comic than tragic, though barely.

If the tangle of Stone's major characters sounds intricate, it is, and then some. This is Stone's longest novel, and it is overlong and overstuffed, the action often oddly slack. Shake the likes of his whole sick crew and bake them in the Middle East oven, send them on criminal missions into the Gaza Strip, expose them to angry Palestinians and millenarian settlers, and *Damascus Gate* ought to be superb. It has Stone's characteristic lizard eye for human tension and pretension. It has the morally pained point of view, than which nothing could be more apposite for Israel and Palestine. But the intricacy comes at a steep price. Stone's largest population of characters is too dense, too much a cobbler of bad apples. The plots are so thickly knitted together with counterplots, the intelligence agents with counterintelligence, it gets hard to keep them alive in the mind. As character after character maneuvers, masks slip away and reversals come too frequently. Perhaps because there is so much plotting—in both senses—at work, the mild acid of Stone's prose is at times weaker than usual. Forward motion stalls. Stone's characteristic grace notes are here, but muted, perhaps in the interest of motion that proves difficult to sustain. For all the quasi-biblical raptures, lightning does not strike. There is nothing nearly as vivid as the desperate snowy zonk-out of *Outerbridge Reach*, comparable in its intensity to the transports of Hans Castorp in the great "Snow" chapter of Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*. Here, Stone's passionate intensities clog up.

Still, Stone's fascination with moral collisions and pirouettes shines through *Damascus Gate*, and the rewards, sentence by sentence, are frequent. His newfound Balzacian relish for multifarious character extends this time even to women. Most gratifying, more strongly than in previous novels, there's a comic aspect that gets as close to redemption as Stone will allow. As demented Jewish settlers and Palestinian villagers "entertain each other," so do Stone's crazies. In *Damascus Gate*, Stone Country has the unexpected virtue of finding in Israel/Palestine the shtick each party sorely needs. All seekers of Revelation and *jihad* will be equally offended—no small tribute. ■

Yupward Mobility

LINDSY VAN GELDER

A WIDOW FOR ONE YEAR. By John Irving. Random House. 537 pp. $27.95.

John Irving is arguably the American Balzac, or perhaps our Dickens—a rip-roaring storyteller whose intricate plot machinery is propelled by good old-fashioned greed, foolishness and passion. His characters are sometimes as much a collection of tics as believable people, but they're nothing if not memorable: a cavalcade of lovable misfits, fruitcake feminists, transvestite hookers, wrestlers, dwarfs, tamers of bears and losers of body parts. More than most big-tent writers, however, Irving wants us to care about the smallest aches of the human heart. His books are full of people with obsessions, and even the ridiculous ones have a kind of integrity. *A Widow for One Year* won't disappoint Irvingites who count on this mix. But Irving has also given us a pair of (possibly masturbating) Escher hands: a book about the obsessional, colorful characters whose pain and yearnings turn into books about same.

At the onset of the novel, Ted and Marion Cole's marriage is running on empty. The deaths of their sons in a grisly accident have devastated the beautiful Marion. The Coles have had sex only once since the accident, a "well-intentioned but passionless act" to conceive a daughter, Ruth, as a replacement for the boys. Marion wasn't counting on a daughter. In any case, she can't bring herself to love Ruth and possibly lose her, too. The walls of the Coles' Hamptons house are a photographic shrine to Timothy and Thomas. Ruth knows the story of each picture the way other 4-year-olds know Dr. Seuss: "This is the one with Thomas in the tall hat...Timothy is trying to reach Thomas's hat, but he can't reach it because Thomas is standing on a ball." Sometimes the little girl can be soothed only by making the rounds of the photo gallery, like Stations of the Cross.

The first third of the novel takes place during the summer of 1958. Ted (a predatory womanizer even before the accident) wants a divorce. But he also wants custody of Ruth—one of his few redeeming traits is that he gives her the affection her mother can't—but the double standard of the fifties dictates that mothers always get custody unless they commit adultery. Ted calculates that his ice-queen wife might be sexually vulnerable to any young man who resembles the dead boys, so he hires 16-year-old Eddie O'Hare as his summer assistant.

Eddie and Marion's affair is a wonderful evocation of teenage horniness, solo sex and the hangdog purity of first love. But there's an undertow of creepiness, especially where Ruth is concerned. In the first scene of the novel, she is awakened by the sounds of Eddie and Marion making love.

> When Ruth Cole entered her parents' bedroom, she saw the naked young man who had mounted her mother from behind; he was holding her mother's breasts in his hands and humping her on all fours, like a dog, but it was neither the violence nor the repugnance of the sexual act that made Ruth scream.... It was the young man himself who made Ruth scream, because she was certain he was one of her dead brothers; he looked so much like Thomas...that Ruth Cole believed she had seen a ghost.

Ultimately Eddie helps Marion escape without him (but with the photographs) to start a new life. The summer remains the high point of Eddie's life. He will forever afterward be hung up on Marion in particular and older women in general. "I try to see the whole woman," he explains. "I try to see her whole life in her. There's something so moving about someone's whole life." A widow is not expected to mourn for more than one year, but a truly grand grief—like Marion's for her sons and Eddie's for Marion—consumes a lifetime. Eddie and Marion carry the torch to the point that they're burned by it. As for Ruth, her secondhand childhood at least proves to have a silver lining. "That Thomas and Timothy were killed before she was born was another part of the reason Ruth Cole became a writer; from her earliest memory, she was forced to imagine them." Not surprisingly, she also grows up to be a control freak.

Like Eddie, John Irving was born in Exeter, New Hampshire, in 1942—a fact that would ordinarily go unremarked in a review of a work of fiction. But *A Widow for One Year* is at least as much about the relation-

Lindsy Van Gelder, who writes for Allure, *is co-author of* The Girls Next Door: Into the Heart of Lesbian America *(Simon & Schuster).*

ship of writers' lives and their material as it is about dysfunctional families or May–December romances. Almost everyone in the novel is a writer, or at least a voracious reader. Eddie grows up to be a marginal novelist, telling and retelling the story of the summer of 1958. Marion writes equally marginal pseudonymous mysteries starring a detective haunted by the photographs of two missing brothers. A failed novelist, Ted writes scary, disturbing, spectacularly successful children's books featuring Timothy, Thomas and Ruth. The adult Ruth's best friend, Hannah Grant, is a shallow bimbo who profiles movie stars and sports heroes for popular magazines. (On a book tour, Ruth once devastates the literary wannabes in her audience by lecturing them that "if you can't make something up, you're no better than a journalist.")

Ruth alone is "that rare combination of a well-respected literary novelist *and* an internationally best-selling author." She is so averse to analyzing the impact of personal experience on art that she can't get through a biography of Graham Greene. Hannah infuriates her by her insistence that there's a "Hannah character" and a "Ruth character" in all of Ruth's novels. In fact, Ruth writes one novel about a writer who "despised writing about real people; she found it a failure of the imagination—for any novelist worthy of the name ought to be able to invent a more interesting character than any real person."

As Ruth hits middle age, her pretenses start to unravel. The second third of the book takes place in 1990 and centers on an author's tour of the Netherlands. (The third section, set in 1995, is a Dickensian tying up of loose ends from the first two sections.) Just prior to the Dutch trip, Ruth has seen Eddie for the first time since the fateful summer and learned about Ted's role as the engineer of the affair. The same night, Ted and Hannah have a fling, in the same bedroom where Ruth once walked in on Marion and Eddie. Ruth feels "as if she'd been locked in a closet." The betrayal sets her on a kind of sexual binge and purge. When she arrives in Amsterdam, she is drawn, like so many tourists, to the red-light district. But Ruth has become preoccupied with themes of sexual humiliation and can't stay away. While literally locked in a whorehouse closet, she witnesses something infinitely more horrifying than her mother in bed with a ghost.

One of the many bits of fallout from the Amsterdam episode is that it's destined to seep into Ruth's next novel—a humbling prospect for someone whose "credo

amounted to a war against the *roman à clef*." Irving's title refers to a loony stalker who puts a curse on Ruth for presuming to write about widowhood without any personal experience. Nor is the wacko widow alone.

> When she wrote about abortion, not having had an abortion, she got angry letters from people who *had* had abortions; when she wrote about childbirth, not having had a child—or when she wrote about divorce, not having been divorced (*or* married)...well, there were always *those* letters.... Why was it that women were absolutely the *worst* readers when it came to something that touched upon their personal lives? Ruth thought. What made a woman presume *her* rape (her miscarriage, her marriage, her divorce, her loss of a child or a husband) was the *only* universal experience that there was? Or was it merely the case that most of Ruth's readers were women—and that women who wrote to novelists, and told them their personal disaster stories, were the most fucked-up women of all?

Here it's Irving's readers who might want to step back and say "hmmmm." Certainly some women think *John Irving* is overreaching when he tries to convey female experience—several of them wrote *me* outraged letters many years ago when I favorably reviewed *The World According to Garp* in *Ms.* Irving is fascinated with gender, and as an individual writer—not even an individual male writer—he may well push the buzzers of certain doctrinaire feminists. But it seems a little cheesy for Irving to graft their complaints onto a female writer like Ruth. One also wonders what Irving is really saying here. Is Ruth's contempt for autobiographical novels nothing more than a cover for a lousy childhood, or is it more complicated than that? Either way, if Hannah and the boorish readers are right at some level about the limits of invention, why are they so fucked up?

Which is not to say that Irving's take on the authorial state is all peevish. Irving manages to make the relationship between reader and writer as dynamic as sex: The writer is the top, holding all the cards, but the reader—the bottom—gets to have all the fun.

> When, if only for a moment, the novelist steps out of the creator's role, what roles are there for the novelist to step into? There are only creators of stories and characters in stories; there are no other roles. Ruth had never felt such anticipation before. She felt she had absolutely no will to take control of what happened next; in fact, she was exhilarated *not* to be in charge.

Ruth learns that she can be the passenger in her own fiction, not just the driver. What she also learns is not to be like Ted and Hannah, both emotional drifters who don't care about much of anything beyond their next conquest. In Ruth, Irving captures the whole yuppie *Zeitgeist*—the search for commitment *and* adventure, meaning *and* success. To be marked by love and loss and transform the pain into compelling, best-selling novels...could Ruth Cole (or John Irving) ask for more? ■

Mistaken *Identity*

MAUREEN CORRIGAN

IDENTITY. By Milan Kundera.
Translated from the French by Linda Asher. HarperFlamingo. 168 pp. $23.

In an early chapter of *Kafka Was the Rage*, Anatole Broyard's cagey memoir of hipster life in Greenwich Village, Broyard recalls the heady joys of taking courses at the New School in the late forties. Most of the classes were taught by professors who had fled Hitler's Germany, and these displaced *Doktors* were committed to alerting their American students to the cracks in their complacent worldview. Broyard observes, however, that sometimes a native ponderousness muffled the professors' critical perceptions:

> I...studied Gestalt psychology with Rudolf Arnheim, but here I confess I was disappointed. It seemed to me that Germans were sometimes stunned into a kind of stupor by an ordinary insight, which they would then try to elevate into a philosophy or a system....
>
> The Gestalt psychologists had discovered that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts—something everybody already knew—and Arnheim spent most of the semester demonstrating this.

As an indictment of the stereotypical Germanic tendency to fasten an intellectual deathgrip on the obvious, Broyard's description is adroit. Never, ever, when I first read that passage, could I have foreseen that it would also serve as a damningly accurate diagnosis of the flaws in the latest novel by that most buoyantly insightful of writers, Milan Kundera.

In *Identity*, Kundera dully and doggedly elaborates on the idea that a person's sense of self is shaped by life circumstances and by other people's perceptions. That's it, the big epiphany in this little novel. What's even more disturbing than the lack of thought-provoking content is that Kundera's trademark mischievous and epigrammatic style has been largely supplanted by faux profundities that sound like snatches of dialogue from *Rochelle, Rochelle*—*Seinfeld*'s send-up of pretentious foreign movies. "No one can do a thing about feelings, they exist and there's no way to censor them," intones our ostentatiously omniscient narrator. "No love can survive muteness," opines one of the glum main characters. "I hate the rain because I see me dead in it," utters a... oops, sorry, that's a line from one of our own homegrown philosopher *manqués*. That slip tells you just how weak *Identity* is, that one of Hemingway's most overblown pronouncements blends smoothly into the gaseous atmosphere of this novel.

Things begin badly. A Frenchwoman of a certain age named Chantal checks into a hotel in a seaside village in Normandy where she plans to spend a night alone before her younger live-in lover, Jean-Marc, joins her for the weekend. Shortly after arriving, Chantal enters the deserted hotel dining room. Two waitresses ignore her: They're engrossed in a discussion of a "true crime" television program called *Lost to Sight*, which profiles people who've vanished. After a restless night, Chantal takes a stroll along the windy beach, where she ruefully observes emasculated men who've been "transformed into baby-trees"—so weighted down are they by the children they're pushing in strollers and carrying in packs on their backs and bellies. Chantal is self-conscious about her own childlessness amid this relentlessly domestic crowd (we later learn that she was once married and had a 5-year-old who died). Surrounded by the young fathers, Chantal also becomes painfully aware of her age and thinks to herself that "I live in a world where men will never turn to look at me again." Hoping to

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