

>> This is Matt Raymond at the Library of Congress. Each year thousands of book lovers of all ages visit the nation's capital to celebrate the joys of reading and lifelong literacy at the Library of Congress National Book Festival co-chaired in 2009 by President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama. Now in its ninth year this free event held Saturday, September 26th on the National Mall in Washington D.C. will spark readers' passion for learning as they interact with the nation's best selling authors, illustrators and poets. Even if you can't attend in person you can still participate online. These podcast interviews with well known authors and other materials are available through the National Book Festival website at www.loc.gov/bookfest. It's now my honor of talking with a man who really needs no introduction but I'm going to give him one anyway, John Irving. He's one of the most influential writers in America today or in the world. Mr. Irving is widely known for his critically acclaimed novels such as *A Prayer for Owen Meany* and *The World According to Garp*, the latter of which became an international bestseller, won the National Book Foundation's Award for paperback fiction and was later adapted into a film. Mr. Irving's *The Cider House Rules* was also adapted into a film by him. He won an Oscar for best adapted screenplay, and the movie went on to receive seven Academy Award nominations. Mr. Irving's latest novel, *Last Night in Twisted River*, is due out this October. Mr. Irving, thank you so much for your time today.

>> Thank you.

>> Let me just start out by I have read the book, I had the opportunity to read *Last Night in Twisted River*, but tell me a little bit in your own words what it's about.

>> Well, it's a fugitive story. It's about a man and his son who for reasons I don't really want to give away are forced to flee the place they're from and have been all their conscious lives. And it's a story that pursues them. They are on the run for 50 years. And it's a story that's largely set in the northeastern United States and in Canada. So it's located in that cold weather part of the world. And it's a story about how much this man and his son love each other, but also about how much someone else hates them. And so it is very old fashioned. In a way because of the violence that's set in motion in the beginning of the story it has the pattern of a Greek drama or an American western. I think everyone in the audience knows that an unpleasant showdown is inevitable. But what you don't know is exactly how or when this comes about.

>> I noticed that there are a lot of recurring themes in the book, and in fact there are recurring themes throughout your writing. A couple that jump out at me are the notion of accidents and the theme of angels. Is there a deeper meaning that you try to convey through your use of these recurring themes?

>> No, I don't think one has a very conscious control of those things that occur from book to book. They're more in the nature of obsessions for the writer than they are of what maybe outsiders of the subject would see as themes. You might consciously choose a theme. You might consciously think, oh, wouldn't it be interesting to write about this or that. But the things that occur most forcefully over the course of my

books, and there's 12 novels now, are things that I really have no control over keeping out. They just insert themselves. The idea that someone in the family or some element of the family is missing or lost. The idea that children are in peril. The idea that someone is trying to protect someone who is almost impossible for a variety of reasons to protect. A sense of helplessness in the face of the random accident which in the world of a plotted novel which mine all are isn't really that random, has more to it, the flavor of inevitability than it does of randomness.

>> I guess this is probably more of a mechanical question than anything else, but in this book you have chosen a nonlinear style of storytelling. Why did you choose that style?

>> Well, it's a novel also about the process by which one of the characters himself becomes a writer. And the process, that creative process, is not necessarily a linear one. It's a linear novel in the sense that it's a story told chronologically, that is it begins at the beginning. There are no flashbacks of significance. But that said because there are six separate parts each of which is set off by a substantial jump in time, each first chapter that begins those new parts includes almost as much back story as it does forward story. And that's what interrupts or complicates the linear flow of the novel. I was attracted to that structure because I'm frankly good at first chapters. I like setting the scene where there is equal or even more abundance element of back story than there is forward motion. But by the time the end of the chapter catches up to the present there is nothing but forward moving story. I like that about first chapters. I like beginnings. And by choosing a structure of this kind where these guys have a life, it's been long established, they have a routine, and that routine is disrupted, they go on the run and it might be 10, it might be 12, it might be 15 years before we see them again sometimes with changed names, always older, always in different places, different occupations. There's a lot of catching up to do each time we meet them. And that gave me the opportunity to write -- in a novel of 17 chapters I get to write six first chapters, and I like those chapters.

>> You mentioned the character who becomes a writer, and in the book the character says that he's tired of questions from reporters that start out by asking how much of a book is true or based on the writer's life. So I guess it's with a bit of trepidation I ask how much of personal inspiration is there in this book and in your other books? And, of course, the character also rejects the notion that a writer should write what they know. So where do you come down between those two ends of the spectrum?

>> Well, I think there's a difference between being afraid of learning about something new so that you can also write about that and being true to your most heartfelt fears and obsessions. I've always found the Hemingway sort of ex-reporter victim to be truly uninspiring, truly boring. And many of my novels have taken me into walks of life that I've known nothing about until I've done the research, spent time with doctors, policemen, Danish organ players, wherever the story takes me. Perhaps this novel was a little more forthcoming, three years six months

in the writing, short for me, because the area of research covered things that I already knew a sizeable amount about. I didn't need to learn as much outside of my own experience as I normally need to do with a novel. My uncle was in the logging business in the northern part of New Hampshire. My cousin who is a good friend and a contemporary of mine was a big help to me in this book. I remember spending time in the logging camps when I was a kid in the 50s when they were still driving logs down rivers. I remember that from New Hampshire and from Maine. I'm the cook in my family, I've worked in restaurants. The aspects of the novel that concerned the cook was not as intimidating to me as the life of a tattoo artist, say, in the previous novel *Until I Find You*. I didn't have to learn as much or I already had some background when I went and spent some time in restaurant kitchens with chefs who were friends and owners of restaurants that I knew already fairly well. There was less material to learn that was wholly foreign to me. As for what part is biographical, eh, I was never a cook in a logging camp. This isn't, however, the first time I've made a main character in a novel a writer, and I doubt very much it will be the last time. I like writing about writers. One takes a certain amount of criticism for that which I find insulting. The criticism seems to be based on the fact that writers aren't very interesting or that the process of writing isn't very interesting. I think you can make the process by which anyone sort of makes a living or creates a life for himself or herself interesting. That's the job of the writing. And I think Danny Baciagalupo's development as a writer is as interesting a part of this novel to me as the fact that he and his father are being hunted. So, you know, the reflections on being a writer or writing are autobiographical but not as emotionally or psychologically difficult in an autobiographical sense as other things I have written about. There's a missing mother in this story. The missing father is a common theme in earlier novels. This isn't the first child who is lost. Those things keep coming up. I sometimes think that the things you fear which have never happened to you but which you are compelled to write about again and again are as certifiably autobiographical as those small sort of trivial things that actually did happen to you and you do write about but which have left you largely emotionally or psychologically untouched. You know, I think if you continue to create a character who is entirely fictional but who, you mentioned earlier angels, but who serves a story as a kind of savior, as a kind of protector, even if there wasn't such a character in your own life if you keep creating that character you must wish that there had been which is also a kind of autobiography.

>> We went out to the Library of Congress's Facebook and Twitter pages, and we gave some of your fans an opportunity to pose questions. So I wanted to turn to at least a couple of those. One that I thought was, I don't know, maybe a little bit off beat, but this person asks what well known voice most resembles the Owen Meany voice that you hear in your head. Is there one?

>> No. Well, no, no, not a voice I've every heard. Granite quarrying, other kinds of rock quarrying, marble quarrying, any hard, heavy rock that produces a finite kind of dust, before they got savvy about masks that people should wear to protect their breathing there was a lot of rock dust damage, a lot of inhalant damages as it were we know so well in coal mines. So I've heard voices scratched, impaired, even vocal cords

that have been so affected by tiny polyps of the kind that singers get that there's a constriction, a kind of permanent rattle and a pinched forced falsetto. Somebody asked me what does Owen Meany sound like. And my best guess would be something I call rock dust falsetto. He's just got a lot of junk on his vocal cords. And they're strangled, you know? So it's not I imagine a strained, forced, not not appealing but a harsh falsetto voice.

>> One other question from the Twitter feed. This person asks is there anything in a novel that's more important than the characters?

>> Well, the characters mean everything to me. I mean their development, their growth over the course of the novel, over the passage of time, when their paths cross and re-cross those are the things that I take the most number of notes about. I need to know what's going to happen to everybody and when they meet, how they meet, if they meet again and when that happens and how devastating or not it is to him or her. I often think that the early stages of a novel are a lot like trying to isolate the half dozen or if you've had a more interesting life than mine maybe a dozen people whose lives have intersected yours who you would unequivocally admit have changed your life. How many people are there, you know? I'm 67, I count seven or eight people that I would say, okay, if I hadn't met him or I hadn't met her I wouldn't have made this turn, I wouldn't have gone there, I wouldn't have done this thing that turned out to be significant, some kind of gravity. There aren't a lot. And I would be surprised at someone my age even with a fabulously interesting and well traveled life comes up with more than a dozen such people. Well, thinking about a novel in the early going is a lot like that. You think, okay, who are the main characters? Who are the major minor characters? Who are the even minor characters who effect major changes in the major characters? And you don't come up with a large number of people, but you do come up with a significant differentiation of characters. There always aren't at least a half dozen people of telltale significance. And I think anyone at almost any age in his or her life can answer those questions. You can answer those questions about your own life. Well, putting together a novel is a kind of heightened common sense of doing exactly that kind of thing but with fictional characters.

>> Another person asked if you'd consider coaching wrestling for his university, but I won't ask you to respond to that one. I touched on your experience writing screenplays. And I was wondering when you're writing a book how much consideration do you give, if any, to how it will translate on film?

>> Absolutely none. In most cases I don't see my novels as films. I don't have a strong feeling about resisting someone else's impulses to adapt a novel of mine as a film. But most of the time I'm not interested. I like something perfectly well as a novel, but I just don't see it, I don't have a vision of it as a film. It doesn't strike me as especially filmable or not interestingly so. I don't think that a novel is ever, what's the word, incomplete if no one ever makes a movie of it. Maybe that's a kind of triumph. I don't hold my breath about that process, and a good thing, too, it takes too long. I was asked to write the screenplay for *The World According to Garp*. George Roy Hill asked me, and I said to

him honestly that I just didn't see it as a movie. That I would be happy to read somebody else's script and happy to talk to him about cast or any other aspect of the process that he thought I could help him with. But I didn't really want to be involved as the writer. I didn't see it as a doable film. I said to my friend Tony Richardson who made the Hotel New Hampshire, wrote and directed it, that I wasn't interested either. Tony was relieved because he wanted to write it himself, and it was only a courtesy that he asked me if I wanted to. And as soon as I said no I could see he was delighted. It's rarely the case that I see a book of mine as having what I see as film potential. In the case of the Cider House Rules I saw it immediately. I just saw it as a film. I saw how to do it. It has a particularly elliptical shape. It comes back on itself. The orphan who leaves the orphanage goes back to the orphanage to be the orphanage physician. That kind of egg shaped story is very well done in films. What isn't well done in films and which makes many of my books really improbable as films is the passage of time. And what I also saw about the Cider House Rules was how to truncate the time of that novel which takes place in more than 15 years, how to truncate it to less than two so that I didn't have to continue to change actors. I didn't have to have three Homer Wellses. I didn't have to have two Dr. Larches, I could stick with the same actor which is very important to me. So that was a novel that I saw as a film as I finished the novel. And when the novel was still in manuscript, even as I was revising the novel I thought, oh, I see how to do this. The young guy who came to me with the plan to make an adaptation of A Widow For One Year by doing only the first third of that novel which is called the Door in the Floor from a chapter title, an early chapter title of that novel, he had a great idea. I mean he came and said I see how to do this if you only do the first third, if you only do part one. It is a novel in three acts like a play, and that way you circumvent the problem of the passage of time. Time really doesn't pass very significantly in that first act of that novel. And you leave the rest of the novel untampered with for people who haven't read it and who see the movie, and then they can go read the last two acts of the book. I thought it was a brilliant idea. I didn't write it because it was his idea. And Todd Williams is the writer and director, and we're working together again on an adaptation of The Fourth Hand. I also see The Fourth Hand, my novel The Fourth Hand as adaptable. But, you know, other things right away I would say that the passage of time in a novel like Until I Find You makes it unfilmable. And I'm not kidding. No one has asked about making a movie of that novel, and I am unsurprised. I think they would have to be crazy to want to film that novel. I don't know how you'd do it. And as appealing visually as some of the scenes in Last Night in Twisted River are, again, the passage of time is as significant to this novel which takes place over 50 years as a major minor character in the story. The effect of the passage of time, what happens because of the passage of time is an integral part of that novel. It wasn't in the case of the Cider House Rules. I could take it out of the story and leave the story intact so that Homer Wells could come back to that orphanage in 18 months time instead of after 15 years. Nothing essentially changed about the urgency of the story. And so it was instantly doable, and it still took 13 years to get made. So it's not something that far from consciously thinking of the film possibilities as I write a novel I don't usually think there are any film possibilities, at least none that would involve me. And I like writing screenplays. I'm writing a couple of other

screenplays but they're not adaptations of my novels, you know. They're just screenplays. And I like writing screenplays. But I had a ball doing Cider House. I loved it. But, you know, I'm not eager to write screenplays adapted from my novels. It usually doesn't interest me. And I'd much rather -- you know, it's much easier to write a screenplay than it is to write a novel. I can write a first draft of a screenplay in usually two to three months. Even a novel that is quickly forthcoming as Twisted River was is more like three or four years. I can rewrite a screenplay in six weeks. Screenplays aren't hard to write, but movies are hard to get made. A serious movie, a so-called bart [phonetic] film especially in today's economy is really difficult to get made. And, you know, if I was 37 instead of 67 I might be spending a third of my time writing screenplays and two thirds of my time writing novels. But I don't want to spend a sixth of my time writing screenplays at 67. I mean I don't know if I've got another 13 years to wait for a movie to come out, right? I mean it may take four or five years to write a novel, but you don't have to wait more than 18 months for it to come out after you write it, right? I mean there's a certain practicality about it that isn't very appealing.

>> Well, the book once again Last Night in Twisted River will be released in October. John Irving, thank you so much for your time today.

>> You're very welcome.

>> And we will be hearing more from you at the National Book Festival that's on Saturday, September 26th on the National Mall from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. As always, free and open to the public. For more details and a complete list of participating authors visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. From the Library of Congress this is Matt Raymond. Thank you so much for