

Author Walter Wangerin's many lives and words

Those of us who worked with him sometimes suspected he had cloned himself.

by [Frederick Niedner](#) in the [September 8, 2021](#) issue



Walter Wangerin Jr. (Courtesy photo)

Despite his cohabitation with cancer for 15 years, Walter Wangerin's death on August 5 came as a surprise. To friends he seemed to have lived multiple lives—some public, others more private. He, and we, expected more.

Wally, as family and schoolmates called him, grew up in Lutheran parsonages and parochial schools. Biblical characters and ecclesiastical officials populated his world along with the Dakotans, Oregonians, and Albertans in his father's parishes. In novels and poems, however, Wally discovered other worlds, and concomitantly a yearning to become a storyteller and writer himself.

While still a high schooler, Wangerin entered a pre-seminary school. But when it came time for seminary, he parted ways with classmates, did graduate study in literature at Miami University in Ohio, and then began teaching at the University of Evansville in Indiana.

His vocational ambivalence soon reemerged when a pastor friend encouraged him to complete seminary studies. Before long, a tangle of church politics and the needs of a struggling African American congregation led him to accept the pastorate of Grace Lutheran in Evansville. He finished seminary, but by his account, the people of Grace were the ones who educated and shaped him as a pastor.

He and his wife, Ruthanne, welcomed four children in the eight or so years of that ministry, two by birth and two through adoption. Grace was their home and world. Any who have heard Wangerin preach over the years can tell his heart never left that congregation. In the belief that faith comes by experiencing grace and gospel, not by learning and affirming assertions and syllogisms, all his sermons were stories—and for the rest of his life, the preponderance of those stories centered on families and individuals of Grace, with and from whom he had come to know God's heart. Like all first loves, that community dwelled always in his own heart.

All through his years at Grace, Wangerin submitted stories, poems, and other manuscripts to journals and publishers. In 1978, one appeared in print. Harper and Row published *The Book of the Dun Cow*, which then won a National Book Award in 1980 in, of all things, the science fiction category, most likely because no one knew how to peg a book whose primary characters included a bold rooster, a faithful hen, a cosmic villain called Wyrms, and a bumbling, canine hero. It enthralled readers and changed Wangerin's life.

He became a public person, with all the rights, privileges, responsibilities, pressures, and demands thereunto appertaining. He needed agents and a manager to handle the requests on his time. In order to be fair to the people of Grace, Wangerin stepped aside as pastor to focus on writing, and in 1991 he accepted an appointment as writer in residence and occupant of a chair in the study of Christian values in public and professional life at Valparaiso University. There he taught literature, creative writing, and theology until, and occasionally after, his retirement in 2012.

Those of us who worked with him sometimes suspected Wangerin had cloned himself and lived several lives at once. He maintained membership and association with working groups such as the New Harmony Project and the Chrysostom Society. He roamed Africa, Israel, and the apostle Paul's ancient travel routes in preparation for major writing projects. From 1994 to 2005 he became the voice of the weekly *Lutheran Vespers* radio ministry, a role that required frequent fundraising and

promotional appearances in addition to regular trips to Chicago to record a dozen or so homilies for later broadcast. He also preached regularly in Valparaiso's chapel, roaming the chancel and spinning gospel-laden stories that surprised, amused, and sometimes rendered the assembly speechless.

This period saw a constant flow of publications, including biblical novels, novels about curious saints (*Saint Julian*) and lost civilizations (*The Crying for a Vision*), books about marriage and family life, devotional works, meditative memoirs, and collections of poems.

Had Wangerin never written for adult readers, he would yet enjoy fame and the gratitude of all who treasure his dozen or so books for children. As happens with beloved children's books, titles alone trigger memories of precious, shared minutes when a marvelous tale gladdens a child's heart and moistens an adult's eyes, as *Potter*, *Elisabeth and the Water-Troll*, *Swallowing the Golden Stone*, *Probity Jones* and the *Fear Not Angel*, and the others have done for countless readers. Like many Wangerin aficionados, I consider a gift of *Water, Come Down!* an obligatory element of any child's baptism among family or friends.

In recent years, as lung capacity diminished, coughing attacks punctuated every conversation, and supplementary oxygen became a necessary companion, Wangerin admitted to friends and family that he always felt "punk," never really good. Writing gave him reason to get up each morning, and he wrote up to the end. He rewrote, too. He never revised *The Book of the Dun Cow*, but he thoroughly reworked its sequel, *The Book of Sorrows*, and completed the trilogy in 2013 with *The Third Book of the Dun Cow: Peace at the Last*. Despite his flagging energy and his frustration with how oxygen deprivation made finding words more difficult, he completed multiple drafts of novels and lengthy poems that ranged in subject from Babylonian creation myths to Sir Gawain to the love story of Abelard and Heloise. Most of these still await potential publishers and readers. One posthumous publication will certainly appear, a monograph on the use of storytelling in preaching.

One character whose story Wangerin frequently revisited over the past 20 years was the prophet Jeremiah's, and to that project he had returned when the end came. His fascination with this ancient man of sorrows, who could not stop the flow of words even when he tried, did not surprise those close enough to know of the melancholy that stalked Wangerin.

Thankfully, unlike Jeremiah, Wangerin did not die unappreciated. This summer, his Chrysostom Society colleagues published *Songs from the Silent Passage*, essays that discuss and honor Wangerin's work. It simultaneously humbled and delighted him to read, for example, how *The Book of the Dun Cow* had impacted his late friend Eugene Peterson's thinking. He deeply appreciated being wrestled with and taken so seriously by other writers and friends, and he happily joined the revelatory journeys on which his children's books had taken a dear colleague and her children.

Public person or not, the weightiest of human accomplishments happen away from public view, as we ply our vocations as friend, spouse, and parent; face our dark sides; and forgive and accept forgiveness. Having met with Wangerin at an appointed time each week for three decades to study, brainstorm, confess, receive absolution, and pray together, I witnessed his painstaking work at all these tasks. His careful readers will discern that he did not keep his private struggles wholly secret but put them in service to others.

In recent months, Wangerin often spoke of dying. He assured conversation partners he was at peace and unafraid. As he explained in *Letters from the Land of Cancer*, he chose not to "battle cancer," for the cancer was also him, his body, so he sought to learn whatever he could from the way his body had turned on itself—and what that might have to do with understanding God, being flesh and blood, and having this brief time to love and be loved.

Walter Wangerin breathed his last at peace with himself, his loved ones, and the God whose story he loved to tell—the God who had joined us all in flesh and blood, loving life, then losing our breath and dying, but forever and together held in the embrace of the Creator Spirit, whose breath gives life and never ceases.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Endless lives and words."