

Running on empty

by [Christopher E. Bush](#) in the [December 23, 1998](#) issue

*By John Irving, A Widow for One Year. (Random House, 537 pp.)*

John Irving's themes come straight out of pop culture sensibility--sexuality and violence, suicide, and religious yearning. Thematically, his novels are the literary equivalent of a well-crafted Madonna hit or a Quentin Tarantino film. His finest books, *The World According to Garp*, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, *The Cider House Rules* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, tackle, respectively, sexual politics, rape and incest, abortion and religious faith. His characters are forced to make moral choices about these issues. Irving is at his best when he has a powerful central idea to which to tie his always-interesting characters. Since *Owen Meany*, however, Irving seems to have run out of things to say.

His most recent novel, *A Widow for One Year*, does nothing to change that perception. The book focuses on a family of writers, the people who love them, and a tragic automobile accident that defines them. The protagonist, Ruth Cole, is the daughter of a children's book author and his beautiful wife, who mourn the death of their two sons, killed on the highway prior to Ruth's birth.

In the first part of the novel, Ruth is a four-year-old child, only dimly aware of what goes on as her parents' marriage falls apart. Her father, who has gotten over the worst of his grief at the loss of his boys, spends his days drinking and seducing the mothers who bring their children to his book signings. Ruth's mother, unable to recover from her despair, has an affair with a high-school-aged chauffeur. She then finds the courage to leave the marriage and her entire former life, including her daughter.

The rest of the novel follows Ruth as an adult. She becomes a world-renowned author, a wife and mother, a widow--and a witness to murder. Finally, she makes a happy second marriage and gradually learns to forgive her mother for abandoning her.

While Ruth's story is moving, Irving spends too much time on a rather ridiculous subplot about a murderer of prostitutes--a topic that preoccupies Irving in *A Son of*

*the Circus*. As in that novel, religious themes--miracles, weak faith, forgiveness--are suggested, but Irving does little with them. The theme of forgiveness is handled without religious resonance.

Perhaps the novel's greatest weakness is Irving's attempts at self-justification. He provides his writer-characters with pert answers to book reviewers, answers that seem to be responding to criticisms that could be leveled against the novel itself. Ruth and the other characters go to great lengths to explain their art or lack thereof. This device could have been interesting, but it is mostly irritatingly defensive.

Irving's greatest strength always has been creating fascinating, flawed people with whom the reader can identify and sympathize, even when they behave destructively. In this novel, his characters are vibrant, but they stand in need of a compelling theme or plot.