



Until I Find You

John Irving

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Every major character in *Until I Find You* has been marked for life – not only William Burns, a church organist who is addicted to being tattooed, but also William's song, Jack, an actor who is shaped as a child by his relationships with older women. And Jack's mother, Alice – a Toronto tattoo artist – has been permanently damaged by William's rejection of her. This is a novel about the loss of innocence, on many levels.

Until I Find You Details

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From Reader Review Until I Find You for online ebook

Kristin Myrtle says

I have read many many many John Irving books and this one is unequivocally my favorite. It's also the John Irving book that seems to incite the most vitriol. And I don't know why. It's a simple story about a man, a man searching for his father, and searching for himself. It's a road novel, back and forth and back and forth over Europe and America the mother and son characters move. It's also about the history of tattoos and you get to learn all the nifty language and parlance and colloquialisms of a fascinating sub-culture. But most of all it is about how our memories deceive us, they lie to us. And how our parents lie to us and deceive us. And how when we're young, when you're innocent and green and wide-eyed and naive you aren't aware of the weirdness that surrounds you. That surrounds your parents. You think it's normal. This huge sprawling novel reminds me of one line from Alan Moore's *Lost Girls*.

"You see, there's the way things seem and the way things actually are, and one is so often the total reverse of the other."

Sharyl says

One thing I like about John Irving is that even though his protagonists are male, he seriously considers the women in his stories. Women are always more than objects, even when they are not The Subject.

This time, Jack Burns is the protagonist, but at first, his mother's life is front and center. Alice Stronach is so heartbroken and angry after William Burns leaves her that it distorts her personality. At times, I wasn't sure if she loved William, Jack, both, or neither. And by the way--Jack bears an uncanny resemblance to William.

Jack is only four years old at the beginning of this novel, so it goes without saying that what he thinks he remembers and knows about his parents is inaccurate. And this will be the meat of the plot: eventually, Jack seeks out people from his past and uncovers the facts about what really happened all those years ago between his parents.

When Alice and William stop communicating, the story follows Jack's life through school and then his career as an actor and movie star. Bad things happen along the way, and several adults in his life do things that are not even close to being okay. At first, when Alice sends Jack off to boarding school, it seems that Jack is being deprived of parental attention, love, and supervision. Here, Irving is reminding us that a woman's life can be irrevocably changed by an unplanned pregnancy. If she decides to go on with her life the same way a man could, other people might judge her...

Jack's strange childhood notwithstanding, he manages to grow up to be a decent person at heart. He certainly has emotional problems, and does not always show the best character. He knows this. One of the few long-lasting relationships in his life is the one he has with his therapist. His *most* important relationship is with Emma, the daughter of his mother's lover. Jack and Emma's friendship is both sibling-like and--rather sexual. (They'd both disagree with that assessment, though.) There is also an important girlfriend, Claudia, but Jack is too emotionally damaged for that to last. Each relationship is developed in detail, as part of Jack's story.

In his late thirties, Jake is alone and lost; he has no sense of who he is and where he belongs. Some parts of Jack's narrative do go on a bit long. His journey of self-discovery involves traveling to several countries and at times it felt like I was reading Frommer's Scandinavia. But then, this would not be a proper John Irving

novel without subplots and extra information.

And then, just when Jack finds who he needs to find--the story ends. Honestly, I would have enjoyed reading a bit more at this point, perhaps an epilogue. But then, I suppose I don't actually need more information!

I'd recommend this to John Irving fans. For many people, it might be too long-winded, but I enjoyed it very much.

Vendela says

This is the most personal book I have read of Irving's and I am a huge fan. I've read everything save one book, the one that was a very successful movie.

"Until I Find You" is a tough book to get into. The first few chapters are painstaking and seem laborious but you cannot put the book aside. Then in a single moment it becomes essential to know the story, know what happens to this little boy, because you care about him in his over-the-top quirky yet very sad yet oblivious existence.

For an Irving reader this is an oddity because though his empathy, poignancy and humor are all there, and you do laugh and cry aloud, his usual snarky and wonderful laugh mechanisms are not in this book. There is plenty to laugh at but the humor is softer, sweeter, more mindful. You get the sense that he is not creating laughter as armor to defend someone from harming him; rather he is using it to make you love these characters even more.

I loved *"...Own Meany"* best before I read *"Widow for One Year,"* but now I am unsure Irving can top this very personally felt and lovingly written book.

Brean says

What John Irving does best- creates a very detailed history, starting with Jack as a young boy and taking you with him into adulthood. But the childhood portion of this book is told from the perspective of his memory, which will have you having all sorts of bits of nostalgia in relating to the way Jack remembers things and reasons he mis-remembers them. It's especially heartbreaking because as an adult he is searching for his father he never knew, and discovers that some memories he has involve his father, which he was not aware of when they were actually occurring. He has equally revelatory moments about memories involving his mother. In any case Irving's insight into how children see and interpret events and life in general is pretty amazing.

And, like his other books, you get so involved in the world he creates, that when this book ends it is depressing to leave the North Sea and Baltic Sea Ports. This book pretty much made me want to move there. Irving's stories usually take place in New England, and a portion of this book does, but it was really beautiful to read his descriptions of Northern Europe in *Until I Find You*. As a side note, there is also lots of tattoo art history in this book, as Jack's mother is a tattoo artist. And I have to end this with a quote from the beginning

of the book by William Maxwell, which pretty much sums it up-
"What we refer to confidently as memory...is really a form of storytelling that goes on continually in the mind and often changes with the telling. Too many conflicting emotional interests are involved for life ever to be wholly acceptable...In any case, in talking about the past we lie with every breath we draw."

Wendell says

Help! Some hack has kidnapped John Irving and is publishing novels under his name! As so many, many have said: I've loved John Irving's work for years, but this book is a mess (were there no editors? Or - and here's a scary thought - is this actually the edited version?). Irving is getting up there in years (he was 63 when *Until I Find You* was published), but one still wouldn't have imagined he'd be capable of writing such a joyless, tic-ridden, self-indulgent, slightly icky-minded shambles of a novel. And not even early-onset Alzheimer's could explain the endless repetition of catch phrases and character details (I'll say it again -- were there no editors?) that become so freaking irritating you want to scream. Why was Irving not embarrassed to write such clumsy attributions as "'Blah blah blah,' Alice said, maybe." As if that "maybe" was supposed to make us go all mushy inside because of his amateur, cloddish attempt to limn the transient nature of memory. I mean, come on, John. I didn't go to Exeter like you, but I managed to figure out a thing or two in life. All of this is a shame, most of all. Much of the press around the book seems to focus on its autobiographical nature and on Irving's effort to mine personal experiences, a strategy that has served him well in his previous novels but which falters miserably here. This is the sort of book Irving should have written for therapy (if he needed to) and then burned; it's nothing strangers needed to read. I hope he's got more books in him, but I pray to god that work like *Until I Find You* is out of his system for good.

Kerfe says

This is only my second John Irving novel, but I can already see he has abandonment issues. And problems with relationships. Of all kinds.

I really liked the first section, describing Jack's childhood memories of his search, with his mother, for the father that abandoned them. But I got bogged down in the middle sections; I didn't like Jack, or his mother, or the girls and women who abused him, or the women and girls he abused. There was very little that was "functional" going on in the relationships the characters had with themselves or each other. Still, the story held my interest--I wanted to see where it would end up.

The pace and intensity of the story increases when Jack's mother, Alice, gets sick and dies. Jack's view of his life and the people in it is completely turned upside-down; as a reader, I was also taken completely by surprise. Deception, however well-intentioned, is destructive. We cannot go forward unless we know what we are leaving behind. Peace cannot be made with what is not known.

Yet, as Jack realizes, the "real" truth is often elusive and hard to see. There are many angles of vision, many versions, of each event. Each player adds his or her part. At a certain point, as Jack's father's tattoo proclaims: "Reason has reached its limit. Only belief keeps rising."

Acting, writing, tattoos, music--they are all methods of both disguise and transformation. You can hide, you can deceive, but you can also illuminate.

Josh Cutting says

This is a case for me of a pure gut/emotional reaction, and I'm not ashamed to admit it.

First of all, this book has totally sold me on John Irving. I read "A Prayer for Owen Meany", and had the hardest time getting into it. I really liked about the last hundred pages, but getting there was a chore, to be quite honest.

But this book, this book had me from the first line to the last. And it is directly because of all of the personal parallels. You have the musician (I'm a musician, a pianist actually) you have the tattoo addiction (4 of my own at last count, the last one being a true test of iron will, but it is freakin SWEET!) The single boy and his single mother, father estrangement, the feeling of a rudderless life, everything.

And at the end, when Jack has discovered certain key people of his life (if you've read, you know what I mean, if not, go read!) I was a puddle! This was the polar opposite of my experience with "Suttree". That novel was a cold masterpiece that at the end had me feeling academic but cold. This one chimed every emotional cord (or chord) in me.

Isabella says

Interesting story. Way too long. Not my favorite Irving.

Amanda Patterson says

John Irving is an inspirational author and I use many of his books as examples on how to write a good book. A Widow for One Year is in my Top 10 books of all time.

Until I Find You is far from brilliant. It's tedious, self-indulgent and boring.

As much as I like to see authors making money and winning Oscars (The Cider House Rules), I'm not in favour of the power they weild afterwards. No first-time author would be indulged in this way.

Typical John Irving characters. I was hoping for more typical John Irving writing as well. It's not there.

This book falls flat on its 800 page face. In today's instant gratification society, 800 pages is seen as a commitment. If I'm going to invest that kind of time in a book, I really expect to be dazzled and entertained.

The story is told only from the child who becomes an actor, Jack's viewpoint, and I suspect this may be part of the problem.

It's difficult to sustain interest in 1 character for 800 pages. I would like to see John Irving put aside his own father/son issues for his next novel.

Carlos Velez says

Jack Burns!

I can't hear the name without the exclamation point in my head. He leads an interesting life. John Irving weaves his childhood, teen years, and adult life into a strange and fascinating tale. Much of what John Irving writes about revolves around sex, especially for Jack Burns. I've read two of Irving's novels, the other being *A Widow For One Year* and he has a few consistencies. Taboo sex is a major factor in the lives of the main characters, for instance, a middle aged woman and a teenage boy. He follows the life of the main character (or characters) from their formative years well into their adult life, and he shows the change and growth the character goes through, especially in relation to the strange experiences they went through as children. Families are dysfunctional in a very refreshingly unique sort of way. And there is a love of stories.

In both novels, there is at least one creative character who writes books, or movies. He tells these stories within his own story as well. In *A Widow For One Year*, there are four writers, and he gives details about the plots to each of their books. One of the authors, Ted Cole, writes children's books, and he actually tells the full stories of three of them. He has since published one of these children's stories, *A Sound Like Someone Trying Not To Make A Sound*, which I look forward to reading.

In *Until I Find You*, the main characters best friend writes screenplays, and the main character is an actor in movies, and he goes into detail about the plots of these films as well.

In both books, Irving also goes off into tangents. It is especially prevalent in *Until I Find You*, where he seems unable to finish a sentence without being reminded of some event in the characters future or past, or some interesting tidbit about the place where the current scene is taking place. He goes into detail on these tangents to the point where you forget what story he was originally telling, and then he brings you right back into it without whiplash to your brain and sinks you right back into his fascinating story. I don't know how he does this without making me want to put the book down...I've rather grown to like this ability he has. It's bad story telling, put to a very good use. I wouldn't trust anyone else to be able to pull it off, but he does so splendidly.

Read John Irving, unless you're morally uptight, and be enriched.

Also, see *A Door In The floor*, the Focus Film adaptation of *A Widow For One Year*. It is the best book-to-film I've ever seen. It completely captures the spirit and feel of the novel, though it only covers the first half of the book, when the main characters are young. The second half of the novel goes into their adult life, which is not addressed in the movie...sequel?...I doubt it, but would love it.

John Irving is now of one of my top favorite authors.

Tim says

"It's better than a sore penis," Jack said. — From "Until I Find You."

Well, maybe not ...

John Irving's longest novel also takes the longest to become interesting — if it ever does; I bailed before getting close to page 820, all ambition sapped from me by this strangely uninvolved work that, by my limited reckoning, never would have been published if submitted by an unknown. While containing familiar Irving elements (don't they all?), there is an utter lack of verve and momentum. It's as though the work were ghosted by an Irving replacement; like series Westerns or action-detective novels that are "A (known author name here) novel by (fill-in writer here)." I can see it: "Just throw in some prostitutes, child sexual abuse, talk about penises, have characters go back repeatedly to red light districts with lots of prostitutes, add some wrestling — how are you on bears?"

The early part of the novel contains Irving's typical scene-setting and history. Usually, his novels perk up at some point, and suddenly you realize you're "in" the tale, and it's smooth sailing from there. "A Son of the Circus" (a much better, and really underrated novel) was like this; about 100 pages of interesting yet not completely engrossing exposition, then you're suddenly off and running. Not here.

In the early part of the tale, 4-year-old Jack Burns is taken by his mother hither and yon in search of his tattoo-obsessed, church organ-playing father, whom Jack had never met. Oslo, Helsinki, Stockholm; Alice, a tattoo artist, visits whorehouse after whorehouse talking to prostitutes, visits church after church and listens to their organs; talks to tattoo artist after tattoo artist, most with "Tattoo" in their names. Almost nothing of interest happens in the book's first part. Oh, there's a vintage Irving moment in which a housekeeper and young Jack put their bodies against each other, hold their breath and let their hearts beat together. "You must be alive." "You must be alive, too." That's darling, and it's early; after that, it's tough sledding. Irving has Jack GIVING A MAN A TATTOO at 4 years old. This isn't funny (a 16-month old doing it might be; or a 7-year-old); it's just dumb. The only other real relief from traipsing around Europe pointlessly is a scene in which Jack is saved from the ice by a tiny soldier, who of course later has sex with Jack's mother (not everything is tiny).

Preceding the novel itself is a blurb from William Maxwell's "So Long, See You Tomorrow" (a much better novel; this mention actually is what made me decide to give the book a read) about memory, that it's "a form of storytelling that goes on continuously in the mind and often changes with the telling." This implies that what we see through 4-year-old Jack's eyes isn't necessarily what happens. Irving never develops this during the reading I did before tossing the book aside; but the way he handles it, if that's what he's doing, is not even interesting. Perhaps, later, much good happens and Irving rights this listing ship. I'll never know. But if a writer expects people to read an 820-page book, he simply MUST find a way to keep them interested in the first quarter of the novel. I hate bailing on books, particularly those from authors I've loved in the past, but I will if a writer does this to me.

If Irving were trying something completely different, I'd be more forgiving. He's not. It's like Rod Stewart going from a rocker who could do no wrong on his own and with the Faces from 1970-73 to completely losing it and later doing crappy show tunes — except Irving is throwing in the same elements he always does, but without making them the slightest bit interesting. Unlike Rod, he's not abandoning what he does best; he's simply doing what he always does very badly and at excruciating length.

I gave up on "Until I Find You" (better title: "Until I Toss You in the Trash"), picked up the new Tim Powers novel, started reading, and it felt as if I were awakening from a sleepwalk. Enough. I've spent more words on Irving's book than it deserves.

Chrissie says

if you're not into john irving or if you've never read him before, i wouldn't start with this one. but if you're an irving lover, definitely go for it.

no matter what the critics say, for me, irving can do no wrong. reading his books actually take me out of my life. i'm running out of ones i haven't read. maybe i'll have to start rrrrrrrreading.

also, irving can always be counted on for good author photos.

Nathan says

I have read 10 of John Irving's books: his first 9, and this one. Clearly, he does something that I keep going back for. Maybe it's no coincidence that I also read all of Dickens' novels in chronological order, back in my twenties. The two are very different -- Dickens is much funnier, for instance -- but they have much in common. It doesn't surprise me to read others' mention of the links between them:

Of the scope, the sheer heft factor of their books, many complain. I like it. It's hard not to like a character, Jack Burns for one, when, after 800 pages, you feel you've known him his whole life. I think incomplete knowledge and hasty summation of others is at the root of human conflict.

I am a sucker for writers who are both essentially compassionate and unequivocally outraged by human cruelty, especially if they don't just wring their hands, but leap from their armchairs, sprint after the offenders, smash out their tail-lights and put them on notice, a la T.S. Garp.

Irving also is a tonic to me because I feel understood when an author writes frankly about sexuality. I don't have to share a character's particular predilections to enjoy the reading, and I feel respected when things aren't whitewashed 'for my protection.' I concur that cruel sex isn't immoral because of the sex, but because of the cruelty. I believe that *any* morality that's used for superiority, used to judge or condemn others, is really just tarted-up cruelty. For these reasons, Irving is right up my street.

Both Irving and Dickens zero in on the invisible-because-conventionally-unregarded strings that most of us are still dancing at the ends of, with the other ends tethered to our childhoods. Most of us throw our hands up about our pasts, stamp 'history' on the whole bundle, and close the door upon it. If we're like sailing ships, our history is the wind, beyond our control, still pushing at us; it takes skill and tenacity to steer the present, consciously, against this wind, and most of us don't have the grit for it. Both Irving and Dickens have troubled to regard childhood, to steep themselves in it, and their writing about childhood rings with this truth as a result: childhood is magical, yes, but more Pan's-Labyrinth-magical than Pinocchio-Blue-Fairy magical; it's magical because ordinary human actions can be transformed, distorted, elevated to myth, when perceived by a child. A single instance of loss, of gratitude, of injustice, all parts of the passing parade of human experience as understood by adults, can become -- or as mysteriously not become -- lifelong, permanent, and defining for a child. As a former child, present parent, and future feature of my childrens' memories, it helps me to remember this, and reading these authors gets me there.

As for 'Until I Find You,' in particular? Well, it's not Irving's tightest work, and Irving's tightest work is none too tight. I have to conclude that he's serving a purpose other than spare, lean writing. It has a different effect

on the reader than saying, "So Jack and his mom went to a succession of major Scandinavian cities, met assorted tattooers, and stayed in various hotels," to have to go through the somewhat circular experience, the full theme-and-variations, with Jack. It pays off when he has to refactor his memories, because we have them too, and they were so many pages ago that they feel like *our* childhood memories. In many respects, reading the book is more like living life than like experiencing a finely-crafted, precision-engineered storytelling. Mrs. McQuat almost gets to serve as a needed counter-weight, but dies too early; Claudia's daughter comes and goes with Jack seeming to sleepwalk through both the experience and the ramifications; the bat exhibit and The Wurtz; I could make a long list of the dangling threads that just keep dangling. Irving has no regard whatever for Chekhov's gun (look up 'Chekhov's gun' in Wikipedia), and I guess I don't either.

Zulfiya says

Chronotope is one of the words coined by language philosophers and philologists to denote a spatial and temporal unity and their co-dependence in the novel. This is a way a literary continuum of a certain novel is defined and categorized. John Irving is one of the names in the world literature whose novels share not only identical chronotopes (the turn of the century and Maine/New Hampshire/ Canada), but his characters are trapped in the well of the same plots and issues: the search of the lost fathers, who are always nearby watching their off-springs, the elusiveness of the motherly figure, the attractiveness of senior women, the sexuality (and quite often the sexual abuse)and gender questions, religious hypocrisy, true spirituality, epiphany, and, last but not least, writing and creativity.

Despite the deceitful routine and the repetitiveness of Irving's novels, he is one of the most powerful voices in modern American literature. I have a feeling that he is aware of the same world his novels take place in, but he uses this singularly Irving universe as his insignia. And in the course of time it has become the symbol of quality literary fiction.

The book itself is quite lengthy - I was listening to the CD version, and I am not sure I would have stayed committed so much to this book if I had been reading it as a paperback (869 pages might be a little bit more than you bargain for). The novel has a mirror-like structure. The journey (both physical and emotional) is taken twice by the main character, Jack Burns. The first journey is the journey of falsehood, pretense, egotism, and deceit, which has been ingeniously constructed by his mother. The second journey is the journey of truth, musical beauty, sacrifice for the sake of art, and forgiveness. For the protagonist it is also the journey of self-discovery with some very interesting sexual innuendos. As I have mentioned earlier, sexuality and sexual identity have always been the landmarks of John Irving.

As usual, John Irving stretches the truth as much as he can, but he also adds some 'spice' of literature (Hardy, Tolstoy, Bronte, Mishima to mention just a few) to balance and add the verisimilitude and plausibility to his novel. This literary move per se helps us reminisce if you are familiar with those literary powerhouses or it might motivate some of his readers to discover the new and forgotten pleasures of classical literature.

This novel has also been helpful in understanding why John Irving is often called the modern Dickens - he uses the same devices and the similar settings, explores the same issues and topics, stretches the reality in every novel I have read, and introduces weird, bright and memorable characters. Now it is time to stop and ask yourself how many novels by Dickens you have read. It sounds familiar, doesn't it?

I have read several novels by Irving (he is a prolific writer, not pulp-fiction prolific, but he does write quickly, effectively, and recognizably), and every book has been a beautiful and rewarding reading experience, and I am looking forward to re-entering the unique and bizarre world according to Garp ... oops Irving:-)

Sherry says

"When he is four years old, Jack travels with his mother Alice, a tattoo artist, to several North Sea ports in search of his father, William Burns. From Copenhagen to Amsterdam, William, a brilliant church organist and profligate womanizer, is always a step ahead – has always just departed in a wave of scandal, with a new tattoo somewhere on his body from a local master or “scratcher.”

Alice and Jack abandon their quest, and Jack is educated at schools in Canada and New England – including, tellingly, a girls’ school in Toronto. His real education consists of his relationships with older women – from Emma Oastler, who initiates him into erotic life, to the girls of St. Hilda’s, with whom he first appears on stage, to the abusive Mrs. Machado, whom he first meets when sent to learn wrestling at a local gym.

Too much happens in this expansive, eventful novel to possibly summarize it all. Emma and Jack move to Los Angeles, where Emma becomes a successful novelist and Jack a promising actor. A host of eccentric minor characters memorably come and go, including Jack’s hilariously confused teacher the Wurtz; Michelle Maher, the girlfriend he will never forget; and a precocious child Jack finds in the back of an Audi in a restaurant parking lot. We learn about tattoo addiction and movie cross-dressing, “sleeping in the needles” and the cure for cauliflower ears. And John Irving renders his protagonist’s unusual rise through Hollywood with the same vivid detail and range of emotions he gives to the organ music Jack hears as a child in European churches. This is an absorbing and moving book about obsession and loss, truth and storytelling, the signs we carry on us and inside us, the traces we can’t get rid of.

Jack has always lived in the shadow of his absent father. But as he grows older – and when his mother dies – he starts to doubt the portrait of his father’s character she painted for him when he was a child. This is the cue for a second journey around Europe in search of his father, from Edinburgh to Switzerland, towards a conclusion of great emotional force."

An audiobook that I didn't finish. I found the developing sexuality of Jack (at least 6 discs long) to be much too perverted and boring to continue through. Characters felt cold and unreal.

Jessica says

When I first met with my thesis advisor in graduate school and told him I wanted to do my thesis on John Irving, he told me two things. The first was a sort of snobby view of Irving and all his work, which was, my advisor said, "the practice of writing the same book over and over again."

The next comment was full of envy and the desire to do exactly what Irving had done with Garp and The Cider House Rules. "If only I could do that myself," he said.

Well, yeah. And the truth is, I don't care what John Irving writes about, though I am in pretty clear and known territory with *Until I Find You*. Prostitutes, transvestites, absent fathers, controlling mothers, writers, wrestling, strangely strong and unique sibling relationships, and a lot of sex, death, and sorrow.

Love it.

John Irving is smart and funny and a wonderful writer. I listened to this novel, and I was so sad when it was

over. I had a moment of despair, really. the reader is amazing, but the story is deep, rich, interesting and though completely bizarre, true.

Judy says

I enjoyed the first section of this book, which seems almost like a return to the Irving of 'The World According to Garp' or 'The Hotel New Hampshire', about the young Jack and his tattooist mother wandering through assorted European cities searching for his elusive father. However, I feel the book deteriorates disastrously after that - the writing style seems to go downhill and there is a lot about child abuse which I just didn't want to go on reading.

Martin says

I have very much enjoyed the other novels by John Irving I have read (Garp, Owen Meany, Widow for One Year), but I did NOT in any way enjoy "Until I Find You." All the classic Irving tropes are here (wrestling, prostitutes, New Hampshire, older women, people of small stature), but all are deployed in an absolutely forced, joyless, airless manner. The best thing I can say about this novel is that Irving's prose is typically readable. That is also the ONLY positive thing I can think to say about the book. The entire text feels like an exercise in expanding the relatively banal post-modern quote that prefaces the text, except that the quote (generally about the fallibility of memory and storytelling) is about four lines long, and the novel is 820 seemingly endless pages. And at the end of the text, I didn't feel that the quote had been the slightest bit illuminated or developed or enriched. (I don't want to spoil anything, but the prevailing feeling I have about the novel is: that's IT??)

The story hangs together on contrivance and uninspiring, unsurprising "twists." Previous Irving books create worlds where unbelievable acts of fate or outlandish characters become truly believable. Irving follows the old professorial dictum to "make the familiar strange and the strange familiar." Yet the world created in "Until I Find You" fails to cohere. The characters never sound real when they speak; no one's actions ever make sense to us, nor do we (the audience) believe that they even make sense to the characters themselves. Never at any point did I truly care about a single character in this novel, and no one ever achieved anything other than the sketchiest inner life or set of motivations. Managing to keep each and every character a two-dimensional functionary within a novel so enormous is actually an accomplishment, though a dubious one, to be sure. With prose so fluid, I found myself turning page after boring, contrived, unbelievable page, waiting for something – ANYthing – to hook me, for some coincidence to startle me, for some connection to be revealed to me. But page after page (after page after page...) disappointed. There was simply no depth, no truth, no emotion.

I recently read Anna Karenina, and was shocked at the amount of activity that takes place within each and every chapter, and to each and every character. Every person in Tolstoy's novel has a rich inner life and wonderfully nuanced viewpoints; those were 1200 pages that felt like 200. "Until I Find You" is the polar opposite: you could convince me that I have been reading that book nonstop for the last three years. It could be 800 pages or 8,000.

There's really very little else to say about this lifeless cinderblock of a book. I enjoyed almost nothing about it, and can only reiterate my surprise and sadness at being so utterly disappointed by a book I had been so excited to read, written by a novelist I had previously enjoyed so much. What a sad waste.

Daniel says

"Until I Find You" is repetitious, overwritten, overlong and untrusting of the reader. Almost no important detail, key anecdote, phrase in a foreign language, or memorable line is used just once, and few are used just twice or even three times. Even the uninspired elements get repeated again and again. (Inexplicably, however, the occasional detail -- Emma's moustache, for example -- is heavily emphasized, and then completely dropped without being resolved or mentioned again.)

It's been a while since I've read a John Irving novel, but I don't remember him being this poor a writer. This must be an Irving book because all the typical Irving obsessions -- wrestling, cross-dressing, boarding schools, adultery and exceptional children -- are here, but I remember him being a better storyteller. Even the novel's point of view has problems, with Irving seemingly unsure whether to stay the whole time with the main character Jack Burns -- is it the third-person narrator or Jack, an Oscar-winning movie star and screenwriter, who doesn't remember the names of well-known Hollywood films? -- and whether Jack's view of the world is reliable. (There's a big reveal halfway through the book that Jack's early memories were incorrect, but what are we to make of the events we see through his eyes later in the book?)

It doesn't help that Jack is an incredibly bland character, with few opinions and little internal life. This is acknowledged in the course of the novel, but even such an acknowledgement doesn't make the book any easier to get through, as its main character is so uninteresting.

Perhaps Irving's previous books had better editors. I can think of no other reason why this one pales so miserably in comparison. Somewhere in this 850-page, flabby mess of a book, I suspect, is a good if not great 350-page novel.

Laura says

What a shame when a decent story idea is mangled by diarrhea writing and non-existent editing. I plowed through all 800-some pages of this book, hoping that Irving would somehow redeem himself in the end. No such luck. It managed to even get worse at the end - quite a feat. This book was a real disappointment, and I give it two stars only because the basic story itself was intriguing; it was the execution of the story that fell far short.
