

# ***A Prayer for Owen Meany***

by John Irving

Hawthorne doesn't tell us, but Brown believes they were real, and the rest of his life is dictated by his belief: "A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man did he become from the night of that fearful dream." Johnny Wheelright doesn't see the devil, but he does see Owen Meany, who may have been an instrument of God. Like Young Goodman Brown, Johnny becomes sad, distrustful, and desperate, his faith in the existence of a God who would sacrifice Owen Meany souring his ability to live.

Setting out to contemplate "what magnitude of miracle" might inspire religious faith, Irving finds an answer, but it is an answer wrought with thought-provoking complexity.

## **Discussion questions**

1. Irving uses foreshadowing in *A Prayer for Owen Meany* both to anticipate what happens in the novel and to embody Owen's belief in predestination. Identify three instances of foreshadowing in the novel and discuss how they function. Does Irving convince his readers of the existence of predestination or does he leave room for skeptics to see Owen's life as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy?

2. Irving wants readers of *Owen Meany* to think about miracles and what they mean. Johnny says near the end of the book that "Pastor Merrill was quite a *fake*; after all, he had met the miracle of Owen Meany and still hadn't believed him—and now he believed *everything*, not because of Owen Meany but because I had tricked him. I had fooled him with a dressmaker's dummy." But which miracle, the "real" one experienced by Johnny or the "fake" one experienced by Pastor Merrill, changes the most lives and brings the most happiness?

## **Further reading**

Joe Coomer. *Beachcombing for a Shipwrecked God*. Graywolf, 1995.

John Irving. *The Hotel New Hampshire*. Dutton, 1981.

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John L'Heureux. *The Miracle*. Atlantic Monthly, 2002.

W.D. Wetherell. *The Wisest Man in America*. Univ. Press of New England, 1995.

## **StoryLines New England Discussion Guide No. 13**

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Owen Meany***  
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Like many of the characters in his ninth novel, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, John Irving was a regular churchgoer as a boy. "I've always asked myself," Irving said in a 1989 *New York Times* interview, "what would be the magnitude of the miracle that could convince me of religious faith." He attempts to answer that question in a sprawling novel that cuts a deep swathe through American culture and politics from the 1960s through the '80s but that, more fundamentally, reaches back to the Puritan roots of American literature.

John Irving grew up in Exeter, New Hampshire, and attended Phillips Exeter Academy, where his father taught history. His narrator in *Owen Meany*, John Wheelright, shares a similar personal history, though Exeter has been renamed Gravesend in the book. Irving acknowledges these similarities and admits to "sharing some of [Wheelright's] opinions emotionally" but is quick to stipulate that the connection ends there. For Irving's sake, that is probably a good thing because John Wheelright is not a contented man. He finds faith, but the manner in which he finds it leaves him frozen in time and permanently embittered toward God and country. In that paradox, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* finds its center.

In his introduction to the Modern Library edition of *Owen Meany*, Irving says, "I may one day write a better first sentence to a novel than that of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, but I doubt it." Irving likes this sentence because he believes it contains the whole of the novel: "I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice—not because of his voice, or because he was the smallest person I ever knew, or even because he was the instrument of my mother's death, but because he is the reason I believe in God; I am a Christian because of Owen Meany."

The ambiguity implicit in that sentence is what drives the novel: we know immediately that Johnny, the narrator, has come to believe in God because of a boy named Owen Meany, but we also know that, in some sense, Johnny considers himself doomed. We keep reading so that we may understand this apparent contradiction.

We quickly learn that Owen Meany, the very small boy with the very weird voice, was so small that his classmates liked to hold him above their heads and pass him back and forth. His seeming weightlessness is the first sign—many more are to come—that Owen is an instrument of God. As the narrative jumps back and forth between Johnny's life in the present (the 1980s, during the Iran-Contra scandal) and the past (coming-of-age in an unconventional family with an unconventional best friend), Irving takes us through a series of watershed moments, events that convince Owen that his life is in God's hands and that, eventually, bring Johnny to the same conclusion, but with far different ramifications.

The narrative structure of this novel—the building-block series of life-changing incidents, and the linking of past to present through an elaborate series of foreshadowings—allows Irving free reign to create the kind of show-stopping set pieces, played against a broad sociopolitical canvas, that have made him a best-selling novelist in the grand 19th-century tradition. Whether it is Johnny's mother being killed by a foul ball off the bat of Owen Meany (the only time in his hitless Little League career that Owen made solid contact), or Owen, in his role as the Ghost of Christmas Future in the annual village production of *A Christmas Carol*, seeing his own name and the date of his death on Scrooge's gravestone, or, in the end, Owen's much anticipated, Christ-like demise, Irving writes on overdrive, each chapter of the novel building to a crescendo, sometimes comic, sometimes tragic, sometimes inspirational, but always drenched in full-throttle emotion.

Like Dickens and his other 19th-century antecedents, Irving surrounds his eccentric characters and high-octane melodrama with broad comedy, often bordering on farce, and with an underpinning of richly detailed sociopolitical commentary. Both elements are on display in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. The novel offers a blistering critique, most often in the distinctive voice of Owen himself (his words appear in capital letters), of American foreign policy in the Vietnam era. Owen enlists in the Army and meets his death in uniform, but his commitment is not to the war. His commitment is to his understanding (formed largely from a dream) of what he must do to carry out God's will. Johnny's own antiwar sentiments—and his later disgust with Reagan-era policies—are as colored by Owen's fate as by any ideological conviction.

Irving admits to being a social commentator and a moralist, but he insists that, above all, he is a comic novelist. His comedy in *Owen Meany*, especially, is expressed through his social satire and through the unbridled oddness of his characters.

He lampoons our television-driven pop culture both viciously and hysterically, usually through the character of Johnny's grandmother, once a firm opponent of television who is ultimately seduced by the medium's incredible badness to the point that, even in death, her cold hand remains frozen around the remote control. Irving's social commentary in *Owen Meany*, published in 1989, proves remarkably prescient, anticipating such modern phenomena as reality TV and 24-hour Cable and even foreseeing a time when born-again religion would become a significant force in the election of the President of the United States.

If the social commentary, the multiple subplots, and the comic eccentricities of Irving's large cast of characters remind us of Dickens, then the main theme of the novel—the mystery of faith and its effect on human behavior—takes us in an altogether different direction: to the word of the Puritans and to questions of predestination, free will, and the nature of miracles. When Johnny Wheelright, a descendant, not incidentally, of Congregationalist minister John Wheelright, witnesses Owen Meany's death and realizes how everything in his friend's short life—from his peculiar voice to his obsession with slam-dunking a basketball after being launched into the air by his best friend—has both foreshadowed and prepared him for his predetermined fate, John becomes a believer, immediately and irrevocably.

But how does his faith affect his life? Yes, John believes that Owen Meany was an instrument of God, but that belief cripples him. After leaving the United States and moving to Toronto, he settles into a kind of shadow life. He becomes a citizen of Canada and teaches English at a private school, but he remains consumed with what he sees as the moral reprehensibility of American foreign policy, first in Vietnam and later during Iran-Contra. His obsession with U.S. politics serves mainly to mask his bitterness over the death of his friend. He blames God but punishes himself. A virgin in his 40s, on the run from life, he feels passion only for the *New York Times* and its reports of American misdeeds.

Johnny Wheelright's distorted life as a man of faith recalls another of his Puritan literary ancestors: the hero of Nathaniel Hawthorne's story "Young Goodman Brown." A pious, upstanding citizen in Salem, Massachusetts, Brown takes a stroll in the woods one evening and encounters his fellow villagers, including his wife, Faith, engaged in a satanic rite. Was he dreaming or were the horrors he witnessed real?