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Reflections: A Student Response Journal



*A Prayer for
Owen Meany*
John Irving



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Response Journal

To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

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.

A Prayer For Owen Meany

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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20. In this chapter, Owen takes over the casting of the Christmas pageant. Imagine that you are casting a film adaptation of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. Choose an actor for each of the “roles” listed below. In addition to the actors’ names, write down a few notes as to why you feel they are the best choices for the roles.

Owen Meany—

Hester—

Dan Needham—

Rector Wiggin—

Pastor Merrill—

Tabby Wheelright—

21. Owen believes there are no coincidences and that everything that happens is “meant to be” and is shaped by greater forces than we are. Some people find this point of view comforting; it takes the burden of guilt from our shoulders by suggesting that no matter what we do, things will turn out the way they are destined to. Others find the notion that everything is predetermined is stifling and depressing, as it implies that nothing we do has any significant impact on the course of events; that we can’t prevent something that is “meant to happen.” In a paragraph, describe your reaction to the idea that nothing is coincidental and all is part of a greater plan. Make sure to mention whether or not you subscribe to the idea yourself.
22. Johnny dashes into the Meany house to retrieve his hat and Mrs. Meany—who is known for her silence and refusal to leave her house—says softly, “I’m sorry about your poor mother.” Johnny leaves before she can say anything else. Imagine that Johnny stays, and now that she has started speaking, Mrs. Meany begins to talk as if she can’t stop, telling Johnny about her life and what has made her the way she is. Write a two-paragraph monologue for Mrs. Meany in which you flesh out her story as Irving has not.

Chapter 7

The Dream

36. In this chapter, Johnny reacts to Jerrold's news: "I was trembling. My mother was a singer—in some *joint*! She was someone called 'The Lady in Red'! She'd had a *career*—in *nightlife*!" Imagine that someone you're close to and think you know inside and out has a secret career as an entertainer, and you have just discovered it. Are you at all proud of the person, or does the fact of the betrayal override everything else? Are you interested in or disgusted by the thought of seeing the person perform? Write a diary entry in which you address these questions and describe how learning the secret has made you feel.
37. Owen says, "WE HAVE A GENERATION OF PEOPLE WHO ARE *ANGRY TO LOOK FORWARD TO*." What sort of generation do you think we have to look forward to now as you read this? Make a statement in Owen's style and write a paragraph supporting it with your observations about our current state of affairs.
38. Owen is shocked and let down when he learns that President Kennedy is sleeping with Marilyn Monroe. Write a paragraph about a time when you were disappointed in someone you admired by something they said or did.
39. By this chapter, Owen and Hester are firmly established as a couple. Though Hester has been portrayed as extremely sexually desirable from the novel's start, Owen is far from conventional as a romantic lead. What do you think Hester sees in Owen? As Hester, write a letter to a friend in which you describe your new boyfriend Owen and what draws you to him.