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Monmouth professor debuts new literary genre on *A Wing and a Prayer*

By B.A. Sweeney

John Morano thinks the environ-novel (that's short for environmental novel) is going to be the literary genre of the '90s.

He ought to know.

Morano, who teaches journalism at Monmouth College, has introduced the form with his first novel *A Wing and a Prayer*, published this year by Northwest Publishing, Inc. of Salt Lake City, Utah.

The story is about Lupe, the very last Guadalupe Petrel, a species which Morano said became extinct in 1911 "due to man's carelessness."

Although *Wing* has been compared to *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, the pop philosophy bestseller of the early 1970s, the comparison is unfair.

For one thing, *Wing* has no pretensions. Anybody, child, teen, adult, can pick it up and understand what's going on without being hit with double meanings found in existential philosophy. Morano has a clear, light style and can say a lot—directly—while saying very little. He also has a fine sense of humor that makes you laugh out loud when you least expect it.

For another, we see the world entirely from Lupe's point of view.

It's not a question of anthromorphism. Morano read everything he could about the Guadalupe Petrel, learning such smallest details as the color and size of their eggs and how far they could fly. He's clearly familiar with and comfortable in Lupe's world, too. *Wing* unfolds as a quick, enchanting read.

Morano, 33, didn't set out to write a book about the last living "Gwatta" petrel or even about the environment, although, as a native of the South Shore of Long Island, he was always interesting in the environment.

He said he always wanted to write a book, but he didn't know what to write about.

Then, while visiting his parents in Florida during a break from graduate studies at Penn State, he saw a television news brief about the last living Russian woolly hamster.

"The voiceover was saying, 'This is the last Russian woolly hamster alive in the world,'" Morano recalled. "This is a male. There are no females. When he dies, it will be the end of the species."

Morano said the idea for a story about a very last animal of its kind “hit me like a ton of bricks.”

But he knew he wasn't going to write about the Russian woolly hamster. Not that he didn't like the little thing. It was in a cage. It lacked a certain mobility.

The story had to be about a bird, Morano said; specifically a seabird, to give both the character and the story range.

Russian woolly hamsters are (were?) cute. But after reading *Wing*, there's no doubt Lupe was the best choice. Not only does the bird have mobility, he has an appeal that is universal.

Northwestern is marketing *Wing* for children as well as adults. Morano hopes the Disney studios will want to develop it into a movie, perhaps with Danny DeVito doing the voice of Stithl, Lupe's likable lizard friend.

He is now writing a second novel to be published by Northwest. Titled *Gift of the Sea*, it's a double story about an octopus who lives in the Great Barrier Reef and a little boy whom Morano describes as “a Cambodian boat person.”

Meanwhile, Morano is excited by the initial success of *Wing*, which is feels is a children's story for adults.

“I hoped to write something to cross over audiences,” he said. “I'm a kid. I think we all are.”