

THE JOHN ADAMS INSTITUTE

AMERICAN CULTURE IN THE NETHERLANDS

Introduction of John Irving by Pieter van den Blink

January 23, 2016

Each day and night, every one of us walks an Avenue of Mysteries.

In our dreams and memories, we see apparitions of things that are not there. How vivid and forceful these turns of our minds may be, their origins are unknown to us, just as their purpose: why does something that happened long ago suddenly pop up before my mind's eye? Why does another memory refuse to come back, no matter how hard I try? And why did I dream..... that I was on stage, announcing John Irving, the great writer?

It is even possible to have suffered from nightmares and yet to miss them when they don't reoccur, as is the case with Juan Diego, the main character in Irving's new novel. How that works, you will hear tonight.

When we grow older, the facts of our own lives, the real events that, for better or for worse, shaped our 'walk of life' as it is called, form an avenue as well, the walk of our life that we can look back upon, saying to ourselves: what a strange road it was that brought me here. Juan Diego certainly has reasons to look back down his road in amazement. He was a scavenger in his youth, living on the edge of a garbage dump. But now he's in his fifties, and between the dump-days and the present lays a career as a writer, among other things. But somewhere along the way he lost his identity, as we come to understand right from the first paragraph of the book:

Occasionally, Juan Diego would make a point of saying, "I'm a Mexican – I was born in Mexico, I grew up there." More recently, he was in the habit of saying "I'm an American – I've lived in

the United States for forty years.” Or, in an effort to defuse the nationality issue, Juan Diego liked to say, “I’m a midwesterner – in fact I’m an Iowan.”
He never said he was a Mexican-American.

Juan-Diego is limping through life, so to speak, and not only because the boss of the garbage-dump accidentally ran his truck over Juan Diego’s foot. The search for a proper identity is therefore another theme of the book, familiar to Irving’s readers and hopefully a topic of tonight’s discussion.

A third appearance of the Mysteries - after those that the mind presents to us and those of our life in retrospect - is the experience of religious faith. And you can trust John Irving not to miss that one when he gives us a novel called *Avenue of Mysteries*. This time it’s war. Irving develops his vision on religion, more specifically the Catholic Church, on the layout of a souvenir shop in Oaxaca, Mexico, the town where Juan Diego spent his youth. Statues of the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Solitude and Our Lady of Guadalupe are available in any size. Hence the Virgin War, as it’s called in the book, because why should the Virgin Mary have the largest space and why should the Lady of Guadalupe always come third? Behind this battle of the statues lays a larger question of Spanish-imposed Catholicism over indigenous belief in Mexico.

Maybe another Avenue of Mysteries that we can look upon tonight is the huge oeuvre of John Irving. See each novel as a house, a building, and look at the fourteen of them as a beautiful street, an Avenue. Down towards the far end of that Avenue stand *The World According to Garp* and *A Prayer for Owen Meany* like skyscrapers of art, a never-fading light falls out of the windows. These are the landmarks on John Irving’s Avenue, together with other giants such as *The Cider House Rules*, *A Son of the Circus*, or, halfway up the avenue *Until I Find You*. There are more than a few ways in which that part of the Avenue and this new building on the block are connected. We will touch upon recurrent and vintage Irving themes such as the circus and the unidentified father. Some of the characters too, seem quite familiar. The clairvoyant Lupe for example, Juan Diego’s younger sister, shares her gift

with Owen Meany. The unforgettable transsexual football player Roberta Muldoon must have some family-ties to the prostitute Flor in *Avenue of Mysteries*.

Plenty of entrances therefore onto this beautiful *Avenue of Mysteries*. Welcome John Irving.