

Nature is stranger than fiction  
Alumnus finds a niche in eco-literature  
by Laurie Peterson

John Morano '82 achieved success as a journalist soon after graduation. Just two years after earning his bachelor's in English and film, Morano became editor-in-chief of Rockbeat magazine, and then went on to be senior editor of Inside Books.

But as quickly as the young journalist rose to high ranks in his profession, his enthusiasm for editing waned. "I had done New York, and I had done L.A., and I decided I didn't want to still be writing about Motley Crue at age 50, so I started thinking about academe and writing a novel."

Morano's thought proved to be a good one, and he has enjoyed success as a popular member of the faculty at Monmouth University in New Jersey. Monmouth's students have voted him the outstanding humanities faculty member five times, and he received the first Excellence in Teaching Award from the university's school of education.

His work has also afforded him the time and inspiration to write two novels. His first book "A Wing and a Prayer" was published in 1993, with a second printing in 1999. It currently features an introduction by John Sawhill, CEO of the Nature Conservancy, one of the world's largest environmental groups. He recently completed his second book, "Makoona." Both novels are works of eco-literature, a new genre combining environmental responsibility with fiction. A self-proclaimed, lifelong nature lover and conservationist, Morano is passionate in his belief that journalism is about giving a voice to those who have none, a belief that is clearly evidenced in his use of non-human characters.

"I see journalism as empowerment, very often providing a voice for the voiceless. The most voiceless group I can think of is the planet's non-human populations. I guess, I'm trying to give the fauna and flora a voice," says Morano.

### **Story for adults and children**

Critics have compared "A Wing and a Prayer," the story of the last living Guadeloupe Island Petrel, a bird named Lupé, to other anthropomorphic literature such as "Jonathan Livingston Seagull" and "Watership Down." The book has also been described as a children's book for adults, meaning that it can entertain just about anyone. As a testament to its wide appeal, Morano recently turned down two offers to turn "A Wing and a Prayer" into an animated feature film, with additional offers to bring the story to the screen still on the table.

The depth of "A Wing and a Prayer" can be attributed to more than its environmental plotline. Morano uses his non-human cast of characters to comment on education, race relations, parenting and sexism, in the vein of George Orwell's "Animal Farm." And like Orwell's books, Morano's have found their way into the classroom. Charlie Aria, a 7th-grade English teacher in New Jersey says his students really root for the book's main character, Lupé.

"He holds onto his dreams and my students get behind him. One of the biggest messages pertains to relationships and friends. In middle school, that's what you are living," says Aria.

### **An undersea tale**

Morano's second novel, "Makoona," is the story of Binti, Swahili for courage, a female octopus who lives in a coral reef, and Kemar, a Cambodian boy who fishes the reef. Binti's love interest, a psychedelic male octopus named Molo, speaks nothing but Grateful Dead lyrics. The premise of the book and its environmental message helped Morano earn the Grateful Dead's permission to use the lyrics, a request that is rarely granted.

The book's introduction is by Kathryn Fuller, president of the World Wildlife Fund. Fuller writes, "Sometimes it takes a book like John Morano's 'Makoona' to remind us just what amazing sights are lurking beneath the surface. In the undersea world of 'Makoona,' octopuses, dolphins, sharks, turtles, blowfish, gobies, stargazers and moray eels all combine to create a teeming tableau of life."

"I decided to use animals as characters because I believe that there is nothing more interesting than the natural world," Morano says. "The saying goes that truth is stranger than fiction, and I believe nature is far more exciting than anything I could create."

### **Finding success**

Morano, who lives in the New Jersey woods with his wife and two young sons, is currently working on a textbook for film critics called "Don't Tell Me the Ending!" He expects to complete it soon and is already thinking about his third novel, "Out There Somewhere," the story of several animals who live in a marine life theme park. Only when those projects are complete will he think about a sequel to "A Wing and a Prayer."

Despite his successes, Morano remains modest.

"I know I'm no Stephen King or John Grisham," he says. "I'm no Hemingway or Twain. I don't need to be them. My stories don't need to be bestsellers or major

motion pictures for me to feel like a success. All those achievements are great, but I think my work stands on its own, and I'm proud of that. It's a success because I can read it to my kids and you can read it to yours and because I believe it gives something back to the planet."