

The Myth Maker

Writer Daniel Wallace: *Big Fish* and Beyond

by Dave Korzon



“I came upon the idea of mythologizing the life of a contemporary man because it corresponded with my idea of what myths are,” Daniel Wallace tells me when I ask him about the origins of his debut novel *Big Fish: A Novel of Mythic Proportions*. We are sitting on the rustic back porch of his house in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, on a rapidly cooling fall evening, acorns peppering the roof as we talk.

Wallace, a Birmingham, Alabama, native but longtime Chapel Hill resident, is relaxed and happy—in a good place in his life, he says. In the world of fiction writers, he is a rare bird, someone who can devote himself to his writing full-time, although he does presently teach creative writing at UNC-Chapel Hill. The success of *Big Fish*—both of the novel (1998) and the Tim Burton film adaptation (2003)—has left him with a writer’s most valuable commodity: time. “*Big Fish* did change my life financially,” Wallace relates, but he is quick to add that “it didn’t change anything else.” Wallace, who wrote for thirteen years before selling *Big Fish*, is disciplined when it comes to his work. “I don’t feel pressure when I write. But I’ve worked so hard and so long to get to this point and do have this day-to-day routine of working. When I don’t follow this rou-



tine my life is out of balance,” he says, with the faintest trace of a Southern drawl. “I write a lot of stuff, sometimes stories that I get paid nothing for and get two free copies of the magazine. So my writing doesn’t have to be a financial consideration, really.”

Big Fish is the story of a son, William, coming to know his dying father—the incomparable Edward Bloom. The problem confronting William is that Edward’s life seems to waver between fact and legend and is rife with great myths and half-truths that create a skewed version of his past. William searches for the answer to who his father really is but is met only by fantastic stories of bravery and some of the oldest jokes in the world, which Edward loves telling and re-telling. It’s a story that is simple and complex at the same time, but in the hands of Wallace it is deftly rendered, a unique father-son story to say the least.

“All the things that we read about in Greek mythology were based on some actuality,” Wallace explains. “The myth itself was an effort to explain something that otherwise couldn’t be explained or understood—why did the wind blow, why were there clouds? So what I was trying to do in *Big Fish* was to use a contemporary man to do the same thing, explain something that otherwise couldn’t be understood in a normal way.” And while Wallace admits freely that his relationship with his own father, E. D. Wallace, had a great deal to do with the theme and spirit of the book, he is also careful to point out

that Edward Bloom and E. D. Wallace are not one and the same.

Wallace’s subsequent novels—*Ray in Reverse* (2000), about a man who examines his life in a backwards chronology from his perch in heaven, and *The Watermelon King* (2003), about a young man tracing his roots back to an antiquated Southern town (Ashland, the same town we are introduced to in *Big Fish*)—saw Wallace again revisit his love for myth and fable and his story lines involving fathers and sons. With *The Watermelon King* we also witness Wallace examining and playing with motifs and ideas found in Southern literature. Ultimately, these books enforce the notion that Wallace shares the trait of the best writers around in that he is able to create worlds that are unique and wholly of his own invention. Now the remarkable landscapes and characters in these three novels have a quirky new relation. *O Great Rosenfeld!*, a two-part story that challenges categorization, is currently available as a 98-cent download from Amazon.com. It’s the story of a wandering tribe with dubious leadership narrated by the tribe’s well-meaning scribe. A children’s story for adults is how Wallace likes to describe it, adding that it could be a story about ancient times or about the future. It’s Wallace at his best, walking that fine line between myth and reality. It’s also illustrated by the author himself whose artwork, like his writing, is part real, part wonder.

His forthcoming novel, tentatively titled *Mr. Sebastian*, is due in early 2007. “I’ve never really known what my books are about until I’ve read the dust jacket copy that an editor puts on it,” Wallace admits, “but this one is all about illusion and about sense of self and who we think we are as opposed to who we really are. I think it’s my first real novel in the way that it has a life and depth it brings to the story that’s being told. I honestly think my other books don’t feel like novels, even though they are. This next book feels like a novel.”

Our conversations for this interview all take place at Wallace’s home, where he lives with his wife, Laura, and his son, Henry, who is twelve. It’s a home filled with books and music, his own drawings, and the odd Hollywood bauble from his experience with *Big Fish*’s adaptation for the big screen. Yes, he has a chair from the movie set with his name on the back of it (in the attic). Yes, Tim Burton was cool to hang out with (they went to brunch once). But it’s all the same to Daniel Wallace as long as he can sit at his desk each day and continue to do what he does with the time he has earned: write.

THE RAMBLER MAGAZINE: Do you like telling jokes? *Big Fish* is full of them—good and bad.

DANIEL WALLACE: I can tell you a joke that was edited out of *Big Fish*. There were a lot of jokes in that book. This one is about an old cat who lives in the back of an alley behind a bar and

lives off the scraps that the bartender throws out at night. After doing that for a number of years, the cat figures if the food out here is good, then inside it might be better. So when the bartender comes out at midnight, throwing away a bag of trash, the cat tries to make a dash inside, but the screen door slams on its tail, severs it, and the cat has a heart attack and dies. The bartender just kicks the body back into the alley and goes in and finishes up his shift and at about 2:30 that morning he comes back out and is confronted by the spirit of this dead cat holding its tail in one paw. The cat says, "I'm dead, but I'm wandering the afterlife and I will continue to wander in the afterlife until you put my tail back on my body. If you would just do that for me then I could have peace." The bartender looks at the spirit, shakes his head, and says, "You know, I'd really like to help you but it's against the law to retail spirits after 2 a.m."

RAMBLER: [*Laughs*] Why was that cut?

WALLACE: It's a long joke and it's a short book. So you weigh things. Had it been a three-hundred-page novel, I probably would have gotten it in there.

RAMBLER: Was *Big Fish* your first try at a novel?

WALLACE: I had written five novels before that, but none of them were published because they were bad. It's a real blessing that they didn't get published.

RAMBLER: What was it about *Big Fish* that worked?

WALLACE: With that book I had found a way of telling a story that suited me, that was true to who I was and how I saw the world. The other books were written toward an idea of what I thought a book should be, a book that other people would want to read. And once I started writing the kind of book that I would want to read then that's when I found, for lack of a better word, a voice.

RAMBLER: How do you come to that, this getting honest with yourself?

WALLACE: I think the only way to ever become a writer or to write something valuable to you or to anybody else is through this long and arduous

process of practice, of writing, of actually putting pen to paper. There were good things in all those books I wrote, but they each had fatal flaws that I couldn't have learned about without writing them down. Just in the way that I can't tell my son what to do and what not to do, because he has to learn it on his own. There were so many different aspects of my life that made *Big Fish* what it is, and they weren't all literary.

The fact that I spent all those years writing and failing could have been an indication that I shouldn't be a writer, that I should find something else to do. Certainly all the signs would point that way. About the time that I started *Big Fish*, I had a son, Henry, and I realized that I couldn't continue to indulge this desire for some nebulous goal of being a successful writer and support a family. Practically it was impossible.

RAMBLER: Did that scare you? Raymond Carver, in his essay "Fires," talks about the influence being a parent had on his professional life as a writer. It seemed to shake him up, this responsibility, because it was permanent and larger than his work.

WALLACE: *Big Fish* could not have happened without Henry. When he was born the very real prospect was there that I would quit being a writer and that all those years of working hard—I treated it and still do treat it like a real job, where I have to be at a certain place at a certain time and fulfill an obligation—all those years would've been lost years. What did you do between the ages of twenty-four and thirty-six? Well, I can't tell you. I mean, I can tell you about it, but there's nothing to show you, and there's nothing that I would want to show you. So when Henry was born, I imagined him as an adult, and I wanted him to have something valuable, something that I considered valuable at least, as a representation of how I'd spent my life up until the time he was born, before I became whatever it was I was going to become. I wanted to write something that I found valuable, that I loved, regardless of what anybody thought. I would have this document that I would pay to produce if necessary, to have as this

kind of heirloom of my life. That was something that influenced the book in a big way. I had fun—for the first time I really had a great time writing. I've always been interested in Greek myth and I was able to bring that to my fiction. It was so liberating.

RAMBLER: That's really wonderful.

WALLACE: Taking care of Henry as a baby was also an influence. It was just exhausting, as anybody who has a kid knows, and the only time that I could write was when he took a nap, because by the end of the day I was exhausted. When I was writing *Big Fish* I would get in the car, drive him around until he went to sleep because the only way you could get him to sleep was to put him in the car. Then I'd come back home, take him to my office, which was the laundry room, and during the course of his nap I would write. My goal was to write a chapter a day. If you look at the book, some of the chapters are a paragraph long, and some are two pages long, and those really are vestigial records of the length of his nap for that day. He helped determine the structure of the book. Whereas my relationship with my father helped determine some of the themes in the book, Henry determined the structure. So writing is not always, for me, about aesthetic decisions, but real-life decisions as well.

RAMBLER: A parameter like that can be comforting. It can be good to have limitations that make you function within a boundary from a writing standpoint.

WALLACE: That's a good point because when you begin a book or a story you're really faced with an infinite number of choices of what to write about. For the beginning writer, especially, it's very difficult to find a subject and stick to it, so for the class I'm teaching at UNC I drew a map and everything that they write in this class has to happen within the border of this town. So you've got a park and a quarry, you've got a Wal-Mart, the houses, and the river, so obviously you can't write about skyscrapers or aliens or anything like that.

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