Queen Esther

by John Irving



About the Book

After 40 years, John Irving returns to the world of his bestselling classic novel and Academy Award?winning film, THE CIDER HOUSE RULES, revisiting the orphanage in St. Cloud?s, Maine, where Dr. Wilbur Larch takes in Esther --- a Viennese-born Jew whose life is shaped by antisemitism.

Esther Nacht is born in Vienna in 1905. Her father dies on board the ship to Portland, Maine. Her mother is murdered by antisemites in Portland. Dr. Larch knows it won?t be easy to find a Jewish family to adopt Esther. In fact, he won?t find *any* family who?ll adopt her.

When Esther is 14, soon to be a ward of the state, Dr. Larch meets the Winslows, a philanthropic New England family with a history of providing foster care for unadopted orphans. The Winslows aren?t Jewish, but they despise antisemitism. Esther?s gratitude for the Winslows is unending. Even as she retraces her roots back to Vienna, she never stops loving and protecting the Winslows. In the final chapter, set in Jerusalem in 1981, Esther Nacht is 76.

John Irving?s 16th novel is a testament to his enduring ability to weave complex characters and intricate narratives that challenge and captivate. QUEEN ESTHER is not just a story of survival but a profound exploration of identity, belonging and the enduring impact of history on our personal lives showcasing why Irving remains one of the world?s most beloved, provocative and entertaining authors --- a storyteller of our time and for all time.

Discussion Guide

1. ?Not enough was known about where those orphans *came from*. With orphans, too much is missing; there?s always something you don?t know? (page 7). Discuss the importance of familial belonging in QUEEN ESTHER. What does it mean to ?come from? somewhere? How does the novel challenge or uphold your understanding of having a ?home??

2. From the Book of Esther, after which Esther Nacht is named, to Charles Dickens? GREAT EXPECTATIONS, to Jimmy Winslow?s *The Dickens Man*, stories play a major role in QUEEN ESTHER. Discuss the role of stories and storytelling in the novel. What does it mean to ?have a story?? How is the importance of storytelling to Jimmy similar to or different from its importance to Esther? Why do you think Jimmy is attracted to being a storyteller?

3. The threat of Hard Rain?s ?alleged overreaction to thunderstorms? (page 227) hangs over Jimmy?s stay in Vienna. What role does Hard Rain play in QUEEN ESTHER, and how might we interpret her fear of thunderstorms? Is it significant that, when a thunderstorm does come, Hard Rain *doesn?t* ?overreact? in the way Jimmy, Claude and Jolanda have been anticipating?

4. ?Hard Rain is a woman? is a phrase repeated several times in QUEEN ESTHER. It?s one of the first things Jolanda teaches Siegfried to say in English, and it?s what Jimmy writes in Siegfried?s copy of *Roommates in Vienna* when they meet in Jerusalem. What is the significance of this refrain in the novel?

5. Although Jimmy is a heterosexual man, he is surrounded by sexual minorities: Honor is asexual, Jolanda is a lesbian, and Mieke is a lesbian who wants ?to *try it* with a guy? (page 197). Discuss the portrayal of sex and sexuality in QUEEN ESTHER. What role does sex play in Jimmy?s life? In what way does the novel either challenge or uphold traditional notions of sex and sexuality?

6. QUEEN ESTHER starts with a history of the Winslow family in America: ?Beginning in Puritan times, more Winslows kept coming? (page 1). Why do you think the novel begins this way? What role does family history play in QUEEN ESTHER? How, if at all, does personal history intersect with national history?

7. In Chapter 8, we learn that Esther wants the following quote from JANE EYRE tattooed on her chest: ?I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself? (page 71). Why do you think Esther is so drawn to this quote? What do you think Jimmy would make of it? If Jimmy were to get a tattoo, what words or image do you think he might choose?

8. ?In GREAT EXPECTATIONS,? says Thomas Winslow to Jimmy, ?...you will love the characters you?re supposed to love, and you?ll hate the ones you?re supposed to hate? (page 138). How does Tommy?s reading of GREAT EXPECTATIONS play out in QUEEN ESTHER? Do you think we?re ?supposed to love? some people and ?supposed to hate? others? How does the novel reaffirm or complicate this conception of love and hate? Support your ideas with reference to the text.

9. Esther is left at the orphanage at St. Cloud?s by two female ?anti-Semites? (page 65); Jimmy is raised with two mothers and no father; Vienna, Jimmy?s daughter, is raised with a father and two mothers; and Siegfried is adopted by Annelies when the anti-Semitic Irmgard dies. These are just a few examples of how motherhood is portrayed and reconfigured in QUEEN ESTHER. Discuss the novel?s portrayal of mothers and motherhood. What do you think of the idea that ?giving birth to a child and being a mother [are] two separate choices? (page 154)? Support your ideas with reference to the text.

10. ??There *is* a telescope that sees into the future, Jimmy --- it?s called the passage of time. Just wait and see,? [Irmgard] said, closing the door? (page 329). Discuss the significance of this quote, and of the passage of time more broadly, in QUEEN ESTHER. What does it mean to see into the future by means of the passage of time? From the very

first Winslow on board the *Mayflower* in 1620, to Jimmy Winslow in Jerusalem in 1981, the novel covers a long span of time. How is the passage of time portrayed in the novel?

Author Bio

John Irving was born in Exeter, New Hampshire, in 1942. His first novel, SETTING FREE THE BEARS, was published in 1968, when he was 26. He competed as a wrestler for 20 years and coached wrestling until he was 47. He is a member of the National Wrestling Hall of Fame in Stillwater, Oklahoma. In 1980, Mr. Irving won a National Book Award for his novel THE WORLD ACCORDING TO GARP. In 2000, he won the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay for *The Cider House Rules*. In 2013, he won a Lambda Literary Award for his novel IN ONE PERSON. An international writer, his novels have been translated into almost 40 languages. His all-time bestselling novel, in every language, is A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY. A dual citizen of the United States and Canada, John Irving lives in Toronto.

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