



# Setting Free the Bears / The Water-Method Man / The 158-Pound Marriage

Written by John Irving

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# Setting Free the Bears / The Water-Method Man / The 158-Pound Marriage

By John Irving

## Setting Free The Kites

This collection features the first three novels of this highly acclaimed New York Times bestselling author. Compassionate, satirical, deeply insightful and humorous, these compelling novels have gained him millions of fans. *Setting Free the Bears*: Siggy and Hannes were disenchanting students and fellow conspirators. Astride a 700cc royal Enfield motorcycle, they roamed the Austrian countryside. When Gallen, a lovely hitchhiker, joined them, they zeroed in on the Vienna Zoo--and Siggy's dream: setting free the bears! *The Water-Method Man*: The acclaimed second novel by the author of the #1 international bestseller, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. Fred "Bogus" Trumper is a wayward knight-errant in the battle of the sexes, and the pursuit of happiness. Yet, he stubbornly clings to the notion he'll make something of his life. *The 158 Pound Marriage*: Sometimes they looked at each other, aroused half out of their minds by the thought that each had just been making love with another, and it would be enough to make them want to do it--together--all over again. Well, almost enough.

This was a wonderful introduction to John Irving. My friend found out that I had never read him and she dropped a bunch of his books in my lap so I started with this one. It contains his first three novels and I like to read things in chronological order, if I can. "Setting Free the Bears" is one of the funniest books I have ever read. Irving seems, at least in these early works, to be obsessed with post-war Vienna. He took the quintessential American trope of the "road-trip" and plopped it down in Austria. The youth generation after WWII was restless and the two main characters, Siggy and Graff, drop out of their studies and ride on a precarious motorcycle through the country side. They're "living off the land" and causing trouble, especially when they meet up with a young girl who Graff is both attracted to and repulsed by. She is very naive and an easy target and I think Graff feels a little guilty about that, but he also wants to sleep with her. Crazy things happen and Graff runs off with the girl and he goes to carry out Siggy's plan (I won't spoil why Siggy isn't doing it himself) of setting free the zoo animals in Vienna, just like what happened during the war. The whole book the reader can feel a build up of tragedy, yet the comedy is high and the history poignant. A large portion of the book is taken up by Siggy's family history and the aftermath of the war and the affects it had on civilians. By far the funniest portion of the book are the "Zoo Watch" scenes where in between his family history Siggy is documenting the security officer at the zoo. Siggy is suspicious of the officer and doubts his affinity to the animals and judges him about what his role in the war must have been. Siggy is a hugely unreliable narrator so it is baffling for the reader to see Graff taking him and his plan so seriously. This is a book that is fun to read but still tugs at the heart strings as we witness the affects of war.

"The Water Method Man" is an entirely different book. "Bears" felt a little on the fantastic side, but most of this book felt down to earth. Bogus Trumper lives up to his nickname. He is not exactly a con-artist, but he has no real goals in life and doesn't pay his bills and is a noncommittal husband, though you do feel like he loves his wife and son. He suffers from a general malaise and it seems like no one can shake him from it. I found this a more difficult read than "Bears" and it didn't keep my attention as well. But as the story progressed I started to feel more sorry for Bogus. He was a smart, talented man who came from a good family and had a loving wife but he was not happy. I don't think at first he was unhappy either. But pressure began to rise as his Thesis was not being completed, his biggest bogus act was the admittedly made up portions of his translation of an "Old Low-Norse" poem for his dissertation. Everyone wanted the same thing from Bogus, they wanted him essentially to grow up and be a real man, husband, father, son, provider, etc. He breaks free from these "entanglements" and starts living with a new girlfriend after he had disappeared from Biggie's life. She had to track him down in Vienna, the weirdest and most unnecessary part of the story. The new girlfriend ultimately ends up wanting the same thing, she wants to have a child. I really liked the end of this book and was glad I stuck with it. Irving is one of the most imaginative writers I have ever read and it served him well in this novel.

While a general writing style is the same in each book and they each have their own dark humor, "The 158 Pound Marriage" was by far the bleakest. It is about a couple who decides to interchange their spouses. It is never entirely clear why Utch and the narrator want to do it, but Severin and Edith pursue it. It is strange that anyone would see this as a good idea, and Irving doesn't address it this way, but it was the 1960s and monogamy was becoming "old-fashioned." But as the book wears on the relationships between the spouses, and the lovers becomes entangled and frayed. The narrator is highly suspicious of Severin the whole time and is strangely protective of Utch, his wife, because he feels that Utch is falling in love with Severin and that Severin is only participating as a way to hurt his wife Edith. We only glimpse Severin from the narrator's eyes so we don't know if he was as morose and self-centered as the narrator tells us. And in the end, it is not Edith and Severin falling apart, but the "stronger" of the two marriages.

Irving likes to have a book that is wide in geography, all three books have European scenes, some all over Europe like in "Marriage." Sometimes the hilarity and imagery seems like it is overshadowing the plot but Irving always ties it up neatly in the end, whether it is satisfying or not would depend on the individual reader. Irving respects his readers and lets them draw their own conclusions, but he doesn't leave any loose ends either. ...more

## Setting Free The Bears

Three different novels in one volume, and even though the subjects of the books are completely different, they have certain elements in common: Vienna, zoos, World War II, and people who end up hating their significant other in some way. "Setting Free the Bears" was my favorite, because I really liked the plot: two Viennese college students take a motorcycle trip ("Motorcycle Diaries," anyone?) and end up planning to liberate the animals in the Vienna Zoo. The characters were also really enjoyable. Three different novels in one volume, and even though the subjects of the books are completely different, they have certain elements in common: Vienna, zoos, World War II, and people who end up hating their significant other in some way. "Setting Free the Bears" was my favorite, because I really liked the plot: two Viennese college students take a motorcycle trip ("Motorcycle Diaries," anyone?) and end up planning to liberate the animals in the Vienna Zoo. The characters were also really enjoyable, especially Siggy, the radish-loving, saltshaker-stealing zoo liberator. In case you couldn't tell from that sentence, his sanity is questionable, but he's still fun. (Best part of the book: Siggy is in the bath and, after singing some improptu songs, exclaims, "My ass is remarkable!")

The Water-Method Man was good as well, but it switched back and forth between flashbacks and the present, which got confusing at times. The 158-Pound Marriage was my least favorite, mostly because it was so weird. It was about swingers, for god's sake.

But I enjoyed the first two books a lot, and the third one fit with them very well, even if I didn't love it. ...more

If you must complete your collection...

"The Water Method Man" was the first Irving book I ever read—though technically it was read TO me by my high-school boyfriend, Jason, in New Hampshire one summer. It was good enough to make me pursue his later, better works.

"Setting Free the Bears" is remarkable for Irving's early and enduring obsession with bears, circuses and motorcycles. It's not the best book ever, but I sure wouldn't want to be judged on MY first works ("Our Town", anyone?)

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I admit that I read every single Irving book in print before finally turning my attention to the "158-Pound Marriage". If you read Garp with an eye towards Irving's autobiographical poaching, then you can pretty much guess at the themes of The Ice Storm-esque adultery and loss that you'll find in it. That was the hardest part of Garp for me to read, so I put off "158-Pound Marriage". It will never be my favorite of his books. 'Nuff said.

...more

## Setting Free The Kites Review

I read all three of these in one fell swoop. Each of them are books that Irving wrote before he really hit his stride. Setting Free the Bears is post hippie sort of on-the-road shenanigans in Vienna. It's really a minor book, not really worth your time. The Water-method Man is a bit more interesting, the story part is pared down, but there's still some hiccups in his writing that don't quite pare. . . marriage is an Updike like look at partner swapping. A very strange book for someone who would eventually write Garp. This book IS fascinating to see his growth as a writer. (I'm sorry but . . . bears is nothing short of a mess.) ...more

I read Setting Free the Bears some years ago and remember really slogging through it. I just finished The Water-Method Man, and while it wasn't as difficult to read as SFB, it still wasn't quite worthy of passing along to a friend. I'm determined to read the 3rd book anyway, but so far, I'm finding this tome to just be for really die-hard Irving fans. There are other of his books that I've really enjoyed, these just aren't among that list.

The 158-Pound Marriage was definitely the best of the 3. I read Setting Free the Bears some years ago and remember really slogging through it. I just finished The Water-Method Man, and while it wasn't as difficult to read as SFB, it still wasn't quite worthy of passing along to a friend. I'm determined to read the 3rd book anyway, but so far, I'm finding this tome to just be for really die-hard Irving fans. There are other of his books that I've really enjoyed, these just aren't among that list.

The 158-Pound Marriage was definitely the best of the 3. I actually got to a point where I wanted to keep reading. Interesting that he wrote 3 books with ties to Austria. ...more

# Setting Free The Bears Escape From Thought Suppression

It was ok.



## Setting Free The Kites Discussion Questions

## Setting Free The Crabs

## Setting Free The Kites Characters

## Setting Free The Kites Summary

# Setting Free The Bears By John Irving

## Setting Free The Kites Sparknotes