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Lupe's Wing is Morano's Prayer
By Carl Blumenthal

When was the last time you read a book about a talking bird? Richard Back published "Jonathan Livingston Seagull" just before the first Earth Day in 1970. John Morano, a Monmouth College professor of journalism, wrote "A Wing and a Prayer" at the height of the environmental movement, around the time of Earth Day 20. Northwest Publishing issued Morano's novel last year.

What a different two decades makes! "A Wing and a Prayer" is the story of Lupe, a petrel or swallow-like seabird, who may be the last of his species. Like Jonathan Livingston Seagull, Lupe is determined to go where no bird has gone before. Whereas the seagull was little more than a symbol of a pilot's (Richard Bach's) dream to transcend space and time, the petrel has the earthier but no less impossible task of finding the last female of his race (Morano grew up by the ocean in East Rockaway, New York).

To those inspired by Bach's monkish hero, Lupe will seem a pedestrian, family bird. To those who remember "Jonathan Livingston Seagull" as bad philosophy, "A Wing and a Prayer" has the saving grace of being grounded in biology and ecology.

The book's three chapters are a fable of animal liberation. Scientists catch and cage Lupe to ensure his survival. Preferring to take his chances in the wild, Lupe escapes with the help of an Underground Railroad of animal friends. Like a returning exile who finds his society familiar but changed, Lupe meets a flock of related petrels. His mating with one of the birds is the end of one dream and the beginning of another.

Morano plans similar books about the sea, including a sequel to "A Wing and a Prayer." He hopes to carve out a niche for himself with these "children's books for adults." In addition, because of his concern about the environment, he sees thinking and talking animals as the best way for people to identify with nature. This separates him from other nature writers who "stick to the facts."

Yet Morano reminds me of traditional science fiction writers. He extrapolates from scientific observations of animal breeding, parenting, territoriality, hunting and imitation. For the author our similarities with other animals outweigh our differences. If animals can sound like people, people often act like animals.

Morano and science fiction writers often leave science behind when they present their social views. The petrels worship Pettr, reminiscent of the Great Spirit of American Indians. Lupe has several religious experiences which contribute to his

development. Morano implies we must worship nature to save it; that there is something missing in our makeup which prevent us from also saving ourselves. This is an interesting thesis, but why doesn't Lupe question a god who has allowed his flock to disappear? Lupe's beliefs are too pat for my taste, especially given his unsettling circumstances.

John Morano's treatment of interspecies cooperation is much more convincing, whether a pigeon, turtle, or lizard help Lupe. The mutual aid grows from a common experience of the environment, whereas Lupe's worship of Pettr is more a positive—quite literally because he meditates on one leg. Thus the analogy of interspecies cooperation to interracial understanding is more believable.

The writer is not afraid to make fun of his hero's earnestness. In fact, Lupe is a straight man for the antics of the pigeon who thinks he is a rat and a lizard who thinks he is the cat's meow. Although Lupe has a healthy ego, this is a novel of discovery. Both Lupe and the reader have much to learn.

One of those discoveries is Sirka, a female petrel from the other flock whose assertiveness makes her an outsider like Lupe. If not for the variety of sex roles in nature, Morano would appear to be on a soapbox again.

Petrels usually lay only one egg. When Sirka and Lupe incubate twins, there is a kind of genetic redemption. In this mixed marriage, chances are better than one chick will resemble Lupe, thereby preserving his genetic heritage.

In a draft version of "A Wing and a Prayer," Morano let Lupe die by choking on plastic before Sirka laid the eggs. This melodrama would have clashed with the book's evenhanded approach. Although the question of the destiny of Lupe's flock is not answered, the novel's motto might be "a solution for every problem." We flat-footed creatures could use such uplifting.