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A Prayer for Owen Meany

By John Irving

Morrow

"I always do the same thing when I'm between novels:" John Irving told his audience at the 1985 PEN readings on Broadway, "I begin my autobiography. . . . It really won't endure, because what happens to my autobiography every time is that I begin to lie. After a month or so I become so bored with my true story that I find some friend or member of the family, and I begin to lie about them a little. Gradually, I begin to lie about them a lot. And then I know I have a novel-in-progress."

Irving read the PEN audience a short passage about meeting the father of a childhood friend, Russell Meany, who was killed in Vietnam while Irving stayed safely home with the easiest kind of draft exemption, 3-A, Married with Child.

This bit of autobiography grew into is the 543-page lie *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, but, as Picasso once observed, "Art is the lie that enables us to realize the truth." Irving's novel rises above its flaws to reveal a great deal of truth about faith and miracles and personal destiny, all arrestingly embodied in the book's diminutive central character whose voice and image reverberate long after the last page is turned.

The narrator, John Wheelwright, who like Irving grows up in a small New England town, becomes an undistinguished student at a prestigious prep school strikingly like Irving's Exeter, and frequently voices political commentary on America which seems to be the author's own, tells us at the start that he is "doomed" to remember Owen Meany, "the smallest person I ever knew," whose "wrecked voice" is fixed permanently in a falsetto scream and always rendered on the page IN CAPITAL LETTERS. Relating his tale from Toronto, where he has lived 20 years since fleeing the draft, Wheelwright has many reasons to remember Owen. In the book's first chapter, set in 1953, Owen, 11 but no larger than a 5 year-old, hits a foul ball in a Little League game, the first time he'd ever hit a ball solidly, that strikes Wheelwright's mother on the temple and kills her.

People, Faulkner said, can cling to that which has robbed them. Wheelwright never expresses anger over the accident and becomes Owen's best friend. "Owen gave me more than he ever took from me--even when you consider that he took my mother."

Who is Owen Meany? More importantly, what is Owen Meany, this anomalous boy who barely lives to manhood and remains both smaller than normal and larger than everyday life? At one point, he seems "like a descending angel--a tiny but fiery god, sent to adjudicate the errors of our ways." After the fatal baseball accident, Owen's parents tell him he was the product of a virgin birth; as Owen's father later relates it to Wheelwright, "He was born unnaturally, like the Christ Child. . . . Me and his mother, we didn't ever do it." If he never takes himself to be quite the Christ figure the novel suggests, Owen does believe he has divine purpose, even in hitting the foul ball: "GOD HAS TAKEN YOUR MOTHER. MY HANDS WERE THE INSTRUMENT. GOD HAS TAKEN MY HANDS. I AM GOD'S INSTRUMENT."

With undisguised symbolism, he is cast as the Christ child in a school Christmas play, although he is human enough to get an erection when a woman kisses him in his swaddling clothes. Later, playing the ghost of the future in a production of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Owen takes on an oracular quality as he sees a tombstone bearing the date of his death. Ever afterward, he has accurate prophetic certainty that: 1) his voice will never change, 2) his hands are God's instrument, 3) he will die on the date he saw on the tombstone, and 4) he will die a hero.

Owen is "unpredictable, but he's always in charge" and becomes a brilliant student, about to be valedictorian when he is expelled from prep school for forging draft cards that enable classmates to drink alcohol. Unlike Wheelwright, who remains a virgin, Owen rises above his physical limitations, is oddly attractive to women and has a serious sexual relationship with Wheelwright's unconventional cousin Hester. He constantly practices the one athletic feat least accessible to the short--the basketball slam-dunk--which he achieves by taking a pass from Wheelwright then jumping into his friend's arms and being tossed up above the basket, a feat they perfect and which proves crucial to Owen's final act of heroism.

Owen, by then a soldier in charge of escorting home the bodies of men killed in Vietnam, saves Wheelwright from the draft by cutting off his willing friend's trigger finger. This act proves of dubious necessity, as Wheelwright soon expatriates himself to Canada where he continues to live as an English teacher in an all-girls Anglican school, a profession Owen prepared him for by teaching him how to read creatively, aptly with a novel by Hardy, in whose work fate plays so pivotal a role and whom Irving himself seems to adopt at times as a model. In the end, knowing when but not precisely how it will happen, Owen invites Wheelwright to Arizona to witness and help in Owen's martyred and powerfully affecting death.

Irving has written an absorbing, entertaining, even an unforgettable book. He has, however, written a flawed book. Creating a blatant Christ figure itself will open him to attack by the toughminded, especially since the mechanics he employs to create it seem heavy-handed, as subtle as a train wreck. More problematic, John Wheelwright can be a drab narrator. While his very ordinariness sets Owen off as still more memorable by contrast, his often vapid eyes allow few characters other than Owen to achieve depth and richness.

The weakest parts of the novel are those set in the present, 20 years after Owen's death. These either relate Wheelwright's current life, which is dull, or comment on American politics, which is worse. Irving's fiction has had a strong sense of history from the beginning, but his early work lacked the moral sermonizing he is guilty of here: "Every American should be forced to live outside the United States for a year or two. Americans should be forced to see how ridiculous they appear to the rest of the world! . . . What do Americans know about morality? They don't want their presidents to have penises [a Gary Hart reference] but they don't mind if their presidents covertly arrange to support the Nicaraguan rebel forces after Congress has restricted such aid. . . . A pity that they [Americans] don't unleash their moral zest on an administration that runs guns to terrorists."

Wheelwright's frequent political commentary, even if we are in sympathy with it, is seldom profound and seems too easy as hindsight, as when it attacks Gen. Maxwell Taylor's 1961 report to President Kennedy that victory in South Vietnam would be possible without America taking over the war or predicts from the viewpoint of the 1960s that America will before much longer suffer an

epidemic sexual disease. Worst of all, the polemical editorializing disrupts the narrative and yanks the focus off the fascinating Owen Meany to recast it on the colorless Wheelwright. Wheelwright's prose (we'll be charitable for the moment and not call it Irving's) becomes annoyingly pontifical on politics, but it is artlessly honest, if flat and sprawling, when it addresses Owen. John Irving is no dazzling stylist, not even a concise one. Rather than modernist compression, his books since *The World According to Garp* are widely cast nets, like the Dickens and Hardy novels he so justly admires.

Like Dickens, Irving has a gift for memorable characters who are quirky, eccentric, even outright freakish. That gift results this time in a book that wonderfully transcends its creakiness to give us an unforgettable central character rendered with Irving's customary generosity of spirit. That this generosity may appear out of tune with our times is really a far harsher condemnation of our times than of Irving. He creates in Owen a boy of unshakable faith which, even if we don't share, we admire; an endearingly spiritual misfit, as he must be to resist contamination by a morally inverted society, who attacks theological tenets as unabashedly as Jesus challenged the Pharisees; a miraculous presence who leaves his imprint on the lives of everyone he touches.

As in Garp's final chapter, "Life After Garp," there is the sense here of life's going on, how it continues after Owen's death. But without Owen life has an emptiness, a sense of something lost too precious to make what's left fulfilling. Fittingly, Wheelwright closes his story with an echo of Saint-Exupery's conclusion to *The Little Prince*, "If a little man appears . . . please comfort me. Send me word that he has come back"; finally understanding the faith that was Owen's greatest gift to him, aware now of the forces that made tiny Owen seem weightless and lifted him out of Wheelwright's hands, the virgin narrator who, like Paul, is destined to forever spread the news of his mentor's life cries out, "O God--please give him back!" A request I suspect a swelling number of readers will share.