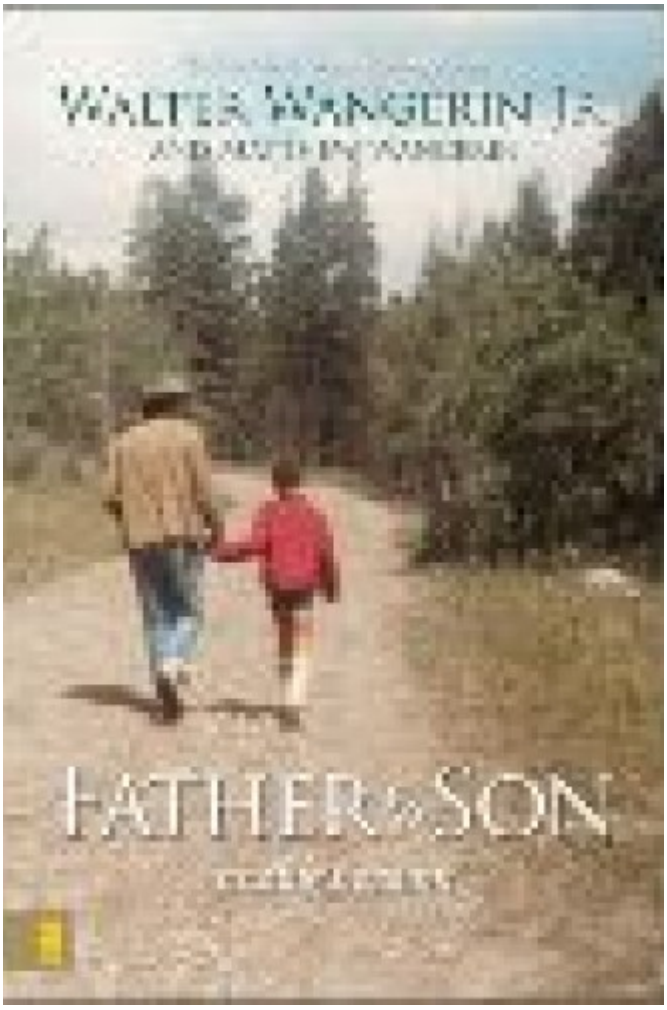
Father and Son: Finding Freedom

reviewed by Lawrence Wood in the October 21, 2008 issue

In Review



Father and Son: Finding Freedom

Walter Wangerin Jr. and Matthew Wangerin
Zondervan

Walter Wangerin has written many beloved books, but perhaps none more affecting than this one. It’s a very personal story, wracked with love and regret for his son

Matthew. He has shared some of the writing with Matthew himself.

Here's how painful their story is: Several years ago at Christmas, Walt was diagnosed with lung cancer. With his grown children all gathered around, he assured them that whatever the outcome, this illness would be his "best adventure." But the hardest part may have been telling 35-year-old Matthew, who was belatedly building an adult life. They had just begun to find their way back to each other.

Twenty years before, Walt had broken up some of Matt's rough horseplay by holding him in a viselike grip. Now Matt held his father so tightly that Walt could hardly breathe. Looking back over their lifelong embrace, Walt could only wonder what his son had learned in his arms. Was it love or frustration?

Both, probably. "There was a time when Matthew yearned nothing more than to get out of our house for good and for all," Walt writes. "And there was an equally sincere time when I bargained with God—offering to give up my son's love for me, offering to suffer his separation, his contempt, even his hatred—if only the Lord would intervene, helping him to survive this life."

Beginning with *The Book of the Dun Cow*, which won the National Book Award in 1980, Wangerin has addressed many of his books to children, so it's startling to learn that he has been so perplexed as a father. He and his wife, Thanne, were the most intentional of parents. As newlyweds in the late 1960s, they had chosen to avoid contributing to the world's overpopulation, vowing that if they had a child, they would adopt the next. When the chance came for them to adopt an African-American boy, they didn't hesitate.

They had not fully imagined the degree to which a black boy with white parents in southern Indiana would meet with prejudice. Matt's earliest friend, a white girl from the neighborhood, wasn't allowed to play with him. Black kids considered him "blite." Even when the family moved to the inner city and Walt served a mostly black church, Matt had to prove that he belonged, and did so in self-destructive ways.

He stole comic books and broke curfew, neglected his schoolwork and pinned his dreams on basketball. Once a joyous boy, he became sullen and remote. As his hoop dreams died—he never grew tall or developed as a player—Walt and Thanne's discipline only hardened his anger. They pushed him to do better at school, so of course he wouldn't. They warned him about the dangers of the streets, so of course

he sneaked out at night. In passages that may make readers cringe, Walt describes how he carried out spankings even when Matt had outgrown them—a vestige of Walt's own childhood in a Lutheran parsonage.

One wonders if Walt may have made too much of his son's earliest mischief and unintentionally cast him in a role he could not escape. But Matt says the root of the trouble was something in his nature, and that for years his parents prevented it from getting worse. In any event, things got bad enough. Matt drank heavily, left one college after another, crashed in friends' apartments, and finally landed back home without motivation to find a job. Seeing no alternative, Walt and Thanne gave him ample notice of the day he would have to leave.

Walt is such a gifted, ambitious writer that when his material has been less personal, his prose has sometimes seemed overwrought. This book is marked by restraint and piercing honesty, as in the utterly devastating account of the day they all had been dreading. He drove his son to Indianapolis, mortified to put him on the streets: "This is my son. Here is my son beside me. We are going up the mountain in Moriah where I must place him . . . on an altar, there to offer him as a whole burnt offering. Christ! Let there be a ram in the thickets!"

How they got from that desperate hour to better days is not entirely clear. Matt recounts his long fall to the bottom but not how he got back up. Walt identifies a turning point in Matt's willingness to join his father in speaking to a group of Lutheran men about the love between fathers and sons. Beyond that episode, Matt's recovery happens offstage, without his dad—with (in Walt's words) his "better Father" instead.

Walt stresses the theological dimensions of what they've learned. "I thought that I had chosen fatherhood," he writes. "Rather, fatherhood chose me." Only God has chosen parenthood with full knowledge of the pain, he says, and that very determined love served as a model when Walt's son slipped from his embrace. As the subtitle insists, this is a story about finding freedom—freedom from expectations, guilt, grief and those we love, so we might come to love them again.

In retrospect it seems that Wangerin's books from the 1980s and 1990s (*Ragman and Other Cries of Faith*, for example, and *The Book of Sorrows*) bear the marks of what was happening at home. How could it have been otherwise? For a memoir, though, *Father and Son* is surprisingly forward-looking. God's redemptive love has given both men courage to embrace the next stage of freedom. If this proves to be a

valedictory, Walt Wangerin has given readers much more to admire in him as a writer and as a man.