

Will Wilder and Me: The Quest For Literacy

Raymond Arroyo

You could say that the Will Wilder series, my first foray into fiction, started as a “soap opera.”

When they were younger, my children, during bath time would demand original stories for entertainment. To get them to advance to the next step in the bathing process, I would indulge the kids desire for new stories night after night. Most were slapstick tales about an impetuous, rule-breaking kid with a good heart and lousy judgment. Though I can’t recall many of those yarns now, the head-strong boy and his family I had created never left my imagination. Over the years I made several attempts to situate those characters in a coherent storyline, but nothing really satisfied me.

Then while in Ireland on a trip with my sons, I stumbled across an article that changed everything. Irish media reported that a treasured relic from the thirteenth century, the heart of St. Laurence O’Toole, had been stolen from Christ Church Cathedral. O’Toole is apparently the patron saint of Dublin. The relic had been locked in a cage on a wall of the cathedral for more than 700 years. “With gold, and silver artifacts everywhere, why would anyone want to steal an ancient relic?” I thought.

Then it hit me: What if a 12-year-old boy—the one I had been telling my children about for years—snatched a relic of rare power? And what if that relic had been rescued and hidden away by his great-grandfather? I finally had a solid concept to drive my story. Over several years, I refined the narrative, expanded it and unearthed the supernatural, slapstick thriller that I suppose had been waiting for me all along.

In *Will Wilder: The Relic of Perilous Falls*, 12-year-old Will hurts his brother in a backyard accident and is punished for weeks. While on yard duty he learns that his great-grandfather, the founder of the town of Perilous Falls and an avid collector of antiques, has hidden a special relic away. It is credited with holding back the town's floodwaters and is believed to possess healing abilities. Will figures he'll borrow the relic, touch it to his injured brother, get out of his punishment, and return it before anyone is the wiser. But once he snatches the relic, floodwaters begin to rise and Will unwittingly unleashes an ancient foe that will change his life and those around him, forever.

There are frights and fun galore in the series, as well as some characteristics unique to middle-grade fiction. While Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series has Greek mythology at its center and Ms. Rowling uses wizardry to propel *Harry Potter*, my story turns on sacred antiques; historical items capable of summoning divine power. Many early readers have loved that most of the relics and items mentioned in the book can actually be found in museums, churches and libraries all over the world. I wanted to draw young people to the wonder of these touchstones and to help them experience the thrill of discovering them in person, no matter where they might live. The conversations that the book has already instigated among young and old are beyond gratifying.

This is also a rare children's book that features an intact, if imperfect, family. Think about it, most children's literature centers around an orphaned or abandoned child making his or her way in the world. It has become such a cliché that I guess I unintentionally sought to avoid it. What I ended up with was a rich family saga about how the past can profoundly shape our future and how the cherished touchstones of our ancestors can light our way forward. It also speaks to our unique gifts and how it is incumbent upon each of us—especially parents—to nurture those gifts in the young.

More than an entertaining series (which I hope it is), Will Wilder is part of a larger mission for me. It is an effort to encourage literacy in the young. Through conversations with librarians and educators, I became sensitized to the scourge of illiteracy facing our country. The numbers are staggering. 21 million Americans can't read at all. According to the Department of Justice, one-fifth of high school graduates cannot read their own diplomas! 67% of all US fourth graders scored below proficient in reading. 67%! When you begin to understand the correlation between low fourth grade reading scores and incarceration later in life, the picture is very dire indeed. So I decided to do something about it. Last year I launched a literacy initiative.

We call it *Storyented* because I believe stories orient us in the world and help us discover our place in it as we grow. Our tag line explains it all: *Find your story. Find your way.* So once a month on TV, radio, and the internet we host a *Storyentation*: a chance for readers to connect with their favorite authors, live. I interview a best-selling author for a half hour about their career and newest work, then readers call in with their own questions. It's sort of a large scale, real-time, book club and it has been very well received. There are few places for authors to discuss their work in a big way, and few things are more important than putting young people in touch with good authors and good books. In addition to the reader/author engagement, Story-ented also provides families with literacy strategies to get their kids reading. We're at [www. Storyented.com](http://www.Storyented.com) and I hope you'll join us for a Storyentation sometime soon.

Ray Bradbury ominously said: "You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them." There are a lot of reluctant readers out there today—especially boys. My hope is that the Will Wilder books will furnish boys and girls with intriguing tales they'll want to read.

Following a visit to a Catholic school in New Orleans last week I received the most wonderful letter from the principal. She wrote in part:

You had an impact on my students that can't be described. I watched my middle schoolers, BOYS, walk into school this morning holding your book. I saw students reading in morning care... I was floored. I don't know how you did it, but you got my kids to read. Thank you. Thank you.! Thank you !!!

I created Will to transport kids to places they might never have a chance to go and in an amazing turn, he has taken me to places I would never have gone—and together we have touched those we never expected to meet. Like Will, I suppose I have my own daring quest: to insure that kids find other epic, funny, moving, uplifting, and even scary books that will excite them enough to lose themselves in the art of reading. Our very future depends on it.

Raymond Arroyo is the New York Times Bestselling author of Will Wilder: The Relic of Perilous Falls, managing editor and lead anchor at EWTN, host of the network's "The World Over" and a Catholic League Board member. For more information on his book and a trailer visit www.raymondarroyo.com.