JOHN IRVING

AUTHOR OF *A WIDOW FOR ONE YEAR*

TRYING TO SAVE PIGGY SNEED

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John Irving

BLACK SWAN

Contents

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TRYING TO SAVE PIGGY SNEED

Also by John Irving

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
A SON OF THE CIRCUS
THE IMAGINARY GIRLFRIEND
A WIDOW FOR ONE YEAR
MY MOVIE BUSINESS
THE FOURTH HAND

and published by Black Swan

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 had 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 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 Vermont and Toronto

This is a memoir, but please understand that (to any writer with a good imagination) all memoirs are false. A fiction writer's memory is an especially imperfect provider of detail; we can always imagine a better detail than the one we can remember. The correct detail is rarely, exactly, what happened; the most truthful detail is what *could* have happened, or what *should* have. Half my life is an act of revision; more than half the act is performed with small changes. Being a writer is a strenuous marriage between careful observation and just as carefully imagining the truths you haven't had the opportunity to see. The rest is the necessary, strict toiling with the language; for me this means writing and rewriting the sentences until they sound as spontaneous as good conversation.

With that in mind, I think that I have become a writer because of my grandmother's good manners and – more specifically – because of a retarded garbage collector to whom my grandmother was always polite and kind.

My grandmother is the oldest living English literature

major to have graduated from Wellesley. She lives in an old people's home, now, and her memory is fading; she doesn't remember the garbage collector who helped me become a writer, but she has retained her good manners and her kindness. When other old people wander into her room, by mistake – looking for their own rooms, or perhaps for their previous residences – my grandmother always says, 'Are you lost, dear? Can I help you find where you're *supposed* to be?'

I lived with my grandmother, in her house, until I was almost seven; for this reason my grandmother has always called me 'her boy'. In fact, she never had a boy of her own; she has three daughters. Whenever I have to say goodbye to her now, we both know she might not live for another visit, and she always says, 'Come back soon, dear. You're *my boy*, you know' – insisting, quite properly, that she is more than a grandmother to me.

Despite her being an English literature major, she has not read my work with much pleasure; in fact, she read my first novel and stopped (for life) with that. She disapproved of the language and the subject matter, she told me; from what she's read about the others, she's learned that my language and my subject matter utterly degenerate as my work matures. She's made no effort to read the four novels that followed the first (she and I agree this is for the best). She's very proud of me, she says; I've never probed too deeply concerning *what* she's proud of me *for* – for growing up, at all, perhaps, or just for being 'her boy' – but she's certainly never made me feel uninteresting or unloved.

I grew up on Front Street in Exeter, New Hampshire. When I was a boy, Front Street was lined with elms; it wasn't Dutch elm disease that killed most of them. The two hurricanes that struck back to back, in the fifties,

wiped out the elms and strangely modernized the street. First Carol came and weakened their roots; then Edna came and knocked them down. My grandmother used to tease me by saying that she hoped this would contribute to my respect for women.

When I was a boy, Front Street was a dark, cool street – even in the summer – and none of the backyards was fenced; everyone's dog ran free, and got into trouble. A man named Poggio delivered groceries to my grandmother's house. A man named Strout delivered the ice for the icebox (my grandmother resisted refrigerators until the very end). Mr Strout was unpopular with the neighborhood dogs – perhaps because he would go after them with the ice tongs. We children of Front Street never bothered Mr Poggio, because he used to let us hang around his store – and he was liberal with treats. We never bothered Mr Strout either (because of his ice tongs and his fabulous aggression towards dogs, which we could easily imagine being turned towards us). But the garbage collector had nothing for us – no treats, no aggression – and so we children reserved our capacity for teasing and taunting (and otherwise making trouble) for him.

His name was Piggy Sneed. He smelled worse than any man I *ever* smelled – with the possible exception of a dead man I caught the scent of, once, in Istanbul. And you would have to be dead to look worse than Piggy Sneed looked to us children on Front Street. There were so many reasons for calling him 'Piggy', I wonder why one of us didn't think of a more original name. To begin with, he lived on a pig farm. He raised pigs, he slaughtered pigs; more importantly, he lived *with* his pigs – it was *just* a pig farm, there was no farm house, there was *only* the barn. There was a

single stovepipe running into one of the stalls. That stall was heated by a wood stove for Piggy Sneed's comfort – and, we children imagined, his pigs (in the winter) would crowd around him for warmth. He certainly smelled that way.

Also he had absorbed, by the uniqueness of his retardation and by his proximity to his animal friends, certain piglike expressions and gestures. His face would jut in front of his body when he approached the garbage cans, as if he were rooting (hungrily) underground; he squinted his small, red eyes; his nose twitched with all the vigor of a snout; there were deep pink wrinkles on the back of his neck – and the pale bristles, which sprouted at random along his jawline, in no way resembled a beard. He was short, heavy, and strong – he *heaved* the garbage cans to his back, he *hurled* their contents into the wooden, slat-sided truck bed. In the truck, ever eager to receive the garbage, there were always a few pigs. Perhaps he took different pigs with him on different days; perhaps it was a treat for them – they didn't have to wait to eat the garbage until Piggy Sneed drove it home. He took *only* garbage – no paper, plastic, or metal trash – and it was *all* for his pigs. This was all he did; he had a very exclusive line of work. He was paid to pick up garbage, which he fed to his pigs. When *he* got hungry (we imagined), he ate a pig. 'A whole pig, at once', we used to say on Front Street. But the *piggiest* thing about him was that he couldn't talk. His retardation either had deprived him of his human speech or had deprived him, earlier, of the ability to learn human speech. Piggy Sneed didn't talk. He grunted. He squealed. He *oinked* – that was his language; he learned it from his friends, as we learn ours.

We children, on Front Street, would sneak up on him when he was raining the garbage down on his pigs – we'd surprise him: from behind hedges, from under porches, from behind parked cars, from out of garages and cellar bulkheads. We'd leap out at him (we never got too close) and we'd squeal at him: 'Piggy! Piggy! Piggy! Piggy! OINK! WEEEE!' And, like a pig – panicked, lurching at random, mindlessly startled *(every time* he was startled, as if he had no memory) – Piggy Sneed would squeal back at us as if we'd stuck him with the slaughtering knife, he'd bellow OINK! out at us as if he'd caught us trying to bleed him in his sleep.

I can't imitate his sound; it was awful, it made all us Front Street children scream and run and hide. When the terror passed, we couldn't wait for him to come again. He came twice a week. What a luxury! And every week or so my grandmother would pay him. She'd come out to the back where his truck was – where we'd often just startled him and left him snorting – and she'd say, 'Good day, Mr Sneed!'

Piggy Sneed would become instantly childlike – falsely busy, painfully shy, excruciatingly awkward. Once he hid his face in his hands, but his hands were covered with coffee grounds; once he crossed his legs so suddenly, while he tried to turn his face away from Grandmother, that he fell down at her feet.

'It's nice to see you, Mr Sneed,' Grandmother would say – not flinching, not in the slightest, from his stench. 'I hope the children aren't being rude to you,' she'd say. 'You don't have to tolerate any rudeness from them, you know,' she would add. And then she'd pay him his money and peer through the wooden slats of the truck bed, where his pigs were savagely attacking the

new garbage – and, occasionally, each other – and she'd say, 'What beautiful pigs these are! Are these your *own* pigs, Mr Sneed? Are they *new* pigs? Are these the same pigs as the other week?' But despite her enthusiasm for his pigs, she could never entice Piggy Sneed to answer her. He would stumble, and trip, and twist his way around her, barely able to contain his pleasure: that my grandmother clearly approved of his pigs, that she even appeared to approve (wholeheartedly!) of *him*. He would grunt softly to her.

When she'd go back in the house, of course – when Piggy Sneed would begin to back his ripe truck out the driveway – we Front Street children would surprise him again, popping up on both sides of the truck, making both Piggy and his pigs squeal in alarm, and snort with protective rage.

'Piggy! Piggy! Piggy! Piggy! OINK! WEEE!'

He lived in Stratham – on a road out of our town that ran to the ocean, about eight miles away. I moved (with my father and mother) out of Grandmother's house (before I was seven, as I told you). Because my father was a teacher, we moved into academy housing – Exeter was an all-boys' school, then – and so our garbage (together with our nonorganic trash) was picked up by the school.

Now I would like to say that I grew older and realized (with regret) the cruelty of children, and that I joined some civic organization dedicated to caring for people like Piggy Sneed. I can't claim that. The code of small towns is simple but encompassing: if many forms of craziness are allowed, many forms of cruelty are ignored. Piggy Sneed was tolerated; he went on being himself, living like a pig. He was tolerated as a harmless

animal is tolerated – by children, he was indulged; he was even encouraged to be a pig.

Of course, growing older, we Front Street children knew that he was retarded – and gradually we learned that he drank a bit. The slat-sided truck, reeking of pig, of waste, or *worse* than waste, careened through town all the years I was growing up. It was permitted, it was given room to spill over – en route to Stratham. Now there was a town, Stratham! In small-town life is there anything more provincial than the tendency to sneer at *smaller* towns? Stratham was not Exeter (not that Exeter was much).

In Robertson Davies's novel *Fifth Business,* he writes about the townspeople of Deptford: 'We were serious people, missing nothing in our community and feeling ourselves in no way inferior to larger places. We did, however, look with pitying amusement on Bowles Corners, four miles distant and with a population of one hundred and fifty. To live in Bowles Corners, we felt, was to be rustic beyond redemption.'

Stratham was Bowles Corners to us Front Street children – it was 'rustic beyond redemption'. When I was fifteen, and began my association with the academy – where there were students from abroad, from New York, even from California – I felt so superior to Stratham that it surprises me, now, that I joined the Stratham Volunteer Fire Department; I don't remember *how* I joined. I think I remember that there was no Exeter Volunteer Fire Department; Exeter had the other kind of fire department, I guess. There were several Exeter residents – apparently in need of something to volunteer *for*? – who joined the Stratham Volunteers. Perhaps our contempt for the people of Stratham was

so vast that we believed they could not even be relied upon to properly put out their own fires.

There was also an undeniable thrill, midst the routine rigors of prep-school life, to be a part of something that could call upon one's services without the slightest warning: that burglar alarm in the heart, which is the late-night ringing telephone – that call to danger, like a doctor's beeper shocking the orderly solitude and safety of the squash court. It made us Front Street children important; and, as we grew only slightly older, it gave us a status that only disasters can create for the young.

In my years as a firefighter, I never rescued anyone – I never even rescued anyone's pet. I never inhaled smoke, I never suffered a burn, I never saw a soul fall beyond the reach of the safety bag. Forest fires are the worst and I was only in one, and only on the periphery. My only injury – 'in action' – was caused by a fellow firefighter throwing his Indian pump into a storage room where I was trying to locate my baseball cap. The pump hit me in the face and I had a bloody nose for about three minutes.

There were occasional fires of some magnitude at Hampton Beach (one night an unemployed saxophone player, reportedly wearing a pink tuxedo, tried to burn down the casino), but we were always called to the big fires as the last measure. When there was an eight- or ten-alarm fire, Stratham seemed to be called last; it was more an invitation to the spectacle than a call to arms. And the local fires in Stratham were either mistakes or lost causes. One night Mr Skully, the meter reader, set his station wagon on fire by pouring vodka in the carburetor – because, he said, the car wouldn't start. One night Grant's dairy barn was ablaze, but all the cows – and even most of the hay – had been rescued