

arts/entertainment

Garp creator discusses new book, life as writer

By Bill Rush

I learned to my astonishment that Garp creator, John Irving, the most successful "serious" writer in America (according to "Time" magazine), wears jeans and a T-shirt.

Irving wore his blue jeans at Middlebury College's Breadloaf Writer's conference this summer. He also lectured with his colleagues, Stanley Elkin, John Gardner, and Erica Jong. The Breadloaf Conference was formed by Robert Frost in 1926. The annual two-week conference gives the writers and writing teachers a chance to share their knowledge with writing students in a summer camp atmosphere.

Irving, 39, is responsible for a philosophy called Garpomania that swept the country in the late 70s. If early reviews are any indication, his latest book, "The Hotel New Hampshire," will carve another notch in the American culture. The following interview was conducted in Middlebury Vermont this past August.

Bill Rush: Can you tell me about *Hotel New Hampshire*?

John Irving: Well, it's the fifth book, and I hope it's the best of them. But it's a love story more than any of the others were. It's about a boy whose in love with his older sister. And it's a story about how a family gets over the people in its group within the family, who don't make it.

B.R.: Where did you get the idea for *Hotel New Hampshire*?

J.I.: It's probably the least autobiographical of a number of books, none of which were really autobiographical. But by the time you get to a fourth or fifth book, whatever personal experience you've been writing about is largely used up.

So what mattered to me most in initiating this novel was that it's really the first novel that is completely imagined. That is, it's a fairy tale in a sense of a story for children . . . that you need to know the least about the world outside in order to read or understand it. It's much more the kind of book that is a door you enter and another door you go out.

In a way, stories for children I think are like that. And I wanted the whole of the novel to be like a dream that you begin and then wake up from; a whole thing rather than a series of events. So I think that was both the first and sort of last idea I had with it.

B.R.: What are the "universal truths" in *Hotel New Hampshire*?

J.I.: This is usually a question other people should say of you rather than you should answer of yourself. But . . . it's a novel that has frequent refrains, it makes use of repetitions . . . litanies. I suppose it's in those refrains that get repeated throughout the novel that you hear the closest thing to universals that there are. The old man who is the grandfather of the family says once to his grandson in reference to weightlifting that "you've got to get obsessed and stay obsessed." That becomes the last line of the book, and what it really becomes is a deterrent to suicide, or a deterrent to quitting, a deterrent to giving up.

There's also one suicide in the book. It's another way of saying "you must have something in your life you wish to do intentionally, purposefully and deliberately.

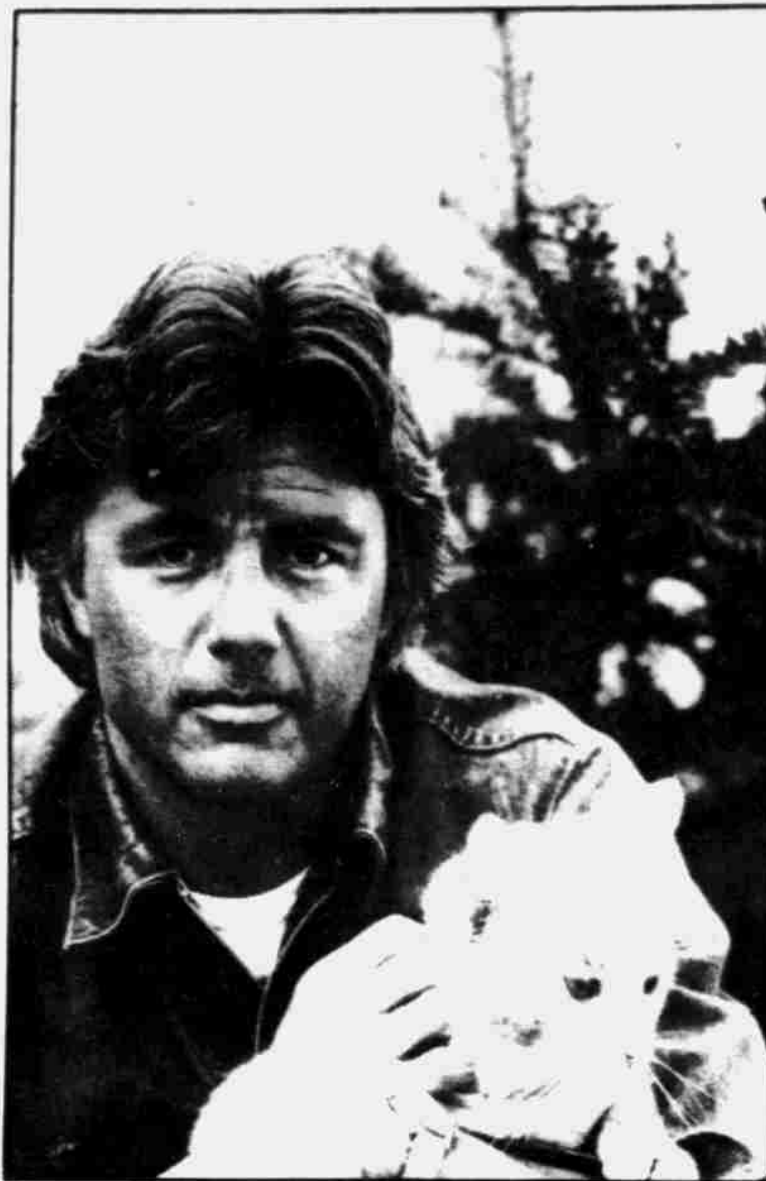


Photo courtesy of E. P. Dutton Publishing

John Irving

Because without it you're subject to accident or depression, and the book makes use of another old city folk tale of Vienna. It makes use of a phrase, an old Viennese phrase called "keep passing the open windows," which is simply a way of saying "don't kill yourself or don't quit on yourself," and it comes from an old sort of city history of a clown, a man who trains animals.

He's a street performer and he never gets paid enough and he never gets treated well enough, and one day with

The physical handicap that jocks have is that they're never very comfortable with getting older than 19.

—John Irving

a box full of his animals he jumps out a window and all the people then, who paid no attention to him . . . miss him when he's gone. It's from this the phrase comes, "keep passing the open windows," which is a sort of greeting. A form of hello/goodbye, hello/goodbye.

It's a book, I suppose, whose biggest universal is one of self-esteem and self preservation to the main people in these novels, the kind of attacks upon you that . . . assault upon you really, that threaten to take your self away.

The heroine is raped when she's a young girl. The youngest daughter of this family never grows. Her growth

is rusted is some way near birth and this becomes metaphorical . . . her ambition to become a writer, which in her own eyes she never can become quite good enough at. That's as close as I can come to a universal conversation.

B.R.: Why did you become a writer?

J.I.: I wasn't good enough at anything to consider seriously becoming. I think a lot of writers start out distracted because they could be a number of things. I wasn't good in school, I wasn't a very good student. I could never have gotten a very good job, I never actually wanted to have a job. If you grow up knowing you never wanted to have a job . . . Jesus, you've got to find something else, you see.

I wrestled as a schoolboy and I loved wrestling, but I wasn't particularly good at it. So the idea of being a wrestler who lost all the time . . . this is also a wearing process. So my options were very infrequent. I spent a lot of time imagining I suppose, that I might be a person who would like to have a job, or I might be a person who could do something else. But it seemed like the best thing I could do as a child was make things up.

B.R.: In some ways we are similar, in some ways we are opposite. You have characters who are jocks and I have characters who are physically handicapped. . .

J.I.: Let me try to guess that one out. You see, jocks have another kind of handicap. The physical handicap that jocks have is that they're never very comfortable with getting older than 19. So that they remain perpetually more immature than other people and they don't grow old very well. Because if their earliest form, as a kid's form of self-esteem, was because of what they could do physically, it's quickly recognizable to them in their 20s that they're not doing something nearly as well as when they were 17 or 18.

This is depressing news to people who insist on seeing themselves through how well their bodies work. The point about bodies is as they get older, they work less well. Jocks are less capable of accepting this simple news than the rest of the world. I suppose this is a mental handicap as well as a physical handicap.

My uncle always referred to me as a late bloomer. One of my uncles insisted on this view of me, which meant simply that he didn't like me until I did something. Unfortunately most people don't give you credit for being a writer until there's evidence . . . until there's the book, although you could, as many people have, gone through half your life getting the book. Which doesn't seem to me, make you less of a writer. My uncle's feeling was that since I wasn't particularly good at, or didn't particularly accomplish anything until I was in my late 20s . . . ergo "late bloomer."

This is inconsistent with being a jock, because jocks bloom in their teenage years and never outgrow them.

B.R.: What do you think of critics in general?

J.I.: Well . . . I usually don't make comments about critics. My favorite remark about a critic was said by the writer Steven Becker, who sent me a consoling letter after he'd read a very bad review of one of my books in which he said: "Critics are the tick birds of the literary rhinoceros." From this time he sent me this unfortunate letter, I continue to see them in that way. They serve the function of the cow's tail on a sunny day.

'Riddle' impressive but lacking commercial form

By Chuck Lieurance and Pete Schmitz

W.I. Thomas, an early 20th century sociologist, said situations defined as real become real in their consequences. Perhaps this maxim can explain the commercial failure of *Tell Me A Riddle*. Adapted from Tillie Olson's powerful novella that received immediate acclaim 20 years ago, this film seems to have enough winning qualities to make it as a hit.

movie review

The story deals with several topics that have recently bombarded cocktail parties and university enrichment courses alike.

The protagonists, Eva and David, are an elderly couple who immigrated from Russia without losing their ethnic identity in the mythic American melting pot. The wife and husband are involved in a struggle of wills in which he wants to sell the house while she insists on keeping it. An uneasy truce is imposed on them when it is discovered that the wife is dying of cancer.

Finally, their last stop on a cross-country journey takes them to San Francisco, where their liberated nurse-grandchild is given the gift of Eva's hard earned heritage and knowledge.

So why didn't a studio take a chance on distributing this intelligent and moving film? For one thing, the director happens to be a woman — the brilliant actress Lee Grant. Had her name been replaced by Clint Eastwood, Robert Redford, or Burt Reynolds (never mind Grant's impressive work with the performers, writers and technicians involved with this project), the movie would have made it to downtown theaters across the nation instead of a few tart museums.

Film was ignored

Because the subject matter deals predominantly with the point of view of its female characters, the film was ignored or patronized by too many film critics. Some have even accused it of being a soap opera. (But of course it's different with *Kramer Vs. Kramer* and *Ordinary People* because they deal with men's problems).

Maybe the plot would have been more interesting had Eva left her family 30 years

earlier. It could have then focused on single fathers. And really, Lee Grant should have tried for some class and used some music by Vivaldi. After all, it worked for Alan Alda in *The Four Seasons*.

But what really did this picture in was the fact that it did not make a young white male the main focus of the narrative. Where was John Travolta? It all would have been much more interesting had David and Eva stayed with a grandson instead of Jeannie. And one has to admit that a good cast of performers like Melvyn Douglas (David), Lila Kedrova (Eva), Lili Valenty (Mrs. Mays) and Brooke Adams (Jeannie) cannot excite audiences like the people in *Charlie's Angels* or *Endless Love*.

If the diatribe just given sounds too bitter, it's because the movie *Tell Me A Riddle* deserved a bigger audience as well as a better critical response. But because of the factors discussed above, certain people defined the movie a failure before giving it a chance to succeed.

Political message

Admittedly, it is easy for critics to make prior judgements and praise a certain film just because it has a "politically correct"

line. And Grant's adaptation falters at one point in which a new political message is inserted.

Thus, Jeannie tells her grandmother about having an abortion and justifies it with the cliché "I respect life." One can almost see Olson cringe at this awkward attempt to update her story with more "politically sound" messages.

Another factor that might have displeased Olson (according to the late Melvyn Douglas, the writer had reservations about the way her work came out on screen) was the fact that the hard edges of her novella were smoothed out in an attempt to attract a wider audience.

In the original material Eva and David do not renew their love or friendship, but in the film they fall in love "all over again." The film's emotional climax occurs as the couple embrace while flashbacks of them making love as a younger couple are inserted.

Yet the rest of the movie remains faithful to the intent and spirit of Olson's gripping and frenetic prose. The opening shots of Eva and David are strokes of genius.

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