



Until I Find You

By John Irving

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Until I Find You is the story of the actor Jack Burns – his life, loves, celebrity and astonishing search for the truth about his parents.

When he is four years old, Jack travels with his mother Alice, a tattoo artist, to several North Sea ports in search of his father, William Burns. From Copenhagen to Amsterdam, William, a brilliant church organist and profligate womanizer, is always a step ahead – has always just departed in a wave of scandal, with a new tattoo somewhere on his body from a local master or “scratcher.”

Alice and Jack abandon their quest, and Jack is educated at schools in Canada and New England – including, tellingly, a girls’ school in Toronto. His real education consists of his relationships with older women – from Emma Oastler, who initiates him into erotic life, to the girls of St. Hilda’s, with whom he first appears on stage, to the abusive Mrs. Machado, whom he first meets when sent to learn wrestling at a local gym.

Too much happens in this expansive, eventful novel to possibly summarize it all. Emma and Jack move to Los Angeles, where Emma becomes a successful novelist and Jack a promising actor. A host of eccentric minor characters memorably come and go, including Jack’s hilariously confused teacher the Wurtz; Michelle Maher, the girlfriend he will never forget; and a precocious child Jack finds in the back of an Audi in a restaurant parking lot. We learn about tattoo addiction and movie cross-dressing, “sleeping in the needles” and the cure for cauliflower ears. And John Irving renders his protagonist’s unusual rise through Hollywood with the same vivid detail and range of emotions he gives to the organ music Jack hears as a child in European churches. This is an absorbing and moving book about obsession and loss, truth and storytelling, the signs we carry on us and inside us, the traces we can’t get rid of.

Jack has always lived in the shadow of his absent father. But as he grows older – and when his mother dies – he starts to doubt the portrait of his father’s character she painted for him when he was a child. This is the cue for a second journey around Europe in search of his father, from Edinburgh to Switzerland, towards a conclusion of great emotional force.

A melancholy tale of deception, **Until I Find You** is also a swaggering comic

novel, a giant tapestry of life's hopes. It is a masterpiece to compare with John Irving's great novels, and restates the author's claim to be considered the most glorious, comic, moving novelist at work today.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

At over 800 pages, John Irving's *Until I Find You* is a daunting proposition at best. Anyone who finishes it will have acquired forearm muscles, sore shoulders, and not much else. The story is self-indulgent, repetitive and, ultimately, boring, that cardinal sin that readers can't forgive. Longtime Irving readers have stayed with him through a few hits and a miss or two, but this is an all-time low. We are accustomed to Irving's work as quirky, bizarre, and off-the-wall and have forgiven all by calling such high-jinks and characters "imaginative" or "absolutely original." The only thing original about this tome is the descent into soft porn.

Jack Burns, the hero of the tale, is four years old when it all begins. He is the illegitimate son of Daughter Alice, a tattoo artist and, guess what, daughter of a tattoo artist. She takes Jack on a pilgrimage to find his womanizing father, William, a church organist and "ink addict." By seeking out church organs and tattoo parlors, she expects to find him. She doesn't, and by now we have spent more than a hundred pages in Northern European cities doing an imitation of *Groundhog Day*. Same story, different day: a little prostitution for Alice, a few questions asked; alas, no daddy.

Alice and Jack return to Toronto so that Jack may enter a previously all-girls school, which will admit little boys for the first time. There begins another 200 pages of the girls and the teachers abusing Jack, over and over again. By now, he is five and is, for some unfathomable reason, eminently interesting to girls and women. His "friend" Emma keeps careful track of "the little guy," as she calls Jack's penis, looking for signs of life. The worst part of all this is that none of it is funny or sad or even clever. There are wrestling vignettes, of course, and prep school tedium, but no bears. Maybe bears would have saved it. There were funny parts in *The World According to Garp* and *The Cider House Rules* as well as poignant, horrific parts in both of those and other Irving novels. This story is flat. The voice never changes; it just drones on.

Jack becomes an actor. First, he is a boy in drag because he is so pretty, then he takes transvestite parts. He and Emma, now a published novelist, live together in LA, which provides endless opportunity for name-dropping. His career eventually takes off and he gets recognition and awards, but still no daddy. Irving, it turns out, never knew his father, either. Perhaps this exercise will exorcise that demon once and for all and Irving's next book will be about something more compelling than a little boy's penis and his trashy mother's antics. If you do make it through to the book's snapper of an ending, you deserve to find out what it is on your own. Call it a reward. --Valerie Ryan

From Publishers Weekly

Actor Jack Burns seeks a sense of identity and father figures while accommodating a host of overbearing and elaborately dysfunctional women in Irving's latest sprawling novel (after *The Fourth Hand*). At the novel's onset (in 1969), four-year-old Jack is dragged by his mother, Alice, a Toronto-based tattoo artist, on a year-long search throughout northern Europe for William Burns, Jack's runaway father, a church organist and "ink addict." Back in Toronto, Alice enrolls Jack at the all-girls school St. Hilda's, where she mistakenly thinks he'll be "safe among the girls"; he later transfers to Redding, an all-boy's prep school in Maine. Jack survives a childhood remarkable for its relentless onslaught of sexual molestation at the hands of older girls and women to become a world-famous actor and Academy Award-winning screenwriter. Eventually, he retraces his childhood steps across Europe, in search of the truth about his father—a quest that also emerges as a journey toward normalcy. Though the incessant, graphic sexual abuse becomes gratuitous, Irving handles the novel's less seedy elements superbly: the earthy camaraderie of the tattoo parlors, the Hollywood glitz, Jack's developing emotional authenticity, his discovery of a half-sister and a moving reunion with his father.

From [The New Yorker](#)

Irving's vast novel recounts the life of an actor as he tries to find the father who abandoned him and to come to terms with the traumas of his youth: a mother who was an itinerant tattoo artist and occasional prostitute, schooling at an all-girls academy where he was tormented by older classmates, sexual molestation at the hands of a woman who had been a kind of nanny. The story gets off to an energetic start as he and his mother scamper through Scandinavian seaports looking for the father, but it quickly becomes bogged down by unnecessary detail. When we finally meet the father, now ailing, we get a clearer impression of his illness and his doctors than of the man himself. This curious absence is all the more disappointing as Irving has said that the novel is based on his own youth, but it's unfortunately typical of a book in which the main characters seem two-dimensional.

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