

The Asbury Park Press
Wednesday, November 2, 1994
Nature novel a flight of fancy
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If they could talk, birds would probably complain about the irritation in their eyes caused by acid rain.

Seagulls might wonder about the oil that spills into the ocean, killing the fish they eat, and turtles likely would describe the difficulty of digging nests on over-developed beaches.

If they could talk, animals might offer a warning about the damage people do to the environment every day.

In John Morano's novel "A Wing and a Prayer," they do just that.

Published last spring, the book explores social and environmental issues through the eyes of animals.

"These days, they're probably at least as concerned about the planet as we should be," said Morano, a journalism professor at Monmouth College.

The book, which has been labeled an "enviro-novel," focuses on Lupe, a bird who apparently is the last one of his kind. Lupe travels across the ocean, seeking a mate to help carry on his species.

Morano said he got the idea for the novel about six years ago when he saw a brief segment on the TV news about a hamster that was the last of its kind. When that hamster died, the species would become extinct forever.

"It hit me like—bang! That's my story. That's my book."

Morano, of Upper Freehold Township, spent a year researching the book and dedicated four years to writing it, he said. He calls the novel a children's book for adults.

Morano, 34, said he has been concerned about the environment ever since his childhood in Rockaway, NY. As a boy, he often swam in a creek near his house and loved to eat the fish he caught there.

"It was filled with life," he said. "As I got older, it got tougher and tougher to catch anything in there and finally to even see anything in there."

Morano said he tries to respect nature and to do little things to help the planet. “I recycle. I try to walk softly. And I really try to be part of the plan, part of the harmony.”

For Morano, the ocean is a source of inspiration.

“I fish the jetties in Long Branch. And I learn a lot about my stories just walking the beaches,” said Morano, who lived six years in Long Branch before buying a log home last winter in Upper Freehold Township.

Morano, who already has plans for five more books, including a sequel to “A Wing and a Prayer,” wasn’t always interested in writing. He originally went to college to play basketball, with dreams of becoming a basketball coach.

Then he took a film course and it changed everything, he said.

Morano was inspired to write and soon realized he wanted to be an author. So he made the difficult decision to quit the basketball team and dedicate himself to writing.

“I was crying like a baby but I’m glad I did it,” he said. “It worked out great.”

Morano still plays a lot of basketball and is advisor to the Monmouth College men’s basketball team. He also advises the school newspaper and student government.

His students apparently appreciate having him on campus too. He has received the Student Choice Award for outstanding faculty member at the School of Arts and Sciences for the past three years. He also won the Education Honor Society’s first “Celebration of Teaching” award this year.

Robert Huber, chairman of the college’s communications department, said the journalism program has grown from 25 students to about 100 pupils since Morano joined the faculty in 1988.

Morano has introduced several new courses as has great appeal with students, Huber said.

“(Morano’s) classes are full,” he said. “I think he understands how to communicate with students. They relate to him extremely well.”

Morano, who has worked in several cities, including Los Angeles, says he prefers teaching at Monmouth College to big-city life.

“It’s been good here,” he said. “It’s better than dealing with Prince and all those folks in Hollywood. The people here are a lot more honest. And they let you touch them, reach them.

“I’m going to stay right here and keep doing what I’m doing. The grass is greener right here.”

Morano said he dedicates most of his time to spending most of his time with his wife, Kris, and their 4-month-old son John Tyler, and to working on the family’s new home.

Of course, he also makes time to publicize his novel, which was published by Northwest Publishing, Inc. Morano has visited malls around New Jersey to sign copies of his book and he spoke at the Monmouth College Library Association’s annual membership reception in September.

He even has promised to give a free talk to children at any area schools that include “A Wing and a Prayer” in their curricula.

Charlie Aria, a seventh-grade teacher at Fords Middle School, Woodbridge Township, has already accepted Morano’s offer.

Aria, of Ocean Township, said he met Morano about five years ago when both men were walking their dogs on the beach. He learned Morano was working on a book and asked to read it when the novel was published.

“You read the book and it tells you a lot about John,” Aria said. “It makes sense to me that a sensitive soul like John would create that work.”

Aria decided immediately to share the novel with his students, he said. The school bought 30 copies and Aria spent three weeks reading the book aloud to his class. “The kids just loved it. Every single one of them loved that book.”

Aria’s students were thrilled to meet Morano and to ask questions about Lupe’s adventures, he said.

“How often does a kid read a book and then get to meet the author?” Aria asked. “(The children) didn’t want to go to their next class. At the end of the day, they didn’t want to go home.”

Morano already has begun working on his second novel, “Gift of the Sea,” which he expects to complete within a year. He eventually wants to show his books to people at Disney, and dreams of seeing his stories animated on the big screen.