



## A Widow for One Year

*John Irving*

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## **A Widow for One Year** John Irving

Richly comic as well as deeply disturbing, this is a multilayered love story of astonishing emotional force. Both ribald and erotic, it is also a brilliant novel about the passage of time and the relentlessness of grief.

### **A Widow for One Year Details**

Date : Published June 1st 2004 by Ballantine Books (first published 1998)

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Author : John Irving

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Genre : Fiction, Contemporary, Literature

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## From Reader Review A Widow for One Year for online ebook

### Rebecca McNutt says

*A Widow for One Year* turned out to be better than I initially thought, although the pages featuring graphic sex scenes were kind of disturbing and felt out-of-place in the story. This book otherwise not only paints a vivid, realistic portrait of grief, but also love and nostalgia.

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### Chana says

I had really expected something different. This is the 1st of his books that I have read but I knew he wrote *The World According to Garp*, *Cider House Rules* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. Maybe it is just this book but I have to say that Mr. Irving has his mind in the gutter. (sorry to all of you who think this was a terrible thing to say!) He is funny sometimes and he does write memorable scenes, however... right now we are perusing the red light district in Amsterdam. There is sex on just about every page of this book and I am sick of it! (more than 1/2 way through the book)

OK, I am finished now. He can write a scene (the shredded pornographic drawings in the hedge, the gardner stuck in the hedge - I mean this is memorable writing. He is often funny (his commentary about the use of the semicolon in modern writing had me laughing out loud). The children's stories are terrifying. The Moleman is definitely nightmare material. His writing is compared to Dickens and rightly so, I mean it IS that good. However, and I do mean a BIG however, there are some things I really object to here.

#1 A bereaved mother has an affair with a teenage boy. She is susceptible to this because she lost her teenage sons?? As a bereaved mother I find this kind of thinking just incomprehensible. I also didn't think leaving Ruth was realistic. Most bereaved mothers cling to their surviving children.

#2 There is so much sex in this book. It is degrading, and feels insulting. A quote from the book:

"But grossness was the norm for many people. Crudeness and prurient interests were the motivating humors for all sorts of individuals;...Whereas she wished more of the population were better educated, she also believed that education was largely wasted on the majority of people she had met."

(Mrs. Dash - a character in one of Ruth's stories)

another quote:

"It galls me that seeking out the seedy, the sordid, the sexual, and the deviant is the expected (if not altogether acceptable) behavior of male writers; it would surely benefit me, as a writer, if I had the courage to seek out more of the seedy, the sordid, the sexual, and the deviant myself."

(Ruth, the main female character, a writer)

#3 His obsession with breasts makes this story about Ruth's breasts as much as about anything else. Do you think I exaggerate? By the end I think the author must have been joking, the references became so frequent:

page 448:

"In Ruth's case, you couldn't even see her breasts."

page 449:

"Yeah, she had nice breasts."

page 451:

"She had nice breasts, Harry remembered."

page 478:

"It may have been his anniversary, but he was looking at your breasts."

page 482:

"And she really did have great breasts."

page 486:

"Graham won't leave my breasts alone."

This is just a tiny sampling of the constant reference to Ruth's breasts. And there are Marion's breasts, Mrs. Havelock's breasts, ... ad naseum.

These aren't the only body parts we hear about, but I've had enough.

He also throws the character of Ted away. Ruth has "no feelings" about this. I seem to have more feelings about it than Ruth does! Ruth was the only person Ted ever loved in his life. Was her "no feelings" supposed to be his just reward for how he treated other women? Yuck-pooey to that, and the whole book when it comes right down to it.

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### **Sarah Becker says**

I hated about 89% of this book. The first part-- the whole 1958 part-- I really loved. Loved Eddie's goofy dad, the clam truck driver, Mrs. Vaughan, Ted drunkenly making Ruth grilled cheese. I was really excited to keep reading.

I even loved the beginning of the next part-- Eddie running around in the rain trying to get to the book reading. After that? JUST WTF. Adult Ruth was insufferable. Hannah was about four billion times more insufferable. Ruth's journal and novel excerpts-- yep, insufferable. Eddie and the old ladies-- sorry-- WEIRD. And what was with all the freaking squash? Only thankful I didn't read this in an academic setting because I'm sure it was a METAPHOR or something but seriously shut up about squash. And then next thing I know we've gone from 1958 Hamptons to prostitutes being murdered in 1990 Amsterdam?? HUH??? Just hated it.

Two stars are begrudgingly bestowed only because of the merits of the beginning and a particularly moving closing line. Otherwise, I wish I would have quit reading this.

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### **Jeana says**

I was very close to not finishing this book around page 350 (the first section wasn't so bad, but the middle really lagged). It was very long (very wordy) and to be honest, I didn't care much for Ruth or Eddie.

I am glad, however, that I continued reading because it got much better toward the end. I started liking Ruth only when she got married and became a mother. It changed something in her, I suppose.

Although this was not one of my favorite books by far, I did like the way John Irving could take something from the beginning of the story--such as Ruth as a child being afraid of a dress moving on a hanger, which I believe came from one of her father's childrens' books, and brought that back when she was waiting in the closet of the red room in Amsterdam. Just having witnessed a murder. His ability to bring back elements like that was nice. And he did it more than once.

This book, though, was exhausting in its amount of sex and all things related. And enough about how Ruth had great breasts. I get it. I got it after the first time they mentioned it.

Anyway, I don't know that I would recommend this book to anyone I know (in fact, I know I wouldn't) but the last 200 pages redeemed itself for me. But the ending tied itself up a little too neatly for me.

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### **devon says**

I don't much know how I feel about this one. The first section of the book is completely brilliant. As is the last line. But in between is rushed, contrite, and full of coincidences that seems like cheap ways to move the story along. Irving gets around conflict in the second part of the book by killing people off. Don't want to deal with the Ruth/Ted conflict? Kill him off! Don't want Ruth to have to face her husband about what happened in Amsterdam? Kill him off! And apparently, having a baby solves all internal conflict. (Didn't we learn at the beginning of the book how untrue that is? Shouldn't Graham's resemblance to Timothy have some affect on Ruth?) It's particularly frustrating when a book that takes such care to develop its characters and relationships throws them into over the top plot devices and removes their complexity of emotions. The description of Ruth's feelings about widowhood are quickly jumped over and given half-ass descriptions when contrasted with the loving detail given to Eddie's desire, Marion's sorrow, and even the hilarity of Ted's mistress/gardner scene (which is wickedly funny). I keep trying to justify it by thinking that perhaps the different parts are supposed to be reflective of the novelists in the story, the careful character development of Ruth's style, the crime caper of Marion's style. In the end, though, it feels more like an Eddie O'Hare, deeply and painfully realistic when it sticks to the good stuff, but ultimately fake-feeling, forced, and unsatisfying.

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### **Eli says**

The first thing that struck me about this book was the heart-stopping beauty of Marion, a central character near the beginning of the book. It's tough to get images that concrete in written words, but Irving handles it without strain. It's not just a physical description, it's the way that the rest of the image is a bit darker, a bit fuzzier when Marion is in the picture, like Irving is using the depth of field in a photograph to highlight the subject, like her physical brilliance is so overwhelming that everything else is dimmed.

Looking back, though, that's really all that there was for me in this book. The post-Marion sections of the book are slushy and incongruous; where Irving was so careful not to create a caricature of beauty in the first part of the book, the later parts are almost nothing but caricature: The detective, the prostitute, the distant, womanizing father.

In all, this was a lesson in leaving well enough alone. Had the first third of the book been left to stand on its own, it would have been a sparse, elegant novel. With the weight of the rest of the book, it was much less.

**Kate says**

I hated this book. John Irving's inability to write women characters was a huge problem in this book since it has a female protagonist. I didn't care about her at all and I wasn't that intrigued by the story either. I generally like John Irving's writing style, but it didn't make any difference to me with this book because I didn't like one single character.

## **Kaloyana says**

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## **Tocotin says**

Just started... I don't know but what's with all the *italicized* words? Does the author do *this* in all his *books*?

Omg I just finished it. It sucked so much. The characters were all flat, reduced to one quirk and one obsession, with maybe one exception (Rooie), and OMG again, why would a writer write about a writer writing about a writer? And what was it with the main character's family of writers, and her mother's lover being a writer too? And why would the author avoid simple names or pronouns, and use "the sixteen-year-old" or "the strawberry-blonde lawyer" or "the prostitute" instead? And the indignation, the tone of narration around "the prostitute" and her colleagues! "The prostitute" was the only interesting character in the whole book, the only one I cared about, and I hated Ruth for what she did (or rather didn't). There. I hated them all. And the stupid dialogue tags, and the italics too.

But maybe I'll try other books of this author because I have heard lots of good things about them, and because I am a soft-hearted reader. Really. :)

Oceana9 says

OK here's my final word on John Irving, because I will probably never read anything else he's written (though I've heard *The World According to Garp* is his best.) His characters are real and they were JUST ENOUGH to keep me going each of the twenty times I nearly stopped reading this novel. The plot is a

rambling patchwork in which we never, ever, forget the writer sitting at his typewriter, searching for something to say. When he finds it, he riffs on it till it dies, and then searches for something else. I felt sorry for his characters, having to submit to such an unbelievable series of twists and turns.

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## **Bridgette Redman says**

I'd forgotten what an intoxicating writer John Irving is. His compelling prose has a clarity and starkness that manages to entertain your brain and soul while permanently incorporating his characters and stories into your memory and being.

Irving is not one of those writers who kicks out a new novel every year. His novels are too carefully crafted, too (dare I say it?) literary to be anything less than an evolutionary process. After reading *A Widow for One Year*, I suspect his books are touchstones in his life, each representing a period in which he explores an idea or a philosophy.

### Three in One

Irving divides *A Widow for One Year* into three major sections. Don't be misled though. None of the three are meant to stand on their own and each would be meaningless without the others.

Book one takes place in the Hamptons in 1958. It is in this book that the events which will forever mold all of the characters take place. Irving also includes enough foreshadowing to clue us in on what will take place in the next two books. Somehow though, the spoilers he gives us in the first chapter do nothing but enhance the reading experience and when the events unravel, they still manage to be fresh and surprising.

In this first book, Eddie falls irrevocably in love with Marion, Ruth learns to live with death and abandonment, Marion shuts down her heart, and Ted shows himself unable to change despite the traumatic events swirling around him.

In book two, Ruth and Eddie meet as adults in 1990. We meet Hannah, Ruth's best friend and other interesting characters. Irving takes us on a book publicity tour to Amsterdam and forces us to witness that which we would otherwise avoid.

Book three takes place five years later (in 1995) and is a book of resolutions. Irving wraps up everyone's plot lines very neatly. He very nearly gives us a "happily ever after" ending for each person. Happy ending or no, there is definitely an ending with no strings left to unravel.

### Characters

Perhaps one of the most amazing things about Irving's writing is his intense characterizations. There are no perfect heroes in *Widow for One Year* and very few villains. Even those people with whom we have the greatest exasperation show themselves in some aspect to be sympathetic.

Irving's characters are filled with quirks. They defy any sort of "norm" or stereotype. Indeed, perhaps some of the strength of Irving's writing is that just when he's gotten you to believe that a character is a stereotype, he shows you a different side of them or makes them act in a way that is unexpected, yet consistent with the character.

Even the dead have a role in this novel. Marion and Ted's two sons die four years before the novel begins yet they have a presence that is more than ghostly that permeates every page.

## Techniques

Irving uses foreshadowing better than any other author I've ever read does. He tells you in first chapter how the book will end, yet no one will want to leave before he finishes telling the tale. Indeed, you'll hang on every page to figure out how he will get to the ending he has foretold.

Irving also frees his writing from the shackles of chronological time. For all that each book is "set" in a particular year, he freely moves back and forth using both character memories and foreshadowing, making the actual "when" almost irrelevant. *A Widow for One Year* is a nearly seamless picture of a lifetime. It doesn't necessarily cover from birth to death, but you do feel you know everything you need to know about each person.

One of the real treats in this novel are the stories-within-the story. Nearly all of the main characters are in the publishing industry, primarily as writers. Irving includes their writings as an integral part of the novel. He includes the complete text of two of Ted's children's books and summarizes the plots and themes of the novels of Ruth, Eddie, and Marion. We even get a slight peek at Hannah's writings.

## A Writer's Life

*A Widow for One Year* is a book that absolutely resists being summarized in a banal statement such as "This book is about writing." Or "This book is about sex." The book is about many things, and is complex enough to have different meanings for different people. However, the complexity of the plot is not reflected in complex writing. It is a very easy book to read and nearly impossible to put down once you've started it.

Having made that disclaimer, let me say that yet another delightful part of this book is the comments Irving makes on writers and writing. Irving tells us that writers are creative—they create what they write, and yet, even the most original writer draws on his or her experiences and knowledge. I can't help but wonder whether some of the book tour scenes, interviews, and articles weren't drawn from his own experience. At the very least, I think he enjoyed poking fun at some of the publishing industry's foibles.

Irving's books have long ranked as some of my favorite novels. *The World According to Garp* is a must-read, and *A Prayer for Owen Meany* affected me like no other fiction book I'd ever read. While *A Widow for One Year* does not surpass *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, it comes very close.

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## Erick says

The first couple hundred pages of the book, before it jumps forward several decades, are the most even, and it is this part of the story that is most endearing. This first part introduces us to the story's three or four main characters and chronicles their shared summer of 1958--a summer which, you guessed it, has profound effects on the rest of all their lives.

And it is much of the rest of these lives that Irving takes us through in the remaining four hundred pages, and due to the front-heavy nature of the book's dramatic set-up it's probably unavoidable that the follow-through seems noticeably lacking in some intensity.

But I was still happy to follow the characters along, and for the most part they all seem to end up in their correct places. I didn't buy every plot turn/twist (and the shaky pages set in Amsterdam make it clear that Irving is far more at home in his native New England), but Irving is a great storyteller and easily convinces the reader to weather the impressive storm of plot mechanics he (again) rouses to move things along. All in all: An enjoyable read, but pick up the more-satisfying *Prayer for Owen Meany* first.

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### **Inita says**

Man ?oti pat?k ?rvinka stils. L?n?m izbaud?ju gr?matas lapu p?c lapas. St?sts bija labs un ik pa laikam bija p?rsteidzoši momenti. Neskatoties uz to, ka st?sts s?k?s ar Marionu, Ediju un Tedu, man tas visu laiku bija st?sts par Rutu un da?as par devi?desmitajiem man patika vislab?k.

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### **Merry Mercurial says**

Easily one of the five best books I've ever read. Reading Irving out of chronological order allowed me to have the themes and elements of *A Widow for One Year* in mind when I got around to reading *The World According to Garp*. For anyone who hasn't read both--their parallels are legion, but each has its own voice (also: read both). Both are excellent (there just aren't many current literary authors who can do what Irving does), though I personally prefer the tone of *A Widow for One Year*. All said and done, it's brighter.

For weeks after I finished reading this one, I would think of the characters, particularly Ruth, at random and would suddenly feel happy for them. That's where this one wins me over: while it reflects all the greatness Irving is capable of (both this book and *Garp* are literary fugues that spool out with equal acuity in the directions of tragedy and comedy), this one left me feeling connected to the characters after I had finished reading--thinking of their futures, imagining the easier-breathing sort of happiness they could anticipate post-story, wishing them well.

A beautiful book. A must-read for anyone who's ever liked Irving.

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### **Laura says**

John Irving has yet again created a whole world between the covers of a novel. Characters grow old with the reader, experience lust and loss, love and life. The thoughtfulness of his every detail and the concise placement of every word create a landscape more vivid than reality

One of the interesting topics of conversation in *A Widow for One Year* involves the main character's attitude towards autobiographical fiction. Irving's protagonist, world-famous author Ruth Cole, gives one hope that the powers of the imagination can compensate for lacking experience. Or, as would seem the case with my imagination, compensate for inobservance. When Ruth doubts her imagination and seeks real-life research for inspiration, she finds that reality is rarely as scripted and contained as her fiction. Appropriately enough, even her harsh reality is just a construct of Irving (although I am not familiar enough with him to know if it comes from his imagination or not). Ruth vehemently criticizes a journalistic tendency to mirror one's stories on autobiography; yet one wonders how many of Irving's repeat themes stick with him due to his personal history.

One aspect of *A Widow for One Year* that struck a chord (other than the glorious title) was the fact that, except for on a few rare occasions, the characters did not change. A love-struck boy, aged into his fifties, carries his idealized boyhood obsession throughout his adulthood. A philandering husband merely morphs into a philandering divorcé, and a woman bearing the sadness of the world carries it with her throughout self-inflicted exile. A whorish best friend does not let life jade her into changing, although she may at times feel a twinge of regret for the innocent pleasures she forfeits. In the end, who has changed? The characters have perhaps learned to understand each other, but doesn't the understanding they receive allow them to sink ever deeper into the comfort of their own well-established personalities?

I also had the pleasure of watching the movie based on the beginning third of this book, entitled *A Door in the Floor* (starring Kim Basinger and Jeff Bridges). I thought it wise to focus solely on the exposition (if it could even be given such a flippant categorization), which in itself contained more that is real than your typical reader's life. Although I would eventually become quite fond of our 30-something female protagonist who does not appear until the latter two-thirds, the episodes surrounding her during that fateful childhood summer are certainly what establish the story's weight and depth of feeling. Ruth's ability to create such powerful memories of family members that have only ever existed in photographs is a testament to the power of the imagination – both Ruth's and John Irving's.

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