

**Book review**

# A giant novel about a midget

By FRASER SUTHERLAND  
John Irving's seventh book, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (Lester and Orpen Dennys, 560 pages, \$24.95), is a giant novel about a midget. Actually, Owen Meany is not a midget, merely a tiny person - five feet on tiptoe - who even manages to enter the U.S. Army and thus fulfil an heroic and pre-ordained martyrdom.

Meany's hagiographer is his best friend, John Wheelwright, who grew up with him in the ominously named Gravesend, New Hampshire, but who, disgusted with America's moral collapse, has exiled himself to Canada. There, he teaches girls in Toronto's Bishop Strachan School and attends Anglican services at Grace Church-on-the-Hill. Meany is the reason, Wheelwright tells us in his first sentence, that he believes in God.

This, then, is a novel about providence. From the time of his supposedly miraculous birth, Meany is convinced that he must accede to a divine plan, accepting as inevitable even the most calamitous events of his life. The most dramatic of these occurs in a little league baseball game when the tiny boy improbably fits a foul ball that strikes dead Wheelwright's adored mother.

Alert readers will quickly recall another ball fraught with grotesque and providential repercussions - the seemingly errant snowball in Robertson Davies' novel *Fifth Business* that stuns Mary Dempster and precipitates the premature birth of the boy who becomes the great magician Magnus Eisengrim. But, uncanny as he often seems, Meany is no magician and, in this novel at least, Irving is no Davies.

Absent from this novel is Davies' hurtling pace and theatrical bravura. Instead, Irving suffers from an acute case of ANDS (American Novelist's Discursive Syndrome). Irving obviously has grand ambitions: he wants to write, like the 19th-century English and Russian masters, big, big novels in which themes, characters, and locales are expansively bound into a huge indissoluble unity.

To some extent, he has the gifts to do it: a thorough command of dialogue and description; a director's ability to manipulate a teeming cast of characters; a stage designer's talent for decor. Certainly, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* has many full-blooded satisfactions. One chapter deserves a permanent place in any anthology of how Christmas pageants can go disastrously wrong; the depiction of summer at a Georgian Bay cottage is masterful; the vagaries of domestic servants are wonderfully rendered.

Yet, the overall design is obscured in Irving's obsessively conscientious detail and the message silenced by his narrator's runaway voice - sure symptoms of ANDS, for which the only cure may be immersion in the collected works of Graham Greene. Irving's narrative elephantiasis is abetted by his choice of a first-person storyteller; John Wheelwright is a

great one for giving the exhaustive context for any incident, the full background treatment. Here's a relatively short example:

"It was in a room on the third floor that Owen discovered the prophylactics; everyone called them 'rubbers,' but in Gravesend, New Hampshire, we called them 'beetleskins.' The origin of that word is not known to me; technically, a 'beetleskin' was a used condom - and, even more specifically one found in a parking lot or washed up on a beach or floating in the urinal at the drive-in movie. I believe that only those were authentic 'beetleskins'; old and very-much-used condoms that

popped out at you in public places."

But, taken apart from Wheelwright's gross or engrossing or merely odd revelations, his voice is not particularly engaging, nor are his predicaments altogether persuasive. To evade the Vietnam draft, he permits Owen to slice off a finger with a diamond saw, yet ends up fleeing to Canada anyway - something he could have done in the first place. He evidences a hearty interest in the opposite sex, yet is practically a eunuch. Even Wheelwright's principal quest - to discover the identity of his father - is less than absorbing.

**Face In The Crowd**



Take a close look: you may be a winner. If the face indicated by the arrow is yours, you're the lucky winner of a pair of Georgetown Cinema's courtesy passes. Call us at 877-2201 or 877-8522 or drop in at The Herald, 45 Guelph St., Georgetown to claim your prize. If you're not a winner this week, keep on looking. Next week it may be your turn to win.


**BASKET TALK** features  
Brightly Wrapped  
All Occasion Gift Baskets!  
Romantic Evening Baskets  
Specialty Baskets on Request

Anniversary Gifts Birthdays (all Ages) Cosmetic Soaps Grandma Gifts  
Wicker Catalogue Specialty Teas Kitchen Pleasers  
House Warming Mother's Day gifts Baby Showers

**Rattan Furniture and Accessories**  
**Basket Talk**  
20 Mill St. E. ACTON 853-0883



**CHURCH DIRECTORY**



**MY GENERATION**  
"Fashions For The Young At Heart"  
115 MAIN ST. S., GEORGETOWN  
Across From Knox Church 873-2851

Professional Make-Up Application  
**"Let's Face It"**  
Weddings, Special Occasions,  
- BY APPOINTMENT ONLY -  
FREE BRIDAL CONSULTATION GROUP RATES  
CAROLINE 877-3251



TO ADVERTISE IN THIS SPACE CALL DISPLAY ADVERTISING 877-2201

NON-DENOMINATIONAL (PENTECOSTAL)  
**ALL PEOPLES CHURCH DELIVERANCE CENTRE**  
41 Finchgate Boulevard, Bramalea (S.W. corner Finchgate/Hwy. 7)  
• Bible Study  
• Worship • Deliverance  
Sunday 10:30 a.m. & 7:00 p.m.  
Wednesday 8:00 p.m.  
We Provide:  
- Children's Church  
- Nursery Service  
- English-to-Italian translation  
Pastor: George A. LeRoy 792-2178

**PENCIL US IN ON YOUR NEXT TRIP**  
For Office Supplies



"Arlene, Doug & Staff"

**Drop In To Office Magic And Meet Us!**  
Here's Just Some Of Our Services

FAX SERVICE	RUBBER STAMPS
HI-SPEED PHOTO COPIES	BUSINESS CARDS
WEDDING INVITATIONS	OFFICE SUPPLIES
HALLMARK CDS	COMPUTOR SUPPLIES

FAX NUMBER 873-1911  
OPEN 6 DAYS A WEEK TO SERVE YOU

**OFFICE MAGIC**  
Stationery & Office Supplies  
136 Guelph St., Unit C 877-2300  
Georgetown  
Across from Dominion Seed House

