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A Son of the Circus

By John Irving

Random House. 688 pp. \$25.

An old anecdote tells of a N.A.T.O. conference at which a British officer asked a French general whether, in the event of Soviet attack, France would be committed to defending its allies.

"France," the general declared, "would be involved."

"Involved,' 'committed,' what's the difference?" the Englishman asked.

"The difference is like your English breakfast of bacon and eggs," said the Frenchman. "In bacon and eggs, the hen is involved. But the pig is committed."

The best of John Irving is wonderful because he becomes thoroughly committed. In *A Son of the Circus* he is merely involved.

There can be little doubt that Irving is one of our great storytellers. But here he tells far more story than he shows. The resulting tale moves at a snail's pace, if the snail were chained to a rock.

At the center of the tale is Dr. Farrakh Daruwalla, a rootless 59 year old orthopedic surgeon who lives alternately in Toronto and Bombay. Daruwalla's hobby is conducting genetic research on achondroplastic dwarfs. An "adopted son of the circus" who feels at home nowhere, Daruwalla's research and secondary career as a mystery screenwriter have brought him back to India where a transsexual serial killer is murdering prostitutes and drawing cartoon elephants on their bellies, a theme the doctor has touched on in his films.

The star of these films, who also happens to be one of a pair of identical twin dwarfs of dubious parentage who'd been separated at birth, just may be the man to catch the killer. It will take over 600 pages to find out.

What makes Irving's best novels—*Garp*, say, or *Owen Meany*--irresistible is that they feel like they were written with love. Here, however, much of Irving's love seems to be for his own voice. That voice sounds at first almost Fieldingesque, a tone of mock gravity that eventually progresses into the gravity it mocks.

Buried but not completely lost in this massive narrative are dozens of fascinating and often hilarious incidents as well as a riotous slaloming between the credible and absurd. How many other serious writers might pen this sentence: "Dr. Daruwalla's

awareness that the source of his conversion to Christianity was the love bite of a transsexual serial killer had further diminished the doctor's already declining religious zeal; that the toe-biter had *not* been the ghost of the pilgrim who dismembered St Frances Xavier was more than a little disappointing"?

Readers can savor here a large corps of typically quirky Irving characters. There's Deepa, the "normal-sized" trapeze artist who married a dwarf because she had no dowry, whose abdomen the good doctor accidentally finds his face buried in. There's Vera, mother of the identical dwarf twins, who feels a maternal need to help prep school boys get their sexual performance on track. There Nancy, the demure, naive farm girl who goes to college where she experiments in sex with the football team. There's Dieter, a drug-trafficking German; and Rahul, who hates women but has himself surgically transformed into one, which doesn't elevate his opinion of them; and Dr. Aziz, "the praying urologist." Locales range from golf courses where people are struck dead from behind with putters to a low-rent sexual arcade call The Wetness Cabaret to the exclusive Duckworth Club with its 22-year waiting list.

In this often racy novel, sex is seldom bad for one, often better than it is for two. One of the dwarfs is raised by an auto-erotic live-in babysitter from U.C.L.A. There's Lady Duckworth, who has a penchant for exposing her breasts in public. Nancy and Dieter won't travel without a dildo, whose uses include smuggling. And Irving includes a 20-page pean to James Salter's novel *A Sport and a Pastime* primarily to describe its erotic effect on Daruwalla.

Everpresent, too, is Irving's extremely attractive and characteristic compassion. From its epigraph for "Salman" to its empathy for the poor and suffering of India, where parents sometimes cripple their children to make them more successful beggars, Irving shows a heart as large as his books.

Sadly, though, many readers will lose patience before encountering it all in *A Son of the Circus* because here Irving's many golden kernels of wheat are entombed within a ton of chaff.