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A Wing and a Prayer
By Bethany Dickerson

We have all heard the fanciful children's stories in which the hero, an overgrown, unrealistic animal is capable of astounding feats, such as saving the human race or the world. The problem with these stories is their lack of believability.

Readers know that a mouse cannot overthrow the government or protect the environment within its own limited resources. John Morano, Journalism professor at Monmouth University, presents readers with a new story, an "Econovel," which entertains as well as promotes an environmental message through the perspective of a realistic hero.

"A Wing and a Prayer" centers around Lupe, a bird who believes he is the last Guadalupe Petrel. Lupe's problem exists in having been captured by the "man-flock," a scenario which he cannot understand. His escapades, told from his perspective, involve breaking free from further captivity and beginning his search for a mate in order to further his race and take himself off the endangered species list.

In 1993, "A Wing and a Prayer" was published by Northwest Publishing Company, Salt Lake City, Utah. Under the contract, Northwest was permitted to print and sell 10,000 copies of the book. If and when all copies were sold, Morano would regain all rights to his book and begin shopping for a new deal, if he so chose.

"Wing" began to gather attention from several reviewers being credited as the beginning of a new genre, the Econovel. Praise arrived from the environmental community as well.

Kathryn Fuller, President and CEO of the World Wildlife Fund, wrote, "I am impressed with your aspirations to spread the word about endangered species and the need for habitat conservation around the world ... your commitment to protecting the diversity of life on earth, and to enlarging our understanding of its variety and importance, serves as a fine example for others."

Now 10,000 copies later, in September of this year, "A Wing and a Prayer" has been reprinted by Pride & Imprints, a publishing company in Port Orchard, Wash., featuring an introduction by John Sawhill, President and CEO of The Nature Conservancy.

"He's like a rock star to me," Morano said. "He's in the Jacques Cousteau league. For someone like that to see what I'm doing and endorse it ... that is just incredible."

Incredible, but true. Although “Wing” has been compared to other animal novels, Morano insists that there is a difference.

“You will never see an animal do something that it can not (ordinarily) do,” Morano said.

Examples of this abound throughout the story. Every character, from the confused pigeon Zomis to the land iguana Stithl, are described living in their natural habitats and eating their normal food. The only real creative license that Morano seems to have taken with these characters is found in their personalities.

The idea for the novel was born on a Florida vacation while watching a television program about the last living Russian woolly hamster. Morano said he was intrigued by the story. He remembers thinking that it would make a great book, but not with a hamster hero.

Morano wanted to use a bird because he felt it would expand the settings in which the story could take place. He chose a shore bird because he has always lived near the ocean and has been interested in its inhabitants.

After spending more than a year researching endangered animals, Morano, then a Long Branch resident, finally settled on the Guadalupe Petrel, last seen in 1911. The species, he felt, was neither “too tough, nor too wimpy” to tackle the obstacles which his main character was bound to face.

Morano has found the praise that he has received for his Econovel to be thrilling. He has been honored by Fords Middle School in Woodbridge, whose entire 7th grade class yearly reads “A Wing and a Prayer,” and then invites Morano to speak about his work. Morano has been encouraging other schools to follow suit as he describes “Wing” appropriate for those with a 6th grade reading level and above, as “a children’s book for adults.”

With the success of his first novel still expanding, Morano has decided to continue his literary career. He has just completed his second Econovel, entitled “Makoona,” the story of a female octopus and a Cambodian boy who share a coral reef. It will possibly be published within a year, Morano said, with Fuller writing the introduction.

Morano is also composing a film review textbook entitled “Don’t Tell Me The Ending.” He also has plans for another Econovel entitled “Out There Somewhere,” about several animals living in a Sea World setting, and is also considering a sequel to “A Wing and a Prayer.”

Despite the recognition Morano is achieving through his novels, he says he remains grounded.

“I’ve read a lot of crummy books in my time. That’s what made me think I could do it too ... I’m not Michael Crichton or John Grisham, but I know it can still be a wonderful book and not be a bestseller. I’m just thrilled that so many people are reading it (Wing) and I’m just going to keep writing.”