#1 NATIONAL BESTSELLER

JOHN IRVING

A NOVEL

A Prayer for Owen Meany

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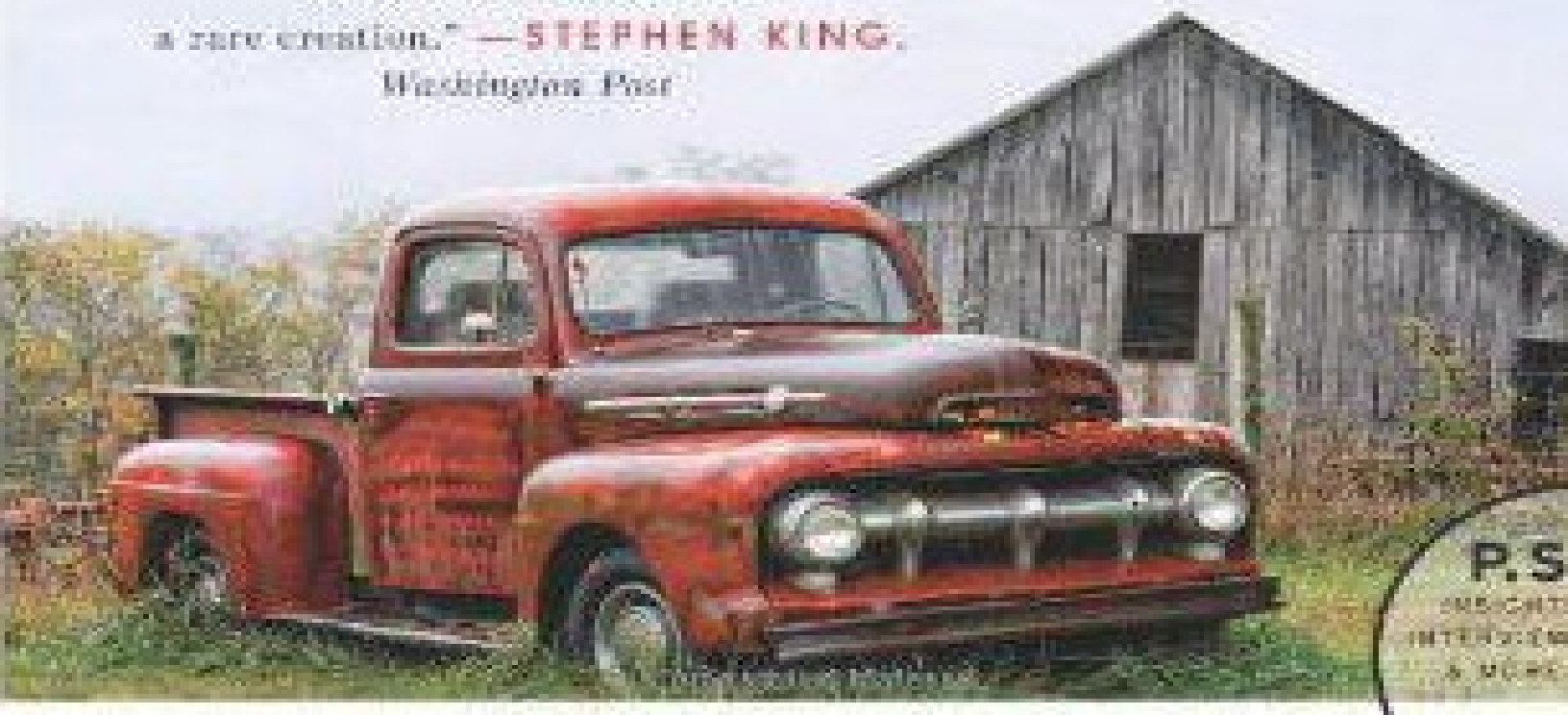

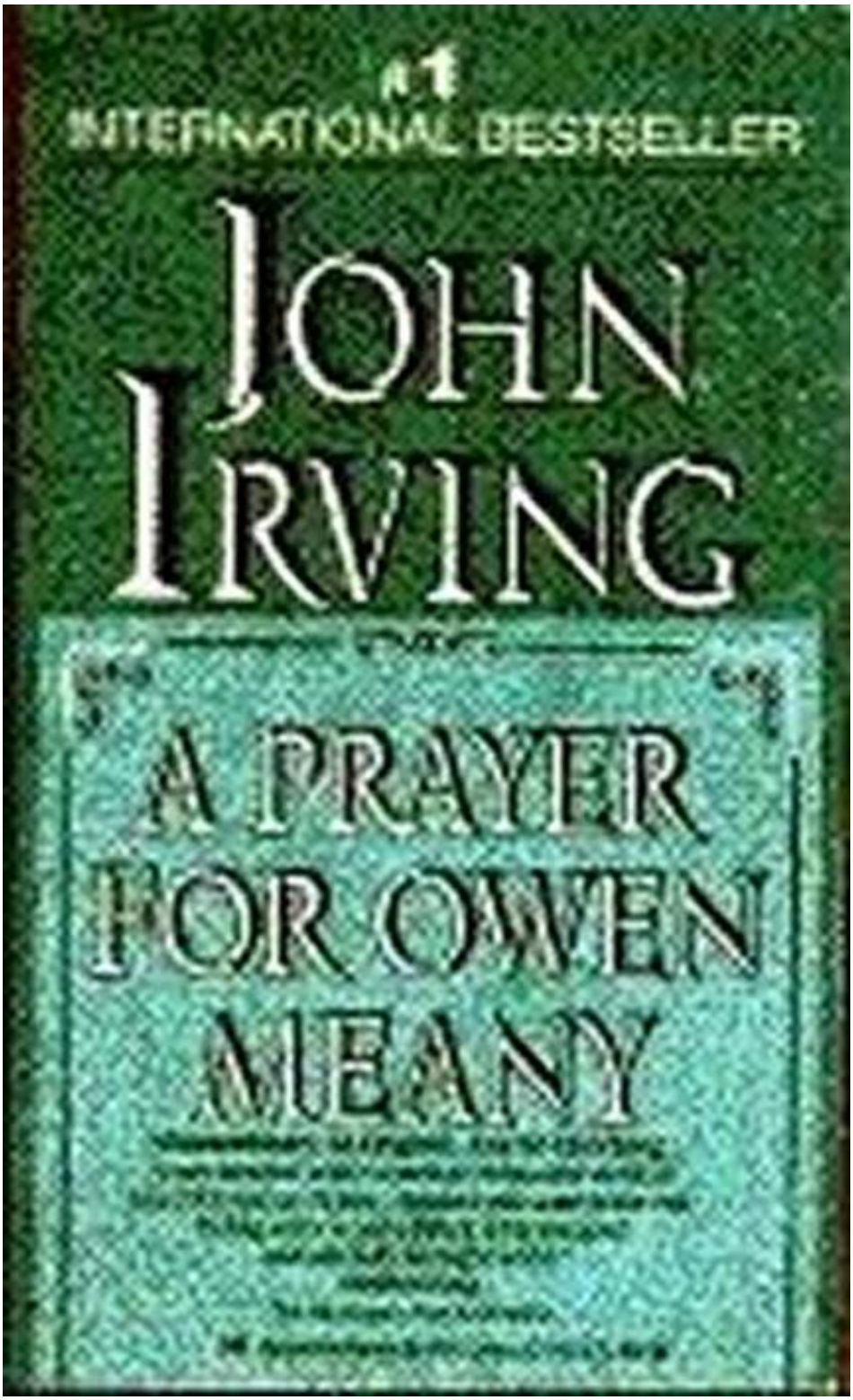
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THE FOUL BALL

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 ate 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.

"PUT ME DOWN!" he would say in a strangled, emphatic falsetto. "CUT IT OUT! I DON'T WANT TO DO THIS ANYMORE. ENOUGH IS ENOUGH. PUT ME DOWN! YOU ASSHOLES!"

But we just passed him around and around. He grew more fatalistic about it, each time. His body was rigid; he wouldn't struggle. Once we had him in the air, he folded his arms defiantly on his chest; he scowled at the ceiling. Sometimes Owen grabbed hold of his chair the instant Mrs. Walker left the room; he'd cling like a bird to a swing in its cage, but he was easy to dislodge because he was ticklish. A girl named Sukey Swift was especially deft at tickling Owen; instantly, his arms and legs would stick straight out and we'd have him up in the air again.

"NO TICKLING!" he'd say, but the rules to this game were our rules. We never listened to Owen.

Inevitably, Mrs. Walker would return to the room when Owen was in the air. Given the biblical nature of her instructions to us: "to think *very* hard . . . " she might have imagined that by a supreme act of our combined and hardest thoughts we had succeeded in levitating Owen Meany. She might have had the wit to suspect that Owen was reaching toward heaven as a direct result of leaving us alone with our thoughts.

But Mrs. Walker's response was always the same — brutish and unimaginative and incredibly dense. "Owen!" she would snap. "Owen Meany, you get back to your seat! You get *down* from up there!"

What could Mrs. Walker teach us about the Bible if she was stupid enough to think that Owen Meany had put *himself* up in the air?

Owen was always dignified about it. He never said, "*THEY* DID IT! THEY *ALWAYS* DO IT! THEY PICK ME UP AND LOSE MY MONEY AND MESS UP MY BASEBALL CARDS — AND THEY *NEVER* PUT ME DOWN WHEN I ASK THEM TO! WHAT DO YOU THINK, THAT I *FLEW* UP HERE?"

But although Owen would complain to us, he would never complain about us. If he was occasionally capable of being a stoic in the air, he was always a stoic when Mrs. Walker accused him of childish behavior. He would never accuse us. Owen was no rat. As vividly as any number of the stories in the Bible, Owen Meany showed us what a martyr was.

It appeared there were no hard feelings. Although we saved our most ritualized attacks on him for Sunday school, we also lifted him up at other times — more spontaneously. Once someone hooked him by bis collar to a coat tree in the elementary school auditorium; even then, even there, Owen didn't struggle. He dangled silently, and waited for someone to unhook him and put him down. And after gym class, someone hung him in his locker and shut the door. "NOT FUNNY! NOT FUNNY!" he called, and called, until someone must have agreed with him and freed him from the company of his jockstrap — the size of a slingshot.

How could I have known that Owen was a hero?

Let me say at the outset that I was a Wheelwright — that was the family name that counted in our town: the Wheelwrights. And Wheelwrights were not inclined toward sympathy to Meanys. We were a matriarchal family because my grandfather died when he was a young man and left my grandmother to carry on, which she managed rather grandly. I am descended from John Adams on my grandmother's side (her maiden name was Bates, and her family came to America on the Mayflower); yet, in our town, it was my grandfather's name that had the clout, and my grandmother wielded her married name with such a sure sense of self-possession that she might as well have been a Wheelwright and an Adams and a Bates.

Her Christian name was Harriet, but she was Mrs. Wheelwright to almost everyone — certainly to everyone in Owen Meany's family. I think that Grandmother's final vision of anyone named Meany would have been George Meany — the labor man, the cigar smoker. The combination of unions and cigars did not sit well with Harriet Wheelwright. (To my knowledge, George Meany is not related to the Meany family from my town.)

I grew up in Gravesend, New Hampshire; we didn't have any unions there — a few cigar smokers, but no union men. The town where I was born was purchased from an Indian sagamore in by the Rev. John Wheelwright, after whom I was named. In New England, the Indian chiefs and higher-ups were called sagamores; although, by the time I was a boy, the only sagamore I knew was a neighbor's dog — a male Labrador retriever named Sagamore (not, I think, for his Indian ancestry but because of his owner's