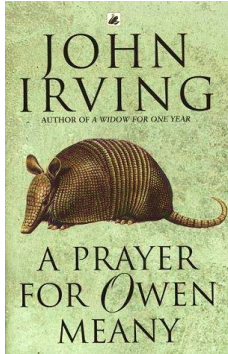


Oliver Wolcott Library
A Prayer for Owen Meany by John Irving
Book Discussion Guide
Prepared by Patricia Moore



About the Book:

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.

In the summer of 1953, two eleven-year-old boys—best friends—are playing in a Little League baseball game in Gravesend, New Hampshire. One of the boys hits a foul ball that kills the other boy's mother. The boy who hits the ball doesn't believe in accidents; Owen Meany believes he is God's instrument. What happens to Owen after that 1953 foul ball is extraordinary.

Source: ReadingGroupGuides.com

About the Author:

John Irving published his first novel at the age of twenty-six. He has received awards from the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Guggenheim Foundation; he has won an O. Henry Award, a National Book Award, and an Oscar.

In 1992, Mr. Irving was inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame in Stillwater, Oklahoma. In January 2001, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Source: ReadingGroupGuides.com

Book Reviews:

"Extraordinary, so original, and so enriching . . . A rare creation in the somehow exhausted world of late 20th century fiction . . . Readers will come to the end feeling sorry to leave [this] richly textured and carefully wrought world."—*Stephen King, The Washington Post Book World*

"Roomy, intelligent, exhilarating, and darkly comic . . . Dickensian in scope . . . Quite stunning and very ambitious."—*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

"A wondrous novel from the author of *The World According to Garp*--occasionally maddening in its massive detail yet ultimately beguiling in its soulful account of a remarkable friendship. The narrator remembers back to when he and Owen Meany were both 11 years old in Gravesend, New Hampshire.

Best pals, they were in Little League together when Owen hit a foul ball that struck the narrator's mother in the left temple and killed her on the spot. End of friendship between the boys? Hardly. Owen, after the accident, believes himself an instrument of God; the narrator, Owen's friend throughout his life, follows Owen to religion. Piling anecdote upon anecdote, Irving documents this everlasting friendship--as Owen, God's instrument, brings divine intervention into the narrator's life. Irving's ability to create idiosyncratic characters and put them through weirdly ridiculous yet realistic paces has never been in finer fettle. Humor partnered with compassion, wisdom with absurdity, leave the reader both mirthful and tearful. *—Brad Hooper, Booklist*

Diminutive Owen Meany, the social outcast with the high, pinched voice, has an enormous influence on his friend Johnny Wheelwright--not least because the only baseball Owen ever hits causes the death of Johnny's mother. But as Johnny claims, "Owen gave me more than he ever took from me. . . . What did he ever say that wasn't right?" Spookily prescient, convinced that he is an instrument of God, Owen intimidates child and adult alike. Why Johnny "is a Christian because of Owen Meany" is the novel's central mystery but not its only one: Who, for instance, was Johnny's father? Untangling these knots, the adult Johnny pauses to consider his religious convictions and distaste of American politics in passages that are neither especially persuasive nor effectively integrated into the book. And though Owen is a compelling presence, his power over others is not entirely convincing. Still, readers will be drawn in by the story of the boys' friendship and by the desire to see some resolution to Johnny's mysteries. *—Barbara Hoffert, Library Journal*

Source: ReadingGroupGuides.com

Discussion Questions:

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 children 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 active 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 supporting 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?

Further Reading:

Drop City by T.C. Boyle

It is 1970, and a down-at-the-heels California commune devoted to peace, free love, and the simple life has decided to relocate to the last frontier—the unforgiving landscape of interior Alaska—in the ultimate expression of going back to the land. Armed with the spirit of adventure and naïve optimism, the inhabitants of “Drop City” arrive in the wilderness of Alaska only to find their utopia already populated by other young homesteaders. When the two communities collide, unexpected friendships

and dangerous enmities are born as everyone struggles with the bare essentials of life: love, nourishment, and a roof over one's head. Rich, allusive, and unsentimental, T.C. Boyle's ninth novel is a tour de force infused with the lyricism and take-no-prisoners storytelling for which he is justly famous.

Beach Music: A Novel by Pat Conroy

Spanning three generations and two continents, from the contemporary ruins of the American South to the ancient ruins of Rome, from the unutterable horrors of the Holocaust to the lingering trauma of Vietnam, Beach Music sings with life's pain and glory. It is another masterpiece in PAT CONROY'S legendary list of beloved novels.

The Art of Fielding: A Novel by Chad Harbach

At Westish College, baseball star Henry Skrimshander seems destined for big league until a routine throw goes disastrously off course. In the aftermath of his error, the fates of five people are upended. Henry's fight against self-doubt threatens to ruin his future. College president Guert Affenlight has fallen unexpectedly and helplessly in love. Owen Dunne becomes caught up in a dangerous affair. Mike Schwartz realizes he has guided Henry's career at the expense of his own. And Pella Affenlight returns to Westish after escaping an ill-fated marriage, determined to start a new life.

Out Stealing Horses: A Novel by Per Petterson

Trond's friend Jon often appeared at his doorstep with an adventure in mind for the two of them. But this morning was different. What began as a joy ride on "borrowed" horses ends with Jon falling into a strange trance of grief. Trond soon learns what befell Jon earlier that day--an incident that marks the beginning of a series of vital losses for both boys.

Bridge of Sighs by Richard Russo

Louis Charles Lynch (also known as Lucy) is sixty years old and has lived in Thomaston, New York, his entire life. He and Sarah, his wife of forty years, are about to embark on a vacation to Italy. Lucy's oldest friend, once a rival for his wife's affection, leads a life in Venice far removed from Thomaston. Perhaps for this reason Lucy is writing the story of his town, his family, and his own life that makes up this rich and mesmerizing novel, interspersed with that of the native son who left so long ago and has never looked back.

The Story of Edgar Sawtelle: A Novel by David Wroblewski

Born mute, speaking only in sign, Edgar Sawtelle leads an idyllic life with his parents on their farm in remote northern Wisconsin. For generations, the Sawtelles have raised and trained a fictional breed of dog whose thoughtful companionship is epitomized by Almondine, Edgar's lifelong friend and ally. But with the unexpected return of Claude, Edgar's paternal uncle, turmoil consumes the Sawtelles' once peaceful home. When Edgar's father dies suddenly, Claude insinuates himself into the life of the farm—and into Edgar's mother's affections.