

# ‘Formed by what we desire’

John Irving's new novel explores bisexuality and affirms the need for tolerance in matters of the heart

**IN ONE PERSON**  
by John Irving  
(Knopf Canada, 425 pages, \$34.95 hardcover)

Robert Reid, Record staff

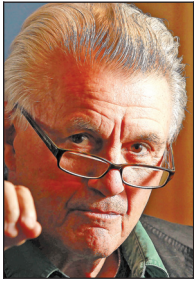
John Irving is more storyteller than topical writer.

Nonetheless, his novels are not immune to controversial subjects that stimulate public discourse, whether feminism in *The World According to Garp*, abortion in *The Cider House Rules* or the Vietnam War in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*.

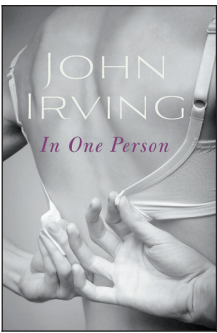
Although neither planned nor intended, the publication of Irving's 13<sup>th</sup> novel, *In One Person*, coincided with a Canadian news story.

Just as Jenna Talackova was making headlines as the first transgender person to compete in the Miss Universe Canada pageant, Irving released his novel about a bisexual man.

To reduce the novel to such a narrow plot and simplistic theme misses the point. *In One Person* is deeper and richer, as it explores not only sexual politics but the mystery of identity at the heart of who we are in all of our wondrous mutability.



John Irving



The novel reminds us that sexuality is more than how we dress or the gender to which we are attracted. Rather, our sexuality is an aspect of what we are as people, which defines how we interact with others as family, friends and lovers, even enemies.

“We are formed by what we desire,” Irving's protagonist Billy Abbott observes in the opening paragraph. In the broadest sense of the word, this novel is about how desire shapes our loves throughout life.

It also affirms the importance of tolerance, understanding, compassion and generosity in matters of the heart.

Like many an Irving protagonist, Billy is a writer who looks back on his life. There is much about literature and literary matters in the novel, which could be subtitled *A Portrait of the Artist as a Bisexual Man*.

We meet Billy as a teenager in the 1950s. He has a crush on both his handsome stepfather, an English teacher at the all-boys private school Billy attends, and Miss Frost, the village librarian and a former wrestling champion at the same school.

Now on the cusp of 70, Billy takes us on a journey via New York, San Francisco and Vienna as he pursues love and happiness while searching for his mysterious birth father. His story repeatedly returns to First Sister, the small logging town in northern Vermont that is his ancestral home.

In a novel that explores the ambiguity of sexuality (encompassing gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and transsexual identities), all roads lead to the devastating HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s.

The novel's most harrowing passages involve Billy visiting classmates, friends and lovers who are dying miserable deaths. The series of deathbed scenes owes a debt to Charles Dickens who, along with Shakespeare, makes a cameo appearance in the novel.

A reader doesn't look for brevity in an Irving novel. Taking his cue from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel, the ride is always as important as the destination.

Still, the excessive narrative repetition is more than a novelistic quirk; it has become irksome. It's as if the writer thinks he's getting paid by the word, as Dickens was. A judicious editor could easily have shortened the novel by 50 pages.

More significantly, *In One Person* echoes earlier novels to such an extent that it's apparent Irving is continuing his life's work: writing one, long, continuous narrative exploring the soul of his native New England — which is really his personal metaphor for America — in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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## WHAT THEY'RE READING



Ada Craniford of Kitchener is an author and the executive director of the Eugenia Educational Foundation, which produces audio books. She recently read:

**IN THE GARDEN OF BEASTS**  
by Erik Larson  
(Crown, 464 pages, \$30 hardcover)

*“In the Garden of Beasts* fascinated and disturbed me in equal measure. The title alone — it takes the name of a lovely park in Berlin, the Tiergarten (or “Garden of Animals”) and renders it as Garden of Beasts — speaks to the brutality of Hitler and his Nazi party as they inexorably subvert all that was once lovely and free in Germany.

“The book held more immediate meaning for me because I was born in Vienna at the time Austria was taken over by the Nazis and (as Jews) we had to escape or go into concentration camp.

“It horrified me in the book that no one in America believed what was going on, no matter how clearly the American ambassador to Berlin — the central character — tried to warn his superiors back home. In spite of the horror, the step by bloody step of Hitler's ascent is riveting to read.”

• *The audiobooks* **Bitter Sweet Taste of Maple** (by Tacia Werbowski) and **The Murder of Uncle Charley and Other Stories** (by Robert M. Levine) are sold by the Eugenia Educational Foundation through Library Services Centre (519-746-4420) and through the foundation itself (519-896-5856). **Ada Craniford** is the author of **Mordecai Richler: A Life in Ten Novels** (published in 2006) and **Fiction and Fact in Mordecai Richler's Novels** (published in 1993).

## NON-FICTION

# War of 1812 titles follow well-worn paths

Bill Bean

With so many writers arguing that Canada's national identity was forged by repelling American invasions during the War of 1812, it is perhaps surprising that no author has attempted to write an alternative history for this year's bicentennial of the conflict.

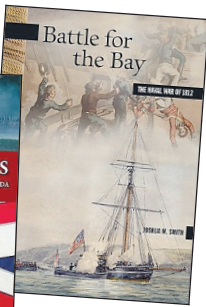
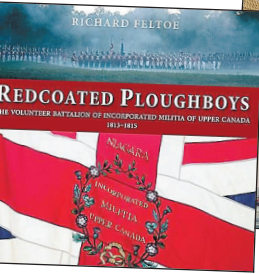
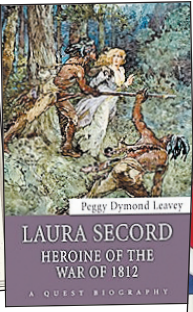
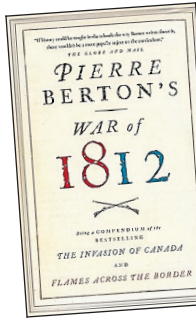
What if the Americans had succeeded? Would the sudden acquisition of the northern lands have slowed U.S. westward expansion, allowing Spain to consolidate its western holdings? Would the addition of anti-slavery territories have tipped the balance against the slave states so that the American Civil War might not have happened?

Instead, and it's possibly an acknowledgement of what may be limited reader interest in the period, publishers are generally marking the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the war with books that follow the well-worn paths taken by the doomed hero General Isaac Brock, the Niagara heroine Laura Secord, and other prominent characters in the war.

Doubleday Canada has, for example, re-issued Pierre Berton's 1980 double volume *The Invasion of Canada* and *Flames Across the Border* as a single compendium titled *Pierre Berton's War of 1812* (911 pages, \$29.95, softcover).

Berton's history might be called into question (his name prompted snorts of derision during a War of 1812 Bicentennial Symposium held in Guelph earlier this year), but he did tell a great story.

And Montreal's Robin Brass Studio, a longtime publisher of War of 1812 histories, is offering a new edition (with more maps and photos) of the 1993 book, *Merry*



*Hearts Make Light Days: The War of 1812 Journal of Lieutenant John Le Couteur, 104<sup>th</sup> Foot* (304 pages, \$24.95, softcover), edited by the eminent Canadian military historian Donald Graves.

The hands-down champ at producing bicentennial offerings is Toronto's Dundurn Press.

Its catalogue lists more than 40 works of biography, history, fiction and youth fiction having an 1812 theme. Dundurn publisher Kirk Howard won this year's President's Award from the Ontario Historical Society in recognition of Dundurn's contributions to heritage conservation in Ontario.

The Dundurn books include *The Astonishing General: The Life and Times of Sir Isaac Brock* (248 pages, \$35, hardcover), by Wesley B. Turner (which has won the Ontario Heritage Society's Donald Grant Creighton Award for best biography relating to Ontario history); *Laura Secord: Heroine of the War of 1812* (224 pages, \$19.99, softcover) by Peggy Dymond Leavey (part of Dundurn's Quest Biography series of famous Canadians); and *Captain Fitz: Fitzgibbon, Green Tiger of the War of 1812* (176 pages, \$19.99, softcover), by Enid Mallory (part of Dundurn's *Canadians at War* series for young people).

Of particular interest to Canadianists, family history buffs and 1812 fans is Dundurn's *Redcoated Ploughboys: The Volunteer Battalion of Incorporated Militia of Upper Canada, 1813-1815* (432 pages, \$35, softcover), by Richard Feltoe.

Feltoe, curator of the Redpath Sugar Museum in Toronto and a War of 1812 re-enactor, has plowed through correspondence, order papers and record books to produce a large-format story about the reservists, farm boys and townsmen who signed up to face hails of musket balls. It's a detailed collection of battles, raids, military politics and human relations.

Rene Chartrand, a former curator for Canada's National Historic Sites and now a freelance history consultant, has two new books this year. *Fort's of the War of 1812* (64 pages, \$19.95, softcover) is an Osprey Publishing edition filled with contemporary drawings and modern recreations of such familiar facilities as Fort George, Fort Erie, Fort McHenry and Detroit, plus lesser known structures such as the Lacolle blockhouse and Castle Williams.

*A Scarlet Coat: Uniforms, Flags and Equipment of the British in the War of 1812* (227

pages, \$69.95, hardcover), published by Service Publications of Ottawa, is a coffee-table book containing hundreds of drawings, sketches and photographs of military equipment, individuals and events, drawn from public archives and private collections. Particularly unsettling is the contemporary drawing showing an execution by firing squad.

And there are small books. Among them is *1812 The War for Canada: A War with a Year Named After It* (Despub, 176 pages, \$16.95, softcover) by Geoffrey Corfield. He tries to do what many authors have not — find some laughs in the War of 1812.

That the humour in his book rarely rises above groan-worthy (jokes about Laura Secord chocolates and an illustration about signs pointing to the Chrysler's Farm Battlefield and the Chrysler's Farm Auto Sales are typical) hardly matters.

And finally, there are small, specific books that are sweet finds. One of them is *Battle for the Bay: The Naval War of 1812* (Goose Lane Editions, 128 pages, \$16.95, softcover) by Joshua M. Smith, published as part of the New Brunswick Military Heritage Project.

Limited to the naval actions around the Bay of Fundy and the Gulf of Maine, it is packed with detail about the privateers and regular naval crews, rickety boats and conniving captains (one naval officer was paid by a smuggler to tow his ship). It's a wonderfully fun short book about a side of the War of 1812 that is otherwise seldom seen.

**Bill Bean** is assistant news editor at The Record and a keen reader of books relating to the War of 1812.

## CHILDREN

### HOW THINGS WORK IN THE HOUSE

by Lisa Campbell Ernst (Random House, \$18.99 hardcover)

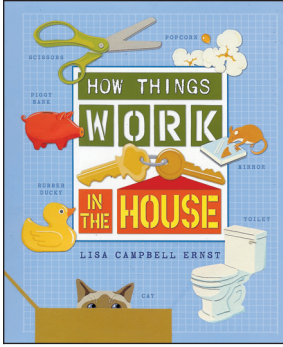
They may seem like everyday objects, creatures or food items, but there's more to them than meets the eye.

Take the goldfish for instance. It wears its scales like armour for protection, and the oil on those scales helps it slide through the water easily. The lateral line that you see going along its side horizontally helps the goldfish sense motion, pressure and even sound. And what is a group of them called? A troubling.

Those are the kind of fascinating facts found throughout Missouri author/paper artist Lisa Campbell Ernst's book, which explores 24 common household items and how they work. We're talking everything from toilets, crayons and drinking straws to cats, kazoos and even drums here.

The author's penchant for scrapbooking takes each page to a whole new level. This is a great book for curious children ages four and up.

— Brenda Hoerle, Record staff



## SHORT STORIES

### INSTRUCTION MANUAL FOR SWALLOWING

by Adam Marek (ECW Press, 252 pages, \$14.95 softcover)

I was immediately sucked in by the title of Adam Marek's book, *Instruction Manual for Swallowing*.

A prize-winning United Kingdom author, he writes about mundane, ordinary people in spectacular situations. His often disquieting voice takes you to places you've never imagined — and just when you think you've read the most bizarre story ever, you find the next one is even more disturbing.

In the second story of the collection, *Belly Full of Rain*, pregnancy hormones are on super drive for a couple who learn they are expecting not one, but 37 babies.

“Brendan knew why Doris was grumpy,” Marek writes. “It wasn't just the hormones. Fear makes people snappy, and Doris was terrified. Even more than he was.”

In the story *Testicular Cancer vs. The Behemoth*, a man receives a fatal diagno-

sis on the same day that a grotesque monster arrives in his town, bent on destroying it.

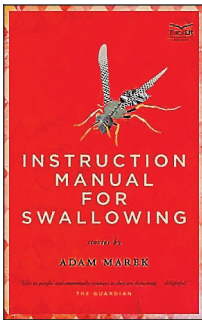
Every story is surreal, more bizarre than the one before, aligning the impossible with the probable, pitting men against insects, portraying sex in ways that are terrifying, titillating and enormously bizarre.

You are guaranteed to have a myriad of reactions — from knee-slapping laughter and gut-wrenching empathy to eye-blinking wonder and disgust.

In his acknowledgments, Marek writes: “Thanks so much to . . . my wife Naomi — when she reads my work, I hide around the corner, listening out for her giggles and shrieks of disgust to let me know I've done something right.”

Definitely an author to watch.

— Cindy Matthews



### Hardcover fiction

- (3) **In One Person** - John Irving
- (2) **Deadlocked** - Charlaine Harris
- (1) **The Wind Through the Keyhole** - Stephen King
- (4) **The Sins of the Father** - Jeffrey Archer
- (5) **A Dance with Dragons** George R.R. Martin
- (6) **The Limpopo Academy of Private Detection** - Alexander McCall Smith
- (7) **Why Men Lie** - Linden MacIntyre
- (8) **The Headmaster's Wager** - Vincent Lam
- (9) **Sacre Bleu: A Comedy D'art** - Christopher Moore
- (10) **Calico Joe** - John Grisham

### Hardcover non-fiction

- (1) **The End of Growth** - Jeff Rubin
- (2) **Go the F\*\*K to Sleep** - Adam Mansbach/Ricardo Cortes
- (3) **Eating Dirt** - Charlotte Gill
- (4) **A Thousand Farewells** - Nahlah Ayed
- (5) **Dying to Be Me** - Anita Moorjani
- (6) **Drop Dead Healthy: One Man's Humble Quest for Bodily Perfection** - A J Jacobs
- (8) **Bringing Up Bebe** - Pamela Druckerman
- (12) **Imagine: How Creativity Works** - Jonah Lehrer
- (7) **The World of Downton Abbey** - Jessica Fellowes
- (10) **Thieves of Bay Street** - Bruce Livesey

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