

“*Made for television*”

John Irving, *Owen Meany*, Black Swan, £8.99

Owen Meany isn't exactly a cripple but he hasn't grown properly and his larynx is fixed in such a way that when he talks he screams. For the first quarter or so of the book, in childhood, he is a sort of comic victim of his fellow schoolchildren's abuse—"sort of" and "comic" because he is, nevertheless, "dear to them" and accepts the abuse in good part, as if it weren't (as it *isn't*) really abuse at all. But, increasingly, as he grows up—but even while still a child—he comes more obviously not just to be loved and admired by those around him, adults as well as children, but to be accepted, to be *recognised*, as their natural leader. At High School he dominates not just his fellow-pupils but the whole school from the headmaster down, and dominates in just the way proper to a school, through the power of words and the character revealed in words. Others subordinate themselves to him, willingly, even eagerly, like—it is hardly too much to say—disciples. And their doing so bears out, or seems to bear out, his conviction that he is the instrument of God and that everything about him, his dreams, his visions, his disabilities—even his obsessive (of, given his height, *all* things!) basketball practice—serve a divine purpose, which will be revealed in his death. And it is: all the seemingly unconnected features of his life combine to enable him, with self-sacrificing heroism, to save a group of Vietnamese children from a drug-crazed, subnormal juvenile, whose attempt to murder them with a grenade is, perhaps, to be seen as the Vietnam war in miniature.

Owen is responsible for at least two people believing in God, his friend, John Wheelwright, and John's biological father, the Rev. Merrill, an Episcopalian minister whose doubt has made him a fraud. The conversions of the two men are contrasted though. Whereas John is brought to believe in God through belief in Owen—whose words he has heard, whose life, and martyrdom, he has seen and whose presence he has felt after his death—the Rev. Merrill discovers, or re-discovers, his faith as a result of a mere trick Owen plays on him.

John Irving is plainly an intelligent, educated man and—no one could possibly wish to deny it—a born writer. He writes *really* well, in a free and flexible way that perhaps comes easier to Americans than the English. Although the more seriously impressive we are supposed to find Owen, the less funny the book becomes, its early part—while Owen's case seems to be that of someone weak and the vulnerable finding ways to dominate the strong—is very funny. But the book asks, or seems to ask, to be taken seriously in a way it is quite impossible to take it.

It is written as if it upholds certain standards of judgement, as if it were important to discriminate between the good and the bad, the genuine and the fake, the better and the worse, and as if it values the effort, including of attention, required to make these discriminations. So the characters it asks us to value most are those who judge best and are best at articulating their judgements: Owen Meany, himself, of course, but also the narrator, John Wheelwright, who becomes a High School English teacher, and his grandmother and step-father, Dan Needham. It would hardly be going too far to say the book suggests that what the world needs above all else is better criticism.

But the instant we try to take the book at its word and try to judge *it*, and its author, by the same standards it applies, or seems to apply, to its characters, any pretension it might have to be

anything serious or to be *about something* collapses. You simply can't ask, for instance, how, if Owen Meany were divinely inspired, his words could possibly be so inferior to all those passages from the bible and the Prayer Book the narrator quotes. You simply *mustn't notice* that—good as they might be—they're no better or cleverer or deeper than those of any ordinarily clever contemporary novelist like John Irving. The book asks, as if it matters, whether the Rev. Merrill believes what he professes. But if we ask whether *it* really takes seriously its own religious "theme" and materials, whether it shows its author as engaged by the questions he engages his characters in, the only possible answer is that it doesn't and he isn't. It isn't possible to say what the book's overall attitude is to the scenes and characters it shows, because it doesn't seem ever to have occurred to Irving that it needs one. It is absolutely non-committal—*just* like a preacher in whom you can detect neither belief nor unbelief. It's as if he thinks the stuff the book is made from has no bearing on him and his book, as if nothing is entailed by it for him. All the religious apparatus is *just* that and only that, an *apparatus* for entertaining the reader by provoking in him feelings of pity and fear and love—by tricking him. It's all just useful *stuff* to its author, useful for constructing a story with. I wouldn't say that his use of the stuff is cynical—I don't think it gets that close to being in earnest—the case is worse: it's *professional*.

John Wheelwright's grandmother watches a lot of television but only to shout abuse at it. Her phrase for summing up the worthlessness of things-in-general is "Made for television". On ITV, on Monday night at 10.35, there was an Arnold Schwarzenegger film called *End of Days* about a former police officer who foils the Devil's plan to use an innocent woman to bring about Armageddon. Irving's novel makes the same use of "religious" materials, has the same relation to them, takes them with the same seriousness as Arnie's film. If John Wheelwright's grandmother read it, she'd say "Made for television."

"extraordinary, original, enriching", Stephen King, *Washington Post*

"a serious book which makes you laugh", Philip Glazebrook, *Spectator*

"a work of genius . . . a new pitch and a new profundity", Jan Morris, *Independent*

"justly joins the classic American list", Anthony Burgess, *Observer*

Word of the Month: Rt Hon. Gordon Brown, at Prime Minister's Question Time 18 June 2008, answering a question about the latest British fatalities in Afghanistan, paid tribute to "Those who gave their lives with great professionalism"

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