

Right: the writer with his son Everett by the river near their home in Pointe au Baril, Ontario

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO JOHN

His novels are epic, explicit — and shaped by his unusual childhood. John Irving talks to Ariel Leve about his lost father, being seduced at 11, and getting a second stab at life. Portraits: Jonathan Torgovnik

Before the journey begins, the details arrive. There is a note from his assistant: “John says it is an open boat ride, so you should bring rain gear, just in case.” And advice: request a specific driver who knows the way from Toronto airport to the boat basin in Pointe au Baril, Ontario. From there I’ll get the boat to the remote cottage where the Irvings — John, his wife, Janet, and their son, Everett — are staying.

The cottage is a 10-minute ride from the boat basin, and as we pull up, a dripping-wet labrador is waiting on the dock, wagging his tail and barking. “Dickens!” a cheerful shout comes from Everett, Irving’s 18-year-old son, who greets me with two of his friends. A tall, elegant woman with long legs appears and warmly introduces herself as Janet, John’s wife. We enter the house through a screen door that leads into the kitchen, and she introduces me to her husband.

John Irving is as formidable in person as he is on the page. One of America’s greatest living

novelists is chopping vegetables in knee-length shorts and a sleeveless tank top. There are a smattering of tattoos: the names of Colin and Brendan (his grown sons from his first marriage) on one arm; on the other, Janet and Everett; and a wrestling mat on the inside of his right forearm.

Irving has earned his place in the pantheon of literary American novelists. Over 10m copies of his books have sold in dozens of languages. He has written 12 novels, among them *The World According to Garp*, which won the National Book Award in 1980; *The Cider House Rules* (he won an Oscar in 1989 for his screenplay adapted from it); and *A Prayer for Owen Meany* in 1989, which deals with fate, social injustice, and Irving’s lingering anger about the Vietnam war.

At 67, Irving is robust and lean. I’m shown a small room where he works out on a fitness machine for two hours every day. A collection of skipping ropes hangs on the wall and there are photos of him in action both as a wrestler >>>



and later, as a wrestling coach. Irving discovered the sport when he was 14, and in 1992 was inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame. Being an athlete and a writer both require extreme discipline and attention to detail.

He was born John Wallace Blunt Jr in 1942 in Exeter, New Hampshire. His parents divorced in 1944 when he was two, and his mother refused his father access to him. His early life, before his stepfather, Colin Irving, entered the picture when he was six, was spent in a household of women. He found these women agreeable, and he felt an anger towards men that he didn't understand. It was his mother who introduced him to wrestling. She took him to the gym and said: "If you're going to keep fighting people you might as well know what you're doing."

At the same time, he began writing. There was a feeling of not fitting in in his early life and later in his career. "I was seen as a pig-headed jock by my literary friends," he says, "and by my wrestler friends I was seen as a weird artiste."

In the simple, open-plan kitchen, Irving prepares dinner. He is in nonstop motion, squatting to open the oven to check on the aubergine parmigiana and then quickly bouncing up to tend to the blackening chicken on the grill. As he cooks, he cleans up as he goes along, methodical and careful. He appears as organised in his life as he is in his thoughts.

Last Night in Twisted River is Irving's 12th novel. He first mentioned to Janet that he had an idea for a book about a cook and his son on the run when they met, in 1986.

"He has the ideas lined up, like planes on a runway," Janet says, sounding genuinely awed by her husband's talent. When they met, Janet Turnbull was vice-president and publisher of Bantam-Seal books. It was five years after Irving's divorce from his first wife, Shyla, who he had been married to for 17 years. He and Janet fell in love quickly, and were married a year later. Janet is 12 years younger.

Irving exists now in an exclusive realm where he writes and Janet handles all the minutiae and business. As they discuss how this works, she explains that even a food processor breaking can set him off. "He gets really bogged down and really angry. It's kind of irrational. So I feel I need to swoop in there and sweep it out."

Irving admits that he is an angry person. "I certainly had reasons to be angry as a kid. And... I'm very slow about how I process things. Especially things that have emotionally, psychologically and politically affected me. I try and get as much distance as



I can before I write about those things because I know I am angry about them."

He wrote his Vietnam novel, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, many years after the war, and he purposely made *The Cider House Rules* a historical novel, to get it away from the political clamour surrounding abortion. More recently, he has withdrawn from conflict with others. "There was a point after George Bush was elected where I said to Janet, 'We don't do dinner any more with Republicans. Because I'm not going to be polite. I'm not going to be nice. And if someone says something of a Republican mindset, then I'm going to throw a f---ing chicken bone at them.' And I meant it."

What about controlling anger? A wry smile crosses his face. He lowers his voice and his tone is suddenly mischievous. "I always control it," he whispers. "I never lose my temper so that I'm not in control. That's maybe a wrestling thing. But I know how to look like I'm out of control. I know how to look like I'm ballistic." He shakes his head. "But I'm never ballistic."

Dinner is served on the veranda. Irving sits at the head of the table. He explains that his life was altered in 1978 when he was in his mid-thirties and *The World According to Garp* was published, though he admits

now that he was at a low point and unable to celebrate his success and good fortune because his first marriage was ending. In retrospect he feels that it was a good thing that he wasn't successful too soon. He had written three novels preceding *Garp* (*Setting Free the Bears*, *The Water-Method Man* and *The 158-Pound Marriage*), and he anticipated that he would continue writing novels in obscurity, teaching English, and coaching wrestlers. Success meant he could write full time; his preoccupation became his occupation. As Everett clears the dishes, the talk turns to health, and Irving reveals that in April 2007 he was diagnosed with prostate cancer. The prognosis was grim. He was informed that even after a radical prostatectomy there would be a 30% chance of the cancer recurring. Thankfully, that hasn't happened. He was also told that he stood a 70% chance of being left incontinent and sexually dysfunctional. That hasn't happened either. "The most threatening part of the procedure..." he begins, and Janet covers her eyes with her hands. "This is too much information," she says under her breath. "Oh no, no, this is a good story," he continues with enthusiasm, "I love this part. You have a catheter. It's an uncomfortable experience. So I came back from the hospital and walked into the kitchen — and the dog took one look at the rubber hose apparatus and clearly thought that it

was a dog toy, and lunged. I thought, 'Oh God. Not even I could write this and get away with it.' It's one of the best scenes: a guy comes home from the hospital with a catheter and the dog takes it out. I was totally paralysed, I could barely move, still on the painkillers, Janet was putting the car away, I was helpless and Dickens was coming at me. This big 80lb ball of fur charging across the kitchen." Luckily, his son Colin tackled the dog mid-kitchen.

"It is," Irving says, turning serious, "a great feeling when you get a diagnosis like that and it passes. It's like the sound of a bullet going past your ear. You think, 'Okay — lucky again.'"

How did that diagnosis change things? "I've always been a morbid person," he says. "It highlighted how much longer I wanted to be around — as a father and for Janet. They stood to be shortchanged. But mortality is a huge factor in every novel I've written. Somebody's time is always up."

In the novels, terrible things happen in often absurd circumstances, and in ways we don't understand. *Last Night in Twisted River* is on a par with *The World According to Garp*; it will not disappoint his loyal readers. It covers five decades, and structurally, he confessed,



Far left: Irving is wrestled to the ground by Robin Williams on the set of *The World According to Garp*

Left: Williams, who plays Garp, in a more tender moment

Below: Michael Caine and Toby Maguire in *The Cider House Rules*; for the screenplay, Irving won an Oscar (inset)



would be, he points to a photo of his biological father, who he never knew, in his second-world-war uniform at the age of 24. It is the first photograph he ever saw of his father. "By the time I saw that picture, my eldest son, Colin, was already older than my father [in that picture] and so I thought that I was looking at my son."

"That's my mother," he says, pointing to a sepia photo from long ago. Then he points to photographs of his father with him as a small child. He was 36 when he learnt the truth about his biological father. His mother gave him these photos as he was getting divorced from his first wife, along with letters that his father had written from China during the war, and said: "Now that you're leaving your wife you can understand these letters."

And then she wouldn't talk about it. He knew his father existed, he knew who he was, that he was alive and that he'd been a pilot in the war. When he was a child, his mother would only say, "I just don't talk about him, dear," and his grandmother said the same thing. Irving concluded he was a monster, and that they were trying to protect him.

"It would have been a comfort if he'd been killed in the war — but they said, 'No, it just didn't work out and we don't want to talk about it.'"

Years later he heard that his father would occasionally attend his wrestling matches. Did he hope for him to ever appear and introduce himself? "I always did. I thought he would. And I wondered why he didn't."

We are still standing in front of the photos. "I always wondered why... but my mother was very tough. She must have laid down the law and said, 'No. You leave me, you don't see him.' But I wasn't in her shoes in 1941 and pregnant."

Did he ever try to look for him? He answers instantly: "No." Then he adds: "It's got an easy answer. If my mother had been unhappy — if she hadn't remarried, or if she'd remarried someone who was an asshole — I definitely would've looked him up. But I loved my stepfather. It wasn't for my mother's sake that I didn't try to find him. He would have been easy to find. He was in the military. I knew his

it was the most challenging to write. He has reached a point where he has nothing to prove and is, like the characters he creates, vulnerable to the uncertainties of life.

The next morning we meet for breakfast. Irving lowers a few eggs into a pot of boiling water. He sets the egg timer for seven minutes. Even inside the fridge there is order: the milk cartons are lined up on one side, the juice on the other. We eat and then head to the writing shed. Irving writes seven days a week, eight hours a day, from 7am. He begins his novels with the final sentence and works towards

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it. On his wooden desk there is nothing out of place. "Listen to this," he says, and turns on his IBM typewriter. It sounds like a tractor. He has six of them at the family home in Vermont, so that if one breaks, he can use another. There is a cup of highlighter pens — he colour-codes when he rewrites, which he does constantly, so it doesn't get confusing for his assistant. Tacked to the wall there is a quote from the Austrian poet Rilke typed on a sheet of paper. It reads: "Works of art are of an infinite loneliness."

When asked if there was a fire and he had to save one thing, other than his writing, what it



name; I knew his rank. But I didn't want to betray my stepfather. He had been such a good guy to me. It would have felt like I was saying, 'You're not good enough, I want to have my real father.' Because this guy came into my life at a vital moment."

He was living with his mother, Frances Winslow, and grandmother — "a piece of work" — when his mother remarried. Colin Irving, his stepfather, was even-tempered and calm. "And he was good with me. He was a barrier between myself and my mother and her temper," he says. "So he was like the best thing that happened to me."

In 2001, he was contacted by one of the children from his biological father's second marriage. He found a new family. His father, John Blunt, had been dead for five years. As a child, he used to bait his mother that if she didn't tell him about his father, it would just make him more of a writer because he'd have to invent him and the circumstances of how she got pregnant. She'd say: "Go ahead, dear." And he did. In *The World According to Garp* the mother straddles a brain-damaged, dying second-world-war soldier so that she can impregnate herself.

When his mother handed him the letters, they were, he says, his first introduction to the fact that his father wasn't a monster, and that he sounded very reasonable and very nice.

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But then Irving lets out a resigned sigh. At that point he was divorced, he had two sons to support, and recalling why he didn't reach out he explains: "I thought, 'I don't need another emotional strain in my life.'"

His novel *Until I Find You* was published in 2005, and at the time he revealed some autobiographical details about his childhood, specifically his sexual abuse — although he never called it that. Molested is the wrong word for what happened, he insists: "I was sexually initiated by a woman in her twenties." He was 11 years old. "She was someone I was tremendously fond of. I never felt coerced, frightened; I never use the word abuse."

Irving understands that the woman could have gone to prison, but he didn't feel that she mistreated him. "When she moved on with her life and moved away, I missed her because I was very fond of her. Later, having relations of my own sexually, they weren't as satisfying. Because groping around with a girl your own age wasn't as interesting as this woman.

"And then I felt I had a problem — and a secret. I was much more attracted to women who were older than I was. I had infinite numbers of crushes on various girlfriends' mothers, which seemed totally inappropriate.

I went through a period where women who were 5, 10, 15, 20 years older than I was were attractive to me. I felt that they could see it. It was almost as if they could read my history and they knew that I was vulnerable to them as older women. I felt ashamed. But then it all went away when my first child was born. And I suddenly thought, 'For God's sake, what's important? You do what you can so that this kid doesn't have your experience.' And that was the end of it."

He waited a long time to write about it. In *Until I Find You* he was able to put necessary distance between himself and his experiences. "I could make Mrs Machado much more complex and awful than the woman who seduced me ever was."

I point out that the use of the word "seduce" is generous and protective. "She felt she was being nice to me. I had no doubt that she loved me and wanted to take care of me.

"She felt sorry for my situation — that I had a skewed home life. It was clear to almost every adult that knew me that I was a singularly withdrawn and different kid."

When pressed about his forgiving attitude he answers. "She didn't hurt me. She didn't put me in a headlock or anything."

He refers back to the household of women who ran the show, his mother, his aunts and his grandmother. "There were these verbally quick,

well-spoken, supremely confident good-looking women just running everything. And I think that might have been enough to make me the kind of young man I was, even if I'd never had that experience. See what I'm saying? Even if this woman in her twenties hadn't seduced me, I think these high-powered women in my childhood were enough. So, I had an early impression that men fled. Either they got pushed around, or they jumped ship."

What characterises so much of Irving's work is memory and the passage of time. He is mindful of his short-term memory fading. The details of his novels are so complex, he needs to reread the novel he's writing more frequently than he used to. He has to work harder at it. Nothing offends him more than laziness. "When I encountered that naturally gifted athlete who was lazy and didn't work hard," he lowers his voice, "I did not wish that guy well. I said, 'Give me the guy who's a pit bull, who will work his heart out — and be there at the end of the match.'"

Critics, too, get under his skin for not reading his novels all the way through. "Someone has a right to dislike what I do as much as they have a right to like it. I don't mind that. I am wilfully, deliberately old-fashioned as a writer and many critics are marching to a modern drum. It's no



Above: Irving in 2001 with his wife, Janet, their son, Everett (right), Irving's son Colin and his wife, Heather (second left)

Centre left: Irving's biological father, John Blunt, a war pilot

Left: with his mother, Frances Winslow

surprise to me that in my lifetime there is constantly an aesthetic argument being made for less is more. More minimalist work has been the zenith of perfection in fiction writing from critical points of view for as long as I've been writing. And I have a very cynical point of view toward them — that they're lazy, that they'd rather read a short novel than a long one, and that they'd rather find virtue in understatement.

"I can easily stomach a critic's dislike of my sexual explicitness — there's always the puritanical element of people who complain about how graphic the details are. Yes, they are graphic. And they are so intentionally. If I can get under the skin of someone who is squeamish — the good-taste police — if I can get under the skin of those people, I will."

There is, he feels, a lot left to say. He has an audience, readers who count on him, and he is loyal to them, aware of them looking forward to his work. This is what drives him to produce. "It's simplistic to think that the only stuff in a novel that's autobiographical are those things that are semi-accurate delineations of what actually happened to you. I think it is equally as autobiographical — those delineations of things that you hope never do

happen to you, the realisation of your fears."

By purging his fears, pouring them into his characters, he is able to cope with them. His worry doesn't paralyse him, but fuels his work. "That's true," he says, warily. "But it doesn't necessarily mean you have a good night's sleep."

A week after our interview, I still have a lingering curiosity about his relationship with his mother and her impact on his life now. His voice on the phone, as it was in person, is serious and direct. He says she is 90, in good health and still married to his stepfather. They live in South Carolina, and he and his half-siblings visit. I am probing, trying to go deeper when I use the word "reconciled". It needles him. "That word," he says, and I can hear frustration. What follows is an acknowledgment about his experience with depression. He speaks with the confidence of a man used to people paying attention to what he has to say. He is always telling a story.

He talks about how he has tried, but can't take, antidepressants because they interrupt the spiral of downward thinking that is essential to his work. He clarifies: he does not usually suffer from depression — it only occurs when he is finishing a novel. He is emotionally attached to the characters and there is a loss, a grieving

process. "I see depression as an unnecessary indulgence. Cancer — that can bring you down." This is a point of view he allows is "old-fashioned, not up to date". And then, with exquisite precision, he brings it full circle. "And so, I don't seek it. I don't need the reconciliation. I don't need to be at peace with things. I don't feel a need to fix anything. I just have to give attention to the people who need it most."

The following day, a lengthy e-mail arrives. He explains he is not good on the phone, does not enjoy it, and prefers writing.

"When I get together with my mom," he writes, "we're affectionate, we talk easily, and I have always gotten along well with my stepfather. My mother has never been easy for other people to be around. She's very outspoken. It was never her outspokenness that I had issues with; it was what she chose not to talk about."

He returns to the word "reconciled" and explains what he is not reconciled to: "My own country." He doubts he will ever be. *Last Night in Twisted River* is the second novel of his in which a main character leaves the US to live in Canada. The first was *A Prayer for Owen Meany*.

"I am not at all at peace, or even comfortable, living in the United States," he writes. "Both as an artist and as a liberal, I would not choose to

live in the United States, but I am from here, and I have ties here. Yet I would say that the absence of any reconciliation between myself and my own country indicates a much deeper rift than any that exists between my mother and me; this lack of reconciliation, my sense of being deeply alienated from my own country, is one I find very difficult to live with. I am often embarrassed by, sickened by, my own country; I detest bully patriotism; yet I am an American, and I'm not going anywhere."

He points out that all he can think of right now are the first two chapters of the new novel he has started. He is worried that he won't be able to begin the third before his book tour begins. And the e-mail concludes: "One night, when I'd written the first two or three chapters of a previous novel, a friend said to me — this was just after dinner — 'Would you read what you've written to me?' I jumped up from the table, to go get the pages. Janet said to the friend, 'Have you got three hours?' 'It won't take that long!' I said. 'Maybe two and three-quarters,' Janet said. The friend got cold feet and went home; I was up for hours, reading aloud to myself." ■

Last Night in Twisted River (Bloomsbury, £20) is out tomorrow. It is available from BooksFirst for £18, including p&p. Tel: 0870 165 8585