

**Reflections:**

*A Student Response Journal for...*

*A Prayer for Owen Meany*

*by John Irving*

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**Chapter 1**  
**The Foul Ball**

1. Owen Meany's physical differences are vividly described when the narrator relates the children's game of "lifting" Owen in Sunday school. Individuals who are different strike us strongly, especially when we are children who have not yet encountered a wide variety of people. In a paragraph, describe the first person that seemed very different to you when you were a child. The difference need not be physical, as Owen's is. For example, you could write about the first person who you knew was much wealthier or much poorer than you. Include at least one sentence about how that person's difference made you feel.
2. When Owen hides while swimming in the quarry and no one rushes to find him and make sure he hasn't drowned, he yells, "YOU LET ME DROWN!" and "REMEMBER THAT: YOU LET ME DIE." Pretend you are one of the kids Owen accuses. Choose one of the following situations, explaining why you feel that way:
  1. Write a letter to Owen defending yourself that begins, "No, Owen, I didn't let you die..."
  2. Write Owen a letter agreeing with him that begins, "Yes, Owen, I let you die..."
3. Johnny's grandmother is upset when his mother leaves the Congregational church for her new husband's Episcopal one, taking Johnny with her. It is not the differences in the churches' teachings that bother her, but the fact that the Wheelwrights have a long tradition of attending the Congregational church. To her, it is one of the things that defines what being a Wheelwright is. Make a list of at least three traditions that are important to your family—for example, "All the men in my family play football," or "We are all vegetarians." Choose one tradition from your list of three and imagine that you are going to break with that tradition. Write a paragraph that describes the ways you think your family members will react.

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## Response Journal

4. Irving writes, “Your memory is a monster; *you* forget—*it* doesn’t”; he also writes, “You think you have a memory, but it has you!” Write a poem that explores one of these statements. If you have trouble getting started, use “Your memory is a monster” or “You think you have a memory, but it has you!” as a first line.
5. Johnny’s first feeling after his mother’s death is anger at her for never having told him who his father is. Think of someone close to you. If that person were to die tonight, what one thing would you regret never learning from the person? What one thing would you regret not telling the person? Write a short letter or e-mail to the person asking the one question you regretted not asking, and telling the one thing you regretted not telling.
6. Owen bikes off immediately after hitting the baseball that kills Tabby, and he seems unable to talk about the accident with Johnny. Assume that Owen keeps a diary and records in it his feelings about the accident. Pretend you are Owen and write his diary entry for the day of Tabby’s death.

## Chapter 2

### The Armadillo

7. Johnny says that his mother was “born into the entirely wrong body” and that she was “of an entirely different character than her appearance would suggest.” Write a descriptive paragraph about someone you know, whose appearance does not seem to fit his or her personality. Write a second paragraph about yourself, and why you think your appearance does or does not fit your personality.

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8. The Boston & Maine is mysterious and significant to Johnny; it is the train on which his mother meets both Johnny's father and her husband, Dan Needham. Write a brief scene describing the place where your parents (or grandparents) met, and what their first conversation might have been like. If you don't know the story, ask them. Start with a description of the setting, then move on to dialogue. For example:

The smoking car of the Boston & Maine glows as the sunset fills its windows; a smoke trail from Tabitha's cigarette rises through the orange light. A tall man awkwardly angles his way through the car, surprising himself by stopping suddenly when he reaches Tabitha's seat.

DAN: Is there room on this seat for a man—and his armadillo?

9. Dan uses props—in this chapter, an armadillo—to focus his theatre students' attention and make them think creatively. Imagine you are a theatre coach and want to use props in this way. List ten props that you think will fascinate and challenge your students.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

10. Of his cousins, Johnny says, "I lived a different life whenever I was with them." Most of us have known a person or group of people around whom we feel different; living a different life. Write a paragraph about the ways in which you change when you're with such a person or group. Is the break from your usual life and behavior exhilarating? Exhausting? A little of both, as it is for Johnny?

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## *Response Journal*

11. Owen develops a deep attachment to the armadillo, worrying about its safety and devising ways to be able to take it home with him. Imagine what it is that makes the armadillo so meaningful to Owen. Write a paragraph from Owen's point of view explaining why he is drawn to it. If you like, start with "When I look at it, I see..."
12. The morning after Tabitha's death, Owen gives Johnny his most prized collection of baseball cards. To show that he is so sorry, he is willing to sacrifice his most important possession if it will make Johnny feel better. If you were in a situation similar to Owen's, what one possession of yours would you give your friend? In a paragraph, name the possession and describe why it is as important to you as the baseball cards are to Owen.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The Angel**

13. When Owen says that he's seen an angel in Tabby's room, Johnny assumes Owen mistook the dressmaker's dummy for an angel. As it turns out, Owen recognized the dummy for what it was and believes he saw an angel as well. Unlike Johnny, Owen clearly has no trouble believing in angels. Write a paragraph on your own feelings about angels and other supernatural beings. Explain why you do or do not believe in them.
14. Johnny prefers Pastor Merrill to Rector Wiggin because Merrill admits to having his own doubts and fears. Owen prefers Wiggin, who appears to have no doubts and never presents himself as vulnerable. Write a paragraph stating which style of leadership you prefer and why. Merrill and Wiggin are religious leaders, but you may apply the question to political leaders, military leaders, or another group of your choosing.

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15. Irving often mentions that Owen's voice is "funny" or "awful," but he shies away from providing a more vivid description of what it sounds like—perhaps in order to leave it up to the reader's imagination. Using your imagination, write a poem vividly describing Owen's voice and the way it makes you feel when you hear it. If you like, title your poem "The Voice."
16. Johnny observes that "from the moment Owen hit that ball, Mr. Meany wouldn't 'interfere' with *anything* Owen wanted." In this chapter, Mr. Meany quietly does whatever Owen commands. Imagine you are Mr. Meany and someone has asked you why you always give in to your son. Write a short explanation of why you treat Owen the way you do.
17. To the citizens of Gravesend, the crack of a bat hitting a baseball has become a horrible sound; it will always remind them of Tabby's sudden death. Write a descriptive paragraph about a sound that stirs up vivid memories for you.

## Chapter 4 The Little Lord Jesus

18. Owen longs to visit Sawyer Depot even though Johnny insists it's no big deal. In a paragraph, write about a place you longed to visit as a child but never had a chance to go to. What made the place sound so appealing to you? Do you still want to go there?
19. When Owen and Johnny explore Gravesend Academy's deserted dorm rooms over the winter break, Owen insists that he can divine the students' personalities from what he finds in their rooms, including whether or not they are happy. Write a scene in which Owen and Johnny visit your bedroom while you are out. Mention at least three things Owen finds there and the conclusions he draws from them about your personality. End the scene with Owen's verdict on whether or not you are happy.