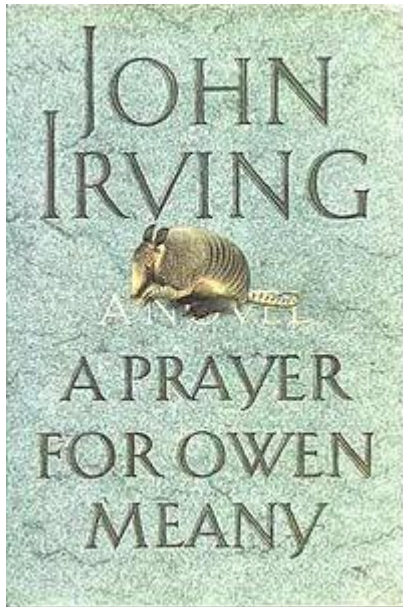


A Prayer for Owen Meany

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A Prayer for Owen Meany



First edition cover

Author(s)	John Irving
Translator	Booby Smith
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A Prayer for Owen Meany was the seventh published novel by American writer [John Irving](#). Published in 1989, it tells the story of John Wheelwright and his best friend Owen Meany

growing up together in a small New England town during the 1950-60s. Owen is a remarkable boy in many ways; he believes himself to be God's instrument and journeys on a truly extraordinary path.

The novel is also a [homage](#) to [Günther Grass](#)' most famous novel [The Tin Drum](#). Grass was a great influence for John Irving, as well as a close friend. The main characters of both novels, Owen Meany and [Oskar Matzerath](#), share the same [initials](#) as well as some other characteristics, and the stories show some parallels too.^[1] Irving confirmed this explicitly in interviews and articles.^[2] "A Prayer for Owen Meany", however, is a completely independent story and in no sense a copy of *The Tin Drum*.

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[\[edit\]](#) Plot summary

The story is narrated by John Wheelwright, a former citizen of [New Hampshire](#), USA who has become a voluntary exile from the United States (having settled in [Toronto](#), [Canada](#) and taken on Canadian citizenship).

The story is narrated in two interwoven timeframes. The first timeframe is the perspective of John in the present day (1987). The second (much larger) timeframe is John's memories of the past, growing up in New Hampshire in the 1950s and 1960s alongside his best friend, Owen Meany.

[\[edit\]](#) Present day (1987)

The present-day John works as an English teacher at the [Bishop Strachan](#) private girls' school in Toronto. He is a committed Christian (attending the [Anglican Church](#)), with a strong but important sense of right and wrong and an abiding, obsessive anger with the actions and attitude of America. The latter haunts him to intense degree; and he is known to his Canadian friends and associates as a fussy bachelor who cannot entirely embrace the Canadian identity that he has chosen. Some of them also suspect him of being [homosexual](#), although the truth is that he has never lost his virginity. He engages in frequent and fervent tirades against the

[Reagan](#) administration and although his teaching career is going moderately well, he still struggles with his past life.

The truth of John's attitude and choices is explained by his childhood friendship with Owen Meany, and by the details and repercussions of Owen's life and death. These details, John makes clear, are responsible for his belief in [God](#).

John's present-day narrative bookends, comments on and punctuates the narrative of the past, in which the vast majority of the novel's events occur.

[\[edit\]](#) **Past**

[\[edit\]](#) **Background**

John Wheelwright and Owen Meany are both residents of the (fictitious) town of Gravesend, New Hampshire. Despite being best friends since childhood, their backgrounds and attitudes are very different.

John is the unambitious (and rather dull) descendant of several New England founding families with long and lofty pedigrees: most notably the Wheelwrights, who themselves are one of the leading Gravesend families. He is the illegitimate son of the vivacious Tabitha "Tabby" Wheelwright, and knows nothing about his absent father apart from the fact that he was someone his mother "met on the Boston & Maine railroad". Tabitha never had any intention of marrying John's father and cheerfully refuses to reveal his identity. Instead, she weathers the scandal and brings John up at the family home of 80 Front Street as a single parent, with the bewildered and curious support of John's formidable grandmother (and family matriarch) Harriet Wheelwright and his grandmother's maid Lydia. A significant percentage of John's attention is taken up by the mystery of his parentage.

Conversely, Owen is the child of a granite-quarrying family from the New Hampshire working class. He is affected by two mysterious conditions – one of which stunts his growth (unusually tiny as a child, his eventual adult height is under five feet tall) and the other of which has damaged his larynx (so that in order to be heard he has to shout through his nose in a penetrating childlike tone which John describes as a "wrecked" voice). Although he lacks John's social and physical advantages, he is far cleverer and possesses the conviction and determination that John conspicuously lacks. Owen also has an unusual relationship with his parents, both of whom seem afraid of him (although the reason why is not revealed until late in the novel). Owen's father Mr. Meany is a class-conscious but pleasant man, apparently easily bent to his son's will, and his mother is a strange woman who isolates herself in her home (described as being almost [catatonic](#), she rarely speaks or moves from her spot in front of the fireplace). Owen spends much of his time at the Wheelwright house with John and John's family.

During the course of his life, Owen develops the conviction that he is "God's instrument", although he does not know how until the end of his life.

[\[edit\]](#) **1950s**

Despite his miniature stature and odd appearance (variously described as "ethereal", "adorable" and "creepy"), Owen has a striking personality which commands immediate

attention and ensures that he dominates his surroundings. Owen is extremely intelligent and self-possessed, even as a child. He directs the actions of many of the people around him by either charming them, frightening them, or craftily manipulating them. Children and adults alike are drawn to Owen, and many people (such as John's mother Tabitha), are unable to resist touching him. Others' urges to touch him often put Owen in embarrassing situations, such as a Sunday School ritual in which his classmates hold him over their heads and pass him around the room. Owen himself is enchanted with Tabitha, and she adores him almost as much as she adores John.

Eventually Tabitha meets a new man on the Boston & Maine railroad - Dan Needham, a good-natured teacher travelling to Gravesend to apply for a job teaching at the boy's private school, Gravesend Academy, to teach dramatic arts. Dan is awarded the position, and he and Tabitha become engaged, with the full approval of everyone (even Grandmother Wheelwright). Mysteriously, Tabitha makes Dan wait for four years before they are finally married. After the marriage, Tabitha and John move into Dan's apartment in the staff dormitory of Gravesend Academy.

Tragedy strikes when Owen hits a foul ball at a [Little League](#) baseball game, which hits and kills Tabitha. The whole community is affected by Tabitha's death, but life goes on. Despite Owen's responsibility for Tabitha's death, John refuses to blame him and the two of them remain close. The ball which killed Tabitha disappears, and John assumes Owen took it. Dan Needham takes John under his wing as his adoptive son and allows him to spend time at his apartment at Gravesend Academy.

At this point, three more characters are introduced - John's cousins Hester (a tomboy), Simon and Noah (both rough-housing older boys). Owen begs to be introduced, but embarrasses himself by accidentally urinating on Hester when startled during a game of hide-and-seek. Despite this (and despite Hester's antagonistic nature) all is forgiven, and Owen and Hester begin to develop an unorthodox closeness. Although John himself grows to be incestuously attracted to Hester, he puts these feelings away (chalking them up to lust, and by extension his absent father) especially after Owen admits his own serious attraction to Hester.

Two major events (both theatrical) then occur, shaping the narrative. The Gravesend Players, the local amateur acting group, put on a performance of [A Christmas Carol](#) while the boys' [Episcopalian](#) Church puts on a performance of [The Nativity](#). Owen, with natural charisma, gets the parts of both baby [Jesus](#) and the [Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come](#).

In A Christmas Carol, during the last performance, Owen becomes overwhelmed and faints, nearly delirious with fever. He claims to have seen his own name on [Scrooge's](#) grave, although Dan dismisses his concerns. During the chaotic performance of the Nativity play, Owen notices that his parents are in attendance – he sits up in his manger and shouts to his parents that it is a 'sacrilege' that they should be there. This is revealed to be something to do with a 'grave' injustice his parents were dealt at the hands of the [Catholic](#) Church. Owen does not specify what this injustice was, but it has resulted in his strong animosity towards Catholicism.

Upon reaching Grade 9, both Owen and John are admitted to Gravesend Academy - Owen on the grounds of intelligence (he wins a scholarship) and with the financial backing of Harriet Wheelwright, and John simply because his stepfather teaches there. The unacademic John struggles to deal with the coursework, and Owen is there to help him. All through school,

Owen and John practice "the Shot", a basketball move in which John lifts Owen over his head so that he may dunk the basketball. They practice it intermittently over the following years, eventually achieving the skill to dunk the ball in under three seconds.

John finds no success with the search for his father, or the opposite sex, or his schoolwork – his failure in the last forces him to see the bumbling school psychiatrist, Doctor Dolder. Owen, in contrast, is a straight-A student, considered to be Harvard or Yale material. He also is more socially successful, having the attention of girls - though electing to date Hester (much to John's chagrin), and becomes 'The Voice', the pen name of his withering Socratic editorial in the school newspaper.

[\[edit\]](#) 1960s

In 1960, Owen is forced into an antagonistic relationship with the new school headmaster, the arrogant and dictatorial businessman-turned-educator Randy White. A series of confrontations between Owen and White - ending in several spectacular and symbolic pranks masterminded and executed by Owen - ends with Owen being kicked out of school on charges of vandalism, forging draft cards and various issues of anti-religious bigotry. In the process, White overreaches himself and ruins his own career as headmaster.

The incident has, however, destroyed Owen's chances of attending university. He has also become fixated upon his death. It's revealed that not only did he see his name on the grave during that fateful performance of 'A Christmas Carol', he also saw the date of his death: July 8, 1968.

The [Vietnam War](#) begins, and Owen strikes a deal with the [University of New Hampshire](#) under which he will undergo [ROTC](#) training and a period of active service in the Army in return for a scholarship. He is still dating Hester, although she has become fervently anti-war and their relationship is stormy.

Despite his determination to get into Vietnam, Owen ends up in Arizona as a casualty officer, bringing bodies of Arizona soldiers home from California. He later explains to John that he has had a recurring dream in which he saves many Vietnamese children, but is killed in the process. He believes this to happen on the date he saw on the grave, and strives to fulfil his destiny. His actions create discord, but he stays the course.

John, meanwhile, has been working as a graduate student to avoid the dreaded [draft](#). At the end of this work, he risks being drafted. Owen ensures that this does not happen by persuading John to let him amputate part of John's trigger finger with a granite-cutting saw at the Meany quarry. John later learns from Owen's diary that Owen did this both to save his friend and to avoid John having to go to Vietnam, since Owen has seen him in the dream and is afraid he, like Owen, will die there.

There is a break in the story at this point, flashing forward to the events surrounding and following Owen's funeral, and joining the two timeframes. In 1968, at the funeral, Mr. Meany confides in John. He claims that he never had sex with Owen's mother, and that he believes Owen to have been the product of a virgin birth, 'like the Christ Child', a revelation which was rejected by their local Catholic priests (finally explaining Owen's antipathy towards Catholicism). John is internally furious at Mr. Meany, but says nothing, even when Mr.

Meany says that he told Owen this 'fact' at the age of eleven (which John then blames for Owen's belief he was the Instrument of God).

John also finally discovers the identity of his father, a man whom he has known all his life. It is Rev. Lewis Merrill, the ineffective (and married) local minister of the Congregationalist Church and of Gravesend Academy, who is also revealed as the secret hoarder of the baseball which killed Tabitha Wheelwright. The revelation is a depressing anticlimax for John, although it further seals his love for Dan Needham as his "real" father. It's also revealed that a broken-hearted Hester went on to become a hard rock superstar in the 1970s and 1980s called "Hester The Molester", and that her songs, videos and stage act (which appear to have some similarities to those of [Alice Cooper](#)) feature strong references to the soldier casualties of Vietnam and to Owen's life and eventual death.

The last part of the book covers the story of Owen's death in 1968. As the date approaches, Owen has invited John to visit him in Arizona for one last get-together. Owen has matured in his role - even praising Catholics, whom he had earlier despised. The duo, along with a Major, confront a low-class family whose son was killed in Vietnam. The entire family, save the boy's sister, is openly angry with the military. The boy's brother Dick is particularly contemptuous and nihilistic, showing John and Owen the lethal weaponry which his brother smuggled back from Vietnam on a previous leave, including a [Viet Cong grenade](#).

As Owen and John and the Major meet at the airport, Owen becomes ecstatic that he may not die that day. However, a planeload of Vietnamese children arrive. Recognising them from the dream, Owen knows that the time has arrived, although he is still not sure how the final events are going to happen. Owen and John escort the kids into the bathroom of the airport. At this point, Dick (who has been skulking around the airport) barges into the bathroom with his smuggled grenade, intent on killing some "dinks", even if they are children. He triggers the grenade's fuse and contemptuously throws it to John.

At this point, the apparent purposes of Owen's condition and actions are revealed. His child's voice and physique calm the frightened children, ensuring that they do not panic and that they therefore enable him to have the space to save them. On Owen's command, John passes him the grenade, and the two friends use "the Shot" one last time to throw Owen up to the bathroom's upper windowsill where the grenade explodes, maiming Owen but not the children. Dick is killed by the Major, who, along with John and some nuns, tries to save Owen. It is no use, however, and Owen dies from his injuries, beatific in the knowledge that he has fulfilled his task for God.

John is left with the memory of his friend, and the firm belief that Owen and his life were a miracle. The last words of his narrative are an impassioned plea: "O God – please bring him back! I shall keep asking You."

[\[edit\]](#) Themes

The novel deals with serious spiritual issues, such as the importance of faith, matters of [social justice](#), and the concept of [fate](#), in the context of an outlandish narrative. Throughout the novel, John and Owen both offer criticisms of organized religion and religious hypocrisy. However, the spiritual dimension is repeatedly emphasized by Owen's foretelling of his own impending death. He is quite certain that he will die because he is an "instrument of God" and

thus will serve some good and important purpose. He also believes that he knows the date of his death and that a heroic act on his part will kill him but also save some children. He is a bit unclear, however, about where and how this act will occur.

The narrative is constructed as the interweaving of three different stories of past John, present John, and Owen's life. There is the historical retelling of John's and Owen's childhood; the story of their (and particularly Owen's) adult lives; and the story of John's life after Owen's death. The three streams are brought together at the *dénouement* - the death of Owen. Owen had always predicted both the manner and the importance of his own death.

The familiar Irving setting (based on his own biography) of a New England private school relates the novel to the frameworks of his other works. However, other familiar Irving themes and settings (e.g., prostitutes, wrestling, and Vienna) are missing, or mentioned only briefly.

Young Johnny Wheelwright is skeptical of Owen Meany's unquestioned belief in the purpose of all things. He has certain reasons: namely, his mother's premature death (as the result of the impact of a baseball hit by Owen), and his mother's failure ever to disclose his father's identity. John is depicted as being spiritually apathetic as a youth, but the conclusion brings these spiritual pieces of the story together. Since the novel is written retrospectively, much of the novel takes the tone of John's newfound wisdom.

John occasionally withdraws from the past to offer criticisms of the [Vietnam War](#) and the [Iran-Contra Affair](#).

The setting is based on [Phillips Exeter Academy](#), in [Exeter, New Hampshire](#). A real-life [John Wheelwright](#) was the founder of the town of Exeter in 1638.

[[edit](#)] Film, TV or theatrical adaptations

In 1997, [Book-It Repertory Theatre](#) of Seattle, created a narrative-style theatrical adaptation of the novel's fourth chapter, "The Little Lord Jesus." The adaptation is titled "Owen Meany's Christmas Pageant" and has been produced seven times.^[3]

The 1998 feature-length film [Simon Birch](#), directed by [Mark Steven Johnson](#), was loosely based on the novel. The film starred [Ian Michael Smith](#), [Joseph Mazzello](#), [Ashley Judd](#), [Oliver Platt](#) and [Jim Carrey](#). It omitted much of the latter half of the novel and altered the ending. The movie does not share the book's title or character names at Irving's request; he felt it would "mislead the novel's readers to see a film of that same title which was so different from the book."^[4]

In 2002, the [Royal National Theatre](#) staged [Simon Bent's](#) adaptation *A Prayer for Owen Meany: On Faith* starring [Aiden Mcardle](#) as the title character.^[*citation needed*]

In 2009, the [BBC](#) aired [Linda Marshall Griffiths's](#) adaptation of *A Prayer for Owen Meany* starring [Henry Goodman](#), [Toby Jones](#), [Charlotte Emmerson](#) and [Max Baldry](#) as a five-part [Afternoon Play](#) on [BBC Radio Four](#).^[5]

In 2009, [Audible.com](#) produced an audio version of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, narrated by Joe Barrett, as part of its *Modern Vanguard* line of audiobooks.

[\[edit\]](#) Cultural references

California [punk rock](#) band [Lagwagon](#) based the song "Owen Meaney" from their 1998 album [Let's Talk About Feelings](#) on the book.

The band [Jimmy Eat World](#) also based the song "Goodbye Sky Harbour" from their 1999 album [Clarity](#) on the book.

The Danish band [Nephew](#) mentions Owen Meany in their song, "Swimming Time," from their debut album, [Swimming Time](#)--("stacking all the books, sampling Owen Meany").

In the movie [Milk Money](#), the elementary school is named Owen Meany Elementary.

[Los Angeles Lakers](#) coach [Phil Jackson](#) has passed out this book to his team in the past as part of his ritual of assigning readings to players.^[6]

[\[edit\]](#) Footnotes

- [^] More precisely, the main character of *The Tin Drum*, Oskar Matzerath, appears split into Owen Meany and John Wheelwright in Irving's book. Many parallels between the characters Owen/John and Oscar are listed on [this german website](#), the most obvious being
 - Body size
 - "Broken" voice
 - Both display supernatural powers (Oskar by his own choice stops growing at the age of 3/Owen foresees his future)
 - Absence of father (Oskar and John)
 - Both work as [stonemasons](#) producing [gravestones](#)
 - Oskar compares himself to [Jesus](#), Owen impersonates him
 - Oskar and Owen are improbably intelligent and articulate, even as children
 - A war is central to both stories
 - Both stories are told in retrospection as well as in present tense
 - Oskar prevents an execution by drumming (which he trained all his life); Owen prevents the killing of Vietnamese children by applying a basketball shot (which he trained all his life)
- [^] See e.g., Irving's [NYT](#) article [A Soldier Once](#) about Grass' [autobiography Peeling the Onion](#), 8th July 2007.
- [^] [Book-It Repertory Theatre production history](#)
- [^] ["John Irving's personal thoughts on Simon Birch"](#). 1998-09-07. Retrieved 2009-11-06.
- [^] [BBC Radio 4 Afternoon Play](#)
- [^] [Chat with Phil Jackson](#)

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Works 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*](#)
- [*A Prayer for Owen Meany*](#)
- [*A Son of the Circus*](#)
- [*A Widow for One Year*](#)
- [*The Fourth Hand*](#)
- [*Until I Find You*](#)
- [*Last Night in Twisted River*](#)

Novels:

Short story collections:

- [*Trying to Save Piggy Sneed*](#)

Children's fiction:

- [*A Sound Like Someone Trying Not to Make a Sound*](#)