JOHN IRVING

THE IMAGINARY GIRLFRIEND

A MEMOIR

'CONCISE, ORIGINAL AND ENJOYABLE'
The Times

About the Book

From a novelist known for the complexity of his novels – they are also *long* – comes an autobiography of compelling simplicity; it is also *short*. Dedicated to the memory of two wrestling coaches and two writer friends, *The Imaginary Girlfriend* is a lucid portrait of the writers and wrestlers who played a mentor role in John Irving's development as a novelist, a wrestler and a wrestling coach. Moreover, this candid memoir portrays a father's dedication to his children: Irving coached his sons Colin and Brendan to New England championship titles – a championship that, as a competitor, he himself was denied.

John Irving began writing and wrestling when he was fourteen. He competed as a wrestler for twenty years, he was certified as a referee for twenty-four and he coached the sport until he was forty-seven. His thirty-three years in wrestling are three times those he spent as a student and a teacher of Creative Writing; yet his concise autobiography details the interrelationship of the disciplines of writing and wrestling – from the days when Irving was a beginner at both pursuits until his fourth wrestling-related surgery at the age of fifty-three.

The Imaginary Girlfriend is both a work of the utmost literary accomplishment and a paradigm for living.

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FACULTY BRAT

IN MY PREP-SCHOOL days, at Exeter, Creative Writing wasn't taught – the essay was all-important there – but in my years at the academy I nevertheless wrote more short stories than anything else; I showed them (out of class) to George Bennett, my best friend's father. The late Mr Bennett was then Chairman of the English Department; he was my first critic and encourager – I needed his help. Because I failed both Latin and math, I was required to remain at the academy for an unprecedented fifth year; yet I qualified for a course called English 4W – the 'W' stood for Writing of the kind I wanted to do – and in this selective gathering I was urged to be Creative, which I rarely managed to be.

In my memory, which is subject to doubt, the star author and most outspoken critic in English 4W was my wrestling teammate Chuck Krulak, who was also known as 'Brute' and who would become General Charles C. Krulak – the Commandant of the Marine Corps and a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. No less a presence, and as sarcastic a critic as the future General Krulak, was my classmate in English 5, the future writer G. W. S. Trow; he was just plain George then, but he was as sharp as a ferret – I feared his bite. It was only recently, when I was speaking with George, that he surprised me by saying he'd been deeply unhappy at Exeter; George had always struck me as being too confident to be unhappy – whereas my own state of mind at the time was one of perpetual embarrassment.

I could never have qualified for Exeter through normal admissions procedures; I was a weak student – as it turned out, I was dyslexic, but no one knew this at the time. Nevertheless, I was automatically admitted to the academy

in the category of faculty child. My father taught in the History Department; he'd majored in Slavic Languages and Literature at Harvard – he was the first to teach Russian History at Exeter. I initiated a heightened level of intrafamily awkwardness by enrolling in his Russian History course. Dad rewarded me with a C+.

To say that Exeter was hard for me is an understatement. I was the only student in my Genetics class who failed to control his fruit-fly experiment. The red eyes and the white eyes were interbreeding so rapidly that I lost track of the generations; I attempted to dispose of the evidence in the drinking fountain outside the lab – not knowing that fruit flies could live (and breed) for days in the water pipes. When the unusable drinking fountain was declared 'contaminated' – it was literally crawling with wet fruit flies – I crawled forth and made my confession.

I was forgiven by Mr Mayo-Smith, the biologist who taught Genetics, because I was the only townie (a resident of Exeter) in any of his classes who owned a gun; the biologist needed me – more specifically, he needed my gun. Boarding students, quite understandably, were not allowed firearms. But as a New Hampshire native – 'Live Free or Die,' as the license plates say – I had an arsenal of weapons at my disposal; the biologist used me as the marksman who provided his Introductory Biology class with pigeons. I used to shoot them off the roof of the biologist's barn. Fortunately, Mr Mayo-Smith lived some distance from town.

Yet even in my capacity as Mr Mayo-Smith's marksman, I was a failure. He wanted the pigeons killed immediately after they'd eaten; that way the students who dissected them could examine the food contained in their crops. And so I allowed the pigeons to feed in the biologist's cornfield. When I flushed them from the field, they were so stupid: they always flew to the roof of his barn. It was a slate roof; when I picked them off – I used a 4X scope and a .22 long-rifle bullet, being careful not to shoot them in their crops –

they slid down one side of the roof or the other. One day, I shot a hole in the roof; after that, Mr Mayo-Smith never let me forget how his barn leaked. The fruit flies in the drinking fountain were the school's problem, but I had shot the biologist's very own barn – 'Personal property, and all that that entails,' as my father was fond of saying in Russian History.

Shooting a hole in Mr Mayo-Smith's barn was less humiliating than the years I spent in Language Therapy. At Exeter, poor spelling was unknown – I mean that little was known about it. It was my dyslexia, of course, but – because that diagnosis wasn't available in the late 1950s and early '60s – bad spelling like mine was considered a psychological problem by the language therapist who evaluated my mysterious case. (The handicap of a language disability did not make my struggles at the academy any easier.) When the repeated courses of Language Therapy were judged to have had no discernible influence on my ability to recognize the difference between 'allegory' and 'allergy,' I was turned over to the school psychiatrist.

Did I hate the school?

'No.' (I had grown up at the school!)

Why did I refer to my stepfather as my 'father'?

'Because I love him and he's the only "father" I've ever known.'

But why was I 'defensive' on the subject of other people calling my father my stepfather?

'Because I love him and he's the only "father" I've ever known – why shouldn't I be "defensive"?'

Why was I angry?

'Because I can't spell.'

But why *couldn't* I spell?

'Search me.'

Was it 'difficult' having my stepfather – that is, my father – as a teacher?

‘I had my father as a teacher for one year. I’ve been at the school, and a bad speller, for five years.’

But why was I angry?

‘Because I can’t spell – and I have to see *you*.’

‘We certainly *are* angry, aren’t we?’ the psychiatrist said.

‘I certainly *are*,’ I said. (I was trying to bring the conversation back to the subject of my *language* disability.)

AN UNDERDOG

THERE WAS ONE place at Exeter where I was never angry; I never lost my temper in the wrestling room – possibly because I wasn't embarrassed to be there. It is surprising that I felt so comfortable with wrestling. My athletic skills had never been significant. I had loathed Little League baseball. (By association, I hate all sports with balls.) I more mildly disliked skiing and skating. (I have a limited tolerance for cold weather.) I did have an inexplicable taste for physical contact, for the adrenal stimulation of bumping into people, but I was too small to play football; also, there was a ball involved.

When you love something, you have the capacity to bore everyone about *why* – it doesn't matter why. Wrestling, like boxing, is a weight-class sport; you get to bump into people your own size. You can bump into them very hard, but where you land is reasonably soft. And there are civilized aspects to the sport's combativeness: I've always admired the rule that holds you responsible, *if* you lift your opponent off the mat, for your opponent's 'safe return.' But the best answer to why I love wrestling is that it was the first thing I was any good at. And what limited success I had in the sport I owe completely to my first coach, Ted Seabrooke.

Coach Seabrooke had been a Big 10 Champion and a two-time All-American at Illinois; he was *way* overqualified for the job of coaching wrestling at Exeter – his teams dominated New England prep-school and high-school wrestling for years. An NCAA runner-up at 155 pounds, Ted Seabrooke was a handsome man; he weighed upward of 200 pounds in my time at the academy. He would sit on the mat with his legs spread in front of him; his arms were bent

at the elbow but reaching out to you from the level of his chest. Even in such a vulnerable position, he could completely defend himself; I never saw anyone manage to get behind him. On his rump, he could scuttle like a crab – his feet tripping you, his legs scissoring you, his hands tying up your hands or snapping your head down. He could control you by holding you in his lap (a crab ride) or by taking possession of your near leg and your far arm (a cross-body ride); he was always gentle with you, and he never seemed to expend much energy in the process of frustrating you. (Coach Seabrooke would first get diabetes and then die of cancer. At his memorial service, I couldn't speak half the eulogy I'd written for him, because I knew by heart the parts that would make me cry if I tried to say them aloud.)

Not only did Ted Seabrooke teach me how to wrestle; more important, he forewarned me that I would never be better than 'halfway decent' as a wrestler – because of my limitations as an athlete. He also impressed upon me how I could compensate for my shortcomings: I had to be especially dedicated – a thorough student of the sport – if I wished to overcome my lack of any observable ability. 'Talent is overrated,' Ted told me. 'That you're not very talented needn't be the end of it.'

A high-school wrestling match is six minutes long, divided into three two-minute periods – with no rest between the periods. In the first period, both wrestlers start on their feet – a neutral position, with neither wrestler having an advantage. In the second period, in those days, one wrestler had the choice of taking the top or the bottom position; in the third period, the choice of positions was reversed. (Nowadays, the options of choice have been expanded to include the neutral position, and the wrestler given the choice in the second period may defer his choice until the third.)

What Coach Seabrooke taught me was that I should keep the score close through two periods – close enough so that one takedown or a reversal in the third period could win the match. And I needed to avoid 'mix-ups' – free-for-all situations that were not in either wrestler's control. (The outcome of such a scramble favors the better athlete.) Controlling the pace of the match – a combination of technique, correct position, and physical conditioning – was my objective. I know it sounds boring – I was a boring wrestler. The pace that worked for me was slow. I liked a low-scoring match.

I rarely won by a fall; in five years of wrestling at Exeter, I probably pinned no more than a half-dozen opponents. I was almost never pinned – only twice, in fact.

I won 5–2 when I dominated an opponent; I won 2–1 or 3–2 when I was lucky, and lost 3–2 or 4–3 when I was less lucky. If I got the first takedown, I could usually win; if I lost the first takedown, I was hard-pressed to recover – I was not a come-from-behind man. I was, as Coach Seabrooke said, 'half-way decent' as a counter-wrestler, too. But if my opponent was a superior athlete, I couldn't afford to rely on my counter-moves to his first shots; my counters weren't quick enough – my *reflexes* weren't quick enough. Against a superior athlete, I would take the first shot; against a superior *wrestler*, I would try to counter his first move.

'Or vice versa, if it's not working,' Coach Seabrooke used to say. He had a sense of humor. 'Where the head goes, the body must follow – usually,' Ted would add. And: 'An underdog is in a position to take a healthy bite.'

This was a concept of myself that I'd been lacking. I was an underdog; therefore, I had to control the pace – of *everything*. This was more than I learned in English 4W, but the concept was applicable to my Creative Writing – and to all my schoolwork, too. If my classmates could read our history assignment in an hour, I allowed myself two or three. If I couldn't learn to spell, I would keep a list of my most

frequently misspelled words – and I kept the list with me; I had it handy even for unannounced quizzes. Most of all, I rewrote everything: first drafts were like the first time you tried a new takedown – you needed to drill it, over and over again, before you even dreamed of trying it in a match. I began to take my lack of talent seriously.

An imperious Spanish teacher was fond of abusing those of us who lacked perfection with the insensitive (not to mention elitist) remark that we would all end up at Wichita State. I didn't know that Wichita was in Kansas; I knew only that this was a slur – if we weren't *talented* enough for Harvard, then Wichita State would be our just reward. Fuck you, I thought: my objective would then be to do well at Wichita State. Ted Seabrooke had gone to Illinois. I didn't suppose that this Spanish teacher thought too highly of Illinois either.

I remember telling Ted that I'd had two likable Spanish teachers, and one unlikable one. 'I wouldn't complain about those odds,' he said.

THE HALF-POUND PIECE OF TOAST

MY TIME AT the academy was marked by two important transitions in Exeter wrestling under Coach Seabrooke. First, the wrestling room was moved from the basement of the old gymnasium to the upper reaches of the indoor track, which was called ‘the cage.’ The new room, high in the rafters, was exceedingly warm; from the hard-packed dirt of the track below us, and from the wooden track that circumscribed the upper level, came the steady pounding of the runners. Once our wrestling practice was underway, we wrestlers never heard the runners. The wrestling room was closed off from the wooden track by a heavy sliding door. Before and after practice, the door was open; during practice, the door was closed.

The other wrestling-related change that marked my time at Exeter was the mats themselves. I began wrestling on horsehair mats, which were covered with a filmy, flexible plastic; as a preventive measure against mat burns, this plastic sheeting was modestly effective, but – like the sheet on a bed – it loosened with activity. The loose folds were a cause of ankle injuries; also, the shock-absorbing abilities of those old horsehair mats were nonexistent in comparison to the comfort of the *new* mats that arrived at Exeter in time to be installed in the new wrestling room.

The new mats were smooth on the surface, with no cover. When the mats were warm, you could drop an egg from knee height and the egg wouldn’t break. (Whenever someone tried this and the egg broke, we said that the mat wasn’t warm enough.) On a cold gym floor, the texture of the mat would radically change. Later, I kept a wrestling

mat in my unheated Vermont barn; in midwinter the mat was as hard as a floor.

Most of our dual-meet matches were also held in the cage, but not in the wrestling room where we practiced. An L-shaped wooden parapet extended like an arm off the wooden track. From this advantage – and from a loop of the wooden track itself – as many as 200 or 300 spectators could look down upon a less-than-regulation-size basketball court, where we rolled out the mats. There was barely enough floor space left over for a dozen or more rows of bleacher seats; most of our fans were above us, on the wooden track and parapet. It was like wrestling at the bottom of a teacup; the surrounding crowd peered over the rim of the cup.

Where we wrestled was appropriately called ‘the pit.’ The smell of dirt from the nearby track was strangely remindful of summer, although wrestling is a winter sport. What with the constant opening of the outside door, the pit was never a warm place; the mats, which were so warm and soft in the wrestling room, were cold and hard for the competition. And, when our wrestling meets coincided with track meets in the cage, the sound of the starting gun reverberated in the pit. I always wondered what the visiting wrestlers thought of the gunfire.

My first match in the pit was a learning experience. First-year wrestlers, or even second-year wrestlers, are not often starters on prep-school or high-school wrestling teams of any competitive quality. In New Hampshire, in the 1950s, wrestling – unlike baseball or basketball or hockey or skiing – was not something every kid grew up doing. There are certain illogical things to learn about any sport; wrestling, especially, does not come naturally. A double-leg takedown is *not* like a head-on tackle in football. Wrestling is not about knocking a man down – it’s about controlling him. To take a man down by his legs, you have to do more than knock his legs out from under him: you have to get your hips under