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## The world according to Garp door John Irving

*anoniem*

**Title**

The World According to Garp

**Author**

John Irving

**Publisher**

Corgi Books, 1989

**First publication**

Dutton, 1978

**Number of pages**

569

**Principal character**

Garp: In the story we see Garp growing up, becoming a wrestling fanatic and a writer.

**Minor characters**

**Win**

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Jenny Fields: Garp's mother. She is nurse at the Steering School. She has written a book called 'A Sexual Suspect', which becomes an enormous success. Although she doesn't want to be, Jenny becomes a model for feminism. In her parental house she runs reception centre for women.

Helen Garp-Holm: Garp's wife. Together they have ups and downs in their lives.

Duncan, Walt and Jenny: Garp's children. Walt was killed in a car accident. In the same car accident Duncan "loses" one eye. Jenny is born after the car accident.

Robert(a) Muldoon: An ex-football player. She used to be a man, but she had a sex-change-operation. She is a close friend of Jenny Fields and Garp. She is Jenny's right hand and 'bodyguard'.

Ernie Holm: Helen's father, Garp's wrestling coach. He dies of a heart attack.

Michael Milton: A student of Helen. He has an affair with Helen.

The Fletchers: Friends of Garp and Helen who have marital problems.

### **Title and Theme**

Garp's world is a world of extremes. Happiness often lies too close to sorrow, new life is too closely connected with death, joy is followed by disaster too quickly, so much that one wonders how anyone can remain optimistic in such circumstances. It is a world for people for whom family life is very important, but who also constantly worry about the dangers that threaten the safety of the family. Extreme feminism is one of its most dangerous threats.

### **Setting**

The story is set at the Steering School and at Dog's Head Harbour, the house of Jenny Fields, both in New Hampshire. Some important events take place in Vienna and New York. The story actually begins in 1942, when Jenny Fields is 22. Garp is born in 1943 and dies in 1976.

### **Summary**

Garp's mother, Jenny Fields, hates men chasing girls. In 1942, when a soldier reaches under her skirt, she wounds him with a scalpel. She is a nurse in a hospital where many war casualties are treated. Here she nurses Technical Sergeant T.S. Garp, who has lost nearly all his mental faculties and who is slowly dying. Jenny

uses him to make herself pregnant. Her son she calls T.S. Garp. Jenny accepts a job as school nurse at Steering School and there Garp grows up. Jenny becomes an inveterate reader. Garp's ear is partly bitten off by Bonkers, the dog belonging to the Percy family. Stewart Percy is generally disliked. He refuses to have Bonkers put down and this is the beginning of a long feud between Garp and the Percy family. When, at the age of fifteen, Garp has to choose a sport, Jenny happens to be at the gymnasium, where she watches the wrestlers. Their coach is Ernie Holm, who has recently come east in order to give his daughter Helen a better education. He never realised that girls were not allowed at Steering.

The only thing Helen Holm knows about her mother is that she is a nurse, and when she sees Jenny Fields she at once embraces her and calls her mother. Jenny registers Garp for wrestling and Garp often meets Helen in the wrestling room. When Helen tells Garp that she will only marry a writer, he decides at that moment to become one.

During his graduation year Garp sends Helen his first story, which she does not like. That same year Cushie Percy tries to seduce Garp, but he appears to know nothing about sex. Jenny Fields decides to take Garp to Vienna after his graduation, but before leaving he tries to finish with Cushie where he had to stop before. Taking her to the infirmary during the night, he meets Bonkers, gets into a fight and bites off part of the dog's ear. In Vienna, Jenny and Garp move from one guesthouse to another before settling down in a rented apartment. Garp has to be his mother's guide, because she speaks no German. She wants to write a book, but does not know how to start a story. Garp only writes to Helen. Jenny and Garp become interested in Franz Grillparzer, an unimportant Austrian writer, and they discover his name everywhere. Garp decides to use the name in the title of his first major story, a story about a man who is employed to inspect hotels and restaurants, but who uses his whole family to carry out this task. When Jenny and Garp meet some whores, Jenny wants to talk to one of them about lust. Afterwards Garp regularly meets this woman, Charlotte, who is much older than he is. Jenny's writing goes faster since she has decided on the title 'A Sexual Suspect'. Garp in the meantime meets some American tourists and finds out afterwards that he has contracted a venereal disease. Also the whore Charlotte is suffering from such a disease and Garp visits her in a very expensive clinic where she dies shortly after. After her death he goes back to work on 'The Pension Grillparzer'. When Jenny finishes her book she sends it to Helen for her opinion. After fifteen months Garp and Jenny return to America. After reading Garp's story, Helen marries him. They have already arranged that Garp will take charge of the housework after the birth of their first child, who is a boy called Duncan. Jenny's book 'A Sexual Suspect' is an enormous success. When her father dies she takes care of her mother and the house becomes a centre for women in trouble, who see in Jenny a last resort. One of her companions belongs to the Ellen James

movement. Ellen James is a 10-year-old girl who has been raped and had her tongue cut out. As a protest against what happened to Ellen James, these women also have their tongues cut out.

Garp's first novel, *Procrastination*, about Vienna in the years 1938-1945, is published and receives favourable reviews. Garp and Helen have a second son, Walt. Garp writes a second novel, called *Second Wind of the Cuckold*, of which the success is slightly smaller than that of his first novel, and Helen takes on a second job as a professor of English.

Their friends, the Fletchers, have marital problems and the result of attempts to help them are that for a time Garp is involved with Alice and Helen with Harrison Fletcher.

Jenny Fields introduces her latest companion, Roberta Muldoon, formerly Robert Muldoon, a famous football player, and now Jenny's bodyguard. Garp often worries about his children and when Duncan wants to spend the night with a friend, whose mother Garp does not like, he tries to persuade him to stay at home. When the woman visits him, she clearly offers herself and feels insulted when Garp turns her down. Duncan has gone to her house all the same and Garp wants him out of it, as he thinks the woman is mad. He decides to go to the house and finds it in a disgusting state. The woman is obviously drunk and asks him to rid her of something upstairs. The something turns out to be a boy in her bedroom and Garp has to use his wrestling techniques to get him out. Once more the woman tries to seduce him, but he decides to carry the sleeping Duncan home.

One day Garp hears that Cushie Percy has died in childbirth and he phones Stewart Percy to offer his condolences. He is not aware that Cushie died several months ago, and his phone call gets through on the day that Bonkers finally dies, and Percy thinks that this is one of Garp's cruel jokes.

At home Garp finds Helen reading a story by one of her students, Michael Milton, and detects a guilty look on her face. Michael is Garp's opposite in every way and Helen has fallen for him. Garp wants her to read one of his stories, thinking that this would attract her towards him again. This story is called *Vigilance* and is about a man who is obsessed with the safety on the road in the suburb where he lives. After reading it Helen indeed loves Garp very much, although she does not like the story.

Garp often panics when one of the children catches a mere cold. He has nightmares during which he finds himself unable to wake up one of his sons. On a cold, snowy day one of Michael Milton's former girl friends informs Garp that Helen is involved with Michael. When Helen gets home, Garp makes believe he is drowning himself, and Helen realises that he knows about her and Michael Milton. She assures him that it is all over now. Garp takes the kids to the pictures and tells Helen to phone Michael Milton and break off with him. In spite of Helen's protests, Michael drives over to her house and in his car they quarrel.

As he is unable to reach Helen on the phone, Garp races home despite very bad visibility. He crashes into Michael's car and in this accident Walt is killed and Garp, Helen, Duncan and Michael Milton badly injured, so Jenny Fields becomes a nurse again. The Garp family moves into her house. With the whole family slowly improving, Garp feels like writing again. He and Helen have come closer together since the accident, although thoughts of the accident still disturb them when they are together. In his new novel Garp puts all his grief. The story 'The World According to Bensenhaver' is in fact the first chapter of his new novel. The subject is rape and the reactions of the victim and of the investigating police officer. John Wolfe, Garp's publisher, dislikes the story so much that he does not want to publish it. When Garp insists, he publishes it in a pornographic magazine. Wolfe still feels this reluctance when the novel is finished, but does publish it after all. The Garp family goes on holiday to Vienna in order to recover fully. Here, late one night they receive a telephone call that Jenny, who has entered politics, has been shot by an anti-feminist man. Her funeral is to be the first feminist funeral in New York. Not even Garp is allowed to be present, so Roberta Muldoon dresses him in women's clothes. But in spite of his disguise Garp is recognised by Bainbridge Percy, Cushie's younger sister, who accuses him of having murdered her sister. Garp can only run away, chased by some women. On the plane to Boston, he meets Ellen James, who writes a note that she has lost both her parents, and that she had been on her way to see Jenny Fields. Now Garp tells her that she can stay with his family.

At Steering, Dean Bodger tells Garp that both Helen's father and Stewart Percy have just died. After the funerals the Garp family decides to stay at Steering, where Helen will teach and Garp will be the wrestling coach. They have another child, a daughter, called Jenny. In her will Jenny Fields has appointed Garp to be the executioner of her last wishes. As a consequence her house is turned into a Foundation supporting women with all sorts of problems. Garp wants to make an exception for the Ellen Jamesians, whom he considers insane. Ellen James even writes an article about these women, because she, too, thinks they are not behaving in a normal way. The reactions that Ellen James receives to this article infuriate Garp, who strongly attacks them in a written reply. The situation becomes explosive when two Ellen Jamesians try to run Garp down with their car, but he escapes and the women are killed when the car hits a wall. In the meantime Garp's son Duncan has become quite a good artist and when Garp's first story is reprinted, his son illustrates it.

One morning Garp talks about writing to his favourite wrestler Don Whitcomb. Writing means to Garp trying to keep everyone alive. That same day a nurse enters the gymnasium where Garp is coaching, walks up to him and shoots him. In his final moments Garp recognises in his attacker an Ellen Jamesian. He is thirty-three when he dies. The nurse turns out to be Bainbridge Percy, who has recently cut out

her tongue.

Helen lives to be quite old and never remarries. Roberta Muldoon looks after Duncan. Ellen James becomes a writer. Jenny Garp outlives all the others and becomes a doctor.

### **Things that struck me during reading**

A thing that struck me, was the fact that Irving describes certain things, that come across the story later in a very detailed way. Like the gear-shift-shaft, which misses its top, so it's quite sharp. Many pages further, in a car accident, Duncan falls with his eye into the shaft, he loses one eye.

### **Most exciting passage**

In the story there isn't just one especially exciting passage, that points out. But if I had to chose one of them I think I'll chose the one in which Garp speeds up the driveway, the engine stalled and the headlights out, and runs into to Michael Milton's Buick:

(page 350) ***'Garp hit the bottom of his driveway at about forty miles per hour he came of the downhill road in third gear and accelerated just as he exited; he glimpsed how the driveway was glazed with frozen slush, and worried momentarily that the Volvo might slip on the short uphill curve. He held the car in gear until he felt what grip he had of the road; it was good enough, and he popped the sharp stick shift into neutral - a second before he killed the engine and flicked out the headlights.***

***The coasted up, into the black rain. It was like that moment when you feel an airplane lift off the runway; the children both cried out in excitement. Garp could feel the children at his elbow, crowding each other for the one favoured position in the gap between the bucket seats.***

***'How can you see now?' Duncan asked.***

***'He doesn't have to see,' Walt said. There wad a high thrill in Walt's voice, which suggested to Garp that Walt wished to reassure himself.***

***'I know this by heart,' Garp assured them.***

***'It's like being underwater!' cried Duncan; he held his breath.***

***'It's like a dream!' said Walt; he reached for his brother's hand.'***

This is the end of chapter 13 (Walt catches cold) and in the begin of chapter 14 (The World According to Marcus Aurelius) Irving tells us how the Garp family will recover after the accident, which is described two paragraphs further.

In this accident Walt gets killed, which is described in the end of the chapter. Walt loses one eye. Garp has a broken jaw and twelve stitches in his tongue, so had to write messages like the Ellen Jamesians, which he hated. Helen needed two

stitches in her tongue; broke to teeth and suffered neck aches for the rest of her life. Michael Milton lost three-quarter is of his penis.  
'It's like a dream!' were the last words Walt said. But it turned out to be a nightmare.

### **My own opinion**

The book had everything a book needs in my opinion. There were lots of funny parts but there were also the emotionally parts. Dramatic parts quickly followed funny parts. It was easy to read, because there were not many difficult words, and if there were difficult words, you could get the meaning of the word out of the text. My favourite character was Walt. He has, as a little child, an other look on the world than the elderly people, he also uses other words for things, like the Under Toad: Garp and Helen warned the children for the undertow of the see, it would drag them into the see and drown them, Walt thought there was a gigantic toad under the water that would drag him under the water and drown him if wasn't paying attention.

The passages between Walt and Duncan were often funny.