

## ANALYSIS

### *The World According to Garp* (1978)



John Irving

(1942- )

## INTRODUCTION

John Irving has the rare distinction of achieving both critical acclaim and huge commercial success. He sprang from relative obscurity to fame with *The World According to Garp*, which became a bestseller and received the American Book Award as the best paperback novel of 1979. It was made into a film starring Robin Williams in 1982. His next novel *The Hotel New Hampshire* was also a bestseller and adapted for the screen. Irving was born in Exeter, New Hampshire and graduated from Phillips Exeter Academy, the model for the Steering School in *Garp*, where his father was treasurer and instructor of Russian history. There he became a better wrestler than he was a student. Wrestling as a metaphor became a motif in his writing, related to bears. He attended the University of Vienna, Austria, graduated from the University of New Hampshire, and earned an M.F.A. in the famous University of Iowa writing program. His first 3 novels, starting with *Setting Free the Bears*, were unspectacular Realism.

With *Garp*, Irving set free the bear of his soul in a style blunt, agonized, extravagant, and bravely comic. A satire of radical Feminism in the 1970s, it generated a mass cultural reaction characterized in the popular media as “Garpomania.” Irving suddenly became a big success, a cultural hero, and even a sex symbol. He appeared on the cover of *Time* (31 August 1981) as the handsome “Garp Creator.” *Garp* provoked extreme reactions, pro and con, that confirmed its vision of extreme conflict between the sexes. Feminists at the time were acting like men made them want to vomit and “Garp” sounds like vomit. Some readers disliked the exaggeration and violence, others disapproved of the explicit sex, and Feminists hated everything about it. T. S. Garp is not Irving, but the novel does reveal the author in its tones and form, transcending autobiography while deriving its passion and satirical inspiration from what comes through as deeply personal. Irving is a male feminist liberal in his public life and *Garp* is feminist in a humanistic spirit that is critical of intolerance and fanaticism. He was courageous to publish such a Politically Incorrect novel at a time when Feminists were taking over literary publishing.

British feminist John Fowles published a much darker satire called *Mantissa* in 1982 that is not funny, casting radical Feminists as Nazis. Additional satires of Feminists by Americans include *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984) by John Updike and *White Noise* (1985) by Don DeLillo, both novelists who were safely

established and had less to lose than Irving did in 1978. Feminists at 13 publishing houses were able to censor the major British novelist Kingsley Amis's *Stanley and the Women* in 1984 and who knows how many works by unknown male writers. Feminist editors at Scribner's censored, stole, rewrote, and reversed the meanings of Hemingway's last novel *The Garden of Eden* (1986).

## TEXT

*The World According to Garp* opens in the year the author was born and is narrated by a writer born soon afterward who also becomes a wrestler and shares other characteristics with John Irving. Jenny Fields is an ironic name as it connotes traditional values, agrarianism and natural productivity, whereas the mother of Garp is untraditional, urban, and produces only one offspring achieved through her rape of a dying man. The novel opens at the peak of national unity in America "shortly after the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor and people were being tolerant of soldiers, because suddenly everyone *was* a soldier...." In the first action of the novel Jenny is arrested for attacking an American soldier with the cool ferocity of a Japanese bomber attacking a ship at Pearl Harbor: "I was trying to cut his nose off, but I missed." The gender war is conflated with World War II, defining Jenny as an enemy of men and of the country: "Jenny Fields was quite firm in her intolerance of the behavior of men in general and soldiers in particular." She apparently has no loyalty whatsoever to the United States.

She has "dark, glossy hair" in the literary tradition of the Dark Lady who violates prevailing values. She is also a challenge to prevailing conceptions of gender in that she has "a mannish way of walking" and "from behind, she resembled a young boy." She comes from a privileged upper-class family and attended Wellesley, the elite women's college that has produced many "well-bred" women leaders. But Jenny's family makes her feel "like a cow, being prepared only for the insertion of the device for artificial insemination." Ironically, she inserts a "device" herself eventually, since in her anticipation heterosexual intercourse is artificial. "'My mother,' Garp wrote, 'was not romantically inclined'." She "stopped having anything to do with men" and retreats to "Dog's Head Harbor." Another of her stereotypical characteristics is that she "was not inclined toward humor." Especially sexual humor: "No peter jokes for Jenny, who was staying clear of the issue"—a pun anticipating her method of impregnation. "She wanted as little to do with a peter as possible, and nothing whatsoever to do with a man."

Jenny is attracted to the practicality of nursing as a career. Significantly, she likes the uniform. "'My mother,' Garp wrote, 'was not one for making fine distinctions'." She thought "people weren't much more mysterious, or much more attractive, than clams." This makes it easy for her to dehumanize Garp, who is just about as inarticulate as a clam. In fact, she dehumanizes most of humanity with binary thinking that reduces people to negative categories: "In this dirty-minded world, she thought, you are either somebody's wife or somebody's whore—or fast on your way to becoming one or the other. If you don't fit either category, then everyone tries to make you think there is something wrong with you. But, she thought, there is nothing wrong with me." In fact, Jenny feels justified by righteousness in whatever she does: "She was imagining that her nurse's uniform shone like a holy shield."

The soldier in the movie theater obviously committed a sexual assault. He is still more at fault after we learn that he has a wife and child. The question is, What should be the offended woman's response to being groped in a theater by a soldier at the outset of World War II? Jenny would say the war is irrelevant and the crime is worse because she dislikes soldiers. In the first place, she thinks innocent male lovers should be punished with a "Valentine treatment" to the penis. Jenny slices open his arm with her scalpel "baring his bones at the joint of his elbow" and slashes off a piece of his upper lip in her attempt to cut off his nose. The soldier flees into the lobby, where Jenny the nurse catches up with him and tries to treat the wounds she inflicted. The contradiction between her vindictive overreaction and her pretense to be a healer corresponds to the contradiction between Feminist vitriol against all men and their claim to be healing relations between the genders. Feminists have been depicted as malevolent nurses beginning with Miss Van Campen in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1927), then Big Nurse in Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), and the nurses in Fowles's *Mantissa* (1982).

Jenny envies new mothers: "It was, to her, the ideal situation: a mother alone with a new baby, the husband blown out of the sky over France." Now she envisions for herself "An almost virgin birth. At

least, no *future* peter treatment would be necessary.” She becomes known as Old Virgin Mary Jenny. Her crusade in the hospital is to persuade young widowed mothers they are better off without their husbands. “Her colleagues detected that she felt herself to be superior to them. Nobody’s colleagues appreciate this.” When his pilot talks to Garp after his injury in combat he exclaims, “Jesus, Garp.” However, in an absurd parallel more to the biblical Joseph than to Jesus, this gunner will have little part in the conception of his son, who will play the role of a mock Christ-evoking figure.

When he comes under the care of Jenny, the ball turret gunner is “a Goner.” Since the wars have been conflated—WWII and the gender war—the narrative is an allegory of how the gender war impacts Garp. The whole novel expresses in detail the various psychological effects of radical Feminism on a sympathetic male. To Jenny “the ball turret gunner looked like some dangerous fetus suspended in the bomber’s absurdly exposed amniotic sac, intent on protecting his mother.” However, the chapter ends with a punch line in which the ball turret gun is a metaphorical penis. Most obviously, ball turrets on both sides of a bomber’s underbelly resemble glass balls. Jenny sees only one side, in terms of what she wants. She wants the man to protect her in the literal war while as Feminism personified on a national scale she breaks his balls, renders him a drooling infant and reduces him to a captive sperm donor.

Garp’s war injuries have turned him into a compulsive masturbator, like a man addicted to pornography. Jenny can only relate to a man who is dependent, helpless and infantile, one she can easily control and use as she pleases. The weaker and dumber Garp gets, the better she likes it. He is now in effect her prisoner of the gender war. Ironically, Jenny becomes a molester like the soldier she maimed in the movie theater. Just as the soldier violated her rights, she violates the rights of Garp—a service man at that. Yet she complains, “That the rest of the world finds this an immoral act only shows me that the rest of the world doesn’t respect the rights of the individual.” She does not respect Garp enough to learn his name, nor her male baby enough to give him a name until her parents insist. Then she reduces the baby to initials referring to the only value of a male in her life—as a technician.

In literary history the initials T. S. famously refer to T. S. Eliot. T. S. Garp is a comic contrast to the genteel poet, as in being a wrestler and “blunt” as a writer. The contrast also reflects the fall in cultural status of male writers during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of Feminism. Whereas the poet was highly revered, Garp is barf. Garp is generous to his mother in calling her “a good nurse with a will of her own.” The soldier who molested her also had a will of his own. The great irony of the story is that Garp loves his mother even though she is “out to get him.” The ball turret gunner idea may have been suggested to Irving by the poem “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” (1945) by Randall Jarrell, often anthologized:

From my mother’s sleep I fell into the State,  
And I hunched in its belly til my wet fur froze.  
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,  
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.  
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

The first chapter of *Garp* may be Irving’s greatest literary achievement, blending tones and modes—pathos with extravagant humor, realism with allegory—for effects as complex, powerful and funny as the best of Mark Twain. The tone of the chapter is conservative, based on traditional values such as sympathy for men in uniform during a war, whereas Jenny Fields is so contrary to these values she feels justified in raping a wounded soldier on his deathbed. As a future leader of the Feminist movement, Jenny embodies its self-centered characteristics and prevailing spirit as experienced by Garp. The second chapter of *Garp* places the first chapter in biographical and social context, balancing its conservatism with liberalism, its male perspective with what is essentially a female perspective.

Garp has inherited some of his mother’s characteristics and is himself a *humanistic feminist*, as opposed to a *radical Feminist*. He is her “New Man.” She raised him to react against a patriarchal society as represented by “the vast and famous Steering School”—a driving motif, as in *Gatsby*. She enrolls him there “‘To make up for denying him a father,’ as her father put it to her.” He and his mother are outcasts at the school because he is illegitimate, introducing the liberal theme of injustice due to social class. The overall rhythm of tones in *Garp* is from smack-down satire of Feminism to liberal stock responses. The

first chapter is like a man slapping a woman he loves in the face the way men used to do to women in movies when they became hysterical, the second chapter is like trying to kiss and make up. Except that Jenny is not hysterical at all, but a cool, calculating and competent professional. Nor can it be said that she is altogether selfish: “she was simply all for little Garp—and for being a good nurse.”

Jenny becomes “head nurse” at Steering. As her own little “New Man,” Garp is a weapon in the gender war. Steering faculty “who had just gotten over the last war remarked that the shape of the child was as blunt as a bomb.... Temperamentally, the child appeared to resemble his mother.” As implied in the comic scene when Dean Bodger mistakes a dead pigeon falling off the roof for little Garp, the boy will also be a dead pigeon—a naïve victim—if he falls into the arms of the educational system, which teaches him, as the Dean directs, to “be a good boy for your mother... Don’t ever disappoint your mother, boy...” Even if she is “out to get you.” In later years Dean Bodger had the illusion that he had saved Garp.

Stewart Percy is a male counterpart to narcissistic Feminists such as his daughter Pooh. He taught only one course: “‘My Part of the Pacific,’ and it concerned only those naval battles of World War II which Stewart Percy had personally fought in. There had been two.” This is a satirical parallel to self-centered Women’s Studies courses and their often limited autobiographical scope. Jenny Fields is “at war” against the aristocratic Percy family that controls Steering, adding class war and anti-church war to the theme of gender war. The Percy house sat “like the oldest church in a town full of churches.” Jenny Fields “seemed to need an enemy.” The class war is mutual, as Stewart Percy thinks Garp’s father “was a Jap.” His big mean dog Bonkers bites people and gets away with it, representing the irresponsible behavior of the rich—recalling the Buchanans in *Gatsby*. When Bonkers bites off part of Garp’s ear, the amputation “forced Garp always to wear his hair long.” As if the longhairs of the 1960s were victims of a callous upper-class that had gone bonkers: “‘The curs of the upper-class,’ Garp would call them always.”

The narrator’s (Irving’s) feminist bias is further evident when he refers to Emily Hamilton who would graduate “from an inferior all-girls’ school just a year before Steering would vote to admit women.” This suggests that all girls’ schools were inferior, even to Steering and Fat Stew Percy. On the contrary, for example, between 1830 and 1860 “The ‘Seven Sisters’ colleges in New England began their rise to equal status with men’s institutions of higher learning.... The degree was equal to that granted in any male institution.” (*Perish the Thought: Intellectual Women in Romantic America 1830-1860* [1978] Susan P. Conrad). Jenny herself attended upper-class Wellesley. Irving takes another shot at the Patriarchy when he faults Everett Steering the founder of Steering for making it a boys’ school in the first place: “He did not mention his girls”—who could have attended Wellesley or Vassar. The country was over 90% rural in 1781 and division of labor made separate educations practical. According to Charles Brockden Brown in *Alcuin* (1797), the first tract advocating women’s rights in America, “Places of public education, which are colleges in all respects but the name, are, perhaps, as numerous for females as for males.” Currently in the novel, Cushie Percy is attending her “fifth prep school for girls.”

Jenny gets Garp into wrestling as a surrogate for sex, whereas later Feminists have opposed wrestling and football for being “too masculine.” The wrestlers “thrive when the walls and floors are as hot and giving as the buttocks of sleeping girls...the intent of each wrestler, in Jenny’s eyes, as deliberate and as desperate as rape.” The wrestling coach Ernie Holm had married a nurse, who is like Jenny in ultimately choosing a career over marriage, except that she abandoned her child, Helen. When she first sees Jenny come into the gym in her white nurse’s uniform, Helen thinks her mother has come back and she bursts into tears and embraces her—sentiment that disgusts Jenny, “never a woman who liked to be touched.” Garp falls for Helen and decides to become a writer because she tells him she is going to marry one. Helen is sent to Talbot Academy for girls, which is not said to be inferior to Steering for boys. Helen is not of Troy. “She never wore lipstick,” wears glasses, is smarter than Garp, is “a snob about her brains,” is a better literary critic, is taller than him “by two inches or more,” and she “couldn’t have cared less” about Garp’s achievements as a wrestler. “Helen never attended a single match.” In all these ways she is a Feminist exemplar—a self-absorbed career woman ironically named Holm (home). In pursuing her, Garp proves himself the exemplary New Man. Falling into the arms of the New Woman is analogous to the dead pigeon falling into the arms of Dean Bodger.

Garp sees so little of Helen that he tries to lose his virginity with Cushie Percy, the pushover cushion with a soft life, soft head, and soft body. But the son of Virgin Mary Jenny is so virginal he neglects to carry a condom. "Cushie's touching brainlessness was straight from her mother," who controls Steering. And Helen's response to Garp's confessional letter sounds exactly like what *his* mother might say: "If Garp was given to this lust, as he called it, wasn't he fortunate to have someone like Cushie around?" The frustrated Garp replies to Helen "that he was doomed to be followed by his mother the rest of his life." Her antiseptic feminism surrounds him. After she goes to bed, he sneaks Cushie into her infirmary for sex. "Sex for Garp would remain in his mind as a solitary act committed in an abandoned universe..." His alienated sexuality is perverted into what is essentially masturbation. For him the most satisfactory climax is his revenge on Bonkers, when he wrestles the rich people's mean dog to the ground and bites off part of the animal's ear. "'An ear for an ear,' said Jenny Fields." Ironically, in the end Garp will be murdered by the bonkers Pooh Percy using the same rationale. Bonkers wins.

In 1961 when he is 18, Jenny takes Garp to Europe. Vienna represents decaying Old Europe in contrast to contemporary young America, but also history, human nature, what never changes—Life and Death. Irving is updating the international theme of Henry James. Jenny is his ignorant self-centered American abroad, insensitive to Europe, ironically writing a book about her Life. She does not speak the language of the country (the world). "'Stop translating everything,' Jenny told him. 'I don't want to know everything'." Gender roles are reversed as Garp does the cooking, since Jenny never learned that either. She also "did not know how to write." She envies women on the street she does not recognize as prostitutes. Then she makes the feminist argument, "Why can't a woman use her body the way she wants to?" But when Garp reveals he knows their prices, "Jenny slapped him. 'You know all about it!'" To a feminist, what is a right for women is a wrong for men. For wisdom about Life, young Garp must turn to a prostitute, just as he does for sex. Charlotte had lost a child. "He was the same age as Charlotte's child would have been." The opposite of a feminist, Charlotte wants to retire, move to Munich and "marry a young doctor who could take care of her, in every way, until she died." Vienna is "the city where Marcus Aurelius Died." The famous Roman ruler was a Stoic, a philosopher who tried to suppress all emotion, as does a prostitute like Charlotte. She becomes Garp's surrogate mother, more a friend to him than Jenny, and when she dies, Charlotte also becomes Garp's Marcus Aurelius.

Garp's first story expresses his own increasing stoicism as a male in a feminist household and culture. He demonstrates that he is a very good writer, at least in "The Pension Grillparzer." Although it originated in a dream of death, the story begins in a comic tone as a parody of spy novels. The father is a spy, but only for the Austrian Tourist Bureau, and he takes his family along with him on the road to evaluate and rate hotels and pensions: "We were instructed to be civilized but troublesome." Their spy activities are comically mundane. "I was always the driver," says the young narrator as if they need a getaway car. "We inherited Grandmother," an upper-class snob parallel to Jenny Fields in her self-centered intolerance, especially of men. "She viewed with displeasure the ascot of dark hair bursting out at the open throat of the singer's shirt." And she slaps the dream man in the face for telling her secret dream--recalling that Jenny slapped Garp for telling the truth.

The dream man, whose jacket "smelled like a zoo," is a psychic who represents spirituality confined or repressed like the bear from the zoo. The Grandmother's prejudice against Hungarians and everything natural is evidence of her dissociation from the body and the soul. A man and his wife are staying in a castle, evoking romance. The dominant motif is water: "'All that is body is as coursing waters,' Garp said...quoting Marcus Aurelius." The fountain in the courtyard of the castle is dry, but in the dream it is flowing and the horses of some knights are drinking it. The dreamer is a woman in bed beside her unromantic husband. He hears the horses but goes back to sleep. She listens to the knights speaking "their dead language.... The woman lay awake, listening to the water which now seemed to be running all through the castle, gurgling in every drain, as if the old fountain were drawing water from every available source." But her husband "never again woke up with her."

Grandmother dreams of knights twice more while they are staying in the castle, but their number diminishes, their breathing is congested, their horses look gaunt and are bearded with ice. She is getting cold. "'Her husband,' said the dream man, 'would die of a respiratory infection.'" Father said, "Didn't Johanna [Grandmother] live in a castle? Once upon a time, I thought she and Grandpa rented some castle."

Grandpa died of a respiratory infection. The narrator imagines Grandmother having her dream again, now of knights with “their armor frozen shut”—no longer able to speak their dead romantic language. This image prefigures Garp later with his jaw wired shut. Grandmother is so prissy, fastidious and disgusted by Nature it suggests that she did not inspire romance in her husband. Gender relations have gone cold. Garp is practical like his mother, who raped his father. Feminism has killed romance. The result is evident when unromantic Garp proposes by letter to Helen that they live together so that he can have convenient sex—he offers to “even *marry* her”—and she tells him to stick his proposal in his ear.

In his evaluation of the Pension Grillparzer, the father concludes that the family running the place “is centered on the sister.” Under the sister’s influence the mother “began to find herself plagued by Grandmother’s dream.” Herr Theobald’s sister and the mother become like Grandmother and Jenny Fields, all of whom have “the sexless cynicism of some maiden aunts.” No romance is allowed. Hence the dream man goes insane. “His removal from the seedy premises...was almost simultaneous with the loss of the Grillparzer’s B rating.” Herr Theobald’s sister represents matriarchal governance: “She was older than her brother, and older than her husbands too—and in time, I imagined, she would cease being lover and sister to them, respectively, and become a mother to them all. She was already a mother to the bear.” She dresses her trained bear Duna in “the dream man’s pin-striped suit,” symbolizing her disrespect for men and control over their animal nature. Ultimately the bear “died of mortification.” Matriarchal culture degrades the soul: “There was no one around to take liberties anymore.”

Helen earns a Ph.D. in English at age 23 and is hired as an assistant professor at a women’s college. “It would take Garp five years to finish his first novel.” Clearly with no need of a man whatsoever, Helen condescends to marry Garp, although “they hardly knew each other.” Their relationship is unromantic, what feminists were calling a “partnership.” Like a law firm, they make contracts. “Helen was at school every day; she had agreed to have a child only if Garp would agree to take care of it. Garp loved the idea of never having to go out.” John Irving is the most prominent among the male novelists during the 1970s who happily accommodated the Feminists demanding that husbands stay home with the kids and let their wives have careers. Male writers liked the idea of being able to stay home and write. Gender role reversal became a convention in fiction by American males and in the popular culture. However, contrary to the radical Feminists making the demands, surveys and studies showed that nearly all women want to marry up, want their husbands to go out and make money, and are inclined to disrespect husbands who make less money than they do. A Rutgers study concluded that husbands whose wives make more money than they do are more likely to have a heart attack.

Jenny Fields publishes “The first truly feminist autobiography that is as full of celebrating one kind of life as it is full of putting down another.” She attacks intolerance with intolerance. Shortly after her book is published, her father dies of a heart attack. Garp is angered to find that reviewers discuss his novel in relation to feminism rather than on its literary merits, a complaint made by many writers since the 1970s. Jenny is so uninformed that she does not even know what the word *feminism* means. It reminds her of “feminine hygiene and the Valentine treatment.” Yet, ironically, overnight she becomes a Feminist heroine—a symbol of the “women’s movement” in a white nurse’s uniform. As a representative male, Garp is embarrassed and infuriated by all her feminist generalizations about men and lust, since she knows so little about them. Jenny is now taken by a “core of adorers” to be an expert on men and lust. The most extremely radical of the Feminists are those who cut their tongues out in order to identify with a rape victim named Ellen James. “The Ellen Jamesians represented, for Garp, the kind of women who lionized his mother and sought to use her to help further their crude causes.” They deliberately victimize themselves to get sympathy and handouts, like beggars in the Middle East.

Garp is unfaithful to Helen with a babysitter he compares to a Steering pigeon—“puppy-brained, and as soft and as easily influenced as a banana.” The opposite of Helen. Ironically, after molesting the teenage girl, in the city park he chases and molests an “apparent child molester” who turns out to be innocent. “‘Help!’ the old gentleman screamed.” In his outraged pursuit of justice, Garp does injustice, an analogy to the Feminists who condemn all men. The actual rapist gets his front teeth knocked out and reminds Garp of the Ellen Jamesians: “Garp realized that something had probably happened to this kid so that he didn’t feel very much—not much pain, not much of anything else.” And the babysitter had been “unable to speak to him when he left her,” making her momentarily like Ellen James and casting him as a rapist: “The three-

pack of condoms nestled patiently in his pocket, coiled like snakes.” Ironically, the newspaper headline reads, “SON OF FAMOUS FEMINIST HAS KNACK FOR HELPING GIRLS.” Guilt makes Garp even more ardent a male feminist: “Garp didn’t want a daughter because of *men*. Because of bad men, certainly; but even, he thought, because of men like *me*.”

Garp had “indulged himself in one other baby-sitter; to his shame, he had even forgotten her name.” You have to watch out for these sensitive male feminists. Helen is so condescending she merely calls Garp immature and curses all men for their “Fucking *lust*... Your mother was right.” Then she sleeps with her colleague Harrison Fletcher. Garp sleeps with Harrison’s lisping wife Alice, his marital counterpart. “‘Nothing is equal,’ Garp would write, one day.” When the foursome breaks up, only Helen is pleased about it. Garp is left impotent: “When anyone asked him how his writing was coming, he managed only a short, cruel imitation of poor Alice Fletcher. ‘I’ve *thtopped*,’ Garp said.”

T. S. (“Tough Shit”) Garp is a good little wife for almost eleven years, cooking and cleaning and tending the kids--financially dependent. Like many other wives in the 1970s, he eventually wonders “what it would be like to have a job.” Like many husbands, Helen “seemed to want him to stay at home.” Helen’s friends and colleagues “pictured Garp as rather bearish,” evoking the trained bear that died of mortification. The quality of Garp’s writing declines and he considers getting a job to meet people he can use as characters. Ironically, he decides to become a marriage counselor. “He sneered at psychiatrists—those dangerous simplifiers, those thieves of a person’s complexity.” Like Feminists.

Marriage counselors with religious affiliations “would all offer fairly optimistic counsel, Garp believed.” But he rejects the religious approach, inclining to pessimism. Later he angrily complains about “the religious morons who bring those righteous pamphlets about Jesus to one’s very door.” When he responds to a hostile reader that “few of us believe in God,” he does not seem to be including himself among the few. His statement is false. Year after year surveys have shown that a very large majority of the American people believe in God—not just a few. On this point, Garp is a secular liberal propagandist. He gives up his notion of becoming a marriage counselor after his encounter with Mrs. Ralph, the aggressive Feminist who drives too fast through his neighborhood: “I should have gotten one like you” she tells Garp, “some muscular little prick who likes to cook.”

Garp is very protective of his kids and anticipates disaster. His mother is now surrounded by women who hate males. He is raising boys in a feminist household, conditioning them by example to become dead pigeons. “What if their most dangerous enemy turned out to be *him*?” He dreams that he and his son Duncan are flying in an airliner. Duncan wants his father to take him to the right door, but “Garp shoved the child into the aisle. ‘Grow up, Duncan,’ he said. ‘It’s one of those doors down there. Go on.... *Try* one!’” Nothing is written on any of the doors. There is no adequate guidance for boys in modern society. Feminists do not care. Duncan tries a door and is sucked away out into the sky—a pigeon who cannot fly. Garp does not see the danger until it is too late and “hurtles after his son.” This is how Garp would feel if one of his boys died because of him.

Duncan sleeps over with a friend at Mrs. Ralph’s house and Garp drops by to check on him because he does not trust Mrs. Ralph. He finds her drunk and sloppy with an arrogant teenage boy in her waterbed. When he gets licked on the ear he wonders whether it is Mrs. Ralph or her dog. Feeling sorry for her, he lies: “I find you very attractive,” he mumbles to Mrs. Ralph, but he’s facing Bill”—her dog. This is the cruel slang motif in the novel of the unattractive woman as a “dog.” Garp is called worse. To him the moral question is whether he should have had sex in compliance with the demand of Mrs. Ralph, who represents the Feminists complaining that men are afraid of strong assertive women. Garp is ironic on the phone when he tells Helen, “I’ve been good.” Mrs. Ralph taunts him: “I guess you haven’t *always* been a good boy.... My husband would have called you pussy-whipped’.”

While Garp is lusting after the older graduate student Mrs. Ralph, Helen is having an affair with a young graduate student in English who is mostly the opposite of Garp. After eleven years of marriage Helen has decided “I want to be loved.” As if Garp does not love her. By loved she means laid, as if Garp is getting cold like the knights in the dream of the Grandmother in “The Pension Grillparzer”: “*Sex*, or at least romance, was the subject she had at last come to: Garp had better provide it or Michael Milton would.”

Named ironically after the great religious poet, young Milton has a mustache like the villain in an old melodrama, the token of the Bad Man in *Garp*, including Garp. Previously, as a representative feminist, Helen has scorned romance. But now she wants romantic sex immediately. Milton had a “certain brittle smartness,” but “he was glib, he was facile, and all that was unlikable.” This blows away the impression we have been given that Helen has good taste. She is a better critic than the narcissistic Mrs. Ralph, but her affair with Milton reduces her to moral equality with Garp and his babysitters.

Garp writes another story about his crusade against speeders through his neighborhood like Mrs. Ralph: “I go too far with them, but they make me so angry—with their carelessness, their dangerous, sloppy way of life, which I view as so directly threatening to my own life and the lives of my children.” He chases down a speeding plumber, O. Fecteau, who goes berserk. “This is how I help the neighborhood, I thought: I drive mad men madder.” The whole novel dramatizes how Feminists drive both mad men and mad women madder. The injustices that result from self-righteousness were illustrated previously when Garp chased down an innocent old man and assaulted him in the park. Now he dreams only of horrors happening to his children. He has compared himself to a bomb earlier and now he dreams of himself indulging his lust while his children, Helen and Jenny hide from falling bombs that their looks at him imply are his fault—destructive consequences of his lust. Helen likewise feels guilty. She punishes herself for shifty behavior by pushing her hand against “the bare, sharp shaft of the Volvo stick shift... She could bring tears to her eyes, this way, and it made her feel clean again, when she arrived home...”

When he finds out, Garp hates Helen. “It was a new situation for her—that she should find herself in the defensive position in a matter of some contention with Garp—and she felt frightened.” This is a feminist marriage and Helen is accustomed to dominating her husband. Nothing is equal, as Garp says. It is ironic that Garp calls Milton a wimp, since he knows himself to be a pigeon. “If she had been sensitive to how much she’d hurt Garp, at first, now her feelings for him were deadening slightly and she was feeling for herself again.” She is so cool about it, “He would have struck her if the children hadn’t burst into the room.... He turned away from them so they wouldn’t see him crying.” It does not help when Helen tries to minimize her betrayal by saying, “I just *enjoyed* him.” Left to himself, he buries his face in her lingerie drawer “like a bear holding a great trough of food in his forepaws, and then losing himself in it.” Garp has lost himself in his feminist marriage to Helen.

Garp warns Duncan about the gearshift in the car: “It’s like a *spear*. You want to fall on that if I have to stop hard?” Duncan says he should get it fixed, but Garp replies, “That’s your mother’s job.” Helen is the primary driver, playing the male role, hence Garp does not take on the conventional responsibility of a husband. Ironically, Helen does not get the gearshift fixed out of guilt for her infidelity. Mutual infidelity, guilt and confusion of roles in a feminist marriage will be disastrous. When Helen sees Milton to break up, he has shaved off his mustache, revealing the “undeveloped lip of a child—like Walt’s little lip.” The comparison suggests that she is a child molester perverting her proper role as a teacher, although Milton is not literally a child. Throughout the Feminist period since *Garp* was published in 1978, there have been many cases reported in the media of female teachers having sex with underage students. “Helen may have supposed that biting off three quarters of a student’s penis was fairly high on the scale of conceivable abuse to students.... There were many worse ways of evaluating students and categorizing them for life. But amputation of their genitalia was certainly severe, even for bad students.”

Jenny Fields moves her family to Dog’s Head Harbor, nursing them and the women’s movement in her white uniform. When Helen sees Milton to break it off, she bites it off. Garp returns from taking the boys to a movie, distracted and upset. Ironically, after blaming Helen for everything in his thoughts, he shows off to his boys by approaching their driveway at about 40 miles an hour, popping the sharp stick shift into neutral—“a second before he killed the engine and flicked out the headlights.” It is icy, sleeting and dark. Because little Walt has a cold (congestion) the windows are rolled up, further reducing visibility. Garp is in the dark: “‘He doesn’t have to see,’ Walt said.” Ironically, Garp says “I know this by heart.” He smashes into the car in the driveway containing Helen and Milton, for whom it is paradise lost. Walt’s last words—“It’s like a dream!”—recall the death dream of the Grandmother in “The Pension Grillparzer.” As results of the accident, Garp has his jaw wired shut, echoing the knights with their armor frozen shut; Duncan lost an eye on the shaft of the gearshift; and little Walt is dead—from “congestion” in several ways. The innocents

pay most for the sins of their feminist parents. Ironically, Garp the speeder does far more harm than any of the speeders he chases down.

The most likeable woman in the novel is a former man. Formerly a pro football star for the Philadelphia Eagles, Garp's friend Roberta Muldoon's position is a transsexual joke—"tight end." Roberta was inspired by Jenny Fields to have a sex-change operation and has become an enlightened feminist: "I never knew what *shits* men were until I became a woman." But he is also politically incorrect: "There was more than a hint of distaste in Roberta's references to homosexuals, and Garp thought it strange that people in the process of making a decision that will plant them firmly in a minority, forever, are possibly less tolerant of other minorities than we might imagine." Irving is able to get away with displacing some of his most critical views of radical Feminists onto Roberta: "'That damn lesbian crowd,' Roberta said to Garp. 'They're trying to make your mother into something she isn't.'" They take over the women's movement. "Garp pondered how these other women in his mother's house, and in her care, had all been victims of intolerance—yet most of them he'd met seemed especially intolerant of each other." Some of them "huddled on the dunes, like dogs told to *stay!* until they're called."

With his jaw wired shut Garp pronounces his name "Arp." He has been wounded and diminished by the gender war as his father was diminished into death by World War II. "Arp" makes him sound like the barking dog in the alley he told his boys about. Thus, he includes himself among the unattractive in his dog insult, as he too is now living in Dog's Head Harbor. He sublimates his rage by writing about a rapist named Rath. "The World According to Bensenhaver," a story that becomes a novel, carries on his theme of self-righteousness. Inspector Bensenhaver has been outraged by rapists since his wife got raped and murdered in a laundromat by three kids. He represents the radical Feminist attitude toward rape in law enforcement: "Other people did not always take rape in the right way." The "right way" is to take revenge by any means, including destruction of evidence, falsification and disregard of facts. His deputy "thought Bensenhaver was not to be totally trusted." The first part of the story is brutal Naturalism detailing the abduction and rape of a housewife named Hope, who fulfills the hope of those who want the victim to prevail. The cleaning woman Jilly Sloper thinks the story is "sick" but likes its depiction of "what men in this world is like." Jenny Fields "thought it had all its priorities in order—that it knew whom to heroize in such a situation, that it expressed the necessary outrage, that it made properly grotesque the vileness of *lust*." A women's studies professor gives it a review that "helped to establish the rumor that *The World According to Bensenhaver* is 'a feminist novel'"—"referred to as 'the new feminist Bible'."

Ironically, the story also appealed to the editors of *Crotch Shots*. The rape of Hope and the killing of the rapist are so graphic the story becomes a form of pornography vicariously involving the reader in sex and violence, satisfying both the lust of Feminists for bloody revenge on the male and male readers of the porn magazine in which part of it is published, some of whom probably enjoyed the rape. Garp's publisher considers the story "an X-rated soap opera"—"Lurid, sensational violence and sex of no redeeming value whatsoever." The rape is made as revolting as possible and is perpetrated by a disgusting retarded creep who also raped animals. Hope is so clearly justified in killing this rapist in self-defense it is easy for some readers to become vigilantes, scorn the law and identify with Bensenhaver in feeling that the end of avenging a rape victim justifies any means. Many lynchings have resulted from this kind of self-righteous outrage. Many cases are not as clear as Hope's. Currently there are about a dozen lawsuits against colleges and universities around the country where accused males have been presumed guilty and punished without due process.

The radicals turned Jenny Fields, who embodies the valid claims that originated and inspired the women's movement, into "something she isn't." Roberta Muldoon says that "she was simply for allowing women to live their own lives and make their own choices." When she gets shot, Roberta took Jenny in his arms and "knifed through the breaking crowd like an old tight end carrying the ball for a hard first down." She became a political football. The other team, the Bad Guys, are conservatives: "The hunters in their pickup trucks were of the opinion that to vote for this woman was to vote for faggotry—and lesbianism, and socialism, and alimony, and New York." These Bad Guys are politically incorrect: They are rural and implicitly oppose gun control, gay marriage, abortion, atheism, and socialized medicine. In this allegory of the women's movement during the 1970s, the death of the valid feminist spirit is blamed on rural conservatives in pickups like the rapist Oren Rath. This is ridiculous. The novel has already shown that

the radicals surrounding Jenny killed that spirit. Roberta says that Jenny hated being called a feminist “because it’s a label I didn’t choose to describe my feelings about men or the way I write.”

After she is killed, the radicals accuse Garp of “cashing in on his mother’s reputation, and the women’s movement.” Feminists put male writers in a double bind: They demand that men write about women’s issues but they are intolerant of anything a man writes. Roberta warns Garp that if he is recognized at his mother’s funeral, “they’ll tear you limb from limb.” Duncan begins noticing men on the street with missing limbs. “‘You should wait awhile and get a look at your father,’ Roberta Muldoon said.” Roberta dresses Garp in drag, “in a cheap turquoise jump suit, the color of Oren Rath’s pickup truck.” The feminist funeral “was not in a church” but in a secular university auditorium. Garp is exposed by Pooh Percy, accused of murdering Cushie Percy, kicked in the balls and chased out of the auditorium. While in drag he is like Roberta and experiences both sides of the gender war. “Garp felt a peculiar kind of unfairness overwhelm him. He had not asked to have such an anatomy.” Idealizing his mother, he forgets that he was conceived when she raped a dying man: “Jenny Fields always did what was right.”

Feminism reduces the quality of Garp’s writing. According to one literary critic, “Garp’s work was progressively weakened by its closer and closer parallels to his personal history. ‘As he became more autobiographical, his writing grew narrower.’” In talks at colleges he blames “The destruction of art by sociology and psychoanalysis.” He does not blame politics, but his publisher says that “political true believers...were always the enemy of the artist.” Garp stops writing and declares to Roberta, “Mom was out to get me.” Nevertheless, with her money he establishes the Fields Foundation for women. The staff of women “alternately liked and disliked Garp—but always argued with him... Some of them wanted lots of money *and* a room at Dog’s Head Harbor, forever.” The parasitic Ellen Jamesians “are almost the essence of the *spirit* of the place,” although “their radicalism (now) seemed growingly obsolete and pathetic.” Garp lacks “tolerance of the intolerant. Crazy people made him crazy.”

Ironically Garp adopts the real Ellen James, who feels that “the Ellen Jamesians had only prolonged her anguish... That’s why I hate them. They force you to be like them—or else you’re their enemy.” This gender war mentality characterized the entire Feminist movement during the 1970s, especially in higher education, and came to be known in the 1980s as “Political Correctness”—political conformity increasingly enforced by institutions and local, state, and federal governments. Feminists suppressed free speech. After the real Ellen publishes an essay expressing her actual views, a driver tries to run over Garp while he is out on a run. She is compared to a ball turret gunner in the war that killed his father the ball turret gunner. An Ellen Jamesian, the driver crashes into a wall and is killed. A spokesperson for the society of Ellen Jamesians declares that the attempt on Garp’s life was “obviously provoked by the ‘typically male, aggressive, rapist personality of T. S. Garp’.” By 1978 in real life radical Feminists were advocating revenge murder of abusive husbands. Garp publishes a meek apology for the “vehemence and self-righteousness” of his published remarks about Ellen Jamesians. “Garp had become the weakest sort of liberal: he would evaluate no one...he was a soft touch in the real world”—a pigeon.

In the social allegory, the death of Garp symbolizes the death of sympathy for the Feminist movement. After wrestling with gender problems all his life, Garp is assassinated in the wrestling room at Steering, normally a male refuge. He has just been thinking about his mother when an apparent nurse comes into the room wearing a Jenny Fields Original. This directly links Jenny to the extension of the feminist movement into murderous fanaticism. Jenny was “out to get” him and ultimately she got him. Dean Bodger, representing the educational system, still believes that he saved young Garp “and not a pigeon.” It was Helen who “tackled Pooh Percy to the mat and kept her from firing a third shot.” Helen represents the humanistic feminists who must tackle the problem of homicidal fanaticism in their movement embodied in Pooh. Garp described the spoiled little Feminist as “an androgynous twerp...with a face like a ferret and a mind completely sodden by spending nearly fifteen years in diapers.” Poo on Pooh.

“He was thirty-three.” This resonant detail, his unjust murder and the fact that he is the son of Virgin Mary Jenny, cast Garp as a Christ-evoking figure. Garp is the male feminist “crucified” by the very people he tries to help. It is true that he is Christian in his love of children, charity work and promotion of forgiveness in his family. But he is a *mock* Christ-evoking figure because (1) he is such an opportunistic fornicator; (2) he is “the weakest sort of liberal”; (3) he does not voluntarily sacrifice his life; (4) his death

does not redeem anyone; in fact his murder can only intensify the gender war; (5) he has no religious or transcendental experiences; (6) his “rebirth” is merely increased sales of his first novel; (7) he invokes the name of Jesus Christ countless times merely as an expletive, or a curse, reminding the reader that (8) he does not believe in God; (9) in fact, since Garp is seen even by himself as a naïve pigeon, he discourages anyone from following his “Christlike” example, making this an anti-Christian novel.

Since the 1980s it has not been necessary for Feminists to assassinate male writers. They have simply censored them: “Literary quality became secondary to representational issues.... By the end of the 1980s, every publisher had complied with the demands of the [Feminist] critics.... The goal of the language police is not just to stop us from using objectionable words but to stop us from having objectionable thoughts.... For twenty-five years, give or take a few, we have lived with this system of silent censorship.” (Diane Ravitch, *The Language Police* [Knopf 2003]: 158, 87, 96) Feminist editors did not cut out their own tongues like the Ellen Jamesians, they cut out the tongues of men.

Michael Hollister (2015)

An international bestseller since its publication in 1978, *The World According to Garp* established John Irving as one of the most imaginative writers of his generation. This is the life of T. S. Garp, the bastard son of Jenny Fields--a feminist leader ahead of her times. This is the life and death of a famous mother and her almost-famous son; theirs is a world of sexual extremes--even of sexual assassinations. It is a novel rich with "lunacy and sorrow"; yet the dark, violent events of the story do not undermine a comedy both ribald and robust. In more than thirty languages, in more An international bestseller since its publication in 1978, *The World According to Garp* established John Irving as one of the most imaginative writers of his generation. This is the life of T. S. Garp, the bastard son of Jenny Fields--a feminist leader ahead of her times. This is the life and death of a famous mother and her almost-famous son; theirs is a world of sexual extremes--even of sexual assassinations. It is a novel rich with "lunacy and sorrow"; yet the dark, violent events of the story do not undermine a comedy both ribald and robust. In more than thirty languages, in more than forty c John Irving's fourth novel, published in 1978, *The World According to Garp* was a bestseller for several years. The book was also a finalist for the "Pulitzer Prize". Most of the books written by Garp echo Irving's previous novels. *Procrastination* is Irving's *Setting Free the Bears*; *The Second Wind of the Cuckold* is similar to *The 158-Pound Marriage*. Following this pattern, Garp's third novel, *The World According to Bensenhaver*, is similarly titled to *The World According to Garp* (Irving's real third novel, *The Water Method Man*, bears no resemblance to *Bensenhaver*) The book Garp is planning to write just prior to his murder contains elements of Irving's novel *The Hotel New Hampshire*, which was published after Garp. Advertisement