

A Son of the Circus Short Guide

A Son of the Circus by John Irving

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Characters

A Son of the Circus teems with characters. Farrokh Darawalla serves as the hero. He is the son of Dr. Lowji Darawalla, a famous orthopedist who founded the Hospital for Crippled Children in Bombay and who was killed by a car bomb because of his atheism. Farrokh Darawalla and his wife Julia have no children, but Darawalla plays surrogate father to various dwarfs and crippled children in Bombay and to his father's adopted son, John D. Anonymously, he writes screenplays for John D., turning him into the controversial movie star Inspector Dhar.

John D./Inspector Dhar and his twin Martin Miller are separated at birth when their mother, an actress, decides to marry one of her lovers and pass Martin off as this lover's child. Where Dhar loses his identity in the roles Darawalla creates for him, Martin seeks his in studying for the priesthood at age thirty-nine. The twins finally meet — on a plane trip scripted by Darawalla — and acknowledge their homosexuality, a sign that they are finding a more authentic sense of personal identity.

Embedded within A Son of the Circus is a murder mystery involving the search for a serial killer who draws pornographic elephants on the victims' bellies. Just as Darawalla creates the screenplays for Dhar, he orchestrates the search for the "real" murderer.

Dhar, the actor-detective, helps solve the crime as much as does the real detective, Inspector Patel. Patel's wife Nancy, a hippie from Iowa, witnessed the first murders of her drug-smuggling pimp and a prostitute. The villain of the murder-mystery is Rahul Rai, son of Promila Rai who used to fondle him in a country club bathroom that contained elephant fixtures. Besides the legacy of abuse, Rahul is led to murder by his thwarted sexual identity. Without body hair, he is mocked by Promila and eventually completes a sex-change operation, returning to India as a woman and marrying Mr. Dogar, a member of the country club where his/her early abuse took place.

Irving develops the characters involved in the murder plot most fully though he tends to explain their motives rather than to develop them interiorly. Numerous other characters people the novel: Mr. Sethna, the country club steward who eavesdrops to help catch Rahul; Vinod, a circus dwarf, and his full-grown wife Deepa; Garg, nicknamed Acid Man because of a facial scar, who marries a child prostitute with AIDs; Ganesh, a crippled boy who falls to his death trying to learn the circus act that was supposed to save him from the streets; Suman, an aerialist who performs without a net; Tata Two, an obstetrician like his father, who gives quick and inaccurate blood tests. Irving's characters function like a circus cast, multiple, exaggerated, and glimpsed only in costume.



Social Concerns/Themes

At over six hundred pages, *A Son of the Circus* is a huge book, as if Irving wanted to pack into it something about all of the themes he has addressed in his previous novels. This is a book about religion: about how Christians and Parsis and Muslims cope with the problem of good and evil; how followers of these religions come to their faith; how cultural practices and prejudices arise from different religious views; how the religious person fulfills social responsibility by caring for those who need love and aid. For example, the novel's main character, Dr. Farrokh Darawalla, born a Parsi and descended, therefore, from the Zoroastrians who came to India in the seventh and eighth centuries to escape Muslim persecution, rejects both his Parsi background and his father's atheism. He converts to Christianity when he interprets a bite on his toe as inflicted by the ghost of a Christian instead of the bite of the novel's serial killer that it actually is.

As a physician, Darawalla fulfills his Christian sense of social responsibility by healing the sick, by searching for a cure for dwarfism, and by rescuing children from the streets and brothels of India and delivering them to the circus.

This is also a novel about exile, about how and where one finds and defines home. Darawalla divides his time between Toronto and India, feeling out of place in both parts of the world and coming to realize by the end of the novel that his home is the circus, the place of dreams. Darawalla is the orphan who saves orphans and, through him and numerous other characters, Irving continues to explore his major thematic concern of what constitutes family.

As in all his novels, Irving places his big themes into contemporary cultural context. Questions about the nature of religious experience become questions about the relationship between reality and imagination that are examined through a narrative method that foregrounds the omniscient narrator as a god-concept. Questions about the nature of good and evil become questions about violence, which become, more specifically, questions about violence against women, violence against children, and, with a particularly contemporary twist, the violence of terrorist bombers leveled against those who do not follow the terrorists' version of religion. Questions about exile are grounded in cultural tensions surrounding immigration, with Darawalla, for example, being feared in Canada merely because of his dark skin.

A John Irving novel would seem incomplete without some focus on the theme of sexuality. Set primarily in India, *A Son of the Circus* exploits that country's more disturbing sexual practices, such as child prostitution and the practice of castrating males into androgynous hijras. It is rife with sexual images: a dildo, phallic statues, erect penises compared to elephants' trunks, naked bodies, and an array of sexual positions. Although many accuse Irving of using sexuality to shock, he wants to remind us not only that sexuality promotes disease and violence, but also that sexual orientation may be genetically determined and that, whether homosexual or heterosexual, sex can be an act of connection, of healing, and of love.



Techniques/Literary Precedents

Like his characters, Irving's technique recalls the circus. This is a busy, chaotic book. Characters come on and off stage, plots surface and disappear only to surface again later, the atmosphere is at once funny, confusing, frightening, bizarre, dirty, and sad.

Stories occur within stories with Darawalla/Irving playing the ringmaster god. At one point, the omniscient narrator asks if the "creative process [has] eclipsed his common sense." Like a child enthralled by the circus, Irving has given himself over to the chaos.

Yet for all its chaos, the novel is still highly choreographed and the careful reader will find an intricate web of connections among the scenic performances.

One example of the web of connections in *A Son of the Circus* occurs in Irving's use of the vampire theme.

Darawalla (here, Dracula) extracts blood from dwarfs, not that he may live but that they might live. Rahul preys on the blood of his victims, biting Darawalla's toe and the lips of Nancy and of his murder victims, not because he wants to harm them but because he cannot stop himself. But blood in the age of AIDs is not often a source of life: If Darawalla finds a genetic marker for dwarfism, blood can transmit healing, but blood, especially in a country with the sexual practices of India, is also a vehicle of death.

Irving nods to various literary influences in *A Son of the Circus*, to Graham Greene especially and his treatment of Catholicism. He dedicates the novel to Salman Rushdie and embedded in its story is his concern for what happens to the artist who oversteps the bounds of what his or her culture or religion allows.



Key Questions

Given its pervasive sexual content and its chaotic plot, *A Son of the Circus* is apt to turn away readers. But its very intricacy can lead to avenues for discussion that should be lively and productive.

1. The main plot of *A Son of the Circus* involves the search for Rahul, the serial killer. How does this plot connect to some of the subplots, for example the search for the genetic marker for dwarfism and the search for a place within the circus? Which of the plots interests you the most and why?
2. Why is the novel called *A Son of the Circus* rather than "The" *Son of the Circus*? Who qualifies as a son?
3. How does the circus become a metaphor in the novel? A metaphor for what?
4. How does the novel address what it means to be a religious or spiritual person? How does religion serve as both a positive and a negative force in life?
5. How does Irving address the idea of fate? If he is the author controlling the text, can fate be possible?
6. Irving's novel is filled with references to contemporary social problems: religious intolerance, racism, homophobia, cultural identity, media exploitation, to name only a few. How does the novel help you to see the influence of these problems in your own life?
7. Do you find the novel too sexual?

Is Irving being sensational?

8. Why does Irving include twins?

What twin images can you find besides those embodied in Inspector Dhar and Martin Miller?

9. Irving never lived in India. Is his India convincing? What have you learned about this country? Do you like what you have learned?

10. How does the Epilogue pull the various threads of the novel together?

In particular, how does Darawalla's encounter with the child and his mother serve as a gloss on the issues of the novel?

Related Titles

A Son of the Circus echoes images and concerns that Irving has addressed throughout his writing career. Its circus imagery recalls the zoo in *Setting Free the Bears* (1969); its concern with gender identity recalls *The World According to Garp* (1978); its over-the-edge sexual content and chaotic plot seem most like *The Hotel New Hampshire* (1981). *Where The Cider House Rules* (1985) pursues the orphan theme by connecting it to abortion and *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989) pursues it in Johnny's search for the father, *A Son of the Circus* pursues it in all the orphaned children of India. Like *The World According to Garp* and *The Hotel New Hampshire*, *A Son of the Circus* foregrounds issues of violence against women and sexual identity and like *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, it foregrounds questions of religious faith.



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