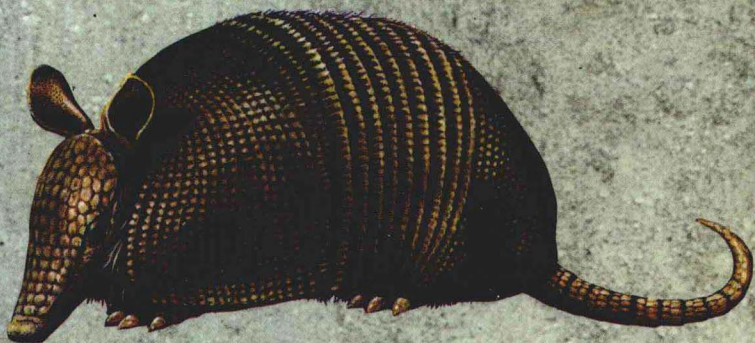




JOHN IRVING

AUTHOR OF *A WIDOW FOR ONE YEAR*



A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

A PRAYER
FOR
OWEN MEANY

John Irving



BLACK SWAN

A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

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John Irving was born in Exeter, New Hampshire, in 1942, and he once admitted that he was a 'grim' child. Although he excelled in English at school and knew by the time he graduated that he wanted to write novels, it was not until he met a young Southern novelist named John Yount, at the University of New Hampshire, that he received encouragement. 'It was so simple,' he remembers. 'Yount was the first person to point out that anything I did except writing was going to be vaguely unsatisfying.'

In 1963, Irving enrolled at the Institute of European Studies in Vienna, and he later worked as a university lecturer. His first novel, *Setting Free the Bears*, about a plot to release all the animals from the Vienna Zoo, was followed by *The Water-Method Man*, a comic tale of a man with a urinary complaint, and *The 158-Pound Marriage*, which exposes the complications of spouse-swapping. Irving achieved international recognition with *The World According to Garp*, which he hoped would 'cause a few smiles among the tough-minded and break a few softer hearts.'

The Hotel New Hampshire is a startlingly original family saga, and *The Cider House Rules* is the story of Doctor Wilbur Larch – saint, obstetrician, founder of an orphanage, ether addict and abortionist – and of his favourite orphan, Homer Wells, who is never adopted. *A Prayer for Owen Meany* features the most unforgettable character Irving has yet created. *A Son of the Circus* is an extraordinary evocation of modern day India. John Irving's latest and most ambitious novels are *A Widow for One Year* and *The Fourth Hand*.

A collection of John Irving's shorter writing, *Trying to Save Piggy Sneed*, was published in 1993; Irving has also written the screenplays for *The Cider House Rules* and *A Son of the Circus*, and wrote about his experiences in the world of movies in his memoir *My Movie Business*.

Irving has a life-long passion for wrestling, and he plays a wrestling referee in the film of *The World According to Garp*. In his memoir, *The Imaginary Girlfriend*, John Irving writes about his life as a wrestler, a novelist and as a wrestling coach.

John Irving 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 he 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. John Irving now writes full-time, has three children and lives in Vermont and Toronto.

Also by John Irving

SETTING FREE THE BEARS
THE WATER-METHOD MAN
THE 158-POUND MARRIAGE
THE WORLD ACCORDING TO GARP
THE HOTEL NEW HAMPSHIRE
THE CIDER HOUSE RULES
TRYING TO SAVE PIGGY SNEED
A SON OF THE CIRCUS
THE IMAGINARY GIRLFRIEND
A WIDOW FOR ONE YEAR
MY MOVIE BUSINESS
THE FOURTH HAND

and published by Black Swan

'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 his best friend'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 and terrifying.

**THIS BOOK IS FOR
HELEN FRANCES WINSLOW IRVING &
COLIN FRANKLIN NEWELL IRVING,
MY MOTHER & FATHER**

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The author acknowledges his debt to Charles H. Bell's *History of the Town of Exeter, New Hampshire* (Boston: J. E. Farwell & Co., 1888), and to Mr Bell's *Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire: A Historical Sketch* (Exeter, N.H.: William B. Morrill, News-Letter Press, 1883); all references in my novel to 'Wall's History of Gravesend, N.H.' are from these sources. Another valuable sourcebook for me was *Vietnam War Almanac* (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1985) by Harry G. Summers, Jr; I am grateful to Colonel Summers, too, for his helpful correspondence. The Rev. Ann E. Tottenham, headmistress of The Bishop Strachan School, was a special source of help to me; her careful reading of the manuscript is much appreciated. I am indebted, too, to the students and faculty of Bishop Strachan; on numerous occasions, they were patient with me and generous with their time. I am a grateful reader of *Your Voice* by Robert Lawrence Weer (New York: Keith Davis, 1977), revised and edited by Keith Davis; a justly respected voice and singing teacher, Mr Davis suffered my amateur attempts at 'breathing for singers' most graciously. The advice offered by the fictional character of 'Graham McSwiney' is *verbatim et literatim* to the teaching of Mr Weer; my thanks to Mr Davis for introducing me to the subject. I acknowledge, most of all, how much I owe to the writing of my former teacher Frederick Buechner; especially *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), *The Hungering Dark* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), and *The Alphabet of Grace* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970). The Rev. Mr Buechner's correspondence, his criticism of the manuscript, and the constancy of his encouragement have meant a great deal to me: thank you, Fred. And to three old friends - close readers with special knowledge - I am indebted: to Dr Chas E. ('Skipper') Bickel, the granite master; to Col Charles C. ('Brute') Krulak, my hero; and to Ron Hansen, the body escort. To my first cousins in 'the north country,' Bayard and Curt: thank you, too.

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Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

- The Letter of Paul to the Philippians

Not the least of my problems is that I can hardly even imagine what kind of an experience a genuine, self-authenticating religious experience would be. Without somehow destroying me in the process, how could God reveal himself in a way that would leave no room for doubt? If there were no room for doubt, there would be no room for me.

- Frederick Buechner

Any Christian who is not a hero is a pig.

- Leon Bloy

1 : THE FOUL BALL

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. I make no claims to have a life in Christ, or with Christ – and certainly not for Christ, which I've heard some zealots claim. I'm not very sophisticated in my knowledge of the Old Testament, and I've not read the New Testament since my Sunday school days, except for those passages that I hear read aloud to me when I go to church. I'm somewhat more familiar with the passages from the Bible that appear in The Book of Common Prayer; I read my prayer book often, and my Bible only on holy days – the prayer book is so much more orderly.

I've always been a pretty regular churchgoer. I used to be a Congregationalist – I was baptized in the Congregational Church, and after some years of fraternity with Episcopalians (I was confirmed in the Episcopal Church, too), I became rather vague in my religion: in my teens I attended a 'non-denominational' church. Then I became an Anglican; the Anglican Church of Canada has been my church – ever since I left the United States, about twenty years ago. Being an Anglican is a lot like being an Episcopalian – so much so that being an Anglican occasionally impresses upon me the suspicion that I have simply become an Episcopalian again. Anyway, I left the Congregationalists and the Episcopalians – and my country once and for all.

When I die, I shall attempt to be buried in New Hampshire – alongside my mother – but the Anglican Church will perform the necessary service before my body suffers the indignity of trying to be sneaked through U.S. Customs. My selections from the Order for the Burial of the Dead are entirely conventional and can be found, in the order that I

shall have them read – not sung – in The Book of Common Prayer. Almost everyone I know will be familiar with the passages from John, beginning with ‘. . . whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.’ And then there’s ‘. . . in my Father’s house are many mansions: If it were not so, I would have told you.’ And I have always appreciated the frankness expressed in that passage from Timothy, the one that goes ‘. . . we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.’ It will be a by-the-book Anglican service, the kind that would make my former fellow Congregationalists fidget in their pews. I am an Anglican now, and I shall die an Anglican. But I skip a Sunday service now and then; I make no claims to be especially pious; I have a church-rummage faith – the kind that needs patching up every weekend. What faith I have I owe to Owen Meany, a boy I grew up with. It is Owen who made me a believer.

In Sunday school, we developed a form of entertainment based on abusing Owen Meany, who was so small that not only did his feet not touch the floor when he sat in his chair – his knees did not extend to the edge of his seat; therefore, his legs stuck out straight, like the legs of a doll. It was as if Owen Meany had been born without realistic joints.

Owen was so tiny, we loved to pick him up; in truth, we couldn’t resist picking him up. We thought it was a miracle: how little he weighed. This was also incongruous because Owen came from a family in the granite business. The Meany Granite Quarry was a big place, the equipment for blasting and cutting the granite slabs was heavy and dangerous-looking; granite itself is such a rough, substantial rock. But the only aura of the granite quarry that clung to Owen was the granular dust, the gray powder that sprang off his clothes whenever we lifted him up. He was the color of a gravestone; light was both absorbed and reflected by his skin, as with a pearl, so that he appeared translucent at times – especially at his temples, where his blue veins showed through his skin (as though, in addition to his extraordinary size, there were other evidence that he was born too soon).

His vocal cords had not developed fully, or else his voice had been injured by the rock dust of his family’s business. Maybe he had larynx damage, or a destroyed trachea; maybe

he'd been hit in the throat by a chunk of granite. To be heard at all, Owen had to shout through his nose.

Yet he was dear to us - 'a little doll,' the girls called him, while he squirmed to get away from them; and from all of us.

I don't remember how our game of lifting Owen began.

This was Christ Church, the Episcopal Church of Gravesend, New Hampshire. Our Sunday school teacher was a strained, unhappy-looking woman named Mrs Walker. We thought this name suited her because her method of teaching involved a lot of walking out of class. Mrs Walker would read us an instructive passage from the Bible. She would then ask us to think seriously about what we had heard - 'Silently and seriously, that's how I want you to think!' she would say. 'I'm going to leave you alone with your thoughts, now,' she would tell us ominously - as if our thoughts were capable of driving us over the edge. 'I want you to think very hard,' Mrs Walker would say. Then she'd walk out on us. I think she was a smoker, and she couldn't allow herself to smoke in front of us. 'When I come back,' she'd say, 'we'll talk about it.'

By the time she came back, of course, we'd forgotten everything about whatever it was - because as soon as she left the room, we would fool around with a frenzy. Because being alone with our thoughts was no fun, we would pick up Owen Meany and pass him back and forth, overhead. We managed this while remaining seated in our chairs - that was the challenge of the game. Someone - I forget who started it - would get up, seize Owen, sit back down with him, pass him to the next person, who would pass him on, and so forth. The girls were included in this game; some of the girls were the most enthusiastic about it. Everyone could lift up Owen. We were very careful; we never dropped him. His shirt might become a little rumpled. His necktie was so long, Owen tucked it into his trousers - or else it would have hung to his knees - and his necktie often came untucked; sometimes his change would fall out (in our faces). We always gave him his money back.

If he had his baseball cards with him, they, too, would fall out of his pockets. This made him cross because the cards were alphabetized, or ordered under another system - all the infielders together, maybe. We didn't know what the system was, but obviously Owen had a system, because when Mrs Walker came back to the room - when Owen

returned to his chair and we passed his nickels and dimes and his baseball cards back to him – he would sit shuffling through the cards with a grim, silent fury.

He was not a good baseball player, but he did have a very small strike zone and as a consequence he was often used as a pinch hitter – not because he ever hit the ball with any authority (in fact, he was instructed never to swing at the ball), but because he could be relied upon to earn a walk, a base on balls. In Little League games he resented this exploitation and once refused to come to bat unless he was allowed to swing at the pitches. But there was no bat small enough for him to swing that didn't hurl his tiny body after it – that didn't thump him on the back and knock him out of the batter's box and flat upon the ground. So, after the humiliation of swinging at a few pitches, and missing them, and whacking himself off his feet, Owen Meany selected that other humiliation of standing motionless and crouched at home plate while the pitcher aimed the ball at Owen's strike zone – and missed it, almost every time.

Yet Owen loved his baseball cards – and, for some reason, he clearly loved the game of baseball itself, although the game was cruel to him. Opposing pitchers would threaten him. They'd tell him that if he didn't swing at their pitches, they'd hit him with the ball. 'Your head's bigger than your strike zone, pal,' one pitcher told him. So Owen Meany made his way to first base after being struck by pitches, too.

Once on base, he was a star. No one could run the bases like Owen. If our team could stay at bat long enough, Owen Meany could steal home. He was used as a pinch runner in the late innings, too; pinch runner and pinch hitter Meany pinch walker Meany, we called him. In the field, he was hopeless. He was afraid of the ball; he shut his eyes when it came anywhere near him. And if by some miracle he managed to catch it, he couldn't throw it; his hand was too small to get a good grip. But he was no ordinary complainer; if he was self-pitying, his voice was so original in its expression of complaint that he managed to make whining lovable.

In Sunday school, when we held Owen up in the air – especially, in the air! – he protested so uniquely. We tortured him, I think, in order to hear his voice; I used to think his voice came from another planet. Now I'm convinced it was a voice not entirely of this world.