

Jewish Books

Views & Reviews

by Joseph Cohen

John Irving: Bears And Fairy Tales

John Irving's *THE HOTEL NEW HAMPSHIRE* was published in 1981. By anyone's calculation, that's a long time ago for a contemporary novel by a popular author. It's old hat, by now. Right. Practically ancient history. I had been so impressed with Irving's earlier success, *The World According to Garp*, particularly because of its mythic understructuring, that I knew I would read *HAMPSHIRE* right away. But I put it off and, then, I put it aside, consigning it to these indefinite limbos in time and space.

Once in awhile consignments of this sort boomerang. A friend was recently reading *HAMPSHIRE* and she recalled it to my attention. The timing was fortuitous: the winter school break had just started. I

be anything Jewish in it. Boy, was I ever wrong!

As I began to read *HAMPSHIRE* images of other characters and themes from Irving's previous novels started to intermingle with their *HAMPSHIRE* counterparts. From that intermingling, a new image of Irving and his *metier* began to take form in my mind. Here was a writer who concerned himself with significant human issues, though not with those related to Jews, anti-Semitism or the Holocaust. In *HAMPSHIRE*, however, it is precisely this Jewish subject matter which gives direction and momentum to the book. Irving has thus joined William Styron, John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, Walker Percy and a growing number of other non-Jewish novelists who have incorporated contemporary

advocating the proposition that parenthood is the highest accomplishment to which human beings can aspire. This advocacy, though not exclusively so, is, essentially, Jewish. A second familiar and, indeed, related theme in American Jewish literature is built upon the characterization of the father as a failure, one who is well-intentioned but ineffectual, like Herzog, for example, in Bellow's book of that name, or Morris Bober in Malamud's *The Assistant*. Irving's portrayal of the father, Winslow Berry, whom is, of course, not Jewish, in *HAMPSHIRE*, runs true to the Jewish stereotype. Thirdly, Irving's attitude toward violence, terror and destruction, of which there is aplenty in his work, is cogently akin to what might be termed "Jewish Apocalyptic." Throughout their history, Jews, as David G. Roskies made clear in *Against the Apocalypse*, have responded to catastrophe by turning outrage and despair into art, creating new hope and courage through the memorializing and mythicizing of their losses. Out of this apocalyptic literature there came an emphasis on surviving. Irving's family in *HAMP-*

and return. Often the young hero setting out on whatever his quest happens to be needs advice and an amulet from a supernatural helper, "some little fellow of the wood." Win Berry needs that help, and he gets it and the amulet from a little fellow who emerges from the wood, a "grizzled Viennese Jew with a limp," named Freud. His performing bear becomes Win Berry's amulet. Freud's advice to Berry sets him on his life's course. Though Berry will fail as a father, his son John, the first-person narrator of the book, will succeed as the exemplar of his principles.

Needless to say, the "other Freud" (Sigmund) hovers over *HAMPSHIRE* since animals in fairy tales represent the id, or a sense of human freedom which in modern times repressive governments have sought to eliminate. The Nazis embodied this threat, and in so many words, Irving states that in a world unsafe for Jews bears will have no future either. Another emblematic character predicts the coming of the Holocaust and expres-

ses his fear for Berry's Freud. Berry's Freud goes back to Vienna, is incarcerated and blinded in a death camp but somehow survives, only to die some years later a martyr's death foiling a terrorist plot to blow up the Vienna State Opera during a performance. The Nazis, Irving is saying, have simply been replaced by terrorists who have acquired "the contemporary fascist spirit" and seek to deprive us of our freedom.

Though Irving's message is masked in fairy-tale refrains and articulated as a kind of manifesto to make the world safe for bears, it comes through strong and clear as a fairy-tale for grownups urging the survival of the human spirit. To that cause, the Jews in the twentieth century, Irving posits, have been the witness-bearers.

The Hotel New Hampshire was intellectually rewarding and emotionally satisfying, but I have to tell you, the next time I am looking for something mindless to read, it won't be a book by John Irving.

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