

A gallery of sexual outlaws

Irving's 13th novel portrays bisexuals, cross-dressers and transsexuals

IN ONE PERSON, by John Irving. Simon & Schuster, 425 pp., \$28.

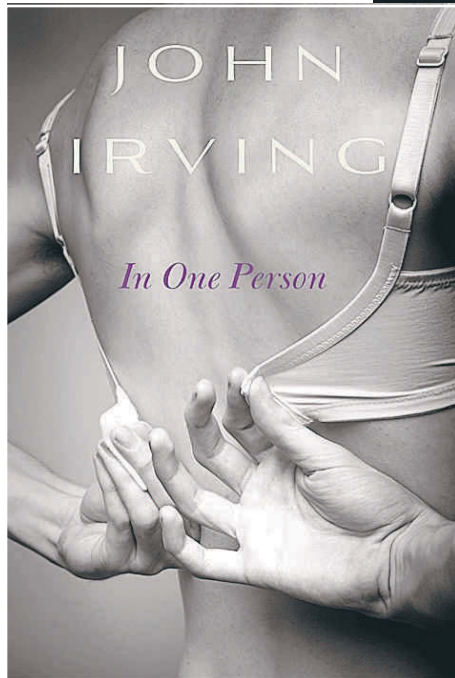
BY MARION WINIK
Special to Newsday

New England, Vienna, prep school, wrestling. An absent parent. Amateur theater. Characters who die gruesomely. Characters who are writers. Characters who can't speak.

Welcome back, John Irving fans. In his 13th novel, "In One Person," we revisit the haunts of the imagination that gave us "The World According to Garp," "The Cider House Rules" and my favorite, "A Prayer for Owen Meany."

In addition to the elements listed above, Irving has always been interested in sexual outlaws and the brutal response of society to sexual differences. An enlightening chart in the "John Irving" Wikipedia entry catalogs the variations in his novels. For "In One Person," homosexuality, bisexuality, transsexualism, older woman / younger man, incest and cross-dressing are on the menu. (The lovely black and white photo on the cover depicts not a young girl reaching around to hook her bra-siere, but a young man.)

Our guide through this territory is Billy Abbott, a boy whose "crushes on the wrong people" include his stepfather, Richard; the oddly masculine town librarian, Miss Frost; and a classmate on the wrestling team. He may have a speech impediment ("liberry,"



"penith"), but on the page he says whatever he likes — gossipy and engaging, full of asides and standing jokes.

Billy's story starts with his coming of age in the faculty apartments of Favorite River Academy in First Sister, Vt., with his best friend, Elaine Hadley, their mutual crush, Jacques Kittredge, and other odd, secretive characters — including Billy's father, gone

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AWOL years ago. His literary formation begins with James Baldwin's "Giovanni's Room," and proceeds through Shakespeare. We skip ahead to Austria, where college student Billy has affairs with a female soprano and an older male poet. In the '80s, he has become a prominent writer whose friends and lovers start dying.

We all know we are not supposed to conflate a fictional narrator with his creator, even if they do match up in some ways. Still, few will read this book without wondering how Irving comes to have such a wealth of clinical detail about gay sex. The author is famous, even notorious, for the research that goes into his nov-

els — so perhaps he did look it all up somewhere. He has already given interviews denying that he was ever gay or bi, chalking the problem up to the reading public's increasing lack of imagination. ("I can think of no other explanation why so many readers seem to be interested in memoirs," the author grumbled to Entertainment Weekly, "which are of no interest to me.")

Irving's best novels take outsider characters (Jenny Fields in "Garp," Lilly Berry in "Hotel New Hampshire") and find the universal chord in their predicaments. Here, he tries to do that with bisexuality, the Rodney Dangerfield of sexual orientations. "My very existence as a bisexual was not

welcomed by my gay friends," Billy complains. "They either refused to believe that I really liked women, or they felt I was somehow dishonest (or hedging my bets) about being gay. To most straight men . . . a bisexual man was simply a gay guy."

"In One Person" takes the opposite approach, treating its diverse characters, from the cross-dressing grandfather to the transsexual wrestlers (not one but two of them), with respect and empathy. It braves with them the ravages of the past six decades, from small-mindedness to AIDS to homophobic violence. It may leave us with questions about John Irving's sexuality but none at all about his imagination or heart.

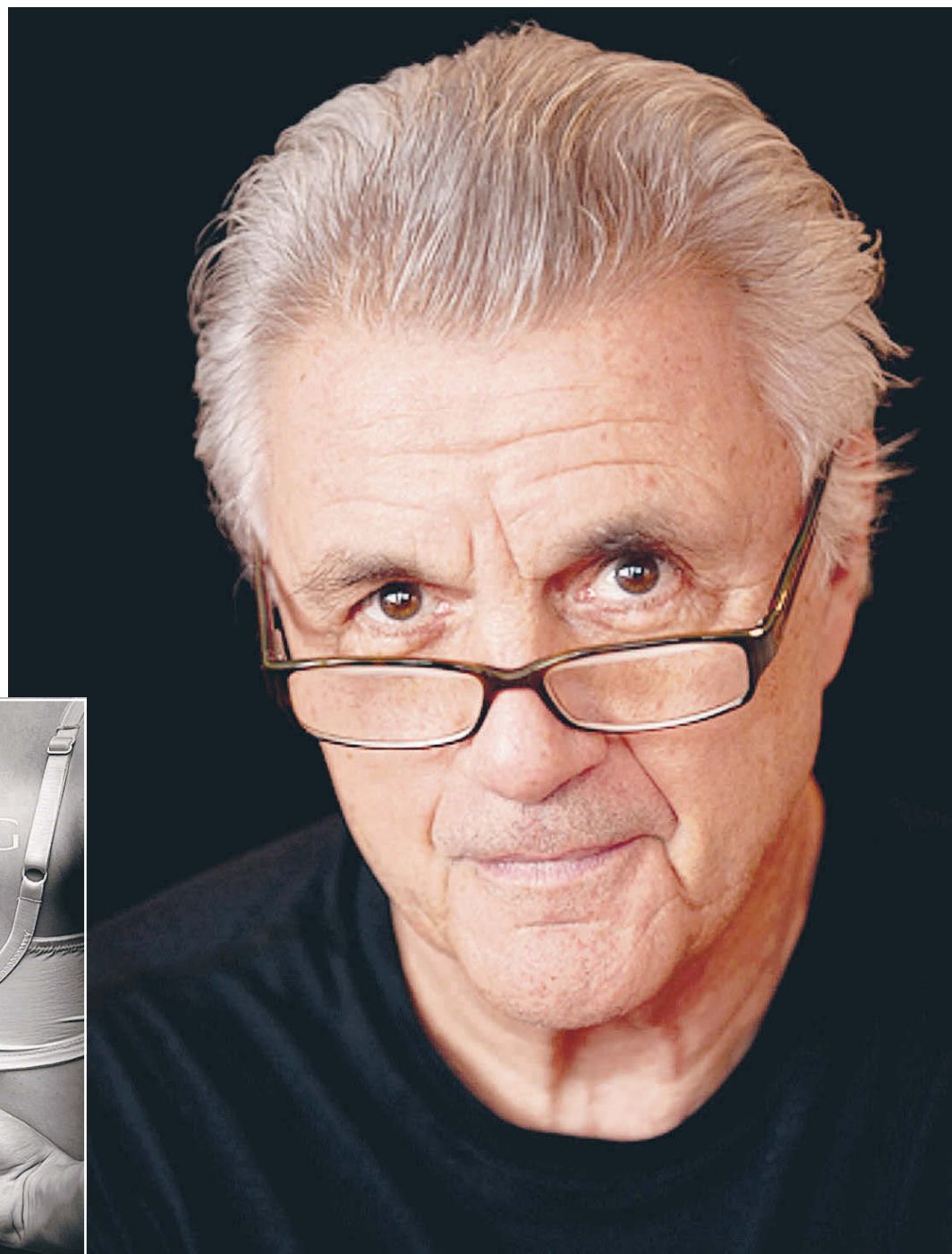


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