

The Daily Iowan talks to John Irving, calling from Manchester, Vermont.

Paul Sorenson, *The Daily Iowan*: I know you were at the Iowa Writers' Workshop for a number of years. What was your experience here?

John Irving: I attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop from 1965 to 67 as a student, and then I was back there teaching for three years, from 72 to 75, so I was at the workshop both as a student as a young writer teaching there, five years altogether. I try to come back every five or six years. I have a long-standing friendship with Dan Gable in Iowa wrestling, and I try to make that happen when I can see him too. It was certainly an important place for me both as a student and as a teacher — there was really no other place I felt as important as a young writer, that an effort was made as a student and as a teacher to give me as much time for my own writing as possible while I had something to important to do with and for other people.

Can you tell me a little bit more about your friendship with Dan Gable?

I wrestled myself: I competed from age 14 to 34. I wrestled [in high school], and both in college and the New York athletic club. I knew Gable when he first came to coach at Iowa after the '72 Olympics, when I went to teach, and anyone in the sport has a huge admiration for him. I coached the sport at various New England high schools until I was 47, so my involvement, though I was in no way as successful as Gable, was a big part of my life. The discipline I learned was a great benefit for me as a writer. I learned how to work hard at wrestling, and I could apply that standard to writing when I began to be more serious about it.

Why are you coming to Iowa City now? Any special occasion?

I called Connie [Brothers, Writers' Workshop Program Associate] a few months ago when I realized that the novel I'm finishing, my 12th, I had just finished the 14th of what I think will be 16 chapters. I'm getting close. But a few months ago I called Connie because I had finished a chapter with a particularly good excerpt for a public reading. I don't write novels for that reason and you can't predict novel by novel if you're really going to have a entertaining piece to read: a theater length, hour length performance piece that works for an audience, and that you don't really need to waste a lot of time introducing. And sometimes there is a first chapter that works, but sometimes there isn't something you want the audience, well, you don't want to give them every thing that's there — you want them to find that when they come to the book, so you give them bits and pieces that don't amount to that dramatic effect.

The most important thing is to let the novel exist and stand in waiting for the reading of that book — I don't want to give too much away in a public reading too many months before the novel is finished, not to mention published — and every so often there's a piece, a good out loud piece. This one had Iowa City content. I thought, oh well, if there's an audience anywhere, it's workshop students at Iowa, it's that time in a character's life. Just a coincidence. So I called Connie and said I was putting together a ski trip with

various children out in Colorado, and I could probably stop on my way, talk to the students in a workshop, go to a class to give a piece about my method, the reading as a public entertainment. But I don't want to say more so I don't spoil it for the audience.

Can you tell me anything else about the book? Even the title?

Because I'm going to be referring to the process of how I begin the book in the class, and the nature of the public reading will allow me to introduce the book, I don't want to say much. It's my 12th novel, and I don't mind giving you the title: *Last Night in Twisted River*. It's too soon to say when it will be finished — I might not even be finished before this calendar year, might be published later in 2009. But that's pure speculation. I'm two chapters away, but I always do a lot of revision after I finish a book length manuscript.

Let's go back to the Writers' Workshop. How do you think it has changed since you were here?

You know, when I pass through like this and spend not more than a day or two with faculty and students — there are some friends there, from other connections and from Iowa — I think you really can't generalize about how things are changed. When you're a successful writer, a best selling writer, and because I also write screenplays in addition to novels, what I notice anywhere is that the nature of the question changes slightly when you're marked as a very successful, out in the world performer. The questions can be more commercial in their orientation, [because] you got to make a decent living doing this thing, because most writers don't, and for the writing of my first four books I was an English teacher and a wrestling coach and I always assumed I would be. It's not fair to say students are more interested today in being published and how to be successful than they are with the craft of writing. That would be a false impression.

The fact is that I'm not the same writer in the public eye when I taught in the workshop. You have to expect that the nature of the questions you're asked has less to do with how the students are different but that the kind of questions you're asked when you write movies and widely selling books are different than the kind of questions you're asked when you have a small literary audience, when people don't really know who you are. That has more to do with me than any changes I see with students. A guy who was my assistant recently and went to the workshop, a good, serious writer named Louis, had a good experience, as Iowa was a really positive and constructive experience for me. He just published first collection.

What has changed is that there are many more MFA programs — before, you only had a choice between Iowa and Stanford, but now it's an enterprise. The quality of writing at Iowa has to be generally better than it was; it has to be more competitive.

How has publishing world changed since you started?

That's a good question. I think I do know the answer to that, and I'm sorry if I sound cynical. But my first published book, for Joe Fox at Random House, who published and

bought my first novel [*Setting Free The Bears*] when it was only two thirds completed and I was only a student. It was a novel about a number of Austrian university students, one of whom has a family history with the Nazi and Soviet occupation of Vienna — not a home-grown story. Shortly before Joe Fox died, he stayed with me in Vermont, and I said, “Tell me Joe: if a first novel by an unknown writer like that came across your desk today, would you publish it?” I tell people this story in this way: he hesitated for just about 10 seconds too long, before he said: “Oh yes, of course I would!” And I said, “No you wouldn’t, Joe. That’s what you’re telling me.” And he put his head down and said, “No I wouldn’t. There’s no way I could publish it today.”

Random House is still my publisher; I went to other places on Joe’s advice and came back. But I think it’s much harder today to become a literary writer than when Random House published my first novel. Here’s the real difference: a mainstream publishing house like Random House/Knopf could publish with increasingly diminishing sales, with each book selling fewer copies, — they could publish my first three novels and not complain about it, point to the good reviews and say, “one day, this kid will write a book that everyone’s going to notice.” They knew it wouldn’t come with the first novel, or maybe even the second one, but they kept supporting me, they didn’t give me a ton of money of publicity or advertising but they published the damn book! But if you think it’s hard to publish a first book today, and it is, try publishing a second novel when the first one didn’t do too well: all the sudden you’re offered an advance that’s half the first one. You can’t live for five years with a 10,000-dollar advance. A literary first novel? Oh boy, it’s harder than it was, and it wasn’t until my 4th novel [*The World According to Garp*] that I became self-supportive, that I became a bestseller, and I never expected it to. All the other writers I knew had to do something else to make money, but the publisher supported you and that’s wholly less now.

Why? Do you think it has to do with a decline in reading, or with the popularity of TV and movies?

I think the rise in TV and movies is frankly overrated. The truth is that however much you can say about the deterioration of reading and the culture at large, the number of books that bestsellers sell today is quadruple or quintuple what they were. My 4th novel was my first bestseller, and on the evidence of how many hardcover copies it sold to get on the New York Times bestseller list, it wouldn’t have qualified for it today. Every five to six years it takes to write a book, with every subsequent book I write, I sell more copies than I ever did — somebody’s reading a lot of books, and they’re reading a lot more books than they were 35 years ago. Even if it’s a smaller percent of the world’s population, the writers who are being read are being read in far greater numbers than were being read back in the ’70s or early ’80s. And look at who the literary, but also bestselling novelists are, most of them: they don’t write short novels. Not me, not Salman Rushdie, not Gabriel Garcia Marquez, not Umberto Eco — look at how difficult his books are, and they have a huge audience in 30, 40 languages. You have to say it’s tough to be unknown and get that start, but there is an audience of readers out there, and they’re not only reading 125 page novels with wide margins, they are reading some very difficult stuff. Novels that make a certain demand on readers.

I don't think the readers are going away; I put responsibility solely on the feet of publishers. They used to say, we publish the best sellers, our how-to books, our big money nonfiction things so we have the money to find the new talent, but they aren't doing it now — they're just publishing the junk. I think they look too often in envy and imitation at the movie industry. They try to guess what's going to work and the strength of the chain bookstores are often wagging the publishers. They say, "I like the writing of this first novel but I'm never going to sell this novel to the chains." They're passing the buck, they say they'd love to publish the book but the book-sellers today aren't going to support it — that's passing the buck. I think that publishing has lowered its standards and isn't looking for the good new writers, and maybe that's why we're finding those books published in smaller presses.

You've been involved in the film industry yourself, winning the adapted screenplay Oscar for *The Cider House Rules*. Do you think there are more opportunities in the TV or film world to tell stories?

Well, I would caution you on that. Consider this: that the film was made at all is certainly my good fortune, we spent 13 years after trying to get it made and my good fortune is well documented. The right people coincided at the right time, it did vastly better commercially around the world that anyone expected. We were making a difficult to make art film for 20 million bucks and on the strength of Academy Award nominations at the right time when we were still in theaters, we had a commercially successful film. Those of us who cared about it as an art film couldn't have been luckier. Now, the producers and I have been working on some other projects, and I have been — [Richard Gladstein] and I — have been unable to get two other adaptations of mine into production, and they got terrific people connected with them and behind them. And you know, my producer is a two or three time Academy Award nominee, and I won an Oscar, and it doesn't help at all — we're still not getting it made. But I know that if I turn a novel into my publisher, it will be published — I have no assurance that, the success notwithstanding, I have no assurance any of those films will ever be made. I wouldn't tell people to write screenplays unless they have the capacity to realize that as writers, the fact that you can write eight screenplays and six will spend their life in a drawer and two will get made 10 years later — if they're lucky.

So as a writer, I'd rather be writing a novel. It's fun to have another hat that I wear occasionally, something that is hugely collaborative that you do with a lot of people when most of my life as an artist is solitary. I show [a novel] to my wife or kids but no one else knows what I'm doing for five years. As a change of pace, as a change of life, as a change of everything, it's fun to throw yourself into a film when you have all these other people you're collaborating with. But if I had to choose between the two as a writer, of course I'd write a novel, of course I'd write a novel. I'd have nothing to do with the movie industry. It hasn't treated me badly, but it's a frustrating slumbering beast that's controlled by a lot of group thinking. I always say the same thing, when I feel like being a director I write a novel — I get to do everything.

One of my projects — I'm not writing a screenplay but encouraging a couple guys who are — that's about Dan Gable and his life, I'm working very hard to get that film along. And the young pair has made a terrific film, but it's a struggle. I read it, turn in my notes, call people, agents and studio people and tell them to take a look, I'm an advocate, but everything's tough, everything's a struggle. In addition to the adaptations, one sitting for 16 years and another a mere seven, there's an original screenplay I wrote 10 years ago that about every year or 18 months almost gets made then falls through, and there's another film like the Gable film I'm associated with. I enjoy these things. I mean, they're fun. But it's a real crapshoot, and it's not writing — you're waiting for a lot of guys who don't know what they're doing to line up and bob their heads up and down at the same time and say, "yeah, let's make a movie." And if you live long enough and you're patient enough, maybe it will happen. Let's put it this way: I'm not in Iowa City to talk about writing movies. I just roll my eyes and say, "I've been lucky a few times, but I don't expect to be lucky any time soon again." The best thing to do is write a book.

Can you tell me a little bit more about the Gable film?

The Gable filmmakers — Jon Greenhalgh and John Hyams — have collaborated on feature length documentaries, one at the opening of the Tribeca Film Festival about ultimate fighting called *The Smashing Machine*, the other *Rank*, about bull riding. Right now they're working on 3rd about a brilliant young shortstop from Dominican Republic, but Gable film isn't a documentary — it's written and conceived as feature film. In this case, they're writing a feature film. And it's an interesting project, and I'm very much behind it and it's just frustrating. Let's put it this way: if it were my day job I'd shoot myself. Movies, right? But it's not.

So my visit to Iowa City is three fold: I have some friends there, I'm very fond of the place, I'll go to a class at the workshop and talk about my method and my process, give a public reading about what I think is a pretty entertaining place, Iowa City in 1967, and then I'll go to a wrestling practice and get together with Dan Gable and another guy working very closely on this film and talk about what we're going to do next. A couple days, a couple meetings.

Your last couple books haven't been met with very positive criticism. How does critical reception work into your process as a writer? Do you care?

You have to recognize that, you know, I get upset when critics write nasty things about a little known writer; you put what effort you have into your books and support yourself on the side, and someone who's worked two to three days dismisses you. As an unknown writer, my reviews were pretty good, but the moment you're perceived as wealthy and famous, when you're published in 30 to 40 languages, now that you're perceived as mainlining the public — I have an audience and they're going to read my next book and they're not going to give a shit about the reviews. And it eliminates them as a middleman; they'd like to see themselves as that, and it's true to a larger extent in the theater world and the film. Critics can destroy a play. It's lethal, their effect, but once you have an audience, once you have sand, it's understandable that critics are going to hate

you for it because they can't keep people away, so they're going to write with little more of an edge, a little more in attack mode than with some guy who's struggling to find an audience. That's to be expected.

Let's just say that, having lived for the writing of four novels as an unknown literary writer, and having since become a bestselling author who in the minds of many critics is a hack, I'm happy with the hack word, because I'd rather have the readers. I'd rather be translated into 35 languages or 40 languages. What are you going to do, are you going to frame a review from the New York Times? You can't eat it. What possible good is it going to do you? That someone who doesn't write novels has pronounced on yours. That's another thing you got to keep in mind: a lot of book reviewers don't know how to do the trick themselves, and so they don't, in the view of most writers, summon much authority. I think you feel very vulnerable when you're younger and you think you need all the praise you can get, to get one or two more readers. And then you're talking about only three or four reviews anyway and if one of them is negative, it just kills you.

There's a difference from when you're in your 20s and when you're 65. I look at the reviewer's name, and I know how many times they've reviewed me before, I know what they think of me and I can often see how far they got in the novel before they stopped reading. You get to a point as a writer where you ask why should you be affected by the predictable condescension from your inferiors? Why would that affect you? You have an audience, and they show up — those are the people who you don't want to let down. Those who love this book or love that book, they like one more than the others and they argue which one that is, but they're going to show up and read it for themselves. When you're that lucky as a writer to have that audience, you have to be a whiner and complainer to care much about critics. Okay, get over it; be happy that your book is going into a 5th or 6th edition. The first printing is a half a million paperbacks; don't cry about someone who traduced your work in magazine or newspaper that people aren't going to remember very long anyway.

Maybe that's another thing wrestling has helped me with: I don't feel very thin skinned about criticism. I lost some matches that have meant a great deal to me, I've been beaten very soundly, and compared to the feeling of those experiences, somebody who clearly doesn't know what he or she is taking about, in a clearly nasty or condescending tone, about something you know you did a good job of for five or six years, well, come on, just get over it — it's nothing to complain about.

I'll tell you something interesting, though. If critics, most of them, stood by what they said — and I do not know of an exception to this, I just don't — it's amazing when you find yourself at a party or dinner or some kind of event where someone who just trashed your book is also present, they hide from you, they can't look you in the eye, they run away. Every time, every time. Whereas I'm perfectly capable of walking up to someone and saying, "gee, you didn't really like that book very much did you," the other guy says "wait," runs away, can't say a word. Makes you wonder about the genuineness of it. I can think of no exception of that experience, no one tells you, "no, I didn't like your book and I'll tell you why."

That's strange that they wouldn't confront you after talking about something in such a public forum.

Publishing a review is not as public a forum as publishing a book. If you're fortunate enough to keep your backlist in print — and writers live most happily in the number of paperback editions in print — if you do, you're doing very well and have no reason to complain.

You often write about the bizarre, about the sexual. Do you think the reception for that content has changed since you've started?

Definitely. It's also true, you also know that you're doing a good job as a writer when the heaviest and most heated criticism you get is from your own countryman. You're saying something of a prickly nature about your society, your time and place, your country, and it rubs a lot of people the wrong way. I've said how important it is that if you have readers, for the people who like you to be happy, the people who have already responded to you and read you in a demanding way. It's like a theater performance: if you're getting the applause in the first and the second act you really want that audience on their feet at the end of the third act — you'll kill yourself for them. And that's a good feeling, to perform for people who love you, to perform for your friends. But it's equally important as a writer to remember that if you have enemies, you should keep them, you should go at where they live. If somebody doesn't like what you do, you should do it more. [Jean] Cocteau said famously that every young writer should only bother to read his most negative review, and take what it is the critic says most negatively and recognize that it's conceivably the only original thing about you and keep sticking it down their throats. Because unlike a politician, it's a mistake for a writer to try to be everybody's friend. You're not. You don't make good friends that way. You're good friends to your friends, but your enemies stick it to you, so you stick them back. That's all. You keep doing it.

There's no question that the country is a far more timid, cowardly, sexually uptight and politically correct place now than it ever was in the '60s when I published the first novel. Ever. It is. It's a backward and regressive place. I can't go to a European country or any foreign country for a translation and not constantly be asked, what's the matter with your country, and they don't just mean the war in Iraq, they don't just mean George W. Bush, they mean, "when are you people going to wake up about gays? What are you so upset about gays for?" And all the rest of it. Just think of a list. What is so uptight about Americans that is completely not reflected by the rest of the world? I'm also aware that my most popular books in other countries are probably aided by the perception of them that they are anti-American. The two most popular of my books, in terms of largest number of readers, are *A Prayer for Owen Meany* and *The Cider House Rules*, and they are the only two of my novels that anyone could call actually political. They are the most popular, but not necessarily here. You have to recognize that's the way it is.

Gunter Grass has his nastiest critics in England; Salman Rushdie's are in England. That's the way it should be. If it's different than that, then what are you doing? You know,

Melville, my fellow New Englander, said this: "Woe to him who seeks to please, rather than appall." There's something to that. It's good to appall. The only people who it's going to appall are the people who it really should. People who are too uptight to take it.