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At the Crossroad: A Visit by Larry Woiwode

When a well-known literary figure visits a college like Dordt, the net effect may be something more than the inspiration he instills in his hosts.

During the week of October 20 prize-winning novelist and poet Larry Woiwode spent several days at Dordt critiquing student work, mixing with faculty, and holding a large audience rapt at a public reading of his short fiction and poetry. With insightful suggestions for improvement and liberal sprinklings of praise, Woiwode stoked the literary zeal of many young writers in his audience. More importantly, both by his example and by precept he challenged Christian writers as a group to claim their place as truth-bearers in this age.

His hearers will not soon forget this short man with a chest like a mastiff, a voice like a civil defense horn, and a smile that could boil water.

And yet, Woiwode left no doubt as the week went by that he values his place in the community of believers as much as he is valued there. By his own testimony, he is a man in the midst of a dramatic awakening to the truths of Scripture. A recent convert to Reformed faith, he freely acknowledges a need for guidance, challenge, fellowship, and support.

Five years ago, Woiwode had reached an outstanding level of achievement as a young professional writer. His first novel, *What I'm Going to Do, I Think*, had won the William Faulkner Award for best first novel in the United States. His giant second novel, *Beyond the Bedroom Wall*, was first published in short segments in *The New Yorker* and other major periodicals and won widespread critical acclaim.

Both novels were published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, a leading American publisher of literary works, and both were reprinted as Book-of-the-Month Club selections. Woiwode had rapidly become a respected fixture in the Eastern literary establishment.

But with professional success, as Woiwode recounts, came personal and spiritual crisis: a libertine lifestyle, a break in his marriage, and ultimately a suicide attempt. In *Bedroom Wall* he had written with fine sensitivity about spiritual struggles in the lives of his Protestant and Catholic characters, yet he had resisted the pressure of the Holy Spirit in his own life, though he had been brought up as a Catholic.

He reached his spiritual watershed as he recovered in a hospital from the suicide attempt. Through the agency of a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Woiwode and his wife were reconciled; both were catechized in Reformed doctrine, refurbished on a steady diet of the Psalms, and led to commit their lives to Christ.

Today, Woiwode lives with his wife Carole and three young children on a quarter-section farm 11 miles from Mott, North Dakota, population 1500. He grows wheat, working the farm himself and fighting the effects of the recent severe drought. But the spiritual drought is over for this committed, energetic, at times boisterous new Christian. He is an elder in the OPC and a leader in the legal battle to establish Christian schools in North Dakota. And he is struggling to realize the full demands of Christian discipleship upon his writing. Because of his status as a novelist and poet, his conversion is a noteworthy event, not only in the

kingdom of God but in the secular literary world as well.

Since conversion, Woiwode has published a book of poems called *Eventide* celebrating his new life. A novel called *Papa John* is scheduled to appear next fall, and a fourth novel is in progress. Woiwode did not achieve his initial success in publishing by hiding his lights under a bushel, and he appears ready now to tell the whole Truth, as he sees it, in his fiction, with all of his prodigious energy.

What difference does it make when a writer becomes a Christian? Above all, Woiwode told Dordt students and faculty in a Tuesday afternoon fiction workshop, "he should be lying less." Christian writers have a high calling, he said, to deal honestly with life, to produce truth. Is it wrong for Christians to appropriate literary forms used by non-Christians? Not if through those forms they can show healing, he answered. He praised the student works which he had scrutinized for the workshop, saying that he had found in all of them the desire to serve and glorify God: "That's tremendous."

"I feel," he added, "that the vanguard is being carried by Christian writers. We're going to be called on to show something to America. The reason is that we carry . . . the Truth, which is Christ Jesus."

Woiwode was asked during a Thursday poetry workshop to name poets

who had had a formative influence on his writings. He named an ensemble of poetic luminaries: John Donne, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Theodore Roethke, Dylan Thomas, and James Wright. He forgot one—King David. But David's influence was obvious to all, since Woiwode began each session at Dordt with an empowered reading of Psalm 120, which says in part:

In my distress I cried unto
Jehovah,
And he answered me.
Deliver my soul, O Jehovah, from
lying lips,
And from a deceitful tongue.
What shall be given unto thee,
and what shall be done more
unto thee,
Thou deceitful tongue?

.....

My soul hath long had her dwelling
With him that hateth peace.
I am for peace:
But when I speak, they are for
war.

(ASV)

These words of introduction are also those that linger in mind in the weeks since his visit. That they are borrowed is fitting, for Woiwode has decided to let the Word speak through him.

Randall Vander Mey