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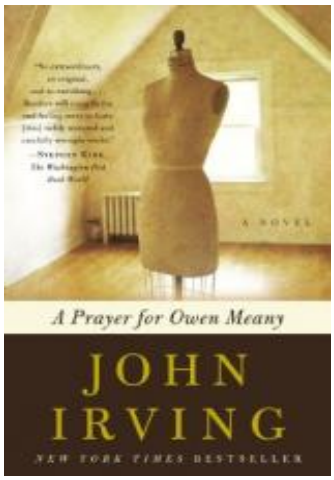
A Prayer for Owen Meany

by John Irving



About the Book

Owen Meany, the only child of a New Hampshire granite quarrier, believes he is God?s instrument. He is.

This is John Irving?s most comic novel; yet Owen Meany is Mr. Irving?s most heartbreaking character.

Discussion Guide

1. Though he's portrayed as an instrument of God, Owen Meany causes the death of John's mother. What other deaths was Owen indirectly involved with? Do you find Owen's close relationship with death to support or undermine his miraculous purpose?

2. Owen speaks and writes in capital letters, emphasizing the potency of his strange voice. At the academy, he is even referred to as the Voice. Why is Owen's voice so important? What other occasions can you think of in which Owen's voice played an especially mean-ingful role?

3. Reverend Merrill always speaks of faith in tandem with doubt. Do you believe that one can exist without the other or that one strengthens the other? Was your opinion about Merrill's views on faith and doubt affected by the revelation of his relationship to John Wheelwright?

4. Merrill experiences a bogus miracle and resurgence of faith when John stages his mother's dressmaker dummy outside the church. Later, John's involvement in Owen's rescue of the Vietnamese chil-dren spurs John's own faith: "I am a Christian because of Owen Meany," he says. Do you think the genuineness of Owen's miracle makes the birth of John's faith more valid than the faith engendered by Merrill's bogus miracle?

5. The Meanys claim that, like Jesus, Owen was the product of a vir-gin birth. Owen dislikes the Catholic Church for

turning away his parents, but Owen himself makes the Meanys leave the Christmas Pageant. Name other instances when Owen's feelings toward his family seem conflicted. Do you think Owen ever considers himself Christlike?

6. An observer necessary to the Christmas Pageant but seldom an ac-tive participant, John plays Joseph to Owen's baby Jesus. John refers to himself on other occasions as "just a Joseph." Do you see John's role as Joseph-like throughout the story? Are there other biblical characters with whom you identify John?

7. Did Irving's references to the armless Indian and the pawless armadillo prepare you for Owen's sacrifice? What other clues did Irving give about Owen's final heroic scene?

8. Throughout the novel, John gives hints to the forthcoming action, adding, "As you shall see." Did you find this to be an effective way to keep you reading and engaged in the story?

9. Owen Meany taught John that "Any good book is always in motion--from the general to the specific, from the particular to the whole and back again." Do you think Irving followed his own recipe for a good book? Supply examples in support of your position.

10. Given John's dislike of Gravesend Academy, which expelled Owen, did you find it interesting that John later taught at an academy in Toronto? In what other ways does John, as an adult, embrace issues or events that he was indifferent or hostile to as an adolescent?

11. John assists Owen in rescuing the children, but John always plays the supporting part in Owen's adventures. Based on the scenes in Toronto in the 1980s, do you think John ever escaped his support-ing role? How do you think John's retained virginity reflects on his sense of self?

12. Did your feelings about the U.S. involvement in Vietnam change after reading Irving's portrayal of the peace movement, the draft dodgers, and Owen's involvement in the army? Were you surprised by Owen's efforts to get to Vietnam?

13. John's reactions to and obsession with the Iran-Contra affair of the 1980s reflect his position as neither a true Canadian nor a true American. Do you think that non-Americans have a clearer vision of the machinations and deceptions within American politics? What did John's focus on American politics tell you about his adult character?

14. Irving frequently foreshadows tragedy; for example, hailstones hit John's mother on the head during her wedding day, providing a glimpse of her later death by a baseball. What other events does Irving foreshadow?

15. Several reviews call A Prayer for Owen Meany "Dickensian," and Irving himself incorporates scenes from Dickens in the story. In what ways does Irving's writing remind you of Dickens's? What other writers would you compare Irving to?

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.

Critical Praise

"Roomy, intelligent, exhilarating, and darkly comic . . . Dickensian in scope . . . Quite stunning and very ambitious."

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