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# Feelin' Good as a Catholic Dilemma

Mary Gordon: *Final Payments*; Random House; New York.

by Christopher Manion

Isabel Moore, it seems, has a problem: her father, whom she nursed through eleven years of illness, has died, and she must get on with the business of living—sell the house, get a job, meet new friends, and decide what to do with her life. She must step gingerly across the threshold to a world which she has scarcely noticed since she was nineteen. All in all, the makings of a good story. But Isabel Moore has another problem: she is a Catholic. That is, she was raised a Catholic, and part of her problem lies in the truth of what every Catholic learns in grade school: there is no such thing as an *ex-Catholic*. And that is precisely what Isabel Moore wants to be. She has lived eleven years in one kind of unreality and seeks comfort (she would like that term) in another. The reader might find the story line uninspired, and the transparent development of the supporting characters a blessing in disguise. It saves more attention for Isabel's confrontation with her father, his faith, and her future.

To this subtle sequence of still lifes, which culminates in the epiphany of Isabel Moore, author Mary Gordon devotes a talent which manages to depict brutality and devotion with an equally soft touch. In fact, they often seem synonymous. This is a part of Isabel Moore's problem, and it, of course, becomes Mary Gordon's problem because she chooses to articulate the Catholic Isabel and the Catholic Church with the same tired runes usually reserved for the runaway priests who elope with the nun who taught your sister in sixth grade. These, as we are all supposed to know, are

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drunk, insensitive priests, dealing with hungry children whose parents send money to some lunatic in Canada who thinks he has the stigmata. There is no relief. The bigotry is by nature oppressive, even hackneyed (like *ex-communists*, *ex-Catholics* are the most devoted critics of their former selves), but in Isabel Moore we see no escape to reality, only a resurrection into nothingness. The pearl of great price becomes a blackened, charred remnant of a faith easily discarded for whatever bleak "life" is left in the world.

Bleak, indeed. Isabel's two childhood friends, Liz and Eleanor, represent the two sources of her inspiration for the future. Liz is married, has two children, and lives in the country. Her Irish politician husband has many lovers, among whom he soon includes Isabel; Liz, chastened, enjoys a lesbian lover who raises horses next door. Eleanor, on the other hand, offers the lifestyle of the single city girl—long books, relaxing baths, leisurely Sunday brunches. She lived with her boyfriend until he got tired of her after six years and kicked her out. She might go back to graduate school. In her slow emergence into the world, Isabel oscillates between these two influences with wide-eyed naiveté. The only experience all three really share is a common hatred of the Church which they inherited from their childhoods.

More on the supporting cast: Margaret Casey, who kept house for Isabel's father after his wife died (when Isabel was three), represents everything tawdry in the faith which hasn't already been discredited by Isabel's father and all his priest friends. Isabel remembers her "when the touch of her damp finger could sicken me for the afternoon." Margaret now lives in upstate New York and writes Isabel letters which wallow in self-pity under the guise of accepting suffering; and Isabel detests her. Almost as much as she detests herself. For Isabel bears a burden of guilt which stretches like an unbroken line from the bed where

her father found her with his best student (this, she is convinced, caused his stroke three weeks later) to the finger of the wife of the man she wants to marry—if he gets a divorce—shaking at her an inch away from her face, in the middle of her crowded office. The unredeemed quality of her shame—one so perverse that the Church has no name for it, thus cannot forgive it—drives Isabel to pursue her own self-imposed soteriology—hence the eleven years of "selfless" service to her father's dying corpse, and the culminating exile in service of Margaret Casey, in search of meaningless suffering which will nicely reflect the brutality of the faith which she hates, but cannot replace. Like her father, it is dying but refuses to die. In seeking to love the unlovable Margaret she redeems the lack of meaning which surrounded the sickbed in Queens and the bed in the next room where she had been found with her lover. God demands

"There is however, more: the electric prose. On whether love is measured by sacrifice: 'wrong . . . because the minute I gave up something for someone I like them less' . . . On sexual technique: 'He handled my breast as if he were making a meatball.' A first-class writer declares herself with knowing art."

— John Leonard  
in the *New York Times*

payment for her "special gifts"—intelligence, beauty—and she accepts this cruelty without question.

The reader searches in vain for a glimmer of insight to illuminate the redemptive value of suffering in the eyes of the Church which Gordon pretends to portray. The perceptive qualities woven through the other dimensions of the narrative—a cool, unemotional freshness in touching things human, even emotion itself—imply by default the shabby, tired quality of the Catholicism of Isabel Moore. Surely, we must think to ourselves, such a perceptive author would have portrayed a richer faith if the Faith were indeed richer.

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But, of course, it is not. For Isabel Moore, the Church has failed because it has failed in its ultimate mission to make her happy, or feel good; and these two alternatives slowly ooze into one, while suffering remains the scourge of an angry God whom we cannot love, since we cannot hurt Him back. And, since we are all ultimately selfish, the identification of suffering with the redemptive mission of a suffering Christ is just out of the question: it will not be discussed, only demeaned. Gordon slowly, exquisitely wrings the faith dry until nothing even remotely resembling charity remains. It is certainly not the faith that beholds the King of the universe manifested in a Host as light as a feather.

What is left, then, of Isabel, the poor outcast whom the "Me" generation has passed by? Exiled to a living death at Margaret Casey's, her search for atonement slowly gives way to an urge to catch up with her already fulfilled, self-indulgent friends; in the struggle between her selfishness and her guilt (the wilted remnant of charity long forgotten), the selfishness waxes triumphant. As someone once put it, "Lady Isabel slides quite unromantically from a 'sick-bed' mentality to a sick 'bed-mentality.'" The moral tension of existence collapses, replaced by a tidy, manageable life where Isabel will cope. The message is clear: if the "Me" generation has passed you by, it is not too late to catch up. To unburden herself for the journey, Isabel leaves Margaret the twenty thousand dollars which remain from the sale of her father's house. Justice, not charity: had it not been for Isabel, Margaret might have married her father. But now, in a moment of glory she reaches for the telephone and the angels waiting in the wings come to deliver her from her voluntary purgatory to drive towards New York City—and life.

Oh, yes, the resurrection occurs on the day after Good Friday. The passion has ended, the ransom has been paid, our heroine has risen above the dead faith of her dead father. It's all very symbolic. □

## One's-Own-Navel Universe

John Irving: *The World According to Garp*; Henry Robbins/Dutton; New York.

by Whit Stillman

In the course of a four-novel career John Irving has failed his way to the top. *The World According to Garp* is a success of both esteem and sales volume. "Highly literate" and "compulsively readable"—the worn superlatives for two different kinds of fiction—both apply to *Garp*.

In his book Irving has followed the literary dictum to "write about what one knows." His subject is a novelist's narcissism. It is convincingly rendered. As T.S. Garp, the novel's title character, Irving succeeds in making himself "come alive." Beyond this central drama—of a novelist not wrestling with his enormous self-regard—the story is alternately flat or grotesque; "richly humorous" in reviewers' language.

Garp's life begins when Jenny Fields—a young nurse with an abhorrence of sex but passion for a child—impregnates herself by a comatose World War II casualty in her care, Technical Sergeant Garp. ("T.S. Garp" is his namesake as well as son.) Jenny Fields recounts this hospital tryst twenty years later in her bestselling autobiography, *A Sexual Suspect*. It makes her a celebrity and a heroine to the women's movement, and as a result the New England mansion she has inherited is overwhelmed with "Ellen Jamesians," a cult of fanatical feminists who have cut out their tongues in sympathy for 11-year-old rape victim, Ellen James. Another Jenny Fields hanger-on and Garp intimate is transsexual Roberta Muldoon, formerly Robert Muldoon of the Philadelphia Eagles. Ultimately, in the course of a gubernatorial campaign in New Hampshire Jenny Fields is assassinated by a

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crazed opponent of feminism and gun control. The implication, however, is that Governor Thomson and Manchester *Union Leader* Publisher Loeb are somehow responsible for her death. Meanwhile T.S. Garp has had a romance with a dying prostitute in Vienna and lost his five-year-old son in a freak accident—his car striking the one in which his wife is engaged in an unnatural sex act with her ex-lover, castrating him. Later Garp publishes a sensational best-seller of his own and is assassinated by a deranged Ellen Jamesian. Melodrama like this might seem improbable, but to readers of the bestselling fiction genre it will not be unfamiliar.

Between sensational episodes Irving always returns to the novel's central theme: himself. Perhaps all writing involves narcissism; traditionally novelists have tried to camouflage it or make it seem pardonable; now some seem to want to make it as obtrusive as possible. No more false reticence. In Erica Jong's novels narcissism is explored at three levels: Erica Jong writing about a character like herself writing about a character still very Erica Jong-like. In *The World According to Garp* Irving writes about a novelist who's writing a book called *The World According to Bensenhaver*. Fortunately, Bensenhaver's not a novelist but a cop—though there's a strong implication that he's "the cop in Irving," another alter ego. Within these not very narrow limits, nearly every possibility for self-contemplation is realized. Previously published fictional works by Irving are ascribed to Garp and inserted entire into the novel. Then the other characters discuss them in terms of style, point-of-view, meaning, theme, realization of objectives, quality. Garp's talent, press clippings, fan mail, philosophies of life and fiction, sales strategy, sense of humor and place in literary history are all covered. It resembles a one-man symposium in *The Writer* magazine. Perhaps some of the