

LARRY WOIWODE

“

WORDS

*for*

READERS

*and*

WRITERS

”

SPIRIT-POOLED DIALOGUES

“In *Words for Readers and Writers*, Larry Woiwode—one of our most compelling and important contemporary voices—illuminates his life and his experience as a writer-of-faith, as a writer within whom and within whose works a profound Christian belief resides. In these essays and interviews, Woiwode takes us into his interior life, offering artful meditations on the holy acts of reading and writing. Woiwode explores what it means to be a writer-in-Christ, to celebrate the durability and holiness of language, to work at that place where the imagination and the soul intersect and flower. We should listen earnestly to what Woiwode has to say.”

**Gregory L. Morris**, Professor of American Literature, Penn State Erie; author, *A World of Order and Light* and *Talking Up a Storm*

“I knew that I was in for a treat the moment I looked at the table of contents, which reads like a tempting menu of topics. When I started to read the essays I was captivated by the energy of Woiwode’s mind and even more by how widely read and broadly informed he is. To read this book is to receive a liberal education. I believe that this is one of Woiwode’s best books.”

**Leland Ryken**, former professor of English, Wheaton College; author, *Christian Guides to the Classics* series

“A book on craft, yes, but more a book on living, Larry Woiwode’s *Words for Readers and Writers* in my library sits between Flannery O’Connor’s *Mystery and Man-ners* and John Gardner’s *On Becoming a Novelist*. Not since O’Connor has a writer put the reader in such comfortable and uncomfortable places at the same time.”

**G. W. Hawkes**, Professor of English, Co-Director Creative Writing, Lycoming College; author, *Surveyor* and *Gambler’s Rose*

“Few writers can match Larry Woiwode for craft and care. Sentence by beautiful sentence he traces the lineaments of thought, feeling, and experience. He inhabits the roles that life has given him, as writer and critic, father and husband, and Christian, with a constant difficult grace. I admire his writing deeply; it is always gratifying to be in its presence.”

**Alan Jacobs**, Clyde S. Kilby Chair, Professor of English, Wheaton College; author, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction*

“The word ‘words’ and the name ‘Woiwode’ are not only similar sounding but are practically synonymous. Who better to parse the subject of words than Larry Woiwode, one of our country’s ultimate wordsmiths?”

**John L. Moore**, author, *The Breaking of Ezra Riley* and *Take the Reins*

“Why do you write? Where does it come from? What sort of life is it, anyway? We badger our writers with those questions certain that living that close to fire must surely have taught them something. Woiwode has been asked those questions many times, over the years, and this volume collects a vigorous, various set of answers. While settings and interlocutors shift, Woiwode’s core insight, quietly returned to, remains always the same. What is writing but faith expressing itself through love?—giving yourself over to that first stab of insight, spending yourself prodigiously for others, certain that the one who calls you has already given you all things. One can learn much here about reading and writing, but one can learn even more what it means to believe.”

**Thomas Gardner**, Alumni Distinguished Professor of English, Virginia Tech;  
author, *John in the Company of Poets: The Gospel in Literary Imagination*

“I loved it. I’d like to read it again this weekend. The way Woiwode phrased things humbled me completely . . . Lots of food for thought . . .”

**Victoria**, college student

“‘Metaphor is the meditative center of a writer’s inner universe.’ That’s just too cool. This essay got me reading sections aloud to my parents because I needed to gush about it with somebody. Woiwode’s essays have been a great encouragement—artistically and spiritually.”

**Phoebe**, college student

*Words for Readers and Writers*

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street  
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Josh Dennis

First printing 2013

Printed in the United States of America

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Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-3522-2

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-3523-9

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-3524-6

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-3525-3

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## Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Woiwode, Larry.

[Essays. Selections]

Words for readers and writers : spirit-pooled dialogues / Larry

Woiwode.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-4335-3522-2 (tp)

1. Christian literature—Authorship. I. Title.

BR44.W56 2013

814'.54—dc23

2012040112

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Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13  
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# INTRODUCTION

The following essays formed an eerie architecture of meaning as I selected them from two drawers of a four-drawer file. The dialogues they record are both inner and outer, between me and memory and interviewers and editors. They deal with the act of writing, with a reader's response to writing, and the ways we all use words, including Facebook entries, to fashion meaning for our lives—even identities.

Words about writing, once on a page, form pooling metaphors that a reader can enter into in a dialogue. Recurring motifs reflect across the pools and a variety of meanings form a growing unity. This is abetted by a spirited gravity that sets them in pooling emphases.

If that's what writers feel when they say they're inspired, I feel and have felt inspired. The Spirit has pressed out a variety of views that counterbalance one another in the spirit-pooled dialogues of my title.



## USING WORDS, A CONTINUAL SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* William James writes: “The science of religions may not be an equivalent for living religion; and if we turn to the inner difficulties of such a science, we see that a point comes when she must drop the purely theoretic attitude, and either let her knots remain uncut, or have them cut by active faith.”<sup>1</sup>

James is an apologist for faith, at least partly, and says in his book that faith has the potential to set spiritual goals for humankind. He is equally an apologist for psychology, the science he refers to, although in our day, after exposés of the Freudian slips at the genesis of psychology, I tend to view it as a *creative* science.

Science is anyhow based on faith—that gravity will inhere and maintain the stability for scientific experiment, hold you and your Bunsen burner where you are while you grip a retort or these pages. Science would not have progressed as it has without faith that the universe, from its center to its outermost reaches, does indeed cohere, no matter that the poet W. B. Yeats said “the center cannot hold.”<sup>2</sup>

A faith of that sort, assumed and covert, rested beneath *What I’m Going to Do, I Think*, a first novel that appeared in May, 1969, by a

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writer who signed himself L. Woiwode. The novel was semiscientific and out to cut knots in its detonation of the romantic lie of honeymoons, as it depicted one spent in the Michigan woods not far from Northport Point by Chris and Ellen (Strohe) VanEenamam.

The book received congenial attention, sold well, and started climbing best-seller lists. To sum up the critical reaction, it's fair to say reviewers saw the book as existential and filled with a foreboding they found hard to define. Some mentioned uneasiness at the foreboding and, as the anonymous reviewer from *Time* put it, "After lyrically celebrating the pleasures of love-making, Woiwode begins softly terrorizing paradise."<sup>3</sup>

So paradise was anyway mentioned. One reviewer noted that the first of the three epigraphs, by William Blake, was titled "To God" and read

If you have formed a circle go into  
Go into it Yourself and see how You would do.<sup>4</sup>

but none mentioned that the last line of the novel's coda employs a verse from the book of Romans—"The wages of sin, dear, is death." Nor was critical attention turned on the Christian Science that seemed to L. Woiwode to inform his central character, Ellen Strohe, nor the Roman Catholicism of his antagonist, Chris, and Presbyterian and Lutheran outlooks of other characters received no notice, although they often vied with the views of Chris and Ellen.

No reviewer suggested the foreboding might be attributed to belief in an entity beyond the novel, an omniscient Creator, and none implied that the author might believe that a scene in nature (though much was made of his "nature descriptions") could communicate attributes of that Creator—the kind who might cause L. Woiwode and the characters in his novel to assume, one assumes, responsibility for their actions.

Woiwode was born on the Great Plains in 1941 or 1942; both are named by reviewers and websites. The sky and plain seemed to him to govern the universe. They were all he knew until he reached what is per-

haps the most critical age—the phase of using words to please parents, and with the use of words he felt suspended between his parents and blue and green, the literal heavens and earth to him.

So his interest in nature and “word pictures,” as noted by reviewers of his first novel, was perhaps not merely literary—a correlative to his characters’ inner state, as some saw it—but an attempt to represent the heaven and earth containing the lives that contained his from before memory began. And as memory formed, Woiwode felt reluctant to speak, since each word carried a specific meaning.

Would he get it right? An analogue of that reluctance is dramatized by a pair of preschool characters in the novel *Born Brothers*:

It’s difficult for us to fit a word to something it doesn’t sound like, especially for him [the narrator’s brother]. If the word doesn’t match the part of the thing it’s meant for, or the thing itself, it slips off the, ah, whatyoumaycallit, you know, that shiny bending thing, wide at the end but flat, for slipping under and lifting—and we learn to use the names that others do, when we do (spatula, for that, for instance, now in Daddy’s big hand, turning over eggs crinkled at their edges) out of habit.<sup>5</sup>

Woiwode can’t attest to the accuracy of this, once its placement in prose has fixed it in memory as fiction fixes fact, but since both his parents were—in real life, let’s say—English teachers, let’s imagine they drilled verbal habits into their children.

There was another, higher use of words, however, as Woiwode learned when he was four, in a situation recorded in *Acts*, a memoir-commentary:

I remember waking (or this is the way the sensation arrives) in church and hearing a priest with a German accent declaim in what seemed anger, in reference to a passage I now know is from First Corinthians, “Does that mean, wives, that you must submit to him when he asks you to go to *bet* wid him? *Yess!*”

With the fervor of his yes! I felt my mother next to me stir in the pew, uneasy, then my father shift on my other side, while I experienced at their center my first faint stirrings of sexual intimation—or

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whatever rough secret it was they shared in the bedroom: scripture had been applied.<sup>6</sup>

The decade of 1964 to 1974 was fruitful for L. Woiwode. He wrote portions of every book he has published since, except *Acts*—although he says he was thinking about it, because of his own acts. During this decade he decided to read the Bible to understand what the generations he was writing about found so important.

North Dakota, where his umbilical roots lie (literally, he has said) is the setting of his second novel, *Beyond the Bedroom Wall*. This six-hundred-page book, begun in the mid-sixties and published in 1975 is, if one heeds certain critics, the only book Woiwode has written. Or should be.

Research has shown that other critics felt the novel was inferior to *What I'm Going to Do, I Think*, however, and Woiwode takes heart at that. There was significance in his new *nom de plume*: Larry Woiwode. It wasn't that he was weary of readers responding to portions of his books appearing in magazines with the question, Are you male or female? Or queries on the weirdness of his name—"With all those vowels, I figure you must be East Indian!" His full name did not signal a hope to be wholly straightforward, using the diminutive his parents handed him—though that thought, too, occurred.

What Woiwode hoped to say was, Don't pigeonhole me. The books he was working on tended in different directions, and he noticed how many reviewers and readers, too, clung to the hobgoblin of consistency, preferring books with predictable sameness, so they knew what they were getting into.

In a further sense, perhaps Woiwode reasserted his baptized name to place himself in the centuries-old Christian tradition. The tradition's hallmark is the diversity of its writers. It takes only a glance at moderns in the tradition to appreciate that—John Updike, Muriel Spark, Diane Glancy, or those grounded in the original covenant: Isaac Singer, Cynthia Ozick, Saul Bellow.

Besides the diversity, Woiwode recognized a largesse of spirit in that tradition. A universal understanding of it existed, plus a host of

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witnesses, which was part of the difficulty in gaining entry. It was that good. Here William James's words on faith fall in place—knots of theory and opposition to be cut. With centuries of scholarship and literary works in its annals, the tradition wasn't one in which you wrote a novel or poem by reinventing the wheel. You stood on or fell from the shoulders of others' achievements, if you stood at all. A sense of the depth and difficulties of the tradition appears in *Beyond the Bedroom Wall*, as Alpha Neumiller considers her entry into the Catholic Church:

It tied her to a past more ordered than hers. She felt her life lengthen backward, watching rituals she knew had been performed in the same way over the world for hundreds of years happen again; her mind had new strength and freedom to roam now; old fears were given names, others disappeared, and doubts were discarded to gain a new end. The prayers held her in a written framework with her feet on the ground. The Church's scholarship and mysteries were beyond the comprehension of any one man and wife, and she felt an infinity of thought and brotherhood about her.<sup>7</sup>

*Couples* and *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Fear of Flying* had recently appeared and the title of the novel itself was meant to register transcendence *beyond* bedroom gymnastics. At the end of its first chapter an aging carpenter who has returned to the place of his birth to bury his father reads from a Latin missal and sings Latin hymns in a homemade, graveside rite. The next chapter concludes with the singer's son, Martin, "kneeling in the furnace-heated warmth of St. Boniface Church in Wimbledon, asking God if Alpha could be his wife."<sup>8</sup>

In the next chapter Martin and Alpha study doctrine with a blind priest. The author doesn't sidestep the irony, but doesn't shower a waterfall of condescension down on them, impair them mentally or call them nitwits, as gentle humanists, claiming openness to every aspect of diversity, do.

By now many readers sensed the direction Woiwode's work would take and a number waved good-bye. Others waited. In 1977 he published a book of poems, *Even Tide*, describing the odyssey of a man

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and woman, and the next year he and his wife moved, with two children (the number would reach four), to southwest North Dakota—the real west, as Woiwode called it.

It was in 1981, with the appearance of his third novel, *Poppa John*, that Woiwode, as ranchers put it, hit the fence. *Poppa John* was generally panned and widely misread—purposely, it sometimes seemed. In the *New York Times Book Review* Joyce Carol Oates claimed *Poppa John* had a heart attack outside a bank, when in the text a spiritual shakedown occurs *inside* a bank—no clinical heart attack intended or suggested, except by a fellow in the psychiatric ward where *Poppa John* ends up. Woiwode figured the negative reaction was generated by the novel's bias against America's god: Television.

Trying to set the record straight in an article solicited later by *North Dakota History*, Woiwode noted that he began the book seventeen years earlier—in his fruitful phase as a unisexual East Indian. He mentioned that an editor at the *New Yorker* wanted the magazine to run *Poppa John* entire (not usual in that era), and when the editor was turned down by the man at the top, he lodged an unprecedented request: that Mr. Shawn take two weeks to reconsider. The response that arrived in two weeks gave Woiwode a glimpse of the fence he was about to hit: to publish *Poppa John* might, to some, the top man said, indicate a shift in *New Yorker* policy. The cryptic nature of this Woiwode translated to mean: the magazine could not appear to condone a serious expression of Christianity.

As reviews and reactions to *Poppa John* rolled in, it became clear the novel was seen as an analogue to a “conversion experience” Woiwode must have suffered. He seemed to some not only to leave the high wire of literary performance for a safety net of faith but to set up a pulpit in fiction—a weak-kneed leap of faith?

Another piece of gossip appeared later on the Internet about the paperback edition of *Poppa John*, issued by Crossway—that the Christian house had edited the text to render it acceptable to its audience. They did not touch a word. Woiwode used the opportunity of a new edition to simplify the opening and last pages (running it past his origi-

nal editor at Farrar, Straus & Giroux first), and Crossway, a true Christian publisher, personified in the Dennis family, reprinted every page of the book as it appeared in the original, including the alterations intended to simplify its opening and conclusion.

OK, I'll slip these suspenders of specious anonymity from my shoulders—I'm the guy!—and say I had not changed, but perhaps my faith became more apparent in that novel. I deplore the idea of a leap of faith. It's irrelevant to Christianity, and is a view of the irrational school of philosophy, as it's called—two of its adherents Kant and Kierkegaard, who tacked flags of philosophy and fiction onto centuries-old biblical texts and commentary.

I don't require a convoluted leap of faith. The Bible contains sixty-plus books and in them I find every shape and shade of belief and unbelief in every form I've experienced (and some I haven't) in translation into clear English. The Word chooses and calls its listeners—"Those with ears to hear, let them hear!"—and they believe and at times fail to believe without the need for philosophical attenuation.

The pages I've composed as a writer, millions of finished sentences, attempt to embody through words aspects of the Word in people and their actions, or to amplify its traditions to include human beings attempting to live out lives of belief or unbelief in the world we all experience daily.

In *Acts* you will find,

For me, a writer aware of how much more complex each book becomes with each sentence added, it was the clarity of the patterns and structure in Scripture and their ability to intermesh with one another through as many levels as I could imagine that convinced me that the Bible couldn't be the creation of a man or any number of men, and was certainly not the product of separate men divided by centuries, but was of another world: supernatural. I was forced to admit under no pressure but the pressure of the text itself that it could be only what it claimed it was, the Word of God.<sup>9</sup>

This conviction arrived while I was drafting *Beyond the Bedroom*

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*Wall*. In my final work on the novel, I tried to honor that conviction by returning to the Catholic Church I grew up in. But Vatican II had intervened and everything for me was, literally, turned around backward. I didn't feel at home. A year after the novel was published I found what I felt I was looking for in a Presbyterian church. Another tatterdemalion of gossip: that I said this church was better than any other. No, I said a particular church of that denomination seemed right for me at that time in my life. My family and I have since moved to another. A troubling suspicion that's haunted me since is that it seemed OK to be a Catholic—the primary religion of my previous books—as in Walker Percy, J. F. Powers, Flannery O'Connor, Graham Greene, T. S. Eliot and the like, but not a Protestant.

As the quirky response to *Poppa John* kept up, sales of my books slowed. It became harder for my agent to place my work, and Christian reviewers queued up to press the dominant chord, as reviewers do, a few registering their demurrers—unaware, perhaps, how even secondary negativity disrupts the supply of the staff of life. I came to feel approximately the way black citizens felt in America's South in the 1950s—aware my ostracism wasn't that complete, but aggrieved that branches of Christianity added to the apartheid.

And in the isolation booth of self-pity, I thought, Do critics take issue with second raters who climb in the carriage with Camus—the thousands who never contemplate existence with his unflinching originality and dignity? Do they scoff at the self-indulgent sentimentality of nihilism? Or is it only Christians they condemn to hell at the back of the bus?

In my next novel, *Born Brothers*, the narrator says

I believe in God, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, and I believe in *history*. The rock that supplied the Israelites with water, and was struck and abused then, is the one that offends to this day. You shepherds are loathsome to Pharaoh, Joseph told his father; that's why he put you out here . . . Israel's tribes kept and milked goats, besides eating them and sheep—lowliest of four-footed animals—but were faithful to other dietary laws that could seem fin-

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icky, particularly when they were impoverished . . . and besides this, brought offerings for sacrifice, and gave away a portion of their earnings to a priest or rabbi, and tried to hold to all this, even if the world they traveled through told them they were wrong. Once you've been dismissed as a human being for your beliefs, the next worst form of prejudice . . . is being told you're wrong, often with a shaking finger, and prejudice, whatever form it takes, is a boot in the face.<sup>10</sup>

My “unbelieving” editor did not touch this, perhaps aware that the present prejudice against Christianity is as fervent as ever. More Christians were martyred in the twentieth century than in the previous nineteen added together. Ponder that. Christians are discriminated against by universities and intellectual gatekeepers, even on the daily news, where anybody who takes the Scriptures seriously, whether Baptist or Greek Orthodox or Catholic, is a right-wing fundamentalist. A state religion reigns and its purpose seems to be to banish or at the minimum denigrate Christianity.

I don't believe prayer in public schools is the answer, or even helpful; nor is it proper to expunge references to Christianity from every text, as educators do. This is true censorship, not a group of parents concerned about the content of required reading for a third grader.

You don't have to be a seminarian or law student to understand that Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy are the basis of common law; that the religious leader Oliver Cromwell enacted the first anti-discrimination laws that opened England to Jews; or that the commandments of the Pentateuch—including prohibitions against murder, slavery, rape, kidnapping, and the abuse of women, to list a few—are the basis of what most of us today consider inviolable human rights.

A relevant sidelight uncovered in the research for a novel, *Indian Affairs* (but does not appear in it) is that the New England Puritans Jonathan Edwards and Cotton Mather worked with Native Americans to transliterate their languages as spoken, as other missionaries did—an irreplaceable addition to the heritage of those nations. The French and British governments involved Indian nations in their internecine, European conflicts, and it wasn't until a commonwealth of states were

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set up on this continent, and finally a central federal government installed—it was only then that unfair treaties were signed and, one after another, broken.

If Christianity is not allowed fair and free exercise, then the orphan knocking at your door, as Bob Dylan sings, is not only wearing the clothes that you once wore but informing you he isn't your orphan anymore. The stick-figure reject of the media and the target of stale jokes, the person of faith forms the largest homeless segment in the United States—70 percent of the population, strangers and pilgrims here.

As individuals, Christians may tolerate a slap in the face, but as churches and religious organizations it's time to reengage history and occupy the seats at the front of the bus. To encourage that enterprise, they need new stories of the sort they can find in the Bible, which presupposes the need for writers, and writing is a spiritual exercise that anybody can join.

You can. Pick up a book. Examine the truth or lack of truth in it; search out the glory of art its creator renders through words. Put off Facebook fads and enter a historic view of Christianity—the basis of day-to-day freedoms—so that political sameness, or newspeak, or whatever we wish to call it, cannot have its perfect work of exclusion and narrow our choices to one. We need to cut a few knots before a circle is formed that we all go into, or the life we once knew will be over for me and for you, Mr. and Mrs. America, and over, too, for the children we hoped to see mature—a threatened and breathless generation going blue in the night, without even the halfway house of William James to settle in for a second wind. No new stories to tell or to listen to.

## GETTING WORDS PLAIN RIGHT TO PUBLISH

For anyone interested in the way writing gets down on a page and published, it's best to listen to those who publish. And now there's a chance to follow the practice as carried out by a pair of consummate writers. Their collection of letters, the most intimate and freewheeling form of writing, gathered in *The Happiness of Getting It Down Right*, allows readers to follow a duo working together to produce as much good writing as they are able, in an exchange more engaging than most contemporary novels.<sup>1</sup>

The letters also reveal the relationship between writer and editor when that relationship is operating as it was intended. This occurs at least partly because both correspondents are writers (a truth that doesn't always follow) and one of the two happens to have a half-week job as editor. Once they begin collaborating on publishable stories and commenting to each other about them, the pace at which they build on each other's abilities is, to say the least, instructive.

Family members and other editors occasionally join in the exchange, but most of the letters are between Frank O'Connor and William Maxwell. O'Connor, protégé of W. B. Yeats and AE (George Russell), was a notable figure in the Irish literary renaissance kindled by Yeats and Russell. O'Connor was indeed a renaissance man. Self-taught, a translator of Old Irish and Gaelic, he wrote poetry, short stories, plays, biogra-

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phies, autobiographies, memoirs, literary criticism, cultural criticism, history, essays, reviews, and polemics. As he said of himself, “I had always wanted to write poetry, but I realized very early on that I didn’t have much talent that way. Story telling is a compensation; the nearest thing one can get to the quality of a pure lyric poem.”<sup>2</sup>

At the time of his death in 1966, O’Connor was recognized as one of the foremost Irish writers of the century. The eminent V. S. Pritchett wrote, “It has often been said that Ireland is packed with genius but is short of talent. Frank O’Connor was one of a distinguished generation who had both. His powerful and outspoken voice, above all his moral courage—not a common Irish trait—gave him the air of a thunderous but unbullying Dr. Johnson.”<sup>3</sup>

Frank O’Connor was a pseudonym, adopted so that Michael O’Donovan could publish in politically polarized Ireland under its Victorian sensibility. Think of the years of brouhaha and boardroom fuss, for instance, over the publication of Joyce’s tame *Dubliners*. As a feisty young man O’Donovan had been imprisoned as an Irish revolutionary, a movement he turned his back on as it became increasingly violent.

So when William Maxwell calls him Michael early in their correspondence, the reader senses what the scrupulous editor of this collection, Michael Steinman, suggests: the closeness of their relationship. Maxwell eventually signs himself “Bill” or merely “B,” and O’Connor begins to call him “Willie.”

William Maxwell? He is one of the best and brightest but least bruited of contemporary writers—though late in his life he was “discovered” by PBS and Pete Rose and other come-latelies, and now the Library of America series has begun to collect his work, early novels first. He was also an editor at the *New Yorker* for forty years, and during most of that time he spent Monday to Wednesday in his office, busy at his writing the rest of the time. He published six novels, four short-story collections, essays, a memoir, over a dozen books altogether, and his voice, “simultaneously very personal and clairvoyant,” as John Updike has noted, “is one of the wisest in American fiction. As well as one of the kindest.”<sup>4</sup>

Amen. And he remained wise and personal and clairvoyant and kind after he left his editorial chair, continuing to write into his nineties, including *All the Days and Nights*, collected stories that came out in 1994 from Knopf, one of the better collections of the decade. It is not presumptuous to suggest that Maxwell had as great an influence on the direction of American fiction from the 1940s to the present as any single person—unobtrusively, with no trumpeting or discursive manifestos or self-congratulatory proclamations or publicity seeking.

He first edited poetry at the *New Yorker* but soon came to occupy the post of senior fiction editor—if the designation can be ascribed to anyone in the magazine’s formerly loose organization, with everything feeding to the one at the top, first Harold Ross and then William Shawn. During his time at the magazine Maxwell encouraged and edited and helped to raise to its highest level the work not only of O’Connor but also of John O’Hara, Sylvia Townsend Warner, J. D. Salinger, Eudora Welty, John Cheever, Shirley Hazzard, Harold Brodkey, Mavis Gallant, John Updike, and, in his American incarnation, Vladimir Nabokov.

There were literally dozens of others, and a book of correspondence with Maxwell as large as this one, three hundred pages, could be gathered from each of the other dozens—except for Cheever, who regularly burned all letters he received. And if Maxwell had been on hand when Raymond Carver began publishing in the *New Yorker*, Carver might have been a writer he handled, had Maxwell felt OK with the content, because Carver’s prose is an unwitting example of the outworking of Maxwell’s influence. Keep it simple (within one’s personality) and *keep it clear*.

Maxwell’s hallmark as a writer was poetic simplicity with an undercurrent of heartrending emotion, as if a plain-spoken Scot had been hot-wired to the mysteries of creation. A common editorial comment, at least to this beneficiary of a decade, was “Isn’t there a simpler way of saying it?” Sometimes there wasn’t, but often there was. And often, too, while I explained what I wanted in a sentence, he jotted my words on a set of galleys, and said, “That’s so much clearer!”

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Of course it was. So when O'Connor defines for himself his sense of the story as "a pure lyric poem" it amplifies the excited currency between the two as they work at "the happiness of getting it down right," the title of the book and a phrase of Maxwell's, from an essay in a Knopf festschrift dedicated to O'Connor. That essay, "Frank O'Connor and the *New Yorker*," appears along with comments by family members as an appendix to the letters. It's worth the price of admission alone, for its affectionate portrait of O'Connor and, in a subsidiary sense, a look at "the disease of perfectionism," as Maxwell puts it, that reigned in the heyday of the classic *New Yorker*.<sup>5</sup>

In a letter from 1954, O'Connor writes, "I accept all the admonitions, which, by this time, you must be tired of giving out. As usual on all the minor things which you pick out for correction, you and Lobrano are right. [Gus Lobrano, who first worked with O'Connor, was ill.] You are in immediate relation to the audience."<sup>6</sup>

And Maxwell, who commonly turned letters around the day he received them, responds: "They aren't admonitions, as I'm sure you know, but the illusions of perfectionators, and individually we would probably get tired and quit worrying about this kind of thing, since the story stands or falls elsewhere, but we keep each other at it."<sup>7</sup>

In his introduction to a collection of Sylvia Townsend Warner's letters he edited, Maxwell writes, "The personal correspondence of writers feeds on left-over energy. There is also the element of lavishness, of enjoying the fact that they are throwing away one of their better efforts, for the chances of any given letter's surviving are fifty-fifty, at most. And there is the element of confidence—of the relaxed backhand stroke that can place the ball anywhere in the court that it pleases the writer to have it go."<sup>8</sup>

Letters of that quality abound in this back-and-forth, as when Maxwell whacks a backstroke that emphasizes the colloquial nature of all writing in his compliment to O'Connor on an addition to a story: "We are using the insert, and feel that the use you made of the notebook was a stroke of well why not say genius."<sup>9</sup>

Or this from O'Connor: "I had promised myself lunch with you and Don Congdon [O'Connor's agent] IF I managed to finish the story I was doing for you. It has inspired me to a point when the story is *almost* right but there's still a small knot in the middle which would drive you crazy. Maybe despair will drive me to solve the problem tonight or tomorrow in which case I'll phone you and come."<sup>10</sup>

O'Connor lived for several years in the United States, serving as professor or writing instructor at institutions like Stanford, Northwestern, and Harvard. On one of his first visits to the States he met a student at Harvard, Harriet Rich, and married her; in 1958 they had a daughter and gave her the name Hallie-Og. A few years earlier, Maxwell, then in his forties, and his younger wife Emily had a daughter, Katherine, and another, Brookie, and gradually the letters brim with details of family life. Every writer at some point makes a decision about how he will include his family in his writing, indeed his life, or not include them, and both writers accommodate the demands of their families—a lesson writers (and critics) would do well to contemplate, not dismiss.

To Harriet, for whom Maxwell develops a fondness and addresses when O'Connor is busy or not responding to letters, he writes in June of 1958,

Kate and Brookie . . . have kept us up between eleven and three or four for three nights running. First Brookie woke up and refused to go back to sleep, so Emmy went to bed in her room, with the window closed, in the kind of general discomfort she contrives for herself when I am not around, out of a belief that comfort isn't everything, and I couldn't get back to sleep because I never can when she is removed from beside me, and so thought about *The New Yorker* all night (TOO MUCH EDITING GOES ON HERE) and what should happen the following night but four violent thunderstorms in succession.<sup>11</sup>

Maxwell as editor was efficient and thorough, sometimes sending off a typed page or two of advice, yet diffident. He set himself aside for the sake of a story. He favored no particular style, as the variety of writers he worked with suggests, but stood for clarity and a

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simpler way of saying it. Something of his manner of handling details in daily life, was present in his editing; when a decision or conflict faced him, he once told me, his practice was to “wait, silent, with my hands in my pockets,” until the matter resolved itself. He generally trusted O’Connor and other writers to solve conflicts in stories and elsewhere themselves, and gave them leeway to do that, while turning away the worst of the checkers’ queries with a stroke of a pencil, saying “That’s simply nonsense.”

He conveys an agreeable, gleeful air, in his delight over everyday details, but can be adamant, usually when he has to reject a story, perhaps regretting how O’Connor feels and hoping to move to the next submission, as when he writes about stories he’s been urging O’Connor to finish: “It is the same as with the last story. The characters do not have the breath of life in them, and so it isn’t a story.”<sup>12</sup> How awful! If, however, he felt it had the faintest breath, pages of suggestions poured from the rattling upright Royal on his office stand. He explains an element of his nature to O’Connor in this way:

When I was a very young man, I had to go over a *New Yorker* proof with Edmund Wilson, who snorted from time to time and said in *his* youth he had been an editor on *Vanity Fair*, and that the editorial fallacy was changing things for the sake of changing things. Had I been older, I might have drawn him out, because he is always interesting no matter what he is talking about, but I just took it for a profound and witty remark, which it perhaps was. But *some* editors suffer from the fallacy of guardian angel-ism, and sincerely believe that they are put here on earth to protect authors from damaging their best efforts by after thoughts [*sic.*] that are not an improvement. So I spent three intense, dedicated days going over your two versions of *Man of the World*, protecting what I feel is one of the most moving and beautiful stories of modern times from your itch to improve it.<sup>13</sup>

O’Connor’s reply: “Thanks for your labors on the proofs. I think the results justify the means.”<sup>14</sup> The means was, of course, unknown editorial tinkering.

O’Connor’s letters, as lyric poet, are often brief, and Maxwell occasionally sends telegrams, as in his initial response to “The Man of

the World”: “From here it looks very much as if you’ve earned your way into heaven.”<sup>15</sup> He then follows up with a letter in which he says,

I wondered also if you would know what I was trying to say in the telegram. “This is possibly the best story you have ever written” sounded too much in the accents of posterity, or at least too pleased with my own sense of judgment, but that is how I felt about it. I read it back and forth and around while I was reading it the first time—Do you know that kind of reading, where you circulate among the words and double back to give your feelings time to catch up with you, and for enjoyment. Now he *has* got himself in a pickle, I said, and waited, and openmouthed watched you walk right over the pickle because it wasn’t, for your purposes, even there.<sup>16</sup>

Who could resist such clearly stated, levelheaded praise, in the sort of letter every writer hopes to receive?

More than twice the number and bulk of letters are from Maxwell, which is natural, since he is not only editor, but encourager, conscience, gatekeeper, even paymaster. *The New Yorker* rates were so generous it appeared to please him to send off checks, usually accompanied by a note, as this one: “I’m sending, today, a cost of living check to Matson’s office [O’Connor’s agent] for \$1972.35, and thought I’d let you know, in case it might affect your traveling arrangements.” And then a concluding backhand stroke: “It is too hot even to go around in your skin.”<sup>17</sup>

The magazine’s word rate was a dollar or more, and there was also a COLA, the cost-of-living-adjustment Maxwell mentions, based on the rate of inflation and usually issued in quarterly payments—here nearly \$2,000 in 1955. And “bonus” payments added increasing percentages of one’s total sales for a year to each story over four, then over six, then twelve—a process so lucrative for even the mildly prolific that Maxwell referred to it as “the slot machine.”

An added bonus was proffered for signing a yearly contract which stated, in essence, that one would accept such payments. And a few minor perks, such as the black-and-green mottled Venus drawing pencils, perfectly leaded for writing, of a grade of hardness you couldn’t

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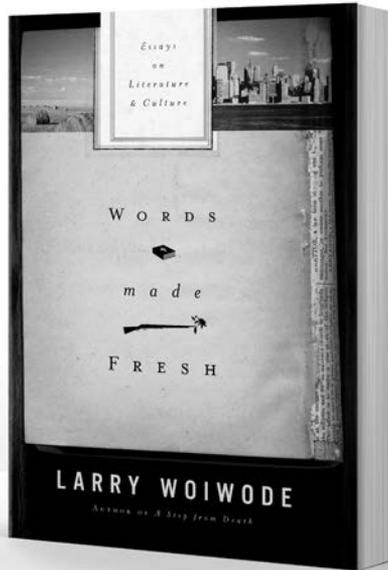
get on the street—a luxury item that O'Connor, for one, delighted in pocketing. And lunches with Maxwell at the Century Club, down the street from the *New Yorker* offices. It's no wonder that Nabokov once said in a fictional context, speaking from his experience on several continents, that the *New Yorker* of those days was “the kindest magazine in the world.”

Readers will leave these letters with a sense of what it is like to see literary creation rise from the page. A few may be surprised to learn that the relationship of editor to writer, when at its optimum, is never adversarial, as contemporary melodrama tends to depict it. A good editor merely hopes to get the best from a writer, and that was Maxwell's gift—a studied selflessness.

As a writer he understood the difficulty of translating people into the words of a metaphor. And as a writer, or so this collection communicates, he hewed to the traditional literary standard, established by centuries of practice. That is what he keeps turning O'Connor toward. The dizzying middle distance in which the work on a story takes place was a world Maxwell was able to enter, in his clairvoyant way, as easily as the writer, not like a hermit crab, lugging around an ungainly carapace of arbitrariness, but as if inside the writer's skin, the shed metaphor of the story itself. And what he led his writers toward, as much as they were able to follow at the moment, was a standard of excellence where suddenly, when one would least expect it, the standard was all that mattered and the writer was flooded with the happiness of at last getting it down right.

It's up to writers, as it's been for centuries,  
to help us find our way around this home on earth,  
whatever our place on it.

—Larry Woiwode



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**LARRY WOIWODE** is a Guggenheim and Lannan Fellow, recipient of the William Faulkner Foundation Award and John DosPassos Prize, a finalist for both the National Book Award and the Book Critics Circle Award, and has received the Medal of Merit from the American Academy of Arts and Letters “for distinction in the art of the short story.” He is Poet Laureate of North Dakota, Writer-in-Residence at Jamestown College, and the author of *Words Made Fresh*.

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