

It's 7.45am and John Irving is lying on his kitchen floor next to his beloved chocolate labrador, Dickens. He is speaking tenderly into her ear. He can say things to her he can't say to people. It's just between the two of them. But she is tired and old. She moves slowly and when she lies down, it's difficult for her to stand up again. So Irving is on the floor, by her side.

I ask how old she is. "Fifteen in November," he replies, softly. "If she makes it." I first met Irving four years ago, when I went to the Irvings' summer cottage on Lake Huron, Canada. The cottage is remote. So remote, there are no roads and it can only be reached by boat. He goes there, he said, to get away from life in Vermont. I remember thinking, how hectic was life in *Vermont*?

Life in Vermont is devoted to what's essential and Irving is not a writer who needs to be around people. He doesn't go anywhere unless he has to. He sails past interruptions, insulated from everything unnecessary; his needs come only from his work and his family.

So much of who John Irving is, is who he's not. He doesn't care about being seen at a book party. If he goes to a film festival, it's to see the film. His wife, Janet, is never far from his side. He seeks perfection, sees it in words – and what makes him important in an industry given to hype is this: he wants to tell a good story.

In his novels, there is usually an element of loss. Children are abandoned, children die, parents are absent, awful things happen. They have to grow up too soon, and navigate adult situations without a map.

But Irving is always in control and makes what he calls "a backward map"; knowing the ending at all times, he writes towards it.

The mechanics of how he writes are distinctive. Nothing is by accident or chance. He is tuned into detail; in his writing and in his life.

The consequences of loss – loss of innocence, loss of sexual identity, loss of trust – inform his fiction and in his latest novel, *In One Person*, the bisexual narrator, Billy Abbott, is a "sexual suspect" – distrusted and feared by everyone, gay and straight.

He has written 13 novels, which have sold more than 12 million copies in 35 languages. Upstairs there are copies of his books in Japanese, Italian, Russian and Hebrew. In the guest bathroom there is the framed *Time* magazine cover of Irving from 1981.

John Irving's life changed after *The World According to Garp* was published in 1978. He had been living in Vermont, teaching, coaching wrestling, married to his first wife, Shyla, and raising their two sons, Colin and Brendan. He had published three novels (*The Water-Method Man*, *Setting Free the Bears* and *The 158-Pound Marriage*) and what the success of *Garp* meant to him was that he could make writing his full-time profession. He took full advantage and trained himself to concentrate for eight hours a day.

The grey shingled house in Vermont was built 21 years ago and sits on a hill. He rarely leaves. He wakes up early, hangs out with his dog, boils some eggs for breakfast, goes into his office and in the late afternoon, emerges to go to the gym at the end of the hall. After an hour-and-a-half workout, he cooks dinner and talks with his wife, Janet Turnbull, who is also his agent. The Irvings have an apartment in Toronto and the cottage in Canada but no matter where he is, the routine doesn't vary.

Nothing frustrates Irving more than interferences that interrupt his routine. The impatience comes from an acute awareness of having a limited amount of time left to devote to what he feels needs his attention the most – his writing and his family.

Irving turned 70 this year. Because his novels are con-



The HIT MAN

John Irving, expert wrestler and one of the world's most beloved novelists, has long fought for life's underdogs – from *Garp* to *Owen Meany*. But with his new novel, the fight is personal. Ariel Leve meets him

Portrait by Blake Fitch

structed so meticulously and the passage of time is an intricate part of the foundation, two years ago, he stopped drinking all alcohol except beer.

Now, he's stopped drinking that too. "If I didn't write novels the way I write them, I'd still be drinking. I didn't need to do it for my health. I did it for my memory." He talks about how it's easy for him to give things up. "For 20 years, I weighed 165lb. I lost 30-35lb every year. I wrestled at 130. I dropped 30lb a year. That's hard. You have to be very disciplined to drop that weight and keep it off."

Since he stopped drinking he's noticed a marked improvement in his concentration and he has a better retention of the details. The consecutive order. He knows at what point he reveals something of significance to the reader, how many times he's mentioned it, when it's time to mention it again. He doesn't want to have to go back every few days to check. He doesn't want to waste time.

When Irving does leave the house for an extended period of time, it's usually to visit one of his children. A day earlier, he and Janet had gone to watch their son, Everett, a joyful 20 year-old, perform in his college production of the musical *Rent*. I'd met them there to drive with them back to Vermont. When I arrived, I spotted Janet, waving enthusiastically. If I hadn't been in the car talking with Irving, he would have used the time to write. One of his favourite places to get work done is on a plane, where he can sit, uninterrupted, for several hours. He and Janet won't fly together on the same plane if Everett isn't flying with them. They are protective of each other and even more so of their son.

Two of Irving's previous novels, *Until I Find You* and *Last Night in Twisted River*, are dedicated to Everett, who is gay. Irving is not happy about the possibility that Everett's privacy will be invaded by a public discussion of his having a gay son and that people will make a false connection as to why he wrote *In One Person*, a novel about sexual intolerance. Always preferring to be in control, he has decided to address the issue himself.

"As I told Everett, when he came out, I love him more for it... why more? Because he'll have a harder time in the world because of it, and he should know how very proud I am of him, and how much I love him, for who he is." But Irving is adamant he did not write *In One Person* because of this.

"*In One Person* isn't about my having a gay son. I was making notes on this novel before I knew Everett was gay; for seven or eight years before I began writing, which I started in June 2009, I knew everything about the characters and the story. A bisexual young man falls in love with an older, transgender woman; the bi guy is the main character. Yet probably, because Everett is my son, I must have felt more urgency about making *In One Person* my next novel – about writing it sooner rather than later, about wanting Everett to read it while he was still in his late teens or early twenties."

The public perception of John Irving is of a robust alpha male yet he has always championed sexual outsiders, and has empathy for outsiders in general.

He competed as a wrestler for 20 years, coached the sport until he was 47, and in 1992 was inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame.

"I had a particular affinity for wrestling and it did have a lot to do with being small and being combative – and being angry. And when you're small and you don't back down, you get in a lot of fights. So I am eternally grateful to my mother, who said if you're going to continue to get in fights,

As I told my son when he came out, I love him more for it. Why? Because he'll have a harder time in the world'

you might as well learn something about it." Irving's mother introduced him to the sport and the discipline, the rigorous repetition of practising moves over and over carries over into his writing process.

As a novelist he has created some of the most substantive female characters in fiction and is a longtime defender of abortion rights. He purposely made *The Cider House Rules* a historical novel and set it in the early 20th century to remove it from the political clamour. In the story, an orphanage director and obstetrician performs safe, albeit illegal, abortions. The pro-choice statement is loud and clear.

"I remember people saying to me – long-time abortion rights activists – that it was quaint that I had written a historical novel about abortion when, as I remember some friends saying to me, the issue was 'now behind us'. *Now behind us?*" He shakes his head, angrily. "I don't think so. But even I could not have told you in 1985 that, sadly, the

resistance to abortion rights would harden and increase over the years to the extent that it has."

He refers to the current crop of Republicans as a "collection of troglodytes" and gets worked up when he discusses them. "They want less government? No they don't. They want less government where they want less government. They don't want government involved when it comes to health care. But when it comes to abor-

tion rights or gay marriage – oh, they'd like a little more government then. They'd like to step in and tell you what to do then. It's coming from," he snarls with disgust, "a sexually discriminatory place."

In One Person is a polemical novel but he does not allow his anger at the current political climate to filter into his work. When I mention that people will say it's a timely novel, this displeases him. He doesn't write things that are timely. "Let's put it this way. There's a lot of ignorance about how long it takes to write a novel. There's a lot of ignorance about how long a novel is in your head before you start to write it. So that when a novel is published, there will always be some idiot who gives credit

for capitalising on the moment – I have a hard time with the very concept."

Asking a question about inspiration is tricky. The implication is it's confining and suggests, too, that there's something outside the story that prompted the story in the first place. "I can't think of a single case in 13 novels where that was true," he says.

"Why is it that Billy is born a bisexual and his life is guided by these two brave transsexual women? Nothing inspired that. That was the beginning." In the novel there is a line: "We are formed by what we desire." Perhaps there is another way into the question. Was he formed by what he desired? There is a long pause. There is the sound of him chewing gum as he sits, back straight, hands folded in lap, staring straight ahead at the road. Thinking.

"I wouldn't make the case that there wasn't anything particularly special about my pre-sexual desires. In the Fifties sexual desire was more far-ranging because sexual activity didn't exist. It wasn't allowed. Your sexual experience was entirely what you imagined. I don't think there's anything very unusual. I had crushes on certain older boys that I hoped would pass; and they did. They were strong enough to give me sympathy for boys for whom those feelings would not pass. I had crushes on girls my own age and their moth-



DISCIPLINE From top, Irving guest starring with Robin Williams in a scene from the film adaptation of 'The World According to Garp'; with his family in 2001; and on the cover of 'Time' magazine in 1981



ers. Thinking about this age – 14, 15 – it’s an age when you fantasise about everything because you’ve had nothing. I would say it was not unusual.

“If someone would say ‘oh no, I only desired unmarried girls my own age’, I say, well lucky you – I don’t know how much I’d believe them or maybe they grew up differently than I did, and any unwanted desire was not acknowledged or strictly denied.

“I’m not writing non-fiction. I don’t feel anything about me as a kid was unique. Except that I had more interest in being alone and using my imagination.”

There is a break in the conversation while we stop at a petrol station. When we get back on the road, Irving resumes where we left off, looking straight ahead, holding his Dunkin’ Donuts coffee cup, absently shifting the cup from one hand to the other.

Incredulous at the “vibrations of intolerance” still in the air, he is concerned for America not only politically, but as a culture. Novels, he points out, aren’t valued and novelists aren’t either.

What’s considered culturally important gets under his skin. “How many days did it take Whitney Houston to die?” He is indignant. “Please. Please. Can we imagine a novelist in America – Christ. What a load of s---. That’s our culture. Jesus Christ. American culture. Spare me.”

The Irvings’ house is spacious, cosy and filled with family photographs. There is a mountain lodge feeling. A grey stone porch is covered with the last dusting of snow. There is no noise. Janet has gone to the bedroom and when Irving appears, he has changed into sweatpants and a flannel shirt and he heads to his office.

His office does not have a door. He had it taken off and explains, “I never wanted my kids to feel I was more inter-



FAMILY BUSINESS

Irving with his wife and agent Janet Turnbull and their son Everett, in 2008

“The young man said, ‘You write novels by hand?’ He thought I was a sea turtle or something”

ested in anything I was doing than I was in them.” We sit in the sunny room which looks out across mountains towards Massachusetts. On a shelf is the Oscar he won in 1989 for his screenplay adaptation of *The Cider House Rules*. On his desk there is a Roget’s Thesaurus, frayed around the edges from abundant use.

There is also a Webster’s Dictionary, Shakespeare’s complete works, and several stacks of papers with yellow post-its poking out. A jar of pencils. Another filled with highlighting pens.

Irving’s heroes are men who take the responsibility of family seriously. For the past 44 years, he has always had a child living with him at home. His two sons, Colin and Brendan, from his first marriage; then just as Brendan left for college, Everett was born.

All of his novels have an emphasis on a child at a transitory time. Something happens to them as a witness or a participant and they will be who they become as adults as a result. Irving has been a close observer of childhood adolescence and its transitions and his children have served to keep him connected to those moments. “Your awareness of what childhood is like and when it leaves you is more acute by proximity.”

But defining what’s autobiographical is not, he feels, based on his own childhood events. There is nothing that has happened to him that he feels he can’t improve upon by fictionalising it and there is a steadfast belief that he can always alter things to make the story more compelling.

It’s fair to assume he won’t be writing a memoir.

He rolls his eyes. “Not only do I think memoir is uninter-

esting, but it's deeply uninteresting. I would only make an exception for those people who have had interesting lives. When I find myself with friends and someone says, 'oh, when are you going to write a memoir?' I have to apologise for getting angry."

It is not a coincidence that he has written about harrowing childhood experiences; he has imagined his worst fears and channelled them on to the page.

It's late in the day. Irving goes to work out before dinner and I head upstairs for a nap. The only thing about getting older that truly worries him is the arthritis in his fingers and only because he now writes every draft by hand. His hand surgeon explained tendons that allow him to move fingers are not easy to fix, and he has broken his fingers many times while wrestling.

On the way to dinner, he tells a story about a recent trip back from San Francisco. Upon landing in New York, the young man sitting next to him on the plane says, "I couldn't help but notice - what were you doing?"

"I was writing. So he says, 'You mean, by hand?' 'Yes. I was writing a novel.'

"By hand? You write novels? By hand?' He was going nuts. He thought I was a sea turtle or something." On the way home, as Irving drives the three of us back to the house, we talk about his writing *In One Person* from the point of view of a bisexual man. Unlike her husband, Janet has little apprehension about the questions people might ask.

"I'm assuming people are decent," she replies, optimistically. Irving groans as she says this. "If you write a book that's convincing and realistic, which a novel is supposed to be," he says, "then you're going to have to deal with people



who don't have the imagination to think anyone could imagine something. When it comes to sex, especially. Everyone has imagined at a young age having sex they've never had and never will." He pauses, eyes on the road ahead. "OK, maybe Rick Santorum hasn't."

Not a lot of research was needed for *In One Person*, yet Irving wrote with forensic and poignant detail about the Aids epidemic in the Eighties. He knew many people who died and has not forgotten the political indifference to the disease in the Reagan era. "I believe strongly that if it had been

a virus that was killing heterosexual young men and women, we certainly would have had a president who was more involved. There's no forgiving Reagan for his non-involvement and utter detachment in that terrible time." We reach the house and pull into the garage. As we enter, he lovingly greets his dog, who does not rise from her dog bed.

The following morning at 7.45am, he is on the floor, by her side. He

gets up to rinse blueberries in the sink and the conversation turns to his excitement about the new novel he's already begun. Has he ever had a day where he hasn't felt like writing? He stops moving and looks at me, puzzled. "I can't imagine that," he says. The patriarch of American fiction, whose boundless imagination has captivated millions, can imagine anything, but he can't imagine that.

'In One Person' by John Irving (published May 10, Doubleday, £20) is available to pre-order from Telegraph Books at £18 plus £1.25 p&p. 0844 871 1515; books.telegraph.co.uk



HOUSE OF LOVE

Irving with Michael Caine, star of the 'Cider House Rules' film, for which the author won an Oscar; and co-stars Tobey Maguire and Charlize Theron