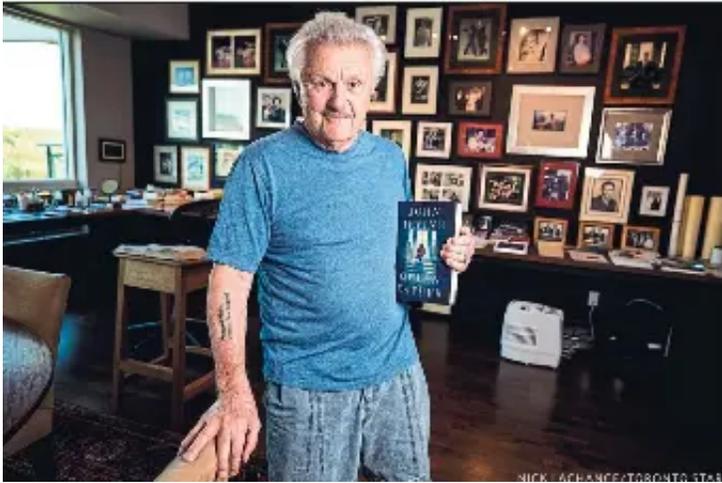


FINDING THE PLOT

John Irving on returning to the world of 'The Cider House Rules,' bonding with Stephen King and writing with wrecked hands

Toronto Star · 8 Nov 2025 · JANET SOMERVILLE

“Part of being a writer puts the burden on you as an outsider,” John Irving told the Star recently. “When you’re a writer, there’s a degree to which you are not participating where you live. You’re observing, a bystander, paying preternatural attention.”



The bestselling novelist was speaking from his Toronto office, where his Oscar (best adapted screenplay for “The Cider House Rules”), he said, “begrudgingly shares the fireplace mantel with an equally lustrous naked emperor statue” — one that Irving was amused to receive from the Freedom From Religion Foundation for the 2019 New York Times essay “The Long, Cruel History of the AntiAbortion Crusade.”

“Oscar thinks the whole mantelpiece should be his,” he said. “Why is that gold man holding what looks like a sword? It’s a little dubious to me. What the hell — it was a fun night, and after all the years it took to make that film, it was gratifying.”

The notion of “intrinsic foreignness” is on the first page of “Queen Esther,” his 16th novel, one that returns to “Cider House”’s St. Cloud’s, Maine, and the orphanage run by Dr. Wilbur Larch, where the Vienneseborn Jewish girl of the title is left in 1908 at the age of three.

A foundling was an essential character for Irving when he realized the ending he was writing toward would take place in Jerusalem in 1981, when Esther is 76: “To create an empathetic Zionist, I had to imagine a child whose childhood has been stolen from her, a child who had been shaped by antisemitism before she’s old enough to know anything else. What happens to her that will drive her as a young adult to make up for the Jewishness she has missed.

“My job,” he continued, “was to find a contemporary embodiment of Queen Esther from the

Hebrew Bible. I wanted my Esther to be burdened with that story as if it were the only story she'd ever heard."

Like Dr. Larch, the driving force of "The Cider House Rules" even when he's off scene, Esther Nacht controls the narrative from the moment she's adopted at 14 by the Winslows, philanthropic New Hampshire folk with a history of providing for orphans who have aged out of the system — people who, Irving said, "are wellintentioned to the core, but clueless about what they're getting into."

It is a comingofage tale of Esther and also her birth son, Jimmy Winslow, whose grandfather Thomas was one of the beloved English teachers at his New England prep school and later the inspiration for Jimmy's first novel, "The Dickens Man."

"Jimmy is a truthful exaggeration of me, an exaggeration of my lack of awareness both as a university student abroad in Germanspeaking Vienna in the 1960s and as an observer in Israel in the1980s when I met daily to work on pages of 'The World According to Garp' with my Hebrew translator — times I was out of my element, clearly ein Ausländer, a foreigner."

A writer's readers

Even though he's never been religious, Irving spent his formative years at Phillips Exeter Academy, taking courses in comparative religion and the Bible as literature with school chaplain Frederick Buechner. "He was the first published novelist I met and I wanted to have him as a reader," Irving said. "He was a great liberal presence while at the same time encouraging of my writing."

In addition to Buechner, Irving would have another influential instructor a few years later at the University of New Hampshire: Thomas Williams read the early efforts of both John Irving and Stephen King.

"Steve and I bonded over having Tom as a teacher before we'd actually met each other," Irving said. "Both of us were married and young fathers. You know, Steve is very engaging to talk to, he's very present. I just shake my head in admiration at his output. My novels are getting shorter and his are getting longer, and still he writes three or four of them in the time it takes me to write one.

"What we do share, however, is living actively in our imaginations, in the stories we're making up," Irving added. "After a day's work, it takes a conscious effort to reconnect with the real world."

Like King, Irving has been outspoken against the Trump administration and has even refused to travel to the U.S. to promote this book, though he is appearing in virtual events.

"Every moment I've thought I will never see my beloved birth country as divided or as polarized as it is right now, I've been wrong," said Irving, a dual citizen of Canada and the U.S. since 2019. "Along comes a more divided, more polarized United States."

Under their influence

At 15, Irving read "Great Expectations" by Charles Dickens for the first time and knew then

that he wanted to become a writer of fiction. That awareness “removed me from all of my friends,” he said. “It was further isolating to use as my model a writer that was so long dead and, among my generation, so deeply unpopular. But I was so engaged emotionally. Dickens was one of those magical guys who could make things up as he went along. I never felt confident enough to be that kind of guy.”

Luckily someone recommended he read “Moby Dick.” In Herman Melville’s plotting Irving realized, “Oh, I get it. This is how you end a novel. Melville never began a story if he didn’t know what was going to happen in it.” Just like John Irving.

“You know,” Irving said, “people have made too much of my writing to the last sentence. If I ever think of a better one, I don’t hesitate to change it.”

In addition to Dickens and Melville, Irving weaves in a gratifying intertextuality with other cherished 19th-century writers, including George Eliot and the Brontë sisters — Charlotte, in particular. Esther discovers in “Jane Eyre,” “a positive and indomitable figure, a character whose individuality separates her from the crowd,” Irving said.

So it’s not surprising that Esther carries Jane’s words with her, a tattoo and a talisman: “I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself.”

For Irving enthusiasts, there is also intertextuality with his own work. “That’s true,” he admitted. “I wish that I could get away from my own oeuvre. Sometimes, I’m 10 or 12 pages into a character or a situation before I think, oh God, you’re doing this again. You’re doing her again. There he is again.”

Irving continues to mine his own life for credible detail and in “Queen Esther” he returns to familiar territory that is LGBTQ-friendly, features orphans, loving single parents and characters who are unabashedly pro-choice. Such allyship is second nature, he said, though he gives credit to a Jewish roommate he had in Vienna during his year abroad in 1963-64, “a dear friend who opened my eyes to an antisemitism that in many instances would have gone right over my head.”

He also noted how his mother, a nurse’s aide and family counsellor who worked with pregnant teens, “passed her pro-choice politics down to me,” and how younger fraternal twin siblings “who were gay and lesbian, showed me how to be an advocate for that community.”

For most of his career Irving wrote first drafts in longhand, a process he relied on to slow down, to think through the story. Now, due to osteoarthritis, he uses a keyboard.

“My hands are so wrecked,” he said, “so many fingers broken in a backward direction from years of wrestling that my hand surgeon told me that I’d soon have to stop writing by hand because I won’t be able to hold a pen for six or seven hours a day.

“My laptop is really kind to my fingers, so I’ve made that transition,” he added, “but I still handwrite notes. I feel I’ve adjusted to what I’ve had to give up.”