

**Disappearing Letters and Breaking Rules:
John Irving as Namer**

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Among a number of interesting contemporary American novelists is John Irving, whose first three novels were inventive and entertaining; his second three works, however, are particularly remarkable. With *The World According to Garp* (1978), *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981), and most recently *Cider House Rules* (1985) Irving has taken, as one reviewer observes, "a quantum leap forward" not only as a story teller, but also as a novelist who makes use of numerous and varied techniques related to names and naming. From the ribald puns on place names and a memorable demonstration of the intricate relationships between one's very existence and one's name in *The World According to Garp* to the epigrammatical and philosophical "sorrow floats" of *The Hotel New Hampshire* to his performance of onomastic *tours de force* in *Cider House Rules*, Irving continues to provide a rewarding and provocative treasure-trove for the student of names in literature.

Garp's mother, a serious young woman named Jenny Fields, rebels against her wealthy parents' wishes and drops out of Wellesley, but not before she receives sufficient training to become a nurse. To explain that his mother was not inclined to such humor, the narrator — not yet born — recounts that there was a popular joke among nurses in Boston at the time. One day, so the joke goes, a Boston cab driver has his taxi hailed by a man who staggers off the curb in great pain crying "hospital, hospital!" (One must know that Jenny worked at Boston Mercy and the other two hospitals were Massachusetts General and the Peter Bent Brigham.) "The Peter Bent?" the cabby asks. That was the closest hospital. "It's worse than bent," the man moans. "I think Molly bit it off" (Garp 7). Jenny did not care for such humor, for she worked in a ward filled with World War II veterans with what she designated "peter problems."

As she worked in this intensive care unit during the war, she would classify her patients according to the nature and the severity of their wounds: "the Externals, the Vital Organs, the Absentees, and the Goners." At this point Technical Sergeant T. S. Garp is brought from France where he has been wounded severely as a ball turret gunner in an American bomber. The flak that had lobotomized him left him with only two characteristics: he could utter only one word, his name "Garp," and he was often and inexplicably tumescent.

Jenny knew he was deteriorating when he lost his "G." One morning he greeted her with an "Arp."

Garp, she said firmly to him. "Garp." Arp, he said. She knew that she was losing him. The next day, he moaned merely "AR." Once a Garp, then an Arp, now only an AR; she knew he was dying. He had just one vowel and one consonant left (21).

Because Garp's ability to father a child did not decrease as his identity, his life, and his ability to pronounce his name slipped away from him, Jenny determined that here was

an ideal way to become pregnant without the necessity of a long-term relationship with a man. Also, because it was 1943, Jenny lost her job when she became pregnant, and she returned to her parents' estate to await the birth of her child. When the child was born and her parents became insistent about a name, she finally shouted, before lapsing into a well-deserved rest, "T. S. Garp, T. S. Garp. That's my baby's name" (23).

The narrator ends the first chapter as follows:

It was great fun going to school with a name like that...
the teachers would ask you what the initials stood for...
I used to say "Call my mom. She'll tell you." And they
would and old Jenny would give them a piece of her mind.
Thus was the world given T. S. Garp: born from a good
nurse with a will of her own, and the seed of a ball
turret gunner — his last shot (24).

Turning from the feminist Jenny Fields and her son, T. S. Garp, we find an outwardly more conventional family unit in **The Hotel New Hampshire**, but the Berrys prove to be equally bizarre. Winslow Berry and Mary Bates marry and have five children: Frank, Franny, John (the narrator), Lilly, and Egg (a boy and the baby). Exploring the significance of each of these names is beyond the scope of this study, but a few remarks about the family dog, named Sorrow, will indicate some of Irving's techniques. Sorrow, as he ages, becomes ever more flatulent and cursed with halitosis — conditions which produce humor of a rather low nature; however, the dog and his name become symbolic in a number of important ways. When Sorrow dies, Frank, interested in taxidermy, stuffs the pet, in a very uncharacteristic "attack" stance, for Franny who is decidedly not pleased with her brother's efforts. Egg retrieves the carcass (from the trash) for his menagerie. From Egg's act a number of comic situations evolve, most being capable of being tagged "black humor," including several deaths.

When the family decides to move to Germany, Mother and Egg — accompanied by the stuffed Sorrow — take one plane while the rest of the family flies on another. The plane carrying Mother and Egg crashes, with no survivors, but Sorrow buoyantly rises to the surface, an occurrence which provides Chapter 8 with the title "Sorrow Floats," a phrase that the survivors use as a kind of lament for the sorry state of things and as a comment on the human condition as they experience it. At the end of one episode, Frank exclaims, "It's sorrow...you can't kill it...It's Sorrow. It Floats!" (Hotel 247).

The process of naming, then, in **The Hotel New Hampshire** is much more than the mere assignment of charactonyms; Irving, by using names, combines slapstick, gallows humor, and a kind of existential designation that pervades every aspect of the work which is a comic, yet darkly serious statement on the absurdities of twentieth-century life in America, and on the planet Earth.

Finally, a brief comment on **Cider House Rules**, the dust jacket of which proclaims the "visited upon" characters to include "Wilbur Larch, an abortionist-obstetrician addicted to ether; Homer Wells, an unadoptable orphan; an odd couple of nurses at an orphanage in St. Cloud's, Maine; a wealthy family of apple farmers; and a band of

migrant pickers..." (**Cider** jacket). The novel's initial sentence reads: "In the hospital of the orphanage, the boys' division at St. Cloud's, Maine, two nurses were in charge of naming the new babies and checking that their little penises were healing from the obligatory circumcision." In the first page and one-half Irving manages to use the word "name," or some form of it, almost two dozen times. On the one hand an interesting *tour de force*; on the other hand, an appropriate beginning for a novel in which the author once more uses names and naming as a major creative tool – not merely as a relatively superficial way to tag people and places.

It is clear, then, that all of Irving's fiction deserves the careful attention of students of literary onomastics, especially these last three novels. Moreover, one eagerly awaits the onomastic "world according to Irving" in subsequent works.

References

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