John Irving’s new ‘In One Person’ covers familiar Irving interests

Freelance

In One Person A Novel By John Irving Simon & Schuster. 448 pp. $28.

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

Billy Dean lives in First Sister, VT., a Lake Wobegon for the “clinically abnormal.”

At age 13, Billy, the main character of In One Person, John Irving’s 14th novel, is “gripped with insufficient comprehension, not to mention the daily terror of being misunderstood.” He wants to learn more about young men and women who have crushes “on the wrong people.”

His grandfather, Harry Marshall, the owner of First Sister Sawmill and Lumberyard, is a female impersonator, who plays the leading women’s roles in the town’s amateur theatrical productions. Miss Frost, First Sister’s librarian, introduces William (“She was austere — the first person to unfailingly address me as William.”) to a lot more than James Baldwin’s novel Giovanni’s Room. And Nils Borkman, Harry’s partner (and the town’s dramaturge), gets a little too much pleasure from beating up the lumberjacks who work for him.

In One Person revisits many of Irving’s signature subjects: absent fathers, Vienna, wrestling, and writing. And, more than ever before, he forces us to confront sexual taboos in the United States, and their impact on the formation of sexual identity.

In One Person can be preachy and prolix. The plot, such as it is, is pretty predictable. And, at times, readers may conclude, with Herm Hoyt, the 91-year-old wrestling coach at Favorite River Academy, that they do not want or need so many details about sexual encounters or the etiology of AIDS.

Nonetheless, Irving’s ability to humanize his unconventional characters is nowhere put to better use than in this novel. In an unforgettable scene, Miss Frost, who knows that one day bisexual William will be confronted by bullies, teaches him the “duck-under,” a wrestling technique by which a heavier opponent can be thrown to the ground. In the 1980s, the dawn of the AIDS crisis, Billy is about to apply for a lifetime membership at the New York Athletic Club when he gets a nosebleed while wrestling, sending his opponent scrambling for the showers and his doctor’s office. “I can’t belong to a club with such an uptight dress code,” William tells his sponsor. He leaves by the back door, depositing in a dumpster the green plastic bag containing the contents of his locker.

William learns, the hard way, that “there’s a lot of politics involved in being sexually mutable.” While “straight” sexual
activity is tolerated, with a wink, a nod, or a slap on the wrist, at Favorite River Academy, a transsexual is banished from First Sister, even though he/she had actually shielded young Dean “from the full array of sexual possibilities.” And try as he might throughout his life, William cannot counter the conclusion of straight women and gay men that a bisexual is inherently unreliable.

At the same time, Irving’s Billy Dean refuses to be a victim and isn’t a saint. Although he thinks of himself as a pillar of tolerance, he is not all that forgiving. All too often, Irving implies, he uses his rejection of monogamy as a “dinosaur idea” to minimize, or eliminate, making a commitment to his lovers. He was not ashamed of his sex life, Billy confesses: “I was ashamed of myself for not wanting to be there for the people who were dying.”

In the end, William Dean can, and does, come home again, to First Sister and to Favorite River Academy, to teach and direct plays as well as to write. And to bring new meaning to a demand, all too often dismissed as a cliche, that Miss Frost had made to him decades earlier. "My dear boy," she had said, "please don’t put a label on me — don’t put a category on me until you get to know me!"

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