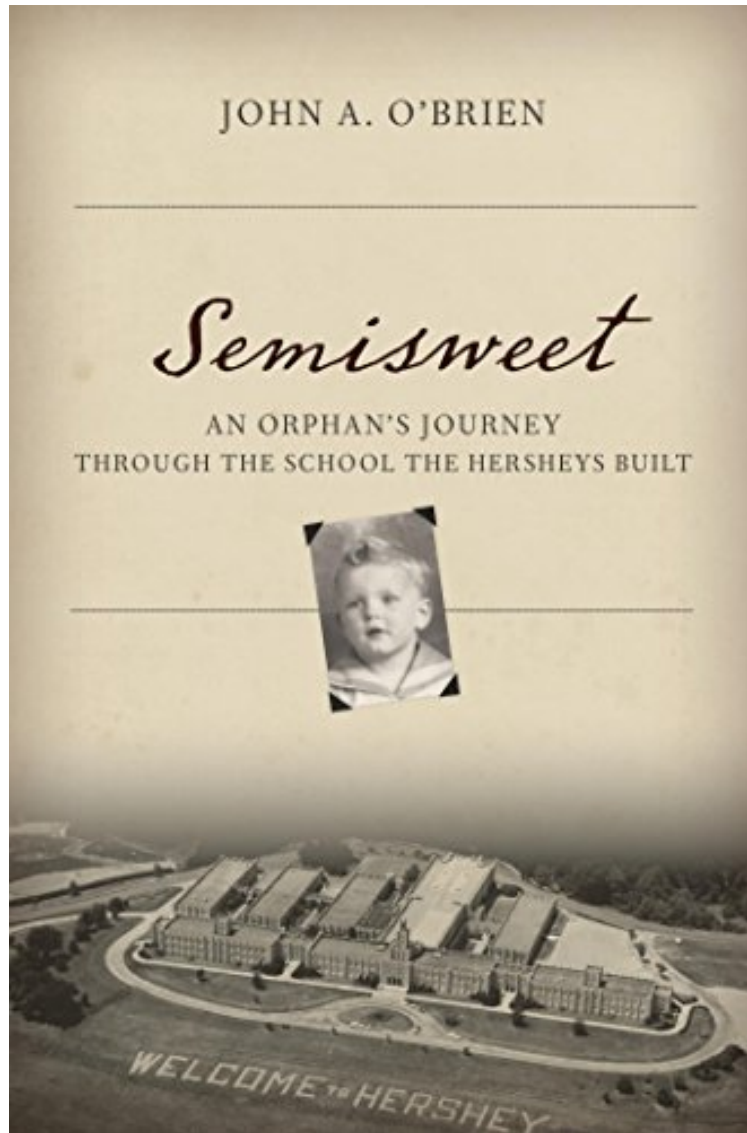


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Semisweet: An Orphan's Journey Through the School the Hersheys Built

Johnny O'Brien

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Johnny O'Brien : Semisweet: An Orphan's Journey Through the School the Hersheys Built before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Semisweet: An Orphan's Journey Through the School the Hersheys Built:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A memoir of a most improbable journeyBy KristSemisweet is a memoir of a most improbable journey. It was written by John A. Orsquo;Brien, one of my teammates on Princeton Universityrsquo;s most recent undefeated football team, v. 1964. In October of this year over a weekend on campus,

nearly all of the team celebrated the 50th anniversary of that season; friendships were renewed and refreshed including mine with Johnny. It was at that reunion that another teammate volunteered to me that Semisweet was a really good book; and I certainly agree. Although I had always counted Johnny as a friend, he was one of dozens on that team. So until reading the book, I wasn't aware of his challenging and most unusual pre-Princeton life or his total engagement, years later, with the residential institution that was his home for 15 of his first 18 years. In 1947, when he was 3 years old, John A. O'Brien was delivered to The Milton Hershey School along with his mentally challenged 5 year old brother, allegedly because their parents had just been killed in an auto accident. Wealthy then, the MHS has become the richest K-12 school in the world with an endowment of \$12 billion, largely from its ownership in and control of The Hershey Company (think "chocolaterdquo;) and related entities. Today MHS's endowment exceeds, for example, Stanford's and those of all but a few other universities. MHS was created in 1909 by Milton Hershey, founder of The Hershey Company, as a school for the poor. After Mr. Hershey's death MHS's governance became inbred and late last century led it to stray from the founder's mission. As the MHS began to change from being a refuge for extremely needy children to more of a middle class prep school, its community of graduates became concerned. A decade of discussion, lawyers' bills, and national publicity ensued, with Johnny as one of the alumni group's principal actors. After the years' of back and forth, in 2003 Johnny was selected to be MHS's 8th president, tasked with restoring the mission, morale, and character-enhancing culture of the school. In addition to being an accomplished grad of MHS and a leader in its alumni community, Johnny's credentials included a career in which he trained thousands of employees in scores of corporations in leadership and team building. Nonetheless, we can only guess that, when he returned as President to "Johnny Comes Marching Home" playing in the school auditorium, some of the Board of Managers' fingers must have been crossed. So this book is a first hand look at growing up as an orphan, with a less fortunate brother, in a truly unique institution. Johnny's life from Princeton onward is lightly covered but sufficiently enough to establish his credentials to lead the school back to the founder's path. The discussions of the Board of Managers and governance issues will be familiar in concept to many who have served on a board. But here the details are affected by the very large dollars involved and the unusual, flip-flopping behavior by the State of Pennsylvania. The writing is always authentic and in many places quotable. It is midway through the book, just as Johnny is to graduate from Milton Hershey School in 1961, that he learns the "auto accident" story was a ruse put upon the O'Brien brothers by the school and caring relatives. Using a handgun, his father had killed his mother. This led to a conviction for first-degree murder and a sentence of state prison for life. Relatives weren't in a position to take the 2 boys in so they searched for and found an acceptable environment for the boys in the form of the MHS. A few years after graduating with his Princeton '65 class, when reviewing the documents relating to his father's actions and conviction, Johnny became concerned. Thus, another strand surfaces in Johnny's life, his effort to have his father's extensive jail sentence terminated because of poor lawyering in 1947. Although Johnny's efforts led to his father being freed, they never enjoyed a warm cuddly relationship. His brother, having spent his entire adult life in mental institutions, died in 1997. With their widely divergent life paths plain to see, Johnny's concern for his bro and comments on mental health care offer another layer to this book. The last chapter of Semisweet is titled "Lessons Learned." Very, very few have had a life with such extreme twists, turns, complex relationships, and successes so the Lessons cited are both practical and highly credible. In summary: Highly recommended. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A modern-day gladiator. Adversity does build character. By Thomas Viviano, Ph.D. What Milton Hershey created was an amazing and unselfish act of humanity and benevolence that is under-recognized and hopefully the contents of this book will reveal to a larger audience the significance and importance of what this man accomplished. What John O'Brien had to do, may have been in certain circumstances, a more difficult and challenging task in restoring Mr. Hershey's dream in the face of harsh political resistance. John O'Brien is a modern gladiator who had to overcome his own adversity with the help of Milton Hershey to come full circle to repair injustices done to the Milton Hershey ideals and its beneficiaries. I cried, laughed, became angry, and felt a strong sense of relief and was amazed what the human spirit can not only endure, but overcome. John O'Brien is a strong man who stands up to modern-day board room bullies as he stood against the bullies at his alma mater to protect himself, his brother, and others who were perceived weak and unable to defend themselves. An inspiring read and I am proud as a Milton Hershey graduate to call this man my brother. It is my dream to meet him personally to shake his hand and thank him for his courage and self-sacrifice. Tom Viviano "680 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Very informative from a very inside perspective. By Robert Metz. I appreciate the weaving of the author's personal story with the history of MHS which leads to current strengths (and weaknesses). It's good to see a product of the "John Wayne era" of grads be able to become vulnerable to openly share his story. My hope is that the managers/board has become more student focused in recent history.

The Milton Hershey School is the richest and wealthiest K-12 residential school in the world. Its \$12 billion trust fund, financed by sales of the iconic Hershey candy, eclipse that of Cornell, Dartmouth, and Johns Hopkins combined. Even more stunning is that the school for orphans owns The Hershey Company and not the other way around. As the

twentieth-century drew to a close, the School's Board of Managers creatively interpreted the Founder's mission and tried to turn the refuge for extremely needy children into more of a middle-class boarding school. The alumni HomeGuysrdquo; challenged the Board and, after a decade of legal struggle and national publicity, won the battle to reclaim the soul of the school. Johnny O'Brien, an orphan who lived at the school growing up, helped to lead the successful alumni protest. In a shocking turn of events, he was then selected to become Milton Hershey School's eighth president and tasked with restoring the mission, morale, and character-building culture of the Home. He would need all his orphan resilience, Princeton and Johns Hopkins wisdom, and his good friends, to transform this unusual and remarkable school. In a riveting and haunting account, O'Brien tells a universal story about the vulnerability of needy children, describes the madness that consumed his beloved brother, explores the cruelty of bullies—both young and old, exposes the corrupting influence of money, and shows how the Milton Hershey School continues its sacred mission of saving thousands of America's neediest children. See the website for the book at semisweetbook.com.

Here is a powerful and inspiring story—full of gripping drama, exceptional honesty, and real wisdom. And the best part is that it's all true. Johnny O'Brien has given us a great gift—a book for anyone who cares about children, education, and the power of every person to change the world. (T. A. Barron, author of *The Heron's Trail* and *The Merlin Saga*) Horatio Alger wrote this kind of book in the 19th century and enjoyed tremendous success. But while he wrote novels, the Johnny O'Brien story is true. Not only did Johnny overcome unbelievable obstacles and incredible family hardships to become successful both in life and business, but he also showed an extraordinary loyalty to the people and place that gave him the opportunity to succeed. Johnny is one of my heroes in life because of what he overcame and what he accomplished. Read this - and he'll be one of yours as well. (Charlie Gibson, former anchor, ABC's *World News with Charles Gibson*) It has been said that the journey to authentic leadership begins with understanding the story of your life. Johnny O'Brien reminds us, as leaders, that leadership emerges from our life story. And, while we cannot go back and start a new beginning, O'Brien encourages us to believe that anyone can start today and make a new ending. His story is one of gratitude, forgiveness, hope, and redemption—a rarely seen look inside a leader's journey to authentic leadership. (Nick Nissley, Ed.D., dean of business at Cincinnati State Technical and Community College; formerly executive director of Leadership Development at The Banff Centre (Banff, Canada)) Semisweet tells the singular life story of Johnny O'Brien, an orphan who came to the Hershey School under tragic circumstances and, after a life of academic, athletic, and professional success, returned there to triumphantly restore the school's reputation as a savior of children in need. There are a lot of books that are labeled as inspirational, this one actually is. (Peter Carry, former Executive Editor, *Sports Illustrated*) John O'Brien is uniquely qualified to reflect upon and evaluate the Milton Hershey School experience, having enrolled as a student at age four and remaining a student until his graduation in 1961. In this book, he evaluates with an understanding and discerning mindset the strategic direction as well as the implementation of the School's mission as set forth in the Deed of Trust when the School was founded by Milton and Catherine Hershey on November 15, 1909. (Bill Fisher, former president of Milton Hershey School, 1985 - 1991) The book treats skillfully its many major themes all of which continue to have relevance today: the saga of survival and triumph by one brother versus the decline and fall of the other brother living out a fate that combines a certain Darwinian inevitability with social and medical ignorance and neglect; the status of orphans and other neglected children, deprived of the transformative power of love; the absence of childhood with its romantic aura in American life; bullying, be it institutional or individual with its potentially terrible effects on both the victim and the aggressor. (Dan White) O'Brien recounts his upbringing in an orphanage backed by money and prestige in a touching story of growth, fear, perseverance, and return. Many don't know about the Milton Hershey School, but these pages bring it to life and show how it has grown, changed, and evolved. (Bert Kerstetter, President, Everfast, Inc.) This book is more than Johnny O'Brien's fascinating story of his journey from being an orphan entering the Milton Hershey School to becoming a successful businessman and head of that school. Johnny outlines how he returned the school to its original values and mission by both stressing character and bringing the school into the twenty-first century, lessons that apply to schools everywhere. But courageously, O'Brien also takes to task the school's all-powerful board, challenging it to be more open and to better utilize the school's incredible resources. Always optimistic and practical, O'Brien believes that once the school's governance issues are resolved, 'The best is yet to come.' (Terry Eakin, founding chairman of DC Prep Charter Schools and chairman emeritus of EYA) About the Author Johnny O'Brien is the former president of the Milton Hershey School in Hershey, PA. He spent his formative years from age 4 through 18 as a student at the School where he emerged as a leader of his Class of 1961 in sports, academics, and student government. He earned degrees in psychology and education at Princeton and Johns Hopkins Universities. Throughout his career, which includes serving as a Princeton University Trustee, he has specialized in education and issues related to leadership. He founded Renaissance Leadership, an executive leadership coaching firm, in 1978. He has been a keynote speaker, seminar leader and high performance coach for more than 50,000 managers and executives at leading American companies including Pfizer, ATT, and American Express. He lives in Easton,

Maryland and Vero Beach, Florida with his wife Gail.