptation of The Cider House Rules encompasses all facets of the Hollywood movie industry. The movie was thirteen years in the making. The script went through numerous revisions, and directors came and went before Lasse Hallstrom signed on and the film was made. Along the way, Irving had to confront some harsh realities, notably trimming his first draft from nine hours down to a more theater-friendly two. This severe editorial surgery required leaving out many characters and subplots, but the novelist's efforts paid off when he won an Academy Award for best screenplay. "Irving comes off as a tested collaborator with a decided anemic view of the screenwriting process." Jonathan Bing maintained in Variety. However, Benjamin Svetkey wrote in Entertainment Weekly that My Movie Business contains "sweetly personal moments" and would well serve readers looking for "a charming, sublimely written technical primer" on the movie industry.

In 2004 Irving released the innovative story book A Sound Like Someone Trying Not to Make a Sound: A Story. Originally told in his novel A Widow for One Year, the author adapted the children's story so that it could be published on its own. When the tale's main character, Tom, wakes up in the middle of the night having heard what he thinks is a monster near his bed, he attempts to wake his brother Tim; when he is unsuccessful, Tom instead enlists his father's help in finding the source of the terror. A Kirkus Reviews critic remarked that the tale is "perfect for anyone who fears things that go bump in the night."

Although he is not a prolific novelist, Irving remains highly popular with the reading public, as well as with moviemakers through his increasing activity as a screenwriter. Afforded the opportunity due to his stature within American letters, he regularly and publicly debates the nature and worth of novelists and their works. Long a proponent of character and plot-driven fiction, Irving has been compared to such luminaries as Dickens and Henry James, both of whom had a similar preoccupation with the moral choices and failings of their characters. Making a similar comparison, Moore noted that "the greatest popular artists—from Dickens to Chaplin—are circus-lovers and showmen, with an unabashed streak of sentimentality and sensationalism. Irving at his best, combining the grotesque, tragic and warm-hearted, has something of their quality.”

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In One Person (2012)

**Cutting for Stone (2009)** AWARD WINNER

Cutting for Stone: A Novel tells the story of a love affair between a young nun and a handsome doctor.

**With or Without You (2011)** AWARD WINNER

For many years, Evan Weiss has been the victim of bullying. He's been thrown into lockers, beaten until

**History of a Pleasure Seeker (2012)**

The author introduces Piet Barol, a charming young man of many artistic talents. After his uneventful

**We Are Water (2013)**

After nearly three decades of marriage to her husband, Orion, Anna Oh stuns her family when she announces

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Will Grayson, Will Grayson is a young adult novel from authors John Green and David Levithan. The story

**Jack Holmes and His Friend (2012)**

Edmund White navigates the birth and development of the gay rights movement through the friendship of