

of instructors and students as well as providing insight into those issues that should be explored in future research.

For specialists in fields such as reading, linguistics, psychology, special education, and communication disorders, the questions posed in this book are not new; however, the comprehensive reviews of research provide new frameworks for understanding complex concepts related to the visual processing of able readers and of those who struggle with print disabilities. Latest research efforts are included in some chapters while others summarize the historical progress of the field. Even the works of the most venerable researchers are open to investigation, and no expert is so distinguished as to escape being scrutinized. The editors of *Visual Processes* are not striving to be politically correct in approaching the research and theory related to the field; instead, they have chosen to include authors who confidently approach a controversial subject. This book makes a significant contribution to the literature by reporting the extensive research of psychologists, educators and optometrists during the past twenty-five years.

—Jennifer Wyatt Sweeney
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

Understanding John Irving—Edward C. Reilly; U of South Carolina P; 1991; 157 pp.; ISBN 0-87249-770-4 (hard cover), 087249-880-8 (paperback).

As an enthusiastic reader of John Irving's novels, I approached Edward C. Reilly's commentary *Understanding John Irving* not only with eagerness but also with a certain degree of suspicion. I determined that my unpredicted reserve was, indeed, a reaction to two of the most basic aspects of the book, its length and its title. Aware of Irving's commitment to the writing of long novels—an assertion attributed to the influence of nineteenth-century British novelists—I was skeptical that Reilly, in a mere 157 pages, could adequately discuss all seven of Irving's novels. Underlying my skepticism was my increasing discomfort with the title of the study, a title that seemed to suggest that, perhaps, I was one of many readers who had already "misunderstood" Irving. My defenses went up.

But my suspicions proved unfounded. The brevity of Reilly's commentary and the conspicuously simple title are justified in the Editor's Preface as Matthew J. Bruccoli names *Understanding John Irving* as part of the introductory series titled *Understanding Contemporary American Literature*. The books included in this series are designed to encourage the reading of contemporary literature, to acknowledge the changes occurring

in literary convention, and to serve as "guides or companions for students as well as good nonacademic readers" (vi).

Reilly's goal, then, is not to analyze Irving's writing in terms of popular critical theory, or to argue the merit of Irving's literary and commercial successes; he offers, instead, an accessible introduction to the action-filled (sometimes violent) plots, controversial themes, and unusual characters for which the author has become recognized. Reilly devotes one chapter to each of Irving's seven novels. While he presents each chapter as an independent essay, helpful to the reading of that particular work, Reilly frequently draws attention to the stylistic developments and thematic transitions occurring from novel to novel. These observations, supported with comments made by Irving himself, emerge as Reilly's most valuable contribution.

Reilly determines that *The Cider House Rules* (1985) marks an important shift in his use of World War II as a metaphor for the "overwhelming forces" intruding upon the lives of his characters. In the first five novels, Irving achieves this metaphor by using war-torn Vienna as a secondary setting, one in which his characters begin to confront a recurring question: What is the secret to "living purposefully" in a violent world (65)? No one in *The Cider House Rules* or *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (1989) travels to Vienna, yet war and its aftermath remain central to the maturation experiences of each character, and the goal to find purpose still persists. Reilly considers this thematic transition, implemented through the use of setting, as evidence of Irving's own maturation as a writer (119).

Despite his obvious regard for Irving's writing, Reilly maintains his commitment to objective instruction as he introduces his readers to opposing views. He relates, for example, that while *The World According to Garp* (1976) spawned critical accolades from the likes of Larry McCaffery who immediately deemed Irving a "natural-born story teller," the novel also received jeers from critics who would eventually be labeled "Garp-haters" (78). The extensive bibliography of critical references and the list of Irving's publications not discussed in the book—poetry, short stories, articles, reviews—encourage readers to search and judge for themselves.

In his introduction, Reilly lists what he concludes are Irving's codes for living purposefully: "accepting responsibility; appreciating life's beauties and gifts; refusing to be intimidated by life's nebulous forces; and especially loving friends and family" (7). Such a summary hardly scratches the surface of the complex values confronted in Irving's novels, yet Reilly lays the groundwork for later discussion. Similarly, *Understanding John Irving* prepares new Irving enthusiasts for further critical study.

—Stephanie Speights Wright
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas