

The Cider House Rules by John Irving

New York: Bantam
1985, 598 pages, \$4.95

It was not without some misgiving that I picked up John Irving's *The Cider House Rules*. I had read *The World According to Garp* and recently finished *The Hotel New Hampshire*, and I find Irving's style so deceptive: he lulls us with a fascinating story, vivid detail, and characters so true we feel we know them personally. And then he turns things upside down; mayhem strikes. It is unsettling and sometimes painful, and I never decide exactly what he's trying to say.

Usually, I am left with a puzzled dissatisfaction: "Yes, but what did it **mean**?" This is not the case with *The Cider House Rules*. Irving's message is clear: No matter what rules the world may post on the wall for our obedience, we must make our own ethical decisions, and the choices are often between the bad and the worse.

This is a book about abortion and its alternatives for a medical practitioner. It is not a neutral statement about an abstract social phenomenon. Rather, as one would expect, Irving writes a personal tale, taking a distinct position which is clear from the opening pages: "For whom did some minds insist that babies, even clearly unwanted ones, **must** be brought, screaming, into the world?"

The story takes place between the 1920's and the 1950's. It chiefly recounts the lives of two men: Dr. Wilbur Larch, obstetrician and director of an orphanage in St. Cloud's, Maines, and Homer Wells, the orphan who seems to belong nowhere so well as with Dr. Larch and the devoted pair of nurses at St. Cloud's. Larch is a genuine Irving character: odd to the point of eccentricity, an ether addict, passionate in his convictions, temperamental, irascible, tender, and completely lovable, no matter what the reader believes about his vocation as performer of abortions. He has no life outside the orphanage; he gives his life to the women who struggle up the hill to the orphanage from the train station at the desolate, abandoned mill town below, either to give birth or request

that he terminate their pregnancies. To them and to the orphans they sometimes leave behind, he gives all the energies of his adult life.

Larch struggles to reconcile himself to the fact that Homer had become, by his early teen years, unadopted and unadoptable. Finally, the doctor acquiesces: Homer can stay, but he is expected to be of use. And so he stays, and he grows up at St. Cloud's, under the tutelage of St. Larch, as the nurses call him.

Gradually, Homer is allowed to observe and then assist at live births of the resident orphans. Finally, when he becomes a teenager, he finds an aborted fetus in the operating room wastebasket, and he has to be told the whole truth — that illegal abortions are performed at St. Cloud's. Dr. Larch explains that a woman must be given a choice — that Homer doesn't have to believe the procedure is right, but the woman has the right to make the decision for herself. "I'm just the doctor. I help them have what they want. An orphan or an abortion." Eventually, Homer decides that he simply cannot view a fetus as the lifeless "product of conception" that Larch does. Homer believes it has a soul, and he will not perform abortions.

Dr. Larch's career did not begin with abortion; he simply accepted it as the only means available to accomplish the end of relieving pain and despair, for both mother and unwanted, unloved child. That Homer eventually comes to this same conclusion, although much later in life, can come as no surprise. This is a clear point of Irving's story: absolute rules have no place in the real world of human experience, where terrible pain and desperation are the price paid by some for society's insistence on blind obedience to these rules.

Although *The Cider House Rules* is full of lively characters and surprising twists and turns of events, it lacks the bizarre tone of *The Hotel New Hampshire*. The people in this story

seem more ordinary, their joys and their griefs more real. Homer's attempt to avoid the inevitable ethical dilemma of a return to St. Cloud's to minister to the women who make their way there in need, are feelings all of us can understand, whether or not we agree with his decisions. At the same time, the women in the book are shadowy, lifeless figures. Irving also grants the adoption process only a brief nod. The few adoptions he describes are not particularly successful. One explanation for these approaches is that this book was intended to convey a single, highly focused message about abortion and the moral and ethical choices it entails for the practitioner. Irving presents no particular argument for or against a woman's choice of abortion; the debate is strictly from the physician's point of view.

On the wall of the cider house at Ocean View Orchard, where Homer lives for many years, the owners post a list of rules for the migrant workers who live in that house during the apple picking season. These are well-intentioned rules, dictating standards of behavior aimed at the health and safety of the workers, but they are routinely ignored. Year after year they are posted and disregarded. Finally, it is revealed that there is only one man among them who can read and write well enough to interpret these rules, and he has never read them to the workers. Those who cannot read are not even aware of the existence of the rules. The one who knows what they dictate tells Homer that these people have their own rules, which serve them well. Irving's analogy to restrictive abortion laws is inescapable. He places a heavy burden on those who would dictate their own standards to others, as well as on those who must interpret the rules to others. *The Cider House Rules* is well worth reading, for entertainment and for contemplation.

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