

The Power of Story:

Acclaimed Author Infuses Literature with Equality

By Joanne Nystrom Janssen

Aclaimed author Walter Wangerin Jr. discovered the power of story in a childhood Sunday School class.

"I remember that a teacher of mine would tell a biblical story, and I literally just packed up my bags and moved into that story," said Wangerin. "I was Zaccheus in the tree."

Wangerin is now a storyteller himself who has written over 25 books, including *The Book of the Dun Cow*, *As for Me and My House*, *The Book of God*, and *Paul: A Novel*. He has received 12 book awards, including five Gold Medallion Book Awards and the National Book Award. Wangerin is also a professor and writer-in-residence at Valparaiso University in Indiana.

Secular and Christian reviewers have given Wangerin's work high praise, often citing his scholarship, imagination and writing style. Because Wangerin is a Christian, his books often explore themes of faith and spirituality.

A Congregation's Conversion

Interwoven through some of his titles is also the theme of gender equality, a topic that Wangerin hadn't thought about until the late 1970s. While serving as a Lutheran pastor, he received a request from a woman seminary student to serve as an intern at his inner city black congregation.

"This was the first time that I was confronted with the [gender] issue directly and had to make a personal decision," said Wangerin. "Moreover, this was the first time that I would have to [explain] my personal decision to a whole congregation of people."

Wangerin studied Scripture seriously and determined that the Bible teaches the equality of women and men. He presented his findings to the congregation, but didn't persuade them at first, he said. Then he invited a woman pastor to preach the Lenten services at his church.

"I saw those folks come to the services folding their arms and drawing their chins back, raising one eyebrow, [thinking], 'We'll see what this woman can do,'" said Wangerin. The audience deemed her first two sermons merely adequate, but they were impacted by the third sermon. In this presentation, she shared her difficult journey to becoming an ordained pastor.



Language of Experience: Art is a powerful communicator, according to acclaimed author Walter Wangerin Jr. "It puts [ideas] in our bones, in our entire being," he said.

"After that, I don't know how many people, leaning forward, said, 'We can't do that to others,'" Wangerin said. The church agreed to let the intern serve at their church, and Wangerin said she was perfect for the congregation: "vibrant and good and the Spirit of the Lord shined in her."

Equal Writes

Wangerin's belief in biblical equality is evident in many of his books, especially in his portrayal of biblical women.

For example, in *Paul: A Novel*, the story of the first-century apostle is told from many perspectives, including that of women. Female characters such as Lydia, Phoebe and Priscilla are depicted as Paul's important co-workers. The book also includes a conversation between Paul and Priscilla, in which Paul provides an affirmation and explanation of her prophecy and teaching ministry.

The presence of gender equality is both intentional and a result of the writing process, said Wangerin. He gave Priscilla such a prominent role because of a clue he discovered in Paul's letters. In his

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earlier letters Paul mentions “Aquila and Priscilla” but in later letters he reverses the order of their names.

“Usually in [Paul’s] day, the male is always named first and the female is named second,” said Wangerin. “I came upon where Paul is referring to the female first. And I think to myself, this reflects a change in Paul’s relationship with Priscilla.”

At the same time, Wangerin said he found himself making discoveries as he wrote. For example, he knew from Paul’s letters that Paul escaped from prison in Ephesus, but the details aren’t recorded in the Bible. As Wangerin wrote, keeping the spirit and tenor of Paul’s letters in mind, his book taught him how the characters might respond.

Editing Experience

This capacity to bring to life biblical characters is due to what Wangerin calls “sympathetic engagement”: the artist’s childlike capacity to imagine and portray the perspective of someone quite different than him or herself.

Authors can write from the perspective of someone of another gender or race because of this ability, according to Wangerin. And, writers can write about dying, even though they haven’t experienced it.

This ability, however, can be blocked. “Sin makes ourselves the center of our world,” Wangerin said. “Sin makes you see all the world through your own, prejudging eyes.” With a self-absorbed perspective, a person can believe and communicate lies about other people.

Wangerin experienced this firsthand when he requested financial assistance to take his church’s African American choir on a tour in Africa. The donor advised Wangerin not to trust the members of his choir, saying he knew blacks “very, very well” from the years they worked in his cane fields.

This response is appalling, according to Wangerin, but not uncommon. Mistaken assumptions, while varied in degree, are pervasive.

“And so it exists between men and women,” said Wangerin, “[imposing] an inequality which it genuinely assumes to be the vision of the world, when in fact it’s a private, personal vision that has never

stopped to examine itself and its effect upon other people.

“As a human being and an artist, I could not [portray] situations where there was a false imposition of hierarchy upon one group by another,” he said. “Why? Because I would be writing a lie, and that to me is the most abhorrent thing I could do.”

A Record of Sin

Wangerin has written about this sin of a self-centered perspective in the book *As for Me and My House*. As a fourth-generation pastor, Wangerin grew up with presumptions about putting ministry above family, which damaged his marriage.

“I entered into the marriage thinking I was a tender and sensitive fellow,” said Wangerin, “and nevertheless, ministry was supreme in our household until [my wife’s] suffering got so extreme that I could not ignore it.”

Wangerin’s transformation gave him insight to write the book, which discusses an equal partnership marriage. But, the book does so without using words like “egalitarian” or “hierarchical.”

“I’m an artist, and I love language too much to use it cheaply,” Wangerin said. “Jargon always is a plugged nickel.”

Instead, Wangerin wrote first from personal experience, giving the story detail and particularity so the reader can live through it. “When I tell stories, they are not illustrations of a point,” he said. “They are the very experience of the issue we’re talking about.”

This vulnerability allows the author and the reader to be on the same plane, according to Wangerin. “I’m not lifting my finger, pointing and teaching, saying, ‘You must, you should,’” he said. “I’m just there communicating my own experience.”

In sections of the book that were more instructive, Wangerin drew upon larger tenets of Scripture rather than smaller commandments. The largest tenet of Scripture, he said, is forgiveness.

This focus meant Wangerin didn’t need to explain biblical texts that are emotionally charged and outworn with conflicting definitions. While he acknowledges that those verses are important, he said Paul wrote more extensively and with more excitement about issues like forgiveness.

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Embracing Ambiguity

While it's important to research and understand a work the artist is producing, Wangerin believes it is important for an artist to approach the subject with a humble attitude. Writers must take risks, he said, especially in admitting that they lack knowledge.

"As soon as I think I know, I'm never going to learn," Wangerin said. "I'm going to change the real experience into something which I myself interpret and control."

Art's power can be diminished when artists "preach" or approach their work as a way to change the world instead of communicating truth by experience, said Wangerin. He encourages other fiction writers to avoid authorial comments, because they turn a story into a sermon.

"If somebody comes up to you after you've written a novel and they say, 'What is the message of your novel?' you should look baffled," Wangerin said. "As soon as you can reduce it to a message, why would you read the novel?"

But how can a writer incorporate biblical equality in the story? Wangerin said that if the author is honorable and honest in telling the story, the writer's deep beliefs will be present in the story — but as a worldview that the reader will experience instead of as instruction.

Wangerin began to understand these concepts as a 13-year-old preparatory school student. Some of his theologian professors began to ask when he was going to start writing theology.

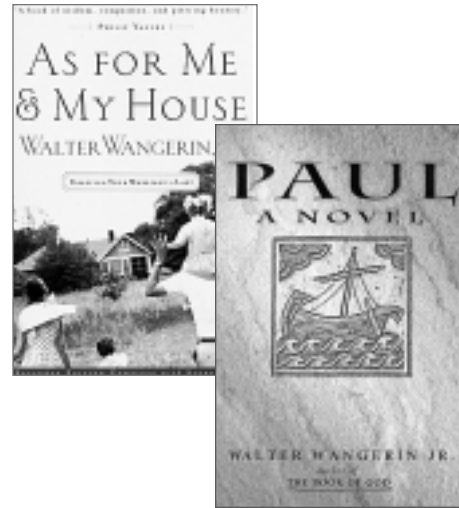
"That's when I began to realize, although I couldn't put words to it then, that what I did was ambiguous," Wangerin said. "What they expected theologians and preachers to do was to tell single truths with single words. Art is nothing if it is not ambiguous."

Art's Potency

For truths like biblical equality, Wangerin believes art may be the most potent communicator. When a truth is argued, listeners must work to understand by intellectual analysis. Art, on the other hand, helps people to experience the truth.

A story from Africa illustrates his point. Jack Priestly, one of Wangerin's friends, taught a college class in Tanzania, where about half of the students had been influenced by Western dress and thought.

Priestly told the class a story about a hyena, which came to a fork in the road. He smelled food from the right, and lifted his paw to go to the right-hand side. The wind shifted, and now the hyena smelled food from the left, so he lifted his paw to go to the left-hand side. The hyena wanted so badly to go both ways that he split in half and died.



Equal Writes: Wangerin's belief in biblical equality is evident in books such as *As for Me and My House* and *Paul: A Novel*. "As a human being and an artist, I could not [portray] situations where there was a false imposition of hierarchy upon one group by another," he said.

When Priestly asked the class if this story was true, those influenced by Western thinking said, "No, because hyenas don't die [like that]." But Priestly noticed that the students in native dress were squirming. With great difficulty, one man admitted that the story was true, blurring out: "Greed kills."

This is the better understanding of the story, said Wangerin. Through art, the truth had become part of the man's mind, emotions and senses.

"When art is our communication, the listeners enter into it and subjectively experience the point," he said. "In other words, that fellow had been the hyena. This is what art does: It puts [ideas] in our bones, in our entire being. This is the power of art."

Joanne Nystrom Janssen is the editor of Mutuality.

The following books by Walter Wangerin Jr. are available from CBE:

Paul: A Novel

B216P\$14.99/Sale **\$11.24**

As for Me and My House:

Crafting Your Marriage to Last

B139P\$13.99/Sale **\$10.49**

A Prayerbook for Husbands and Wives: Partners in Prayer (coauthored with Ruthanne Wangerin)

B247P\$11.99/Sale **\$8.99**

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