

# Irving cracks them up at Vancouver writers and readers festival

BY JOE WIEBE

John Irving's novels are known for their quirky characters, bizarre and incredible storylines and an emotional range that keeps readers veering between laughter and tears. But who knew the 67-year-old American author of a dozen novels could be such a ham in person?

That's exactly what the audience at the Vancouver International Writers & Readers Festival experienced Oct. 22 as Irving worked the sold-out crowd with the skills of a veteran comedian.

The author of some of the best-known American novels of the past few decades — *The World According to Garp* (1978), *The Cider House Rules* (1985), *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989) — spent only five of his 90 minutes on stage actually reading from his new book, *Last Night in Twisted River*. With no moderator in sight and a Madonna mike freeing his expressive hands, he charismatically spun stories, dropped names and cracked jokes that had the audience braying with laughter.

Spectators were asked to hand in questions ahead of time, which Irving used as inspiration for anecdotes such as the time he tackled Kurt Vonnegut in order to give him the Heimlich — even though Vonnegut was not actually choking.

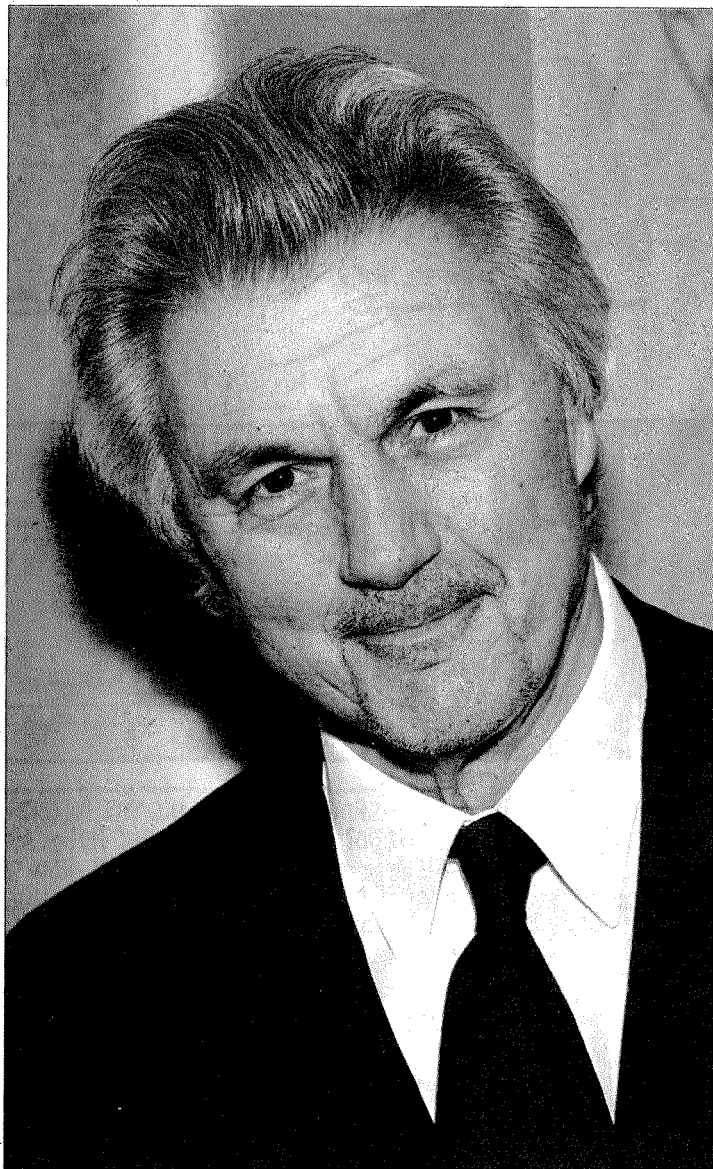
Apparently, two of the questions were inexplicably for Margaret Atwood, and he used this as a running gag throughout the night, at one point even threatening to answer them on behalf of "[his] friend, Peggy."

He knows her well enough to answer them, he deadpanned, only his voice isn't low enough.

When I sat down with Irving the next morning, I told him I was surprised by his performance. Considering how few writers of his stature even deign to go on the road promoting their books, it was refreshing to see how much he enjoyed the experience.

"I like the writing part of being a writer much more than I like the public part of being a writer," he explained, "but it's an advantage that I waited until my fourth novel to be self-supporting as a writer. Whenever I am inclined to complain about the public part of being a writer, I have to remind myself of what it was like to have no public presence as a writer."

*Last Night in Twisted River* is a sprawling story that charts the lives of a father and son, Dominic and Daniel Baciagalupo,



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John Irving's new book is *Last Night in Twisted River*.

from the 1950s to the recent past.

At the start of the story, Dominic is the cook at a logging camp in northern New Hampshire. A single dad, he gets some (often unwanted) parenting assistance from Ketchum, a gruff logger with an extraordinary range of curses ("constipated Christ!") who stands out as one of Irving's most memorable supporting characters.

But when Daniel accidentally kills the girlfriend of the local sheriff — the murderous Constable Carl — father and son end up running for their lives.

Yes, the premise sounds ridiculous, but Irving makes it work by jumping long stretches of time between sections so that we get a chance to see Dominic and Daniel settled in their new lives just long enough before they are forced to flee again. Ketchum remains a constant in their lives while other characters come and go, and gradually the mystery behind the unlikely friendship between Dominic

and Ketchum is revealed.

John Irving is famous for writing the last sentence of his novels first. After it comes to him, he then charts the story backward, until he figures out what the first sentence is, before actually getting down to writing the book.

"I hoped it was a habit I would outgrow," he told the audience at the reading. "If I don't see where the story ends, I don't even start," he explained to me.

"What I had, for more than 20 years, was a situation: a cook in some rough, frontier kind of place; an act of violence as yet unknown; he has a son; they become fugitives; that boy will eventually become a writer.

"But until I know what happens at the end of a story and I've made that map of the action of the story, I'm nowhere near ready to begin the writing of that novel, regardless of how long, or not, the idea has been in my head."

Interestingly, Danny Baciagalupo, the cook's son who becomes a novelist in this book,

writes the same way Irving does. And the similarities don't end there: He shares Irving's birth year (1942) and attends the same schools and teaches at the same colleges where Irving did.

Also, the trajectory of his writing career runs parallel to Irving's: Danny's first three books receive little notice, but then his fourth catapults him to fame.

And there's more. Danny's sixth book is an "abortion novel," its story nearly identical to *The Cider House Rules*. Published in the same year as Irving's original, it is also made into a movie that wins the Oscar for best screenplay.

This is not the first time Irving has written a book with autobiographical elements; actually, it's a habit of his. Certain themes recur in most of his novels, and in *Twisted River* readers will recognize elements from earlier works: an absent parent, the death of a child, sexual relationships between an adolescent boy and an adult woman, severed body parts, wrestling, New England and a novelist protagonist.

The most common criticism I hear of Irving's writing comes from people who say they really enjoyed his novels once but have tired of the thematic repetition from book to book.

I would argue that his best books avoid this pattern of emotional recycling. *A Prayer for Owen Meany* and *The Cider House Rules* don't rely on so many of his clichéd tropes.

One element most Irving novels showcase effectively, is a depth of research on an obscure topic important to the story.

In *Twisted River*, researched elements include logging camps of northern New England in the 1950s, Boston's Italian North End in the '50s and '60s, and professional cooking in a variety of styles.

Irving said he enjoys doing the research, describing it as "the love of having to learn something, the love of becoming a student of some subject before you can write about it."

Although comic and quirky, his books are also known as tearjerkers, often involving the deaths of characters who are important to the protagonist.

Irving acknowledged this at his reading, and even joked about it. He was asked if he'd ever considered writing a sequel or a trilogy. With an eye-rolling smirk, he answered glibly, "You mean about the characters who stay alive?"

When the laughter died down, he mused, "Maybe a prequel..."