Comments on the Book of the Dun Cow
by Walter Wangerin Jr.

History:

In the mid-70's Carol Greene, an editor at Concordia Publishing House in St. Louis, asked two things of me, both of which I accomplished, neither one of which she accepted for publication--yet together they necessary steps to the writing of my first successful novel.

I had already written several thin children's books for her, titles such as "A Penny Is Everything," "O Happy Day," "The Glory Story," "Mary Had a Baby," "God, I've Gotta Talk to You." That last title is still in print, has sold more than 6,000,000 copies (ah, but I did it as a "work for hire," receiving less than $200 for my portion of the manuscript) and sometimes prompts CPH to write the wrong Walter of its progress. (They send their missives to my father, also a Walter and still a member of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod.)

Pleased, I believe, with my lesser stories, Carol suggested that I write a full fantasy novel.

But I had not thought of myself as a novelist. The novel seemed to me high as a mountain, hard to climb and dangerous: one's ego might die in a sudden crevass. But Carol's word nudged me enough that I began in the summer of 1974 to research a notion for such a novel. In a used bookstore in Madison, Wisconsin, I found a book entitled The Ocean of Air, by David Blumenstock, Rutgers U. Press, 1959, wherein I studied the natures and the names of wind and the winds of the world. Through the autumn of that year I wrote a novel which I called Wind Ward, concerning a girl named Elsbeth, gross and unlovely in her class, but beloved by a laminar wind named Ariel. The "laminar layer," I had learned, "is a thin layer of air adjacent to the plants and ground directly warmed or cooled by the earth through conduction." This is" a film of air within which motion is only lateral, along thin air layers.... All objects exposed to the atmosphere, either indoors or out, are surrounded by a laminar air layer." So wrote Blumenstock, and so I found the core relationship for a novel: Elsbeth and Ariel. Ariel made the heavy child light unto flight! Ariel expanded like wings around her, lifting her from the ground and carrying her through this "ocean" of air, encountering the various winds of powerful and distinctive character, carried her sunward, since the winds from the sun themselves had ceased to blow, and it had become Elsbeth's task to cause them once again the bathe the earth.

That's the novel I wrote. I sent it to Carol Greene and she, ultimately, responded that it did not suit the book list at Concordia Publishing House. But she had caused me to believe I could write novels. Yes, I could scale the mountain and not lose my way or skid down false slopes into silly narrative directions.

Wind Ward I sent, then, to publisher after publisher, receiving rejection after rejection, descending myself, so I thought, into the despair of failed writers.

But then I read an article which quoted from an array of young adult novels. Every quote which raised my admiration, I noticed, was from some book published by Harper &Row Junior Books. Therefore I sent the Wind Ward

manuscript to one more place: Harpers. After a full five month's wait I received a letter from an editor named Joanne Ryder who said that the novel was unpublishable--but who wrote a long letter explaining way, identifying two substantial flaws in the text, unrevisable flaws. I was both persuaded and delighted. Someone had taken time. And that someone was absolutely right! But she had a name, and I wrote her back immediately in order to establish and (I hoped) keep a relationship here against a future novel.

The second request Carol Greene made of me was that I write a series of parables, each one touching upon some moral principle. I did. I wrote some fifteen to twenty "parables." I decided to create re-usable characters in order not to waste words with each short parable introducing new figures. I think I thought of the assignment as created complex cartoons in words, with panels of same characters over and over again.

I drew my characters (simply because of my pleasure in the writer) from Chaucer, specifically "The Nun's Priest's Tale" about Chauntecleer and Pertelote and Don Russel the Fox. Then I added my own inventions: Mondo Cani Dog, Tick Tock the Black Ant, John Wesley Weasel. Yes, at this point the were cartoons, no more developed or rounded than that.

I sent the parables to Carol. Carol rejected them, her second gift to me, since now the animals I had created were mine for the using.

But here before me was a small community for which I had developed a real affection.

And here, too, came Joanne Ryder's rejection letter regarding Wind Ward.

Immediately I decided to write a new novel: my animal community in desperate contest against an evil. Some enormous evil. Evil as evil.

What, I wondered through the summer of 1975, would be the community's enemy? I discarded the notion of a "human" enemy, as it was in Watership Down, since humans in that fantasy seemed, to me, to trouble the (human) reader's ability to identify then with the animals. I rejected, next, the notion that the enemy would arise from the animal kingdom itself, since I wanted this to be "evil, das ding an sich, the thing itself," rather than bad animals.

Finally I hit upon the acceptable notion: that my evil would be framed in the solid, complex history of myth! In myths evil appears in animal figures which are unique, distorted, unnatural, as opposed to my own most natural animals (natural since I based them on the habitual facts of their bestial forebears). Thus the Cockatrice--no Rooster anyone had ever really met, an embodiment of evil from the mind of my own race of humans, and therefore both like Chauntecleer and radically unlike Chauntecleer. For the greatest evil in my book I decided to combine the Loki monster from the Icelandic sagas and the serpent of Scriptures. I named it according the Old English word for "serpent" or "dragon": Wyrm.

And now I began writing, wherever I went. I carried the manuscript with me in its own briefcase, writing at work, writing at home late into the night. The process was to me sheer delight, telling the story for its own sake, allowing the

story to tell itself, so instinctively understanding the process that when I took a false tack, why, it rang false in my ear.

Still in 1975 I sent the manuscript of The Book of the Dun Cow to Joanne Ryder at Harpers. It went without a conclusion. I figured that as much as I had already written, the ending was lying latent there, just waiting to be found.

In time she wrote a long letter, saying that she could not "at this time" offer to publish it, but speaking about the story at such length that I felt potential there. I did not despair.

I wrote her back, explaining what sorts of revisions I would do to honor her criticisms. For example, I had written a first chapter in which a great river of its own volition rose up like a serpent from its long bed on earth, curled its head downward, then plunged mightily into the earth, deep, deep beneath the mantle of the earth, there to move in perfect secrecy and in power. Joanne wrote that evil as evil is diminished by describing its beginning. Forget the "how it came to be" and merely declare that it is, and the evil will be the more powerful for having no beginning at all, or for having a beginning lost in primal history and in bafflement.

In the early spring of 1976, out of the blue, Joanne wrote me again, saying that, yes, they would publish the book. Now, then, I had to revise the thing, so I began at the beginning and rewrote it whole. (This has ever since been my method of revision, especially for organic pieces, such as novels, for every necessary new revision to start at the beginning and re-write it whole. The Crying for a Vision went through at least seven such complete revisions.)

In the summer of 1976, after a week's vacation with the family during which I conceived the ending step by step in my mind, I wrote it down and sent it off. I was thirty-two years old.

An Interior History

As I indicated above, the characters for The Book of the Dun Cow were cartoons at first. So it is with all my fiction: characters begin with a handful of characteristics, often stereotypes and flat. But the writer must begin somewhere, and for me the real discoveries come not in outlines, not in preliminary researches or dreaming thought. The real discoveries occur in and by the very process of writing itself.

Therefore, I put my flat characters into situations where they are forced to act and to speak, some little conflict, some problem requiring solution. For a while I, the writer, power forth from my mind their actions, re-actions, gestures, words. But while I labor to imagine their activity, often comes a surprising moment when the character suddenly says something completely on its own, as a surprise to me. When the character speaks so, of its own accord, it declares before my mind a certain autonomy: it has come to be. Henceforward I will ask the character whether it can do this or else do that. I write, as it were, in dialogue with

my characters, so that I never give up all control as the author, but neither do I impose a complete control. The tale, therefore, never falls into chaos; but neither does it lose that capacity to surprise me with turns and twists and narrative developments.

In The Book of the Dun Cow this moment (when the book detached from me to become something on its own) happened at the end of chapter seven. It was late at night. I was still at my office and knew that I had to get home soon, the darkness outside, the darkness inside my building pressuring me. "Chauntecleer," I wrote on my typewriter, "became aware of a little figure with him in the wide world. 'Blow it out your nose!' he said to a Mouse creeping through the field; but she only looked at him and didn't try to blow anything out of anywhere."

It was the rooster's sudden phrase "Blow it out your nose" which came altogether as a surprise to me; and, silly as the phrase is, it was his phrase, not mine. Therefore, the rooster stood sullen and SOLID before me, alive! You can tell the phrase was significant, since I turned around in the next line and paid authorial attention to it, commenting on it through the mouse's own little personality.

Walt Wangerin, September 10, 2001

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