



Cesar Rangel/AFP/Getty Images

John Irving on duality of desire

BY MEREDITH MARAN

No overstatement, this: John Irving is an American literary icon.

First published to little acclaim in 1968 (“Setting Free the Bears”), he was thrice-nominated for a National Book Award and won it in 1980; received an O. Henry Award for a short story in 1981; won the Oscar for best adapted screenplay for “The Cider House Rules” in 2000; and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2001. Qualifying him as an heir to the Tough, Quirky Yet Sensitive White Male Writer tradition, Irving was inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame.

In 1980, Random House published a volume called “3 By Irving,” a compilation of three of the four novels Irving had then published — including “The World According to Garp” (1978), his first bestseller.

“Other novelists of his generation may be equally prolific,” Colgate University professor Terrence Des Pres wrote in the book’s introduction, “but there is something singular, something uncommonly thorough about ... Irving’s manner of mixing disaster and farce, his blend of gravity and humor, his bent for revealing an element of self-parody in the most pitiful moments.”

Indeed, the twin masks of tragedy and comedy weep and leer their way through Irving’s considerable oeuvre, which now encompasses 13 novels, several of them literary prize-winners and five of them adapted to the big screen.

Irving’s gift for containing life’s opposites within the thin walls of his protagonists’ bodies has never been more finely honed than it is in his latest, “In One Person.” The novel is the first-person retrospective of Billy Abbott, a bisexual man in his 60s.

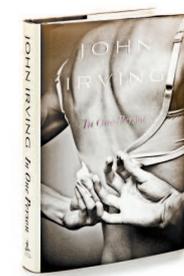
“I made Billy a first-person narrator to make the story more personal,” Irving has said, and stunningly personal it is — especially considering that Irving is a heterosexual

man with limited first-hand experience of the gay male culture about which he writes with the affection and insights of an insider.

Fans of Irving’s trademark settings and themes — New England boarding schools; ex-pat life in Vienna; aberrant sexual enthusiasms — will find familiar touchstones in “In One Person.” Also on display is the particularly biting sarcasm Irving reserves for the profession to which he assigns many of his characters.

He writes: “I just love it when certain people feel free to tell writers what the correct words are. When I hear the same people use impact as a verb, I want to throw up!”

We meet Billy as a fatherless boy, born in the 1950s, being raised by his mother and stepfather in the small burg of First Sister, Vt. Early in his teens, crushed out on Miss Frost, the voluptuous town librarian, Billy comes to a horrifying realization: He lusts after the handsome high school wrestling star, Jacques Kittredge, as passionately as he does Miss Frost.



In One Person

By John Irving,
Simon & Schuster,
448 pages, \$28

“Talk about a crush on the wrong person! ... Was I the only boy at the all-boys’ school who found that the wrestling matches gave me a homoerotic charge? I doubt it, but boys like me kept their heads down.”

Of all people to turn to for advice and comfort, Billy chooses Miss Frost. “I have a crush on Kittredge, and I’m trying not to,” he whispers to her in his “library voice.” “Is there a novel about that?”

“Miss Frost put both her hands on my shoulders. I knew she could feel me shaking. ‘Oh, William, there are worse

things, you know,’ she said.”

As a young adult, Billy contemplates acting on his crushes on “the wrong people.” “If an unwanted pregnancy was the ‘abyss’ that an intrepid girl could fall into ... surely the abyss for a boy like me was to succumb to homosexual activity. In such love lay madness; in acting out my most dire imaginings, I would certainly descend to the bottomless pit of the universe of desire.”

Descend Billy does, with equal measures of courage and self-loathing, struggling to keep his head and his pants up through the closeted ’60s, the disco-depraved ’70s and the decimation of the gay male population during the AIDS epidemic of the ’80s.

“A lot of people left where they were living in the middle of the AIDS crisis,” Irving writes, “many of us moved somewhere else, hoping it would be better — but it wasn’t.”

Irving generously credits two friends and readers with the uncanny accuracy with which he portrays the epidemic: Abraham Verghese, who wrote the 1994 AIDS-doctor memoir, “My Own Country,” and Edmund White, who wrote movingly of the epidemic in his memoirs and founded AIDS organizations in New York and Paris.

“They were my safety net,” Irving said.

“‘In One Person’ is the novel that, for me, will define (the AIDS) era,” Verghese writes in his back-cover endorsement. “A profound truth is arrived at in these pages.”

Along with tears, laughter and an intimate retrospective covering the past half-century of American life, “In One Person” delivers many profound truths, including but not limited to the ways in which our proclivities define us.

“Where our desires ‘come from,’” Irving writes, “that is a dark, winding road.”

Meredith Maran is the author of “A Theory of Small Earthquakes.”