

# **A Son of the Circus**

*John Irving*

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A Hindi film star . . . an American missionary . . . twins separated at birth . . . a dwarf chauffeur . . . a serial killer . . . all are on a collision course. In the tradition of A Prayer for Owen Meany, Irving's characters transcend nationality. They are misfits--coming from everywhere, belonging nowhere. Set almost entirely in India, this is John Irving's most ambitious novel and a major publishing event.

## A Son of the Circus Details

Date : Published by Ballantine Books (first published 1994)

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Author : John Irving

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# From Reader Review A Son of the Circus for online ebook

## Mari says

Tässä oli liikaa henkilöitä, mikä sai aikaan sekavuuden tunteen eikä tarina kiinnostanut tarpeeksi. Toivottavasti oman hyllyn lukemattomat Irvingin kirjat ovat parempia kuin tämä.

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## Snotchocheez says

At long last I got around to reading Irving's long, LONG, LOOONG "A Son of the Circus", and despite its faults (and there are many, given its bloated 600+ page length), it's one of his best efforts, right up there with "A Prayer for Owen Meany", "...Garp", and "A Widow for One Year". I thought he'd be out of his element (if not out of his mind) writing about India, and put off reading it for more than a decade, although I wish I hadn't.

Irving lets the reader know in advance, however, that (although it's set there) the novel is not *ABOUT* India; rather, it's about feeling like a foreigner in your own country. It's a tough feat for a New Englander to write an entire novel set in India, narrated by an ex-patriate Indian-cum-Canadian, and still make it a credible, interesting read. Irving pulls it off admirably.

From what I can ascertain from the autobiographical bits scattered though some of Irving's later novels (particularly his latest novel "Last Night In Twisted River" which recounts some of his relationships with fellow authors like Vonnegut and Salman Rushdie), "A Son of the Circus", written in the mid-90's, seems to have been written in homage to Salman Rushdie, who may, perhaps, feel himself to be a foreigner or pariah in his homeland. The massive plot defies encapsulation: An orthopedic surgeon for children (originally from India but living in Canada) makes regular pilgrimages to India to work with the midget children in Bombay; he has a second career as a screenwriter of second-rate Bollywood detective movies. Throw in a cast of thousands (almost literally!), including clowns, trapeze artists, midgets and rabid monkeys at the circus (and Christian Enlightenment resultant from bites from said rabid monkeys (!)), disaffected Hollywood has-been actors/actresses, twins separated at birth, genteel golf club members, Hijras (a caste of transgendered Indians, akin to castrati) and zenanas (transvestites), child prostitutes (ick), car bombers/Sikh extremists...heck, even throw in a mass murderer into the mix...ultimately the protagonist swims through this mess and tries to make sense of his place on earth. That Irving was able to take the above elements and weave a coherent, entertaining, and socially relevant novel is, quite simply, an amazing accomplishment.

It's not perfect though. While Irving's zeal in writing this is evident in every single page, it can seem frightfully bloated with extraneous characters thrown at you from every-which-way. "...Circus" totally could've used a prudent trim job just to streamline the narrative flow a bit. (Though, to be honest, I'd much rather sift through a passel of Irving's sharp syntax than I would care doing so with any other authors' output). Also, if you're at all familiar with Irving, you probably know he is not shy with topics of a sexual nature. I've never been offended by anything he's put out there, but for the first time, he wierded me out with a plot thread involving saving a 12 year-old prostitute from a life of iniquity and AIDS by removing her from a brothel and putting her in the circus. That part could've easily been excised without any harm to the story as a whole. These are minor quibbles, however. Irving's fish-out-of-water, "once an immigrant, always an immigrant" tale of soul-searching in India is beautifully poignant, incredibly witty, and ages well.

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## **Gail says**

My favorite Irving book. I have a love/hate relationship with Irving's work. "Son" is a madhouse of a novel, even for Irving. The plot(s) are dizzyingly complicated; the characters as bizarre as always, but somehow believable. I loved the feeling for India in the book; and the humor--oh my! The scene in the cab made me laugh until I cried, thus waking up my husband, as I was reading in bed. If you can tolerate really, really weird situations, don't mind some mild but off-the-wall sexual references, and just want to read something completely different, this is a book for you.

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## **Lolanta says**

<http://lolantaczyta.wordpress.com/201...>

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## **Susanna Rautio says**

Sirkuksen poika oli Vesimiehen jälkeen pitkästyttävin John Irvingin kirja ikinä.

Kaoottinen kuin Intia, jossa melkein kaikki tapahtuu. Ei hurmaavalla tavalla vaan sekopäisesti.

On taas värikästä sakkia. Ikääntyvä tohtori ja parikymmentä muuta hahmoa, monikulttuurista ja -arvoista, sukupuoli-identiteettejä ja -tauteja, sirkusta, vammaisuutta, rikoksia, kääpiötä. Irvingille vähemmän ei todellakaan ole enemmän.

Tähdistä toisen annan Irvingin humanismille. En kirjalle.

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## **Thomas Strömquist says**

My favorite John Irving - I'm having a bit of hard time to single out what makes this one a notch above the rest (and above a huge number of others), but I'm certain that the intriguing setting of India and (this time) perfect blend of joy of telling a story and strange but likeable characters are keys to the whole.

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## **Alys says**

I'm a John Irving fan and this book did not disappoint. He weaves together characters from different decades and different countries, complex and rich in detail. The book is both disturbing in its subject matter as most of his books are but compelling in a way that I could hardly put it down. A great summer or vacation read as it is close to 700 pages long.

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## Harry Collier IV says

Reread this and by the end I wished I hadn't. There is a great story in this book but halfway through Irving abandons it for personal politics and exploring issues such as homosexuality and aids. These issues had nothing to do with the story and so felt forced.

2 chapters before the end the main problem of the novel resolves itself leaving Irving two final chapters for wrapping up loose ends and believe it or not character development.

An internal problem was given to the main character in the first chapter and then abandoned. At the end, Irving seems to have realized this and then tried to cram a novel's worth of struggles into about 20 pages.

I have lowered my rating from 5 to 3 stars.

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## Will Byrnes says

I am a big fan of Irving, but I found this one disappointing.

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## Tali says

I read this book by accident and discovered how rich a story can be.

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## Edward Lorn says

This is the 8th book in my John Irving Challenge. I only have five books left. As I said in my review of the previous book, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, John Irving was not the best choice for a year-long chronological study of an author's growth and decline. His books and characters are far too similar. I do not suggest recreating this project with this author. On with the review.

By Goodreads standards, two stars equals "okay". I wish there was something between "okay" and "I hated it", because that's where I'm at with this book. I didn't hate the book, but it's also far from okay. For the most part, *A Son of the Circus* is a disjointed, rambling, meandering mess of a novel. Part of the problem here is the omniscient narration. To have been written by such an accomplished, award-winning author, the book is amateur hour. Examples of good omniscient narration would be parts of Stephen King's *It* and all of Frank Herbert's *Dune*. Those two books read naturally, whereas this one reads like a clunky nightmare. I had to reread whole sub-chapters because I didn't know what had happened to who, and/or I'd fallen asleep mid-sentence.

Which brings me to the fact that this book is boring as fuck. This is compounded by the fact that whole sections of it go absolutely nowhere, with little to no emotional payoff. The serial killer plot? It fizzles out. The circus performers' lives go nowhere. We're asked to care about people in the final chapter who we never truly know. Madhu was important? Since when? We knew very little about her, other than her being a child prostitute. Ganesh? He was offscreen forever and then the end comes and you expect me to feel something? I felt bad for Vinod in the end, but everyone else was just... well, they were just *there*. Not even Martin and

John D. had satisfying endings. Simply put, this didn't feel like a John Irving novel, aside from Martin Mills being the reincarnation of Owen Meany. Seriously. Same character, less CAPSLOCK!

That being said, the final subchapter with Daruwalla was terrific. It was touching and heartfelt and poignant, and it made me wonder what happened to the last 670 pages. It didn't feel like the same book. And that gives me a theory.

I believe so many Irving fans (myself included) are enamored with this book because of the way he ended it. You can hate entire chapters, even hundreds of pages at a time, but then you get to the end and he sticks the landing. This gives you a false sense that the book, as a whole, was far better than it actually was. The problem with my theory is, it's glaringly obvious how terrible the rest of the book is. It's just not any fun to read. And then I'm given a gorgeous closing chapter, and I sit back and say, "Man, what the fuck was that? Did the same author write the rest of the book? Sure as shit doesn't feel like it."

So, if I'm pressed, I give the majority of the book one star. Even though there are numerous quote-worthy lines, the style and meandering narration kill all enjoyment. But I can't give it a one-star because of that final subchapter. Thus I'm giving it two stars. Overall, it was just okay. Still, I wouldn't recommend it.

Finally, where's all the circus shit I was promised? There's very little in here. Maybe 100 pages of 680 pages have anything remotely circus related. How the fuck you gonna title a book A SON OF THE CIRCUS and give a reader so little circus time. That's fucked up, man.

In summation: I tried reading this with two other friends who I've rarely seen quit books. One of them buys Ruth Ware novels even though he's never read a Ruth Ware novel he's liked. If that ain't a dedication to finishing something, man, I don't know what is. Both of them quit this book before page 400. Mostly because of the reasons I stated in this review. I only hung around because of this challenge I'm doing. Had I picked this up on a whim, I'd have tossed it in a fire by page 200. Which would've been sad, because then I'd never have read that final subchapter, and that final subchapter damn near made the entire book worth the read. Crazy.

**Final Judgment: Irving's worst novel... for now.**

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## Joey says

Somewhere in a vacuous universe of this tube, Joey bumped into GR.

Joey: Hi, you look familiar with me. Have we met before? You must be ... one of my friends on Good Reads!

GR: Oh, yeah! You are ...Joey! ( overwhelmed )

Joey: And you are ...GR! Oh, it's nice to see ya here! ( shaking hands with GR)

GR: Oh, yeah! As though we haven't seen each other for ages! ( laughs)  
( then she saw a book Joey holding) Oh, you must be reading something. ( trying to look through it) Wait ! wait! Wait! You have been reading John Irving's ?

Joey: ( hiding the book behind his back ) Ah,huh...er... I have. ( smiling )

GR: What's the title?

Joey: Ah...er..A Son of the Circus.

GR: Oh, really? Wait! ( thinking ) Is not that on the list of 1001 Best Novels of All Time? ( giggling)

Joey: Oh, yeah! You are right!

GR: I said it. So,what do you think of it?( excited )

Joey: Ah.. er..Well, H-how bout you? What have you been reading?

GR : Oh, I have just finished a chicklit by Rainbow Rowell. OMG! It' terrific. I recommend you read it. It's heart-breaking!In fact, it won .....

Joey: Oh, really?

GR: So , Is John Irving's interesting?

Joey: Er..I think I have heard a lot of good things about Rowell. I would love to read hers too.

GR: Oh, yeah ! Come on! Get on with it! Then, let me know what you think of it. I am so excited !What was it again? Oh, yeah! It is John...

Joey : Ah,( looking at his watch ) er.. I am sorry! I've got to go! Nice to meet you again, GR. Chat you on Good reads. ( walking past him in a hurry)

GR: Er..H-how about ...? Wait! ( waving his hand ) Ok. ( watching him fading away ) ...Is there something the matter with the book? ( muttering under his breath, despaired)

When GR was home, he logged into his Good reads account. The first message popped was from Joey's.

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To: GR

From: Joey

Hi, GR. I've checked that you haven't read A Son of the Circus by John Irving's yet.Well, I don''t wanna be a spoiler. If you wanna read it, have LONG PATIENCE.

Otherwise, you might end up laying it to rest.

Good luck!

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At last, I finished this 708 –page novel since I had let it on my study table collect mote of dust as well as get stuck and musty in my currently-reading list on Goodreads for a year. Gee, at that time I still found it very humorous, replete with amusing themes I could not find from other novels, as well as I was impressed by its

firs immortal THE WORLD ACCORDING TO GARP ( 4 stars ). In fact, I was tempted to read first thereupon buying his A WIDOW FOR ONE YEAR because I was fascinated by its softbound cover. Unfortunately, I was very disappointed. So, automatically, I gave it 1 star. And for the second time around, A SON OF THE CIRCUS is somewhat less disappointing than the former . What's the matter? In effect, doubtless , John Irving is a gifted writer. I liked the fact that he is able to write such ambitious novels as though he does not have to deal with a writer's block, as if he never runs out of any ideas. Besides, it is amazing of him to jumble up his different themes together in the same concept. On the other hand, since it is now my third novel, I am now getting more familiar with his writing style than that I found out why I gave both A WIDOW FOR ONE YEAR and this one 1 star. First, Irving loves dilly-dallying with his stories as I thought of before. He tends to beat around the bush. He does not stick to the main story. Rather, he tells more details about a superficial situation I am not very much familiar with. . Who cares? Thus, the narrator sounds to be blabbering.

Blah! Blah! Blah! Blah! Blah!

Furthermore, I have noticed that John Irving loves repeating the same stories in the other chapters in a sense that they are all connected- a writing style that is doubtless very rare among other writers. However, such style is persistent in a sense that it ends up a pain in the ass. Imagine a plot goes like this :

Chapter 1 : You read a story .....blah! blah! blah!

Chapter 2: You read another story.....then here it goes again, the same with Chapter 1...blah! blah! blah!

I am telling you. You need a considerable amount of long patience to finish it.

Granted that this is less disappointing, I believe that this is still a masterpiece. For me , any piece of literary work is a labor of writing skills. Alas, it's beyond my taste. But as the cliché goes," There must be the method to Irving's madness.", and this is on what I want to be shed light someday.

I still have his two novels more on my shelf: A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY and UNTIL I FIND YOU. I wonder if he wrote them with the same style. Dear me!

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## **Lisa Strube-Kilgore says**

I've always been a John Irving fan, but this one took me by surprise. It has a very slow start - I found myself struggling to get into it, thinking, "Why on earth would I care about an Indian circus and an Orthopedist's quest for dwarf blood?" (And yeah - it's *exactly* as weird as it sounds, at least at first.) I almost gave it up. Suddenly, though, after I pushed through the first two chapters, the dozens of characters started to gain their own identities, and all of a sudden, **bang!** , I was in an Irving novel.

This book, surprisingly (at least to me), had the almost certainly unintended (and definitely unanticipated) effect of making me want to learn more about India. Which is weird, since, as the book makes clear time and time again, it's not really *about* India. It's part detective mystery, part rumination on global racial relations, part unapologetic schmaltz, funny as hell and surprisingly heartbreaking (it has a sneaky habit, like more than one of Irving's books, of catching you off guard. You'd think I'd be ready for him by now, but it seems like I never am!). This novel is a lot like *A Prayer for Owen Meany* in that its last chapters, wherein



everything starts getting wrapped up, have a sense of mourning about them, at least in a general "time marches on" kind of sense that's sort of hard to pin down.

I really love this book. It's kind of a slog at 682 pages, but I think I read it every single night for two weeks. Highly, highly recommended.

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## **Roy says**

2.5 stars. My least favorite John Irving book and the only one I can say that I did not especially like, not that it isn't written with his usual level of skill and attention to detail. But I found the plot and the characters far less addictive than that of the typical John Irving book. I probably would have rated this a little higher if it was written by someone else but I have the highest of expectations for Irving novels. He set a standard for himself with masterpieces such as *The World According to Garp* (to name just one) that I suppose is impossible to write up to every time out.

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## **Cody | codysbookshelf says**

DNF @ Page 355.

Yep, I'm giving up after investing so much time into this shaggy dog of a novel. I wanted to like it, really. Irving is one of my favorite authors and reading his stuff is always an unique experience. But this thing is ALL over the place: it doesn't know what it wants to be, or why. I can't keep up with the ever-expanding cast of characters nor can I find a reason to care about them. I don't know where the hell this thing is going, and I'm only halfway done. I just cannot keep going.

Still, Irving's prose is impeccable in places and I did like a couple of the characters — hence my 2 stars. Maybe I will finish this one day.

I buddy read this with my friend Edward. We will be tackling *A Widow for a Year* next. :)

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## **Jacob says**

January/February 2010

Dwarfs and beggars, whores and transvestites, murderers and movie stars and twins separated at birth, and the doctor/amateur geneticist/really amateur writer who knows them all...

Of what I've read, this is John Irving's most sprawling novel yet, a wild circus with a half-dozen acts all scrambling for the center spot. Easily worth five stars, but I probably read it wrong. Often, with Irving, you can set the book down and come back to it after a long absense, or even just pick a page at random and read from there--no matter how complex or dense the book is, it's easy to pick up on a thread and go from there. I do it with *Garp* all the time (and I read the epilogue to that every few months). Here, though, I had to work at it: I thought I could read a chapter or two during my lunch break at work (very short chapters) but I kept getting confused, as Irving spent much of the first act jumping back and forth between the present (a single

afternoon and evening) and various important events in the past--all flashbacks important to the rest of the story, of course, but not quite right for casual, light reading. Still, it's full of fun, short scenes, typical and wonderful Irving-esque comedy, and the chapter "Blood from Dwarfs" is one of my favorite Irving chapters. (after "Life After Garp") Wonderful story, worth five stars (and will certainly earn 'em, next time), but make sure to devote your time to this one. Definitely worth a re-read.

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### **Julia says**

It's a couple of years i read my first irving ever, and it's one of the few books which made me laugh out loud...hilarious situations, incredible characters, highly recommended....

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### **Emi Bevacqua says**

I used to love John Irving, read most of what he wrote (The World According to Garp, A Prayer for Owen Meany, Cider House Rules, The Water Method Man, The 158 lb Marriage) until A Widow for One Year and The Fourth Hand, which I hated and quit him over. So I was hesitant about A Son of the Circus, but then ended up falling in total love with it, and all the characters, even the minor ones.

The story is wacky, the main character Dr. Farrokh Daruwalla lives part-time in Canada and part-time in Bombay. He and his brother both married Austrians (sisters). Dr. Daruwalla is an orthopedic surgeon and has three daughters (orthopedics feature predominantly in this book, oddly his own children play next to zero role at all) and a pseudo-son named John D. In addition to practicing medicine, the doctor has a secret occupation, that of screenwriter. The movies are terrible and star John D as Inspector Dhar.

This book made me remember how witty John Irving's dialog is, and his gift for making such entirely preposterous set-ups completely believable. There is serial killing, family drama, cultural values, twins separated at birth, sex changes and tons more (but no wrestling or New England, which seems weird for John Irving). At times I wondered why the doctor's daughters weren't featured in the story, but maybe that was to highlight how tight the bond is between him and John D, who isn't real kin but is loved just as much. Spanning several countries and time-lines and story-lines as this book does, most writers would confuse and overwhelm, but even though it took me several days to finish reading this 633 page book, I knew exactly where I'd left off every time I returned, and immediately got engrossed in it. I love the constant theme of not belonging and feeling foreign, and wondered how a white American could write about those things so perceptively, especially as racism affects those of color - I learned that John Irving lived in Vienna in his youth and has homes in Canada, and the rest I attribute to his being a brilliant author.

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### **Adam says**

I bought my battered, brown paged copy of "*A Son of the Circus*" second-hand at Blossoms Book House in Church Street, Bangalore. A previous owner had left an old used Bangladesh Biman (airways) boarding pass inside it. I used this souvenir of a journey, completed long ago, as a bookmark. By the time I finished this long book, this fragile strip of paper was a mere shadow of its former self.

The book begins with some pages of 'Author's Notes'. These start with the words: "*This novel isn't about India. I don't know India. I was there once, for less than a month...*" I strongly disagree with this. Irving may have only been in India for a short time, but he has certainly managed to write a beautifully detailed account of the parts of the country that feature in this lengthy novel. His eye for detail is amazing, as is his ability to fondly and sympathetically characterise the Indians who appear in the story.

On page 635 of my copy (published by Corgi in 1995), I read: "*'I'm going to tell you a little story about my mother,' said Martin Mills. Somehow, Dr Daruwalla knew that the story wouldn't be 'little'. The missionary wasn't a minimalist; he favoured description. In fact, Martin left out no detail...*" This brief extract summarises Irving's writing perfectly, and accounts for the great length of this novel.

Page after page, the author keeps on introducing new characters bits of information and frequently goes off at a tangent with seemingly irrelevant sidetracking. I found this a little disturbing at first, but soon realised that almost everything that Irving introduces eventually helps to drive the plot later on. So, if you feel that you are not sure where the book is heading when you have read about 300 pages, don't despair!

I will not attempt to summarise the complicated plot, which is at least as complex as, and often even more enjoyable, than that of a long Bollywood film. The only thing that this novel lacks is the song and dance scenes that make Bollywood movies so much fun to watch. Needless to say, Dr Daruwalla, a Parsee physician, who resides most of the year in Toronto with Julia his Austrian wife, is the hero of this epic tale. Not only does he cure cripples and perform medical research during his regular visits to Bombay, but he also writes risqué film scripts for Bollywood films. His protégé, Inspector Dhar, is the hero of these films. Martin Mills, mentioned above, is Dhar's identical twin. Trouble begins when Martin, a fanatical Jesuit, arrives in Bombay to take up missionary work. But Daruwalla is already facing difficulties on account of his films having upset a large number of people including Rahul, a malevolent transvestite who has recently married Mr Dogar, a fellow member of the Duckworth Club (which may be an alias for one of Bombay's leading clubs such as the Willingdon Club). If you want to know more, then get started on the oddly compelling "*A Son of The Circus*".

Although it has taken me ages to finish this book and the gold writing on its attractive green cover has worn away during many hours of holding it, this is an exciting book, an adventure, or maybe even a thriller, set in India. I recommend it highly.

I intend reading other books by Irving, but first let me tackle something briefer!

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## **Algernon says**

The son of the circus from the title is Doctor Farokh Daruwalla, a somewhat surprising choice as main character that has to carry on his shoulders such a hefty narrative. At first glance he is a placid little man, of a rather short stature and rotund girth, neat and fussy but in general shy and insecure. As I followed his interior monologues for page after page I have come to compare him to a still pond that hides great depths beneath the calm surface.

*as a Parsi and a Christian, a Bombayite and a Torontonion, an orthopedic surgeon and a dwarf-blood collector, Dr Daruwalla could never have been satisfied by just one club.*

The choice of focus on this confused, conflicted personage was intentional on the part of the author, who probably has little use for clear cut, opinionated, inflexible heroes. And Dr. Daruwalla is a true hero of the ordinary kind (I'm thinking **Ikiru** ), trying to do good even when he is not sure of the right path: doing unpaid work in children hospitals, researching a cure for genetical dwarfism, rescuing street urchins, raising other people's abandoned offspring, being a good husband and father, volunteering to help the terminally ill. His insecurities and his unquenchable curiosity are in fact the motors that constantly push him forward, together with a rampant imagination and ingrained sense of justice.

***The doctor was no more the incarnation of a god than he was a writer; he was, like most men, principally a dreamer.***

Bored by the routine of a successful professional and family life, he seeks to discharge his creative energies through writing, more specifically Bollywood film scripts. His shyness and self-deprecation will make him act from the shadows, renouncing the limelight for the quiet satisfaction of the secret observer of human folly. The results are more often than not absolutely hilarious, and I would rate "A Son of the Circus" as one of the best comedies I've read this year. For sure, the humor is often bitter and sarcastic, aimed equally at the outside world and at his own person:

*Farrokh had conceived Inspector Dhar in the spirit of satire — of quality satire. Why were there so many easily offended people? Why had they reacted to Inspector Dhar so humorlessly? Had they no appreciation for comedy? Only now, when he was almost 60, did it occur to Farrokh that he was his father's son in this respect: he'd uncovered a natural talent for pissing people off.*

or,

*Except when eating, Farrokh embraced procrastination as one greets an unexpected virtue.*

Inspector Dhar is the doctor's most famous creation, a tough Bombay policeman moulded as the exact opposite of the creator's personality: athletic and quick witted, a smooth operator when it comes to the ladies and an acerbic critic of the sins of his peers. He is played in the movies by a friend of the doctor, John D., a younger man whose backstory and present tribulations are linked intimately to the main plot.

The main plot is structured similarly to one of the doctor scripts: a grotesque murder in the opening chapter, a chase after a serial killer targetting prostitutes in the Bombay red lights district, a pair of twins separated at birth, a wily police inspector and his emotionally unstable wife, beggars, dwarves, overbearing butlers, a 20 years old unsolved case, and so on. The relation between the plot and the movie scripts is also deliberate, illustrating the tendency of Dr. Daruwalla to retreat into his imaginary world in times of stress, where he uses the godlike powers of authorship in order to reshape events into a more palatable version of reality, one that makes sense and where lessons can be learned, and happy endings are still a possibility.

*Damn other people's messes! Dr Daruwalla was muttering aloud. He was a surgeon; as such, he was an extremely neat and tidy man. The sheer sloppiness of human relationships appalled him, especially those relationships to which he felt he'd brought a special responsibility and care. Brother-sister, brother-brother, child-parent, parent-child. What was the matter with human beings, that they made such a shambles out of these basic relationships?*

As a character study, the novel succeeds spectacularly in presenting not only the many facets of Dr. Daruwalla, but of all the numerous players gravitating around his stocky frame. The narrative jumps effortlessly to these other points of view, only to return to the anchor point of Farrokh. The actual timeline of the events cover less than two weeks of the doctor's visit to Bombay, helping to give the story a sense of

unity and symmetry, but the pacing is leisurely with lengthy flashbacks within flashbacks going back decades to Farrokh's early childhood fascination with the circus, his studies and courtship in Austria, a first contact with an American film crew in Bombay, his medical career in Toronto, his periodical returns to India, his success as a scriptwriter. The wealth of details is often overwhelming (Irving is aware of the fact, and turns it into a self-referencing joke: *The missionary wasn't a minimalist; he favored description.* ), but my patience was rewarded when all the trivia turned out to have a role to play in the script after all.

*No one who's still trying to "find himself" at thirty-nine is very reliable.* exclaims Dr. Daruwalla at one point in the story, apparently unaware that he himself is still searching for his identity at the age of 60. His search leads him to religion, to scientific studies, to the already mentioned literary career. Most of all his questions relate to his cultural and spiritual heritage:

*In Toronto, Farrokh was an unassimilated Canadian – and an Indian who avoided the Indian community. In Bombay, the doctor was constantly confronted with how little he knew India – and how unlike an Indian he thought himself to be.*

At this level, the book scans as an overlong study of alienation, with Farrokh reiterating a favorite phrase of his father: "An immigrant remains an immigrant all his life." Rejected by extremists in his adopted land, viewed with suspicion in India because of his Western mannerisms and sensibilities, his plight will find resonance in readers like me, who are bilingual and immersed in a foreign culture or two on a daily basis, finding few chances to relate and discuss it with my immediate friends and family. The theme of alienation is not limited to Farrokh Daruwalla, it touches every secondary character in one form or another, be they a Jesuit missionary, a redneck girl on the run, a transsexual boy/girl with long held grudges, an actor with a double life, a butler who feels superior to his patrons, or a dwarf who can no longer perform in the circus.

*In our hearts, there must abide some pity for those people who have always felt themselves to be separate from even their most familiar surroundings, those people who either are foreigners or who suffer a singular point of view that makes them feel as if they're foreigners – even in their native lands.*

Dr. Daruwalla seeks refuge in familiar places : his exclusivist and rigidly traditional club, his religious epiphany, the love for his wife, literature. As with his scriptwriting, the results are hilarious, especially the story of his conversion to Catholicism or the discovery of the beneficial effects of purple prose during a second honeymoon (Note to self: check out James Salter - A Sport and a Pastime). Other literary references deal with religious identity, mostly in the books of Graham Greene, quoted repeatedly in the text and in the polemic between the doctor and the missionary.

I'm not an expert on the work of John Irving, beside *Cider House Rules*, but it appears social issues and a general quality of mercy towards his characters are a constant feature of his novels. Intransigence, homosexuality, the exploitation of children, poverty, drug abuse, alcoholism, religious fervor are among the hot button issues touched upon in the text. The intensity of emotions and the subtlety of the observations make me recommend the book wholeheartedly, but my own struggles with the text (I spent two months on it instead of the usual 7-10 days) stop me short of a full endorsement. I experienced a lack of urgency, a self-indulgent streak for getting lost in minute details and painful moral considerations that illustrate well the personality of Farrokh, but stopped me from reading more than a few pages at a time.

On another personal note, a comparison to my other sprawling Indian saga I've read this year (*The Midnight Children*) is inevitable. Salman Rushdie and John Irving have little in common stylistically and the personalities of the main protagonists could not be more divergent (one a riotous, volcanic extrovert, subversive and irreverent in language and deed, the other a laidback, introspective, meticulous and detached

observer) yet I found both accounts true to human nature with their differences more important than their similarities in revealing an Indian culture too big and too wild to fit into a rigid framework.

I would like to close with some praises for the author's use of metaphor and catchphrases (oneliners) reiterated like a song refrain, many dealing with the circus world, even if the actual story only visits the circus in a short episode. For Farrokh Daruwalla though, the circus comes to represent the whole meaning of life, from the childhood exuberance of miracles possible, to the ever present danger ("falling into the net") and constant struggle for survival, and ultimately to the revelation of the whole grotesque absurdity of reality. Since the show must go on, all we can ultimately do is relax and enjoy the ride.

[edit 2016 : spelling]

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