

'Garp' trapped in comic-tragic life

By David Wood

The World According To Garp by John Irving, Dutton, \$10.95.

John Irving's novels have all been well received, in the past, if even by small fringe audiences. But now, with his fourth novel, the bestseller, *The World According to Garp*, Irving, at age 36, is at last taking a place among the dwindling number of critically notable American novelists.

The story is about a writer, which is a popular career nowadays for the protagonists of novels. T.S. Garp, like John Irving, is author to four books. The plots have clearly been fashioned from his own experiences; but the stories are not, Garp contests about his personal life.

book review

"Memories and personal histories — all the recollected traumas of our unmemorable lives" — were suspicious models for fiction, Garp would say."

Ordinary life

And says Irving, harmoniously, in a Times interview, "I'm grateful for how ordinary my life is because I'm not ever tempted to think that something that happened to me is important simply because it happened to me."

Yet, as if mocking their mutual conviction against "the phony mileage of personal hardship," the lives of Irving and Garp share even more than that.

Alike in their age and the novels they have written, both are happily married, reside in small-town New England, each the father of two sons. Both have spent formative years in Vienna. John Irving is an ex-Olympic wrestler; Garp is a wrestling coach. So on and so forth.

This does not make Garp the autobiography of Irving, however, because the book, craftily and artistically, is not about Garp; Garp is just the continuity. Rather, the portrait is of the world according to Garp.

Bum luck

Garp's is a world like ours, but that Garp has the bum luck of meeting the latent random hazard of living in it so often it becomes a current in his life's course. Murphy's Law is an exaggerated symbol of the world according to

Garp; if something is to go wrong, it will, and at the worst time.

Garp's is an ordinary life. He is full of faults, and living among faulted humans. He experiences suburban trivialities and illusions of importance. Yet he shares a Viennese awareness with Marcus Aurelius.

"In the life of a man, his time is but a moment, his being an incessant flux, his sense a dim rushlight, his body a prey of worms, his soul an unquiet eddy, his fortune dark, his fame doubtful. In short, all that is body is as coursing waters, all that is of the soul as dreams and vapors"

Snuffed out

Garp's world is as a caricature of at least one man's vulnerability. And accentuated is the peril of living in our modern world, that in a moment's chaos or in a quirk of incidence can violently snuff out parts or all of him.

Walt, Garp's son, misheard his father, when Garp warned him to be careful of the undertow in the ocean. Walt would sit on the shore looking for the creature he thought he had to look out for. The "undertoad" was for awhile a joke among the family. After an accident, though, the invisible monster stalked Garp's good family the rest of the book.

A car wreck in which Walt was killed; another of Garp's sons lost an eye; one of his wife's students had his penis bitten off; Garp lost his talent; the whacky timing, the unrealness of the unexpected and the realness of the loss, are written perfectly full-bodied with Irving's skill for black comic clarity of realism.

We're all dead


Yet if the moral is an exaggeration, what Irving calls "a truthful exaggeration", that "we are all terminal cases", so is everything in *The World According to Garp* exaggerated. It is Irving's charming craftsmanship, as much as anything, his muted exaggerations, his lucidly comic typicality, the guinness of his phrases, that makes his book a delight to read.

Says Irving of it, subtly, "I don't see comedy and tragedy as contradictions . . . I don't see that unhappy endings undermine rich and energetic lives. There are no happy endings; death is horrible, final and frequently premature . . . That shouldn't strike anyone as a terribly new idea . . . New ideas aren't a novelist's business; I leave the new ideas to the clothing and automotive industries."

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