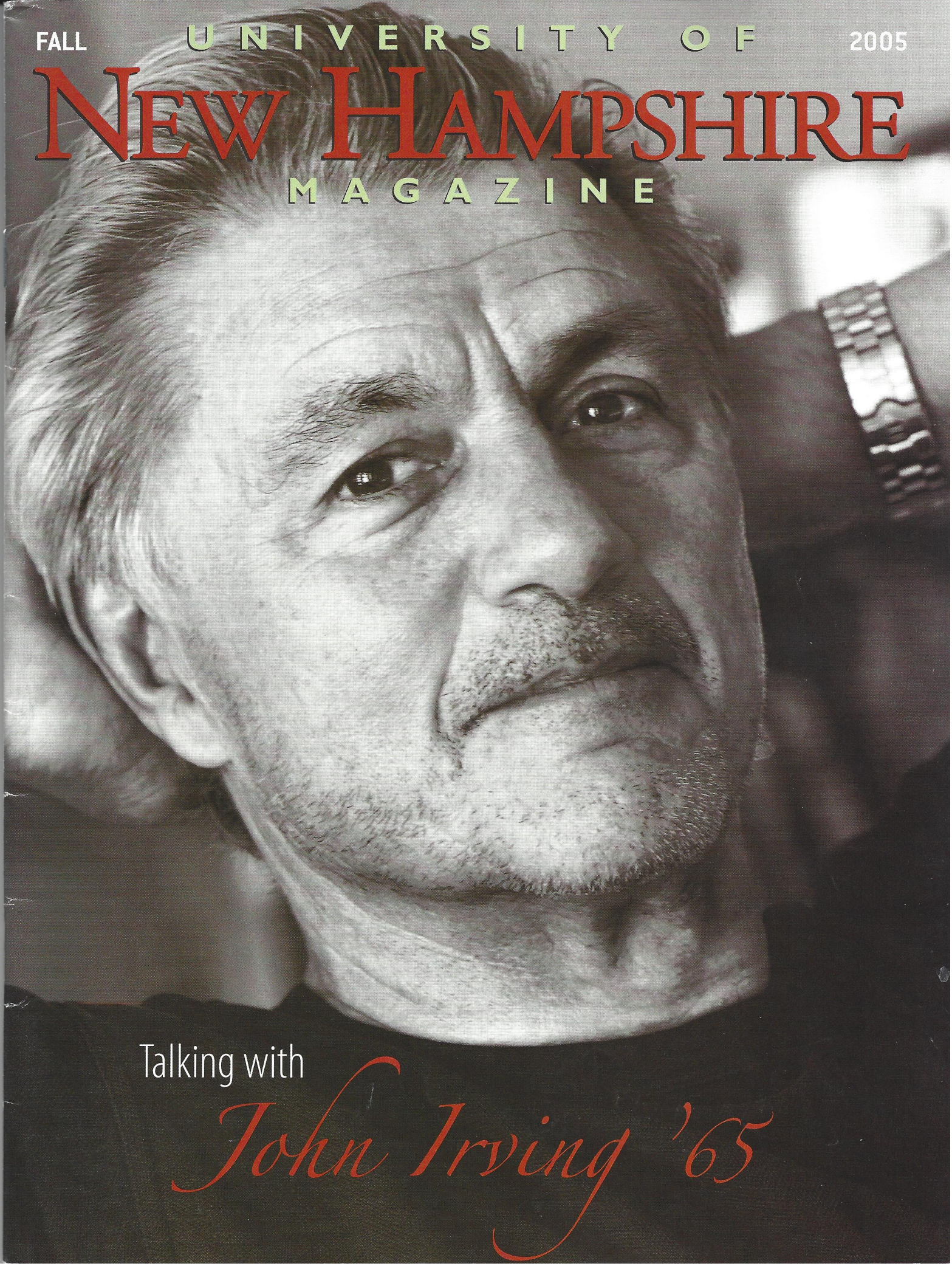
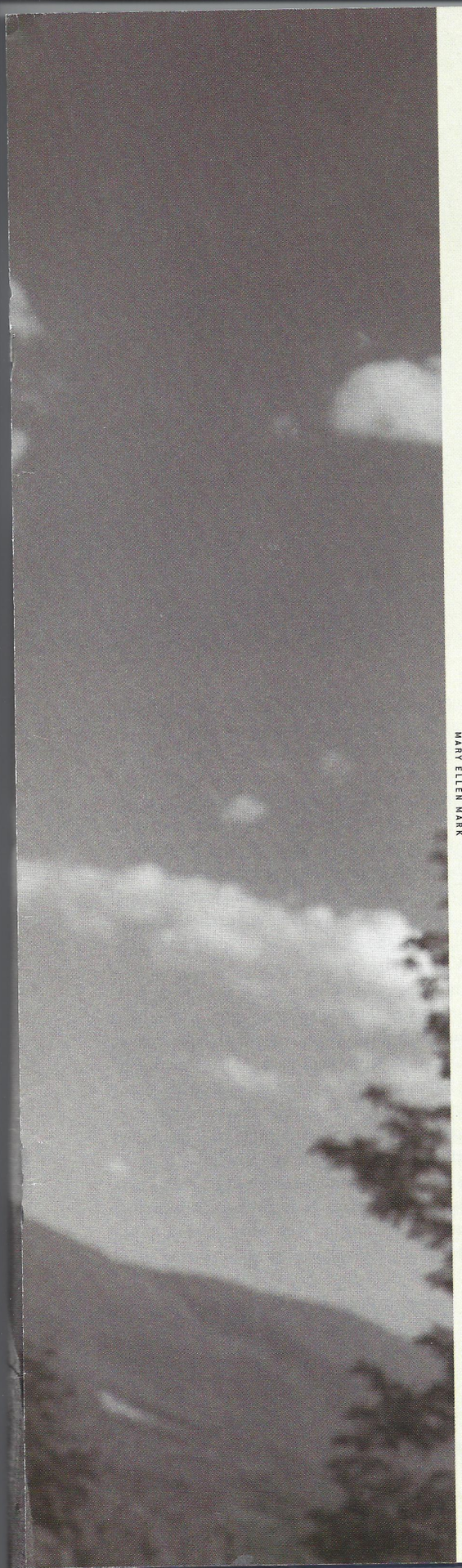
FALL UNIVERSITY OF 2005

NEW HAMPSHIRE MAGAZINE



Talking with

John Irving '65



MARY ELLEN MARK

An earnest but dejected young man crosses paths with two professors who share his passion for writing. His life changes course, leading to an improbably happy ending. The true story of...

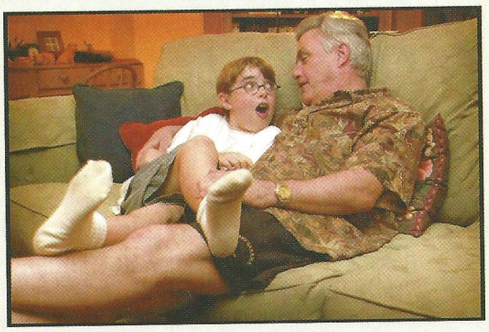
BECOMING JOHN IRVING

By Jane Harrigan

A John Irving conversation unfolds like a John Irving novel. The sentences begin, dense with clauses, bristling with specific detail. Merrily they traverse the tangled undergrowth between subject and verb, meandering past, around, never quite *to* the point. Tagging along breathlessly, the reader or listener starts to wonder: Where in this labyrinth is our hero? Has he lost the plot? What are all these random people and places doing in the story?

To follow an Irving narrative requires suspension not just of disbelief but of distrust. Gradually you squelch your impatience and sink into the couch cushions, trusting that somewhere on this ship, no matter how apparently aimless its course, stands a master navigator who knows exactly where he's going. He knows because he writes the last sentence of each novel first. Not just an *idea* of the last sentence, but the actual sentence, complete with characters named and conflicts resolved. He sends the sentence on a postcard to selected friends, who file it away and then, years later when the book comes out, check to discover that the ending has not altered by so much as a semicolon.

Irving even wrote the ending of *this* story, more or less. In the computerless office of his spectacular mountainside home in Vermont, he turned to the electric typewriter, and he typed . . . . Well, we'll get there. Trust me. In the meantime, join Irving as he narrates a journey of transformation that begins one long-ago sophomore year. As he tells the tale, nothing that's happened since—the 11 novels, the five movies, the deep connection to Europe, the Academy Award for *Cider House Rules*—might have happened at all if he had not, at a low point in his young life, transferred to UNH.

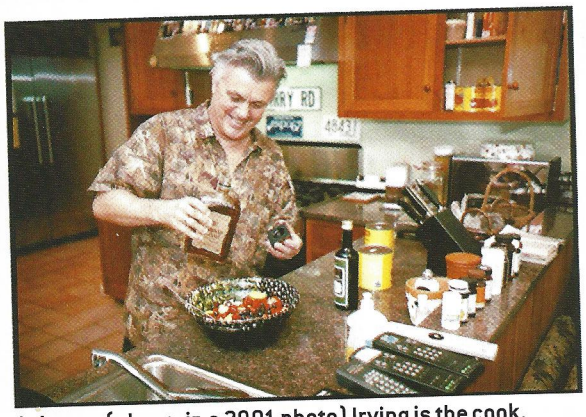


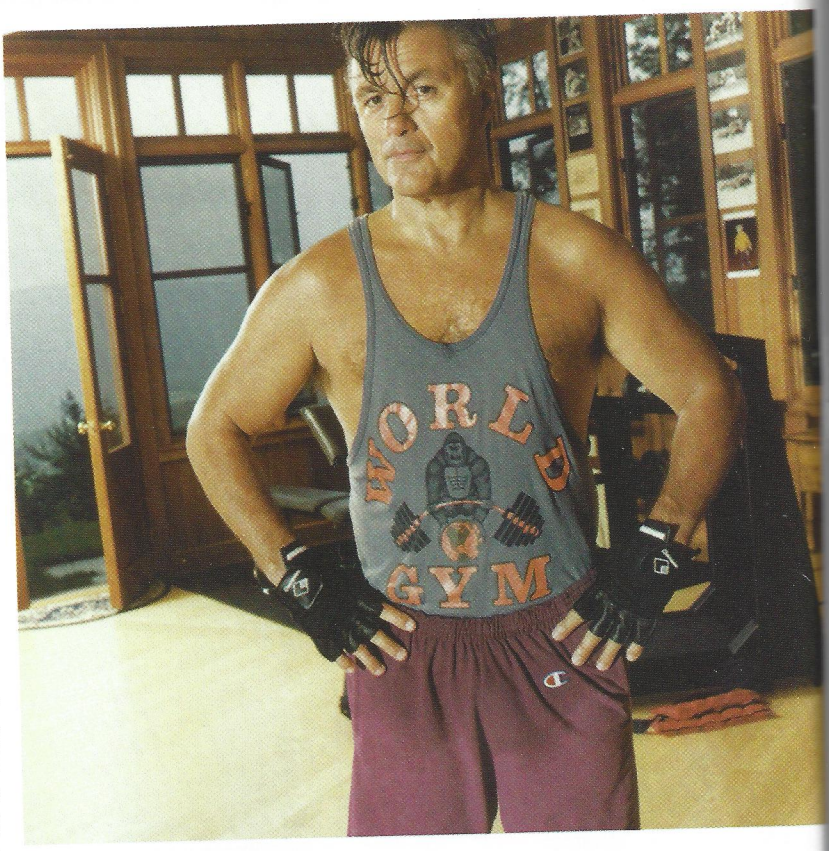
ELLINGAG, ALL OVER PRESS NORWAY/GETTY IMAGES

Father and author John Irving '65 at home with Everett, then 9, in a 2001 photo.

In 1962, the man who knows exactly where he's going was the boy who hadn't a clue. When he slunk into Durham that fall, Irving saw himself as a failure. It had taken him five years to get through Phillips Exeter Academy —where he'd been accepted in the first place, he says, only because his father (a key word in his story) taught there. Today, Irving knows he is dyslexic.

ELLINGAG, ALL OVER PRESS NORWAY/GETTY IMAGES





At home, (above, in a 2001 photo) Irving is the cook. At right, in the gym of his Dorset, Vt., house in 1994.

Back then, all he knew was this: "I'm not good enough." In a world of prep school privilege where his classmates seemed to handle life with ease, Irving was the faculty brat who struggled with schoolwork. "Every year at Exeter," he says, "was just getting your head kicked in."

Only on the wrestling mat did he triumph. Call it love or obsession, Irving's lifetime relationship with wrestling began at Exeter. Unsure of himself as a student, he found his identity as a competitor, "a tough guy if not a very smart one." So when it came time for college, he looked for a place where toughness would count. He enrolled at the University of Pittsburgh, which had one of the top wrestling programs in the country. Instantly, the guy who hardly ever lost became the guy who hardly ever won. By the time he quit Pittsburgh after freshman year and returned to his parents' home in Exeter, Irving's self-esteem had sunk lower than the tires of his Volkswagen Beetle. He and the car puttered off to UNH, which Irving saw the way Robert Frost saw home: It's the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.

He didn't feel lucky, but he was. Because dyslexia forced him to read slowly, he'd had plenty of time to fall in love with language and literature. Because he doubted he could learn the material required for most professions, he'd started focusing on writing, and a friend's father had told him he had promise. Irving saw himself as not particularly talented at either wrestling or writing, but he believed what his wrestling coach had told him: Talent is overrated. He determined to compensate for his lack of natural gifts simply by working harder than anyone else.

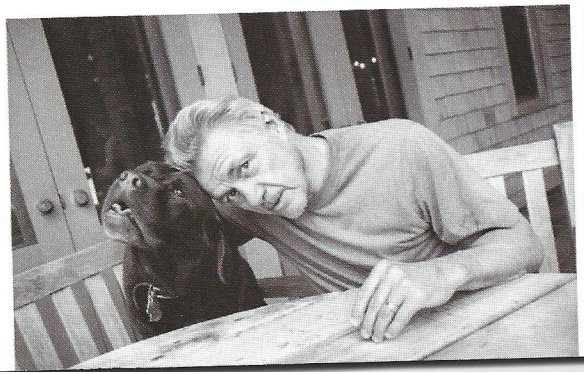
In Durham, Irving met another newcomer to campus, instructor (and later professor) John Yount, who introduced him to another writer, professor Tom Williams. For Jack Burns, the main character of Irving's 2005 novel *Until I Find You*, UNH is an airport layover, a forgettable stop on his journey elsewhere. For Irving, UNH was less layover than launchpad. He continued wrestling, helping to coach his old team at Exeter, but it was in Durham where he found his last sentence. "I started wanting to be a writer at the age of 14," Irving says. "But when I finished that sophomore year at UNH, I felt that I *was* a writer. I had confidence in what would be the rest of my life. I can't attribute enough to what Tom Williams and John Yount did for me, and how that sophomore year at Durham just turned things around."

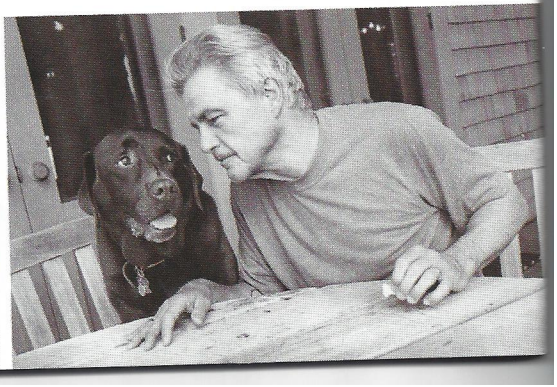
He's not referring to lessons about writing. In Irving's memory, all criticism from his school years survives as a single disembodied voice. "You write well," the voice would say, "but this story, as you call it, is 50 typed pages, and it's really five stories, and which one of them do you want to write?" Then, as now, Irving wrote *long*, like the 19th-century novelists he reveres so highly that he's named his dog Dickens. Even as a student, he loved plot and resisted pruning. He felt he was in college not to choose a story but to choose a life—and the life he wanted looked a lot like the one Yount and Williams already had.

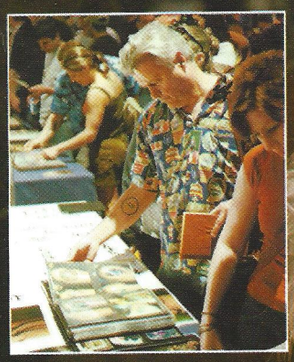
"They were both very verbal and social men," Irving says. "They liked dinner parties. They liked conversation. They liked arguing about books and films. They invited me to their homes, and I got to see how grown-up writers lived." That theme—the boy's serpentine journey toward the events that will certify him as a grown-up—marks not just Irving's novels but his descriptions of his life. Even more than he studied writing at UNH, he studied his mentors by virtually moving in with their families.

Tom Williams died in 1990, but his widow, Liz, remembers Irving—like her husband, a motorcycle rider—visiting their cabin on Cardigan Mountain. "Eventually I'd go to bed," she says, "but I remember the two of them sitting on the couch, arguing about

ABOVE AND SERIES BELOW: MARY ELLEN MARK







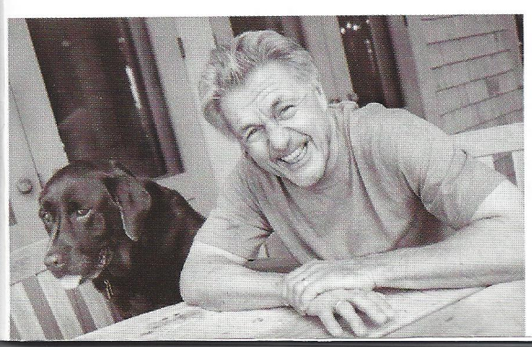
INSET: JUSTIN LANE/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Irving attended a tattoo convention in New York City, above, as part of his research for *Until I Find You*. He also had two tattoos done: a maple leaf on his shoulder, right, in honor of his Canadian wife, and the starting circle on a college wrestling mat on his right forearm.

literature, on into the night." For his part, Yount tells stories of deer hunting with Irving, bonding as their feet froze. When the Younts' younger daughter was born and his mother-in-law came to help, his then-wife filled her in: "You have to understand there are two men in the house. The other one's John Irving."

Yount doesn't remember the first John Irving story he read, but he remembers what he did with it: He took it to Williams' house and said, "This kid who drives in from Exeter is better than anyone in Iowa." That's the Iowa Writers' Workshop, from which Yount had just received a master's degree. What jumped off the page in Irving's writing, Yount says, "was a kind of humanity that shone through his stories, and also an elegance of prose." Like Irving, Yount doesn't dwell on the how-to. "Other than maybe how to use a semicolon, I never taught him anything of value," he says. "Nor has he to this day ever taken any advice from me, which is probably why he's famous." As for Williams, Irving still thinks of him as his sternest, most loyal critic. In his memoir *The Imaginary Girlfriend*, Irving recalls Williams' frequent note in the margins of his stories: "Who are you imitating now?"

Irving looked to the two professors for direction in all things. When Yount told him that a writer should experience being an outsider, Irving set off for junior year in Vienna. He loved the independence and wrote pages by the pile, but he missed his girlfriend. When he said he wanted to come home, Yount responded in two sentences that Irving recites from memory nearly 40 years later: "Melancholy is good for the soul. Stay in Europe." Irving did stay, and his girlfriend came over. By the time he returned to Durham, Irving had a wife, Shyla, and she was pregnant.



JANE SOBEL KLONSKY

The birth of his son, Colin, in 1965, two months before graduation, gave Irving both a lifetime focus on family and a lifetime writing theme. "From the moment I became a father at too young an age, the world became a terrifying place," he says. "The principal drive behind my novels is that something awful is going to happen. I was scared to death to be responsible for this kid." After Colin's birth, Irving parked his motorcycle and never rode it again. Fathers didn't ride motorcycles. They did, however, get draft deferments. So again, Irving became an outsider. He faced responsibilities his classmates didn't share, yet he was spared the defining decision of his generation: whether to go to Vietnam.

Instead, Irving went to Iowa. Yount and Williams had been telling him about the writers' workshop for years, and "the concept that you could get a graduate degree by 'just' writing—it was almost sinful, it was so thrilling." Williams' agent had taken Irving as a client and had just sold his first story, to *Redbook* magazine. So as he headed for grad school, Irving already knew he was a writer. He just needed his next "grown-up" guide, and he found him in novelist Kurt Vonnegut.

Once again, having a wife and child set Irving apart from his classmates. But once again, he was lucky. As long as Vonnegut could see the pages piling up, he believed Irving was better off playing with his son than sitting in class. A story Irving tells about Iowa—another student asked why Irving wasn't in class, and Vonnegut responded dryly, "If I had to guess, he's home writing"—resembles a story Tom Williams used to tell about UNH. As Liz Williams recounts it, one day in the middle of Tom's class, Irving got up and walked out. He'd had an inspiration, he explained. Tom, says Liz, thought that was great.

MARY ELLEN MARK

While in Iowa, Irving wrote his first novel, *Setting Free the Bears*, which was published in 1968 and sold modestly. The next year found the young family installed in a rented castle in Austria as Irving and a director tried to adapt the book into a screenplay. The birth of his and Shyla's second son, Brendan, went more easily than the writing; the movie has never been made. Irving's novels tend to cover huge spans of time, making a literal translation to the screen nearly impossible. Over the years, writers have tried to cope by using a technique called the flashforward—not, like a *fast*-forward, giving every event a quick moment, but rather defining certain moments as keys to a character's future.

REED SAXON/AP

Irving in 1999, above, after accepting an Academy Award for the screenplay of *The Cider House Rules*, which took 13 years to write; at top with wife and agent Janet Turnbull.

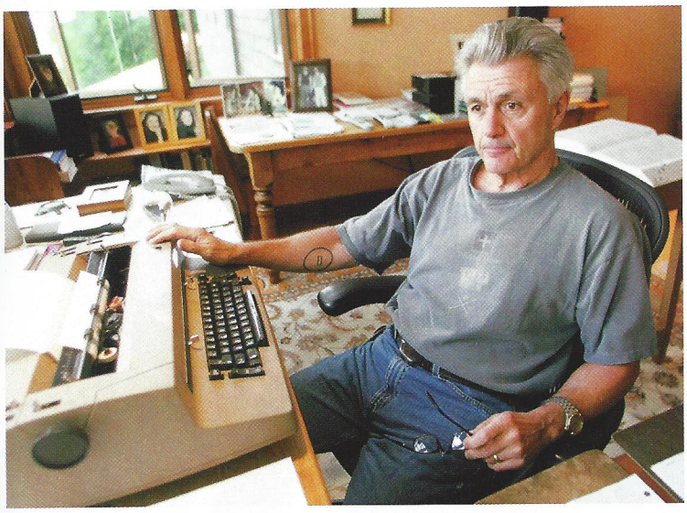
A flashforward from Irving the once-published novelist in the castle at age 27, to Irving the publishing superstar on his Vermont mountainside at age 63, would compress a long process: Slowly, painfully, earning the luxury of writing as a full-time job. (That took 11 years, until *The World According to Garp* won a National Book award and sold 4 million copies in English and as many in other languages.) Venturing, over and over, down the torturous trail from book to film. (That's still going on, with many piles of wreckage along the path and three screenplays in progress.) Wrestling, always wrestling. (He competed until age 34 and coached until 47.) Divorce, followed by bad times, followed by remarriage and, at age 50, a third son, Everett.

His wife, Janet Turnbull, was once his Canadian publisher and is now his agent. In the rooms and hallways of their Vermont home, photographs mark a trail through time. (Anyone who has read *A Widow for One Year* or seen *The Door in the Floor*, the movie made from the book's first section, would recognize the rows of black and white framed photos of significant family moments.) His home gym, where he spends hours working out each day, documents in photos the athletic careers of his two older sons as each achieved what had eluded their father—a New England wrestling title. Behind the desk in his office, 4-foot-tall blowups of *New York Times* best-seller lists show Irving on top: in 1985 for *The Cider House Rules*, 1998 for *A Widow for One Year*, and 2001 for *The Fourth Hand*. His Academy Award (best adapted screenplay, 1999, for *The Cider House Rules*) stands amid other mementoes on an office shelf; photos of the Oscar ceremony dominate a small bathroom nearby.

At a long table looking out over the mountains, Irving crafts and recrafts his central theme, which he describes as "a deeply dysfunctional, even perversely disturbing story with an improbably happy, even joyous ending." The stories wind through time, bounce past minor characters, risk losing their place, then end up right where they're meant to, much as his spoken sentences do. Here's a sample, from a conversation about *Until I Find You:*

> "If you're going to put somebody through this kind of travail, if you're going to torture somebody over this period of time, if you're going to take a boy who is beguiling and innocent as a child and abuse him repeatedly until as an adult he almost disappears, until as an adult he's more comfortable being anybody else, including women, than he is being Jack Burns, there's no way to redeem that except to, at the end of the story, give him a sister and the possibility that he might have the first normal relationship with a woman he's ever had, and give him a father, someone who needs him to be what he is, a good son, instead of all the people he's played."

The good son Jack Burns, or some version of him, lived in Irving's mind for years. All writers repeat themselves, he says, and he knew that someday he'd write a book in which one of his constant themes, the absent father, took center stage. But he kept putting it off. Then in his 50s, he realized that soon he might be too old to handle the personal toll he knew this book would take. So he wrote the last sentence of *Until I Find You* and set about figuring out how to reach it. The process took seven years, during which things happened to Irving that would be



ROBERT SPENCER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

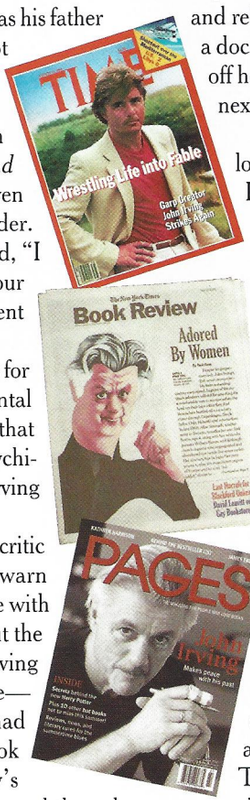
Irving writes longhand on notepads or types on an IBM Selectric: no word processing, e-mail or Internet.

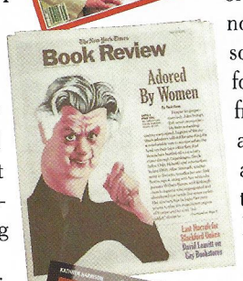
unbelievable if they weren't true. ("People who complain that my books are bizarre," he's fond of saying, "haven't been paying attention to real life.")

First, the matter of the missing father. Irving was born John Wallace Blunt Jr., then adopted and renamed after his mother remarried when John was 6. He loved Colin Irving as his father and had no interest in hunting for another—not even when, in 1981, his mother gave him a packet of old letters that showed him, for the first time, that his biological father had wanted to keep in touch. Then, as he toiled away on *Until I Find You*—with many detours for screenwriting and even another novel—his past tapped him on the shoulder. A man named Chris Blunt contacted him and said, "I think you're my brother." Suddenly Irving had four new siblings (from John Blunt Sr.'s three subsequent marriages) and a revisionist autobiography.

It gets weirder. Irving had already written scenes for the book in which the lost father winds up in a mental institution. Then he learned from his half-brother that in fact his biological father had spent time in a psychiatric hospital. John Wallace Blunt died in 1996; Irving never met him.

When Irving started work on *Until I Find You*, critic Mel Gussow of *The New York Times* tried to warn him: If you publish this book, you'll have to dance with your demons. He meant not just the lost father but the sexual abuse that Jack Burns suffers as a boy. Irving believed he had made peace with his own abuse—"I was 11 when a very nice woman in her 20s had sex with me," he says calmly. But writing the book revived long-buried pain. This June, Gussow's prediction came true. The first interviewers who read the galleys of *Until I Find You* didn't want to talk about Jack Burns' sexual abuse or his missing father. They wanted to talk about Irving's. And so, for much of 2005, the man who wrote a novel about the unreliability of memory has undertaken a book tour in which he has endlessly recounted his own worst memories for public consumption.





TOP MAGAZINE: TIME & LIFE PICTURES, GETTY IMAGES

Ever the tough guy, Irving maintains that talking about being sexually abused caused him far less agony than writing the scenes in which Jack Burns meets the same fate. "It's the *detail* that gets you" is his concise explanation. He's fine answering questions about his past, Irving insists—which is lucky because he'll spend much of next year talking about it again, when the book is released in various languages around Europe. His novels, which often are set partly overseas, sell better in Europe than in the United States. Irving chooses his foreign publishers carefully and likes to be there when the books launch. He's scheduled four trips to Europe next year, and this time he'll be ready for the questions.

He knows he can handle them because, finally, he has moved on. Each obsession in his life, he's found, dominates only until the next one comes along to push it out. For instance, he says that his attraction to older women, the result of his childhood sexual abuse, vanished when his first son was born. Similarly, each of his books has sunk its claws into him and hung on, to be shaken off only when he begins work on the next one. The long periods he spent *not* writing this year—screenplays are writing, but he doesn't count them as progress along his main life path—were starting to make him nervous. So he was equal parts inspired and relieved one morning in January when, as he waited in a doctor's examining room in Rutland, Vt., he tore a page off her prescription pad and wrote the last sentence of his next book.

The story, some of which takes place in a Vermont logging camp, has been unfolding in his mind ever since. In August, flying home with Everett from Amsterdam (a place that has no trees, and somehow the absence of trees got him thinking about them), he pulled out a notebook and wrote the first chapter of the new book so fast that he worried he'd run out of paper. Now, following his usual pattern, he'll spend years getting from there to the preordained last sentence, rewriting and re-rewriting all the way. With any luck, it will be an easier slog than *Until I Find You*. After he'd sent that supposedly finished book to Random House, he pulled it back and rewrote all 819 pages, changing the narration from first person to third.

Knowing how his next story will end has freed him to explore how it starts. And how *will* it end? a visitor wants to know. He could recite the final sentence of the just-begun book from memory, but he chooses to type it. The old-fashioned novelist clearly relishes the old-fashioned sound of typewriter keys striking paper. Then the *ZIP* as the page is pulled out, and he hands it over: the last sentence of his next book. The sentence is, of course, a little long and convoluted, with a strange near-repetition in the middle and the twin rewards of rhythmic language and hope for our hero at the end. The sentence contains, of course, a father. And here is what he says as the paper leaves his hands: "There you go. But don't print it." ~

Jane Harrigan directs the journalism program at UNH.