

Singular

We catch up with

If you had a pulse in 1999, you were bombarded by “Good night you princes of Maine, you kings of New England.” The catch phrase comes from the movie *The Cider House Rules*, based on John Irving’s 1985 bestseller. It starred Tobey Maguire, Charlize Theron, and Sir Michael Caine.

And who doesn’t smile upon hearing “Garp bit Bonkie” from Irving’s 1978 best-seller *The World According to Garp*?

What quip from Irving’s *new* book will be the meme that will define 2012?

How would you compare First Sister, Vermont, to St. Cloud’s, Maine (in *The Cider House Rules*)?

First Sister, Vermont, and Favorite River Academy are not based on an actual town and a real school; they are entirely fictional. St. Cloud’s, Maine—that lonely orphanage—is based on an amalgam of actual orphanages in northern New England.

But there is a comparison to be made between *The Cider House Rules* and *In One Person*. The similarity between opposition to abortion and opposition to gays and lesbians is growingly obvious. The righteous condemning of women with an unwanted pregnancy, and the condemning of gays and lesbians wanting to be treated the way straight people are treated, is borne of sexual disapproval; the social conservatives want pregnant women to “pay the price” for their presumed-to-be promiscuous sexual activity, and they want gays and lesbians to suffer accordingly. The sexual backwardness of our country has always fueled my writing—we are a sexually repressive country, a sexually punitive country.

How far is St. Cloud’s from Castle Rock?

I like Stephen King a lot, but his fictional

First Person

John Irving as he prepares to release his new novel, *In One Person*.

INTERVIEW BY COLIN W. SARGENT

Castle Rock is a multi-purpose place—all kinds of supernatural stuff happens there. (Witness Leland Gaunt's shop of innocent-seeming horrors in *Needful Things*.) Only one thing happens at St. Cloud's. "I gave them what they want," Dr. Larch says. A baby or an abortion; it's all the Lord's work to Larch. There's nothing supernatural about St. Cloud's.

Who'd have thought Pease Air Force Base, New England's former capital of the hush-hush, would figure into all of this? What inspired you to work that in?

No inspiration beyond the belief that men in all-male groups often behave worse than individual men.

How close were you to titling this fantastic new novel *A Sexual Suspect*?

Not close at all. The "in one person" line, from Shakespeare's *Richard II*, was always the title. In a novel from the point of view of a bisexual man, I could play on the "in one person" phrase—as I do near the end of the novel when Billy says, "I knew that no one person could rescue me from wanting to have sex with men and women."

The "sexual suspect" line, from *The World According to Garp*, is from a more radical novel—I mean politically. Garp is killed by a woman who hates men; his mother is murdered by a man who hates women. Yes, *In One Person* and *Garp* are both novels on the subject of intolerance of our sexual differences, but because Billy is a first-person narrator, *In One Person* has as much in common with *A Prayer for Owen Meany* as it does with *Garp*. Johnny Wheelwright, the first-person narrator of *Owen Meany*, is called (behind his back) a "nonpracticing homosexual"; Johnny is such a deeply

closeted homosexual, he'll never come out. The closest Johnny can come to saying that he loves Owen is when he says, "I wrote to him, just casually—since when would a twenty-year-old actually come

young would-be writer's attraction to the superficial. Billy hasn't lived enough—or survived anything—when he passes judgment on that epilogue in *The Tempest*.

AIDS is the collision-in-waiting in *In One Person*, and the reader knows it's coming. My novels are predetermined collision courses; the reader always anticipates what's coming—you just don't know the how and the when, and the small details.

It's clear in *Last Night in Twisted River*—from the moment the cook and his son run away—that the cowboy will find them. It's clear in *Cider House* that Homer Wells knows how to perform an abortion; it doesn't matter that he doesn't want to do that procedure—we know he's been trained. Of course the occasion will present itself. You can't conceive of an epilogue if you don't know what's going to happen.

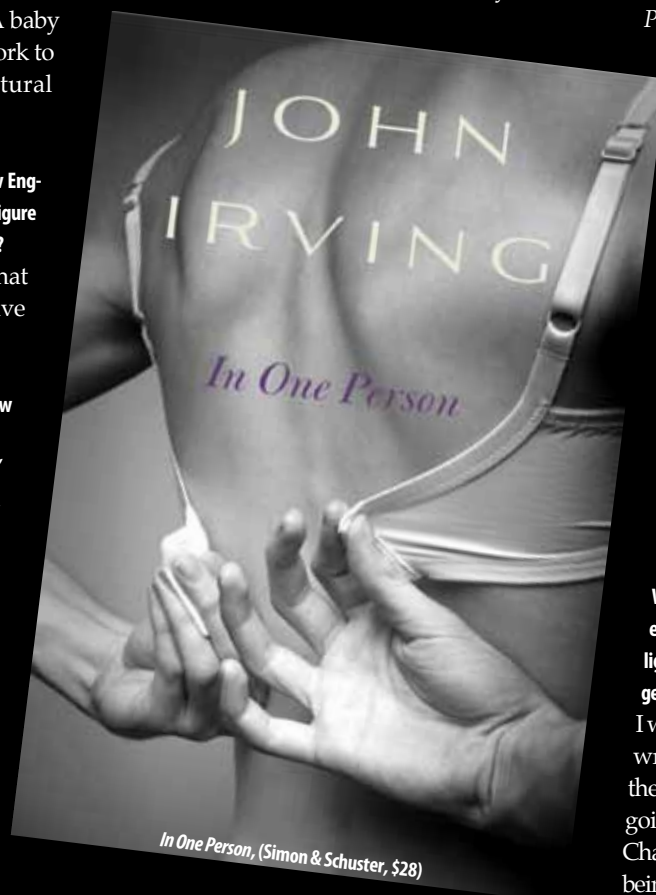
When Billy writes almost longingly about amateur players going "off script," it seems like a state of grace, like lighting a forbidden cigarette. When do you as a writer get to go "off script"?

I write toward an ending that I have already written before I begin; I am "off script" (in the sense that I know my lines, and what's going to happen) from the moment I begin Chapter 1. There is no "winging it" with me; being off script simply means you have confidence in everything ahead of you—it means you know the material.

***In One Person* flirts with taboos, including indulgent grandfatherly cross-dressing. Is there something in you that can't resist teasing the cultural prompter?**

We are an awfully uptight country, sexually. Two transgender women are the heroes of *In One Person*, in the sense that they are the

(Continued on page 80)



out and say he missed his best friend?"
But Billy is out—very out!

At first, Billy questions the epilogue in *The Tempest* because he believes "We are such stuff as dreams are made on" would have made a fantastic last line. Then he reverses course. Is that because epilogues are for the survivors?

I like epilogues. Billy is drawn to an end line that he likes because of the line itself—a

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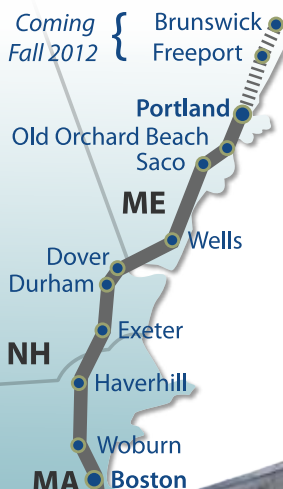
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INTERVIEW

Singular First Person (continued from page 55)

characters my bisexual Billy most looks up to. While the transgender characters in *In One Person* are more developed than the transsexuals in *Garp* and *A Son of the Circus*, they are not new characters for me. And don't forget the gay brother, Frank, in *The Hotel New Hampshire*, or the gay twins in *A Son of the Circus*. I like sexual outsiders; they attract me, I find them brave, and I fear for their safety—I worry about the intolerant people who want to harm them. Our society may be a little more tolerant of sexual differences than we were in the '50s and '60s, but this doesn't mean that the sexual outsider or misfit is "safe."

I write toward an ending that I have already written before I begin...
There is **no** 'winging it' with me... It **means you know the material.**

Larry hits Billy where he lives when he says, you're not just a bystander, you're "bi-everything." As the story's narrator, could Billy have been anything else?

The only part of "bisexual" that most straight men get is the gay part. Many gay men distrust bisexual men. Gay guys of my generation often believed that bisexuals didn't really exist; they were usually presumed to be gay guys with one foot in the closet. And straight women trust bi guys even less than they trust straight guys. (A bi guy could leave you for another woman or for a guy.)

Tell us about Kittredge, the "boy with the balls to play Juliet." Kittredge is the most important secret in *In One Person*; I'm not giving him away!

There's a most poignant sense of the disappeared ones in *In One Person*: Billy's father, the cryptographic cipher. Elaine, Atkins, Kittredge, Miss Frost, and most powerfully the victims of AIDS. Billy feels their absences with differing grades of intimacy. Is this how you connect the story's dark matter?

People—important people—are missing, or missed, in most of my novels. My characters

lose people dear to them.

...They say grief has stages—so does absence, so does missing people.

Missing people take the stage across vast distances and time.

How did you come to this?

In my novels, something has always been withheld; there's a part of a young person's life that is unknown to him (or her). I got that from *Great Expectations*: a boy believes that a horrid, manipulative woman—a man-hater—is his benefactor. The boy becomes a perfect snob, only to discover that his benefactor is a convict—and more of a human being than the vengeful Miss Havisham.

The big lacuna is *A Sexual Suspect*. What was it like, penning a variation on a fictional book within a book you wrote over thirty years ago?

When I finished *Garp*, I thought I was done with the subject of sexual intolerance, but that subject wasn't done with me. I am not bisexual. When I was a boy, I was confusingly attracted to just about everyone. It turned out that I liked girls, but the memory of my attractions to the "wrong" people never left me. What I'm saying is that the impulse to bisexuality was very strong; my earliest sexual experiences—more important, my earliest sexual imaginings—taught me that sexual desire is mutable. In fact, in my case—at a most formative age—sexual mutability was the norm.

Women of First Sister, in polished nails and open-toed sandals, present bloody, stiffened deer to the game warden as their kills so their husbands and sons can beat the lottery and shoot again—classic Maine amateur theater! Are you a hunter?

I used to hunt deer. I grew up in New Hampshire—it seemed that everyone I knew was a deer-hunter. When I lived in Iowa, I shot some pheasants. When I came to Vermont from Iowa, in '67, I just stopped hunting. I didn't like it anymore. I still have a gun, but it's just for varmints.

Have you ever lived in Maine for any length of time? Did you first drive up here when you were at Exeter?

I spent some summer vacation time on Georgetown Island—in the summer house of my best boyhood friend.

Because we're *Portland Magazine*, what are your favorite haunts here?

I was in Portland so long ago—the 1960s. I don't remember much. ■



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