



# JOHN IRVING

AUTHOR OF *A WIDOW FOR ONE YEAR*



# A SON OF THE CIRCUS

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John Irving



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SETTING FREE THE BEARS  
THE WATER-METHOD MAN  
THE 158-POUND MARRIAGE  
THE WORLD ACCORDING TO GARP  
THE HOTEL NEW HAMPSHIRE  
THE CIDER HOUSE RULES  
A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY  
TRYING TO SAVE PIGGY SNEED  
THE IMAGINARY GIRLFRIEND  
A WIDOW FOR ONE YEAR  
MY MOVIE BUSINESS  
THE FOURTH HAND

*and published by Black Swan*

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(1972) AND HIS LONGEST, MOST DIFFUSE YET ... CONTINUES TO DEMONSTRATE IRVING'S IDENTIFICATION WITH DICKENS'  
*Times Literary Supplement*

'THE ULTIMATE IMPRESSION YOU TAKE AWAY FROM THE BOOK [IS] ITS RESOLUTE HUMANITY. MANY WRITERS TAKE FRONT-ROW SEATS AT FREAK SHOWS AND CIRCUSES. JOHN IRVING REMAINS ONE OF THE FEW WHO BOTHERS TO LOOK INTO THE HEARTS OF THE PERFORMERS'  
*Stephen Amidon, Esquire*

'JOHN IRVING IS BRILLIANTLY CLEVER: THE FABULOUS, FANTASTIC STORY NEVER SLOWS NOR WILL YOU LOSE INTEREST'  
*Good Book Guide*

'A HEART-WRENCHING STUDY OF THE WEAKNESS OF ART, SCIENCE AND RELIGION IN A WORLD WITH "NO CLEAR PURPOSE" ... IRVING CAN BLEND COMEDY AND COMPASSION WITH DICKENSIAN BRIO'  
*Boyd Tonkin, Observer*

'A SON OF THE CIRCUS IS COMIC GENIUS ... GET READY FOR IRVING'S MOST RAUCOUS NOVEL TO DATE'  
*The Boston Globe*

'HIS NEW BOOK IS HIS BOLDEST YET ... HIS MOST ENTERTAINING NOVEL SINCE GARP ... THE READER IS SWEEPED ALONG BY A TORRENT OF VIGOROUSLY DRAMATIZED INCIDENTS ... THE LANGUAGE HAS AN ENERGY THAT KEEPS PACE WITH THE FECUNDITY OF INVENTION'  
*New York Times Book Review*

'THERE IS AN OLD-FASHIONED CHARM ABOUT JOHN IRVING. HIS STYLE IS CLEAR, INTELLIGENT AND UNDEMANDING, HIS NARRATIVES DISCURSIVE AND LIVELY. WITH A WHOLESOME RELISH FOR GROTESQUERIE AND ECCENTRICITY, HE PRODUCES SOLID, AMBITIOUS FABLES'  
*Michael Moorcock, Daily Telegraph*

'A SON OF THE CIRCUS, IRVING'S EIGHTH NOVEL, IS HIS MOST DARING AND MOST VIBRANT'  
*Washington Post Book World*

'A SON OF THE CIRCUS IS BEYOND UNRESTRAINED: IT'S A STORY OF THREE-RING EXTRAVAGANCE ... THE VERY THING THAT MAKES AN IRVING NOVEL SO BUMPTIOUSLY IRRESISTIBLE IS THAT HE'S A WRITER WHO PAYS NO HEED TO READERLY DYSPEPSIA AND WHO MAKES OTHER NOVELISTS WORK SEEM STINTING AND PRIMLY CAUTIOUS'  
*Chicago Tribune*

'THE YEAR'S MOST REWARDING READ'  
*The Toronto Sun*

'A REMARKABLE ACHIEVEMENT ... A SON OF THE CIRCUS IS UNDENIABLY ENTERTAINING'  
*Newsday*

John Irving was born in Exeter, New Hampshire, in 1942, and he once admitted that he was a 'grim' child. Although he excelled in English at school and knew by the time he graduated that he wanted to write novels, it was not until he met a young Southern novelist named John Yount, at the University of New Hampshire, that he received encouragement. 'It was so simple,' he remembers. 'Yount was the first person to point out that anything I did except writing was going to be vaguely unsatisfying.'

In 1963, Irving enrolled at the Institute of European Studies in Vienna, and he later worked as a university lecturer. His first novel, *Setting Free the Bears*, about a plot to release all the animals from the Vienna Zoo, was followed by *The Water-Method Man*, a comic tale of a man with a urinary complaint, and *The 158-Pound Marriage*, which exposes the complications of spouse-swapping. Irving achieved international recognition with *The World According to Garp*, which he hoped would 'cause a few smiles among the tough-minded and break a few softer hearts.'

*The Hotel New Hampshire* is a startlingly original family saga, and *The Cider House Rules* is the story of Doctor Wilbur Larch – saint, obstetrician, founder of an orphanage, ether addict and abortionist – and of his favourite orphan, Homer Wells, who is never adopted. *A Prayer for Owen Meany* features the most unforgettable character Irving has yet created. *A Son of the Circus* is an extraordinary evocation of modern day India. John Irving's latest and most ambitious novels are *A Widow for One Year* and *The Fourth Hand*.

A collection of John Irving's shorter writing, *Trying to Save Piggy Sneed*, was published in 1993; Irving has also written the screenplays for *The Cider House Rules* and *A Son of the Circus*, and wrote about his experiences in the world of movies in his memoir *My Movie Business*.

Irving has a life-long passion for wrestling, and he plays a wrestling referee in the film of *The World According to Garp*. In his memoir, *The Imaginary Girlfriend*, John Irving writes about his life as a wrestler, a novelist and as a wrestling coach.

John Irving has received awards from the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Guggenheim Foundation; he has won an O. Henry Award, a National Book Award, and an Oscar. In 1992 he was inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame in Stillwater, Oklahoma. In January 2001, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. John Irving now writes full-time, has three children and lives in Vancouver.

**'JOHN IRVING FANS HAVE WAITED MORE THAN FIVE YEARS FOR HIS LABYRINTHINE NEW NOVEL. THEY WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED . . . THIS IS A NOVEL CREATED BY A MAN WITH A BOTTOMLESS IMAGINATION'**  
*Alison Roberts, Evening Standard*

**'A COMPLEX NOVEL . . . A WRITER TO BE TREASURED'**  
*Erica Wagner, The Times*

**'A SON OF THE CIRCUS IS EVEN MORE AMBITIOUS THAN ITS PREDECESSOR [A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY]. IRVING'S MANY ADMIRERS WILL EXPECT NOTHING LESS'**  
*Candia McWilliam, Independent on Sunday*

**'DARUWALLA IS ANOTHER ICONIC IRVING FIGURE, PRECEDED BY OWEN MEANY AND GARP – THE GOOD MAN IN AN INEXPLICABLE WORLD . . . IRVING HANDLES THIS INCARNADINE COMBINATION OF FARCE AND HORROR WITH HIGH SPEED SKILL, CREATING A COMPULSIVELY READABLE BOOK'**  
*Elizabeth Young, Guardian*

**'JOHN IRVING IS THE MANIC MASTER OF A VERY PERSONAL VISION OF THE WORLD . . . IN A NOVEL OF INVIGORATING VIM AND BRAINS, HE SETS HIS SCENE AMID THE SQUALORS OF COMPLEX INDIA . . . IRVING HAS GIVEN US THAT TREAT OF TREATS, A WIDE-RANGING FICTION OF MASSIVE DESIGN AND LENGTH THAT ENCAPSULATES OUR WORLD WITH INTELLIGENCE AND SUGARS THE PILL WITH WIT'**  
*David Hughes, Mail on Sunday*

**'CONFIRMING HIS TITLE AS A LATTER-DAY MASTER OF THE EPIC GENRE, JOHN IRVING PRESENTS US WITH ANOTHER RUMBUNCTIOUS STORY'**  
*Sunday Tribune*

**'MORE PLOT TWISTS THAN THE RAMAYANA AND A CAST OF CHARACTERS THAT INCLUDES DWARVES, PROSTITUTES, MOVIE STARS, TRANSESTITES AND AT LEAST ONE SERIAL KILLER'**  
*Jonathan Rosen, Daily Telegraph*

**'JOHN IRVING IS AN AUTHOR WHO DEMANDS THE READER'S FULL ATTENTION . . . IRVING IS RIGHT INSIDE THE INDIAN PSYCHE . . . SO BEAUTIFULLY OBSERVED IS MR IRVING'S WRITING THAT ONE INHALES THE ALL-PERVADING SCENT OF BOMBAY, "SEX, DEATH AND FLOWERS"'**  
*Irish Independent*

**'MR IRVING . . . IS AT THE PEAK OF HIS POWERS IN THIS NEW NOVEL. HE PLUNGES THE READER INTO ONE SENSUAL OR GROTESQUE SCENE AFTER ANOTHER WITH CHEERFUL VIGOUR AND A MADCAP TENDERNESS FOR LIFE . . . THE AUTHOR KNOWS WHAT HE IS DOING FROM FIRST TO LAST, AND HANDLES THE DOZENS OF STRANDS OF HIS PLOT WITH EXUBERANT EASE . . . ENTERTAINMENT ON A GRAND SCALE'**  
*The Economist*

**'CRAMMED WITH PLOT AND INCIDENT, A SON OF THE CIRCUS IS IRVING'S MOST INTRICATE WORK SINCE THE WATER-METHOD MAN**

## AUTHOR'S NOTES

This novel isn't about India. I don't know India. I was there only once, for less than a month. When I was there, I was struck by the country's foreignness; it remains obdurately foreign to me. But long before I went to India, I began to imagine a man who has been born there and has moved away; I imagined a character who keeps coming back again and again. He's compelled to keep returning; yet, with each return trip, his sense of India's foreignness only deepens. India remains unyieldingly foreign, even to him.

My Indian friends said, 'Make him an Indian – definitely an Indian but *not* an Indian.' They told me that everywhere he goes – including where he lives, outside India – should also strike him as foreign; the point is, he's always the foreigner. 'You just have to get the details right,' they said.

I went to India at the request of Martin Bell and his wife, Mary Ellen Mark. Martin and Mary Ellen asked me to write a screenplay for them, about the child performers in an Indian circus. I've been working on that screenplay and this novel, simultaneously, for more than four years; as of this writing, I'm revising the screenplay, which is also titled *A Son of the Circus*, although it isn't the same story as the novel. Probably I'll continue to rewrite the screenplay until the film is produced – *if* the film is produced. Martin and Mary Ellen took me to India; in a sense, they began *A Son of the Circus*.

I also owe a great deal to those Indian friends who were with me in Bombay in January of 1990 – I'm thinking of Ananda Jaisingh, particularly – and to those members of the Great Royal Circus who gave me so much of their time when I was living with the circus in Junagadh. Most of all, I'm

indebted to four Indian friends who've read and reread the manuscript; their efforts to overcome my ignorance and a multitude of errors made my writing possible. I want to acknowledge them by name; their importance to *A Son of the Circus* is immeasurable.

My thanks to Dayanita Singh in New Delhi; to Farrokh Chothia in Bombay; to Dr Abraham Verghese in El Paso, Texas; and to Rita Mathur in Toronto. I would also like to thank my friend Michael Ondaatje, who introduced me to Rohinton Mistry – it was Rohinton who introduced me to Rita. And my friend James Salter has been extremely tolerant and good-humored in allowing me to make mischievous use of several passages from his elegant novel *A Sport and a Pastime*. Thanks, Jim.

As always, I have other writers to thank: my friend Peter Matthiessen, who read the earliest draft and wisely suggested surgery; my friends David Calicchio, Craig Nova, Gail Godwin and Ron Hansen (not to mention his twin brother, Rob) also suffered through earlier drafts. And I'm indebted to Ved Mehta for his advice, through correspondence.

As usual, I have more than one doctor to thank, too. For his careful reading of the penultimate draft, my thanks to Dr Martin Schwartz in Toronto. In addition, I'm grateful to Dr Sherwin Nuland in Hamden, Connecticut, and to Dr Burton Berson in New York; they provided me with the clinical studies of achondroplasia. (Since this novel was completed, the gene for achondroplasia was found; the chief research biologist at the University of California at Irvine, Dr John J. Wasmuth, wrote to me that he wished he had read *A Son of the Circus* before he wrote the article describing identification of the gene for achondroplastic dwarfism – 'because I would have plagiarized some of your statements.' I can only guess that my main character, the fictional Dr Daruwalla, would have been pleased.)

The generosity of June Callwood, and of John Flannery – the director of nursing at Casey House in Toronto – is also much appreciated. And over the four years I've been writing *A Son of the Circus*, the work of three assistants has been outstanding: Heather Cochran, Alison Rivers and Allan Reeder. But there's only one reader who's read, or heard aloud, every draft of this story: my wife, Janet. For, literally, the thousands of pages she's endured – not to mention her

tolerance of enforced travel – I thank her, with all my love.

Lastly, I want to express my affection for my editor, Harvey Ginsberg, who officially retired before I handed him the 1,094-page manuscript; retired or not, Harvey edited me.

I repeat: I don't 'know' India, and *A Son of the Circus* isn't 'about' India. It is, however, a novel set in India – a story about an Indian (but *not* an Indian), for whom India will always remain an unknown and unknowable country. If I've managed to get the details right, my Indian friends deserve the credit.

—J. I.

***For Salman***

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