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—and Beyond

AN INSIDE LOOK
AT CULTURE, STORY,
AND GOD WITH
JOE WHEELER

Cover Feature



Christmas
in My **Heart**
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BY KIMBERLY LUSTE MARAN

Getting to that Annapolis home perched high above the wide mouth of Maryland's Severn River was an adventure. The drive through narrow roads, then parking at a steep

incline next to a thick green bush as dusk slowly approached, had my fellow passengers and me tingling with anticipation for a lovely evening of celebration. Indeed, the views from the large family room window were stunning. The food was delicious too. But winding through the stacks and stacks of books in the lower-level library as Joseph L. Wheeler gave us a tour was pure bliss for a book lover like me. Tomes were crowded on shelves, stacked on tables—and the pleasant smell of paper lingered in the air. Wheeler explained his collection, including files of stories he'd amassed, which were as varied as the colored leaves beginning their autumn descent outside.

After the tour we settled upstairs, and as the sun disappeared into the purpled sky I had a new appreciation for my professor. The eclectic assortment, both here and in his office at school, was evidence that Wheeler, a sort of Renaissance man in the best sense, had a keen passion for stories and storytelling. Class with him was often a tour de force through the classics—complete with unbelievably intricate tests in which we students would need to, for example, determine which characters said certain sections of dialogue. “Stories are,” as he once said in class, “life. They make us who we are, and who we will become.”

Book Crazy

“I was an MK,” says Wheeler. At 8 he and his family moved to Panama. Wheeler and his two younger siblings not only had grand adventures in the mission field, but were homeschooled by their mother, a teacher and trained elocutionist. The three children were

“gently force-fed heart-wrenching poetry, readings and stories.”¹ His mother, says Wheeler, “specialized in the tear-jerker. And because she took the time to read to me, I fell in love with reading and the world around me.”²

Thirsty for even more knowledge, Wheeler, throughout his growing-up years, would check out as many books as he could stagger home with—every two weeks—from the nearest American library. “I read through entire libraries,” he explains. “I’ve never stopped.”

A Class Act

Wheeler came back to the United States in his teens. He completed high school and attended Pacific Union College in Angwin, California. As the great-great-great-grandson of Frederick Wheeler, one of the first ordained ministers in the Adventist Church and bringer of the seventh-day Sabbath (with Rachel Preston and the Farnsworths) to Washington, New Hampshire,³ and as the son of a minister, Wheeler felt obligated to do his “Christian duty” and become a preacher. It didn’t take long, however, for Wheeler to realize he ought to be a teacher instead, and with this change his study course turned to history and English.

Wheeler met and married his wife, Connie, during his time at PUC. Obtaining two master’s degrees (one in teaching of history from PUC and another in English from University of California Sacramento), Wheeler entered the classroom and worked on completing a Ph.D. in English (history of ideas concentration) from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. During his 30 years of teaching mostly college students in Alabama, Texas, and Maryland,⁴ Wheeler enjoyed “imparting the love of literature”⁵ to his students. Central to

accomplishing this? The story. “When I was a young teacher,” explains Wheeler, “it became glaringly apparent that my students much preferred hearing a story to working on the rules of grammar. I decided to take advantage of this reality, and eventually . . . stories [became] the centerpiece of my teaching career. Not just any stories, of course, but rather the ones that Mother raised me on: the stories *that touched the heart*.”⁶

Not only did Wheeler relish reading and teaching through story; he enjoyed collecting stories, especially those from the 1880s to 1950s. Over time Wheeler has amassed one of the largest archival holdings of short stories in America. Two events would propel these stories into 58 of the 73 published books bearing his name.⁷

A Christmas Present

It took a challenge issued during a snowy weekend in December 1989 to change Wheeler’s trajectory. Wheeler, his wife, and their student guest were enjoying a serene evening by the fire as snow and wind whipped around outside. The student asked Wheeler if he’d ever thought about writing a Christmas story; to which the answer was “Yes, I will—someday.”

The question came suddenly, abruptly ending the quietude: “Why don’t you write it *tonight*?” With coaxing from the student and his wife—and a full-blown plot given almost instantaneously by God—Wheeler spent the rest of the weekend writing and polishing. The student took “fiendish delight” in handing out the story in Monday’s writing class, starting “a chain of dominoes that are toppling still.”⁸

The next Christmas season, people asked for another story, and Wheeler

obliged, setting “The Bells of Christmas Eve” in Switzerland (his American literature class was reading Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*). But it wasn’t until a class field trip to the Review and Herald Publishing Association that God’s plans became known.

The Lord’s Leading

During the visit to RHPA Wheeler left the tour to wander around a bit. He ended up at the office of then acquisitions editor Penny Estes Wheeler. Chatting for a bit, Penny asked Wheeler what he had written lately. Wheeler told Penny about the two stories—how they were centered on the true meaning of Christmas, adding that a person couldn’t read them without crying.

“But you’ve only written two?” Penny asked.

Wheeler’s response was “Yes, but I’ve been collecting others all my life—in fact, I was raised on them.”⁹

Penny suggested Wheeler package up his favorites and send them in. Fast-forward to the finished book, *Christmas in My Heart*, with its Currier and Ives cover, and the heartwarming stories inside. No

one thought of doing more than one; however, “people realized that the collection was different from anything available,” explains Wheeler.¹⁰ When the book went through two printings before Christmas, the publishing house and Wheeler rushed to get another collection out for the next Christmas. Fall of 1994 saw the third book come out, and an on-air reading of one of the stories by Focus on the Family changed everything. By 1996 Wheeler and his wife would make the move to full-time writing and editing, in absolute belief that God was leading them.¹¹

With number 19 *Christmas in My Heart* out this year, and volume 20 to come out next year, Wheeler is quite clear on who should get the credit. “If there is anything enduring in *Christmas in My Heart*, it’s because I pray the prayer of Solomon every day. My own wisdom wells are shallow, and the water is brackish. . . . I ask Him to take the story where He wants it to go.

“I feel very, very strongly that we have mistakenly assumed that God partners only with certain ancient prophets. But if we pray the prayer of Solomon every day, saying, ‘Lord, whatever my profession might be, would You grant me Your wisdom so that it can make a difference?’—if we do that, it becomes a moot question as to what we will do or not do, read or not read, because God will lead us. And whatever we tackle, God will give us the discernment to know if what we are doing is either drawing us closer to God or alienating us from God.”

The Right Kind of Story

Anticipation of our time together this past November swiftly erased any nervousness I was feeling as I greeted Wheeler in the General Conference lobby. We took the quick, two-minute ride to the bakery restaurant where I was planning to interview him. Ever inquisitive, he peppered me with questions about family and work. After catching up over egg sandwiches, I dutifully turned on the tape and asked Wheeler to explain what he meant by the “right kind of stories.”

“I think that the good Lord, when He created us, made us almost impervious

to abstractions—we don’t internalize abstractions very easily. We only truly internalize story.” Wheeler uses an analogy from one of the *Great Stories Remembered* books to explain: “A minister is speaking to the congregation, going from text to text to text. You glance around the church and see glassy-eyed looks, and the people are starting to sink into a kind of unresponsiveness. Then the minister says, ‘This reminds me of a story . . .,’ and you see a resurrection of the entire congregation. That is the power of story, and whatever values are in those stories that we love—that as a kid we wanted to hear over and over—we become.”

“God can’t use us if we aren’t kind. The right stories make us more empathetic toward human suffering. They help us grow to be loving, respectful. The best stories show us how to make a difference in other people’s lives—they show us how to be kind, empathetic, Christlike—and that’s what is important.”

A Lost Cause?

But what about this age of relativism we’re living in, where there no longer appears to be good or evil, right or wrong? Aren’t we a lost cause? I posed this question, not trying to poke the beehive, so to speak (OK, maybe just a little), but to determine if Wheeler honestly believes it’s possible to fight this tide.

“If I didn’t, I would be pretty disillusioned. I do feel that most people sincerely want a better life not only for themselves, but for their kids. We all want something better than what we have. God has to have a way of reaching us, regardless of where we were born, and what [we were born into]. Religion can be such an accident of birth.

“We tend, as Adventists, to think that God has a pipeline only to us. But I nevertheless feel that story may represent the one thoroughly neutral ground where [every person] could meet. Instead of us feeling that we have to crystallize into a set of ‘thou shalt,’ which can tear us apart, we need to live the [biblical] dyadic. And if we *are* to come together, I don’t know of anything else that could do it other than



In Their Own Words

THREE STUDENTS SHARE THEIR THOUGHTS ABOUT “PROF. WHEELER”

Sadly, my favorite memory of Dr. Wheeler lacks all context now: I cannot for the life of me remember my good-natured but “snarktastic” remark—possibly something about refusing to do my final paper on Zane Grey? But I will always have that perfect mental snapshot of how the venerable white-haired elder of the English Department paused for a second behind his posh wooden desk, then stuck his tongue out at me like a schoolkid.

Dr. Wheeler is a person of dignified sentimentality, dedicated to instilling a love for language and literature in his students. In my case my mother had already taken care of that from my infancy, but his enthusiasm affected me in another way—I remember an English Department gathering at his house by the river when I got to see his collection of literature of the American West for the first time. Shelves upon shelves, lovingly cataloged and organized, carefully preserved. I’d always known—everyone had always known—about his academic

obsession with the frontier genre but that visual, for me, was revelatory. I thought: *Whoa, wait. So, this is allowed? Does this mean I can do that, just dedicate myself to doggedly analyzing something I love, just because I love it?*



Organizing the Renaissance Man/Woman contest, or allowing his English-major students to forgo one of his classes in favor of self-designed independent study (with thesis) supervised by him (à la the New England Study Tour)—without a trace of ego: he just made reading a joy, and gave us room to grow, branch out, and explore our potential—and was far more down-to-earth than I ever imagined him to be on first meeting.

—**Camille Lofters, English/pre-law, and journalism major, 1995 graduate**

While at Columbia Union College (now Washington Adventist University) I took both creative writing and expository writing from Dr. Wheeler. As a challenging professor who expected good effort to get a good grade, the end result was that he indeed helped us to better “inform, explain, describe, or define” our subject to our readers. In many cases Dr. Wheeler’s assignments not only honed my writing skills but helped define my outlooks on life, from important issues to trivial. On the trivial side, an essay I wrote called “My Complicated System of Sports Loyalties” still governs whom I root for to this day (in this year’s World Series, I rooted



for Texas rather than San Francisco because they were farther east and the American League representative).

Dr. Wheeler was always personally interested in what was happening in his current and former students’ lives, and enjoyed the exchange of ideas. It was that sort of exchange that allowed me to share ideas with Dr. Wheeler as he was just beginning to launch the distribution network for what would become his hugely popular *Christmas in My Heart* book series. In my own mind he ranks among the top five best teachers I ever had.

—**David Potts, business administration/management major, 1990 graduate**

I took at least two or three classes with Dr. Wheeler, beginning in my sophomore year. I remember how much he genuinely loved literature—reading it, writing it, and teaching it. I appreciated his deep respect for tradition, yet he impressed me with how open-minded he was when students like me expressed differing opinions. He just enjoyed the dialogue, and that’s what I loved most about his classes.

As a department chair, Dr. Wheeler was incredibly supportive to me personally. I am proud of all his success as an author and editor of so many books. It couldn’t happen to a nicer guy!

One thing he said on the final day of a class has really stuck

with me (and, in fact, I was just thinking of it the other day): that each class he taught was like an island in time. It was the same way for me as a student with my favorite classes, and I thought that was a beautiful way to put it. The older I get, the more I cherish those memories. I work with words for a living, and I also write and edit poetry and prose on the side—I look back to my college years as the time when I realized that I really could make a life out of my love for literature. I hope Dr. Wheeler knows how much his students appreciate the legacy of his inspiration.

—**Janelle Kihstrom, English major, 2003 graduate**

story—the way Christ used it.

“We don’t have to be doctrinaire. We don’t have to be judgmental. All we have to do is share stories, and let the stories—the kind that Christ told—carry their own freight. Christ didn’t bang His readers over the head with a moral at the end of His stories. He let the story have its own effect. Early Adventism had its greatest growth period with story, and we essentially have deserted it. I feel that God is calling us back to it.”

Keeper of the Story

But, according to Wheeler, electronic media is making this extremely difficult. He uses C. S. Lewis’s writings¹² to explain how everything we see, everything we do, everything we experience at any age, makes a mark on the soul. The marks don’t mean much at first, but over time they tend to cluster. Those clusters then tend to freeze into habits. The habits tend to freeze into character, and your character determines your eternal destiny.

“We have all but abdicated our role as parents and handed over the souls of our children to an amoral media. We make the plasma TV the pulpit in the center of our home, displacing libraries of loved books that help incorporate values worth living by.

“We need to take command of the avenues to our children’s souls, muzzle the media, and bring back the daily story hour. If we are to accomplish this, it presupposes the availability of the right kind of stories, phrased so that even today’s ever more sophisticated, streetwise children will find them a delight to hear and read.”

With almost 1.4 million books sold, the title “Keeper of the Story” to describe Wheeler is fitting. He is sure that God chose him and Connie for this purpose. But it’s apparent that keeping story ever before us isn’t his only goal. “God expects us to minister to His sheep. That’s why I consider mentoring to be the number one priority of the rest of my life. Ever since my mentor died, I’ve made that my priority. . . . And what I discovered is that it’s not just in the classroom: every interaction of life is an opportunity to mentor.

“And, essentially, if there is any differ-

ence that my life may make, I’m hoping that it will be in terms of a reconversion to story.”

The End of the Beginning

Back in my cluttered cubicle I think about the difficulty I had getting Wheeler to be part of this article—mainly because he strongly contends that he is “chief of sinners, one who has made many mistakes in life, a ‘work in progress.’” The 73 books that have made his name known around the world he attributes entirely to God; and he accepts no credit for his part in the fact that *Christmas in My Heart* is today the longest-running Christmas story series in America.

I reach up and pull—from its treasured spot on my office bookshelf—a beautifully bound, green-covered and gold-etched *Poems of Yeats*. After I had finished a huge college project for the English Department, Wheeler called me into his book-lined office and handed it to me.

It’s one of the very best gifts I have ever received. I flip through its gold-

gilded pages, pausing to read, to reflect. Renewed, inspired, I sit down to write—a story.



KIMBERLY LUSTE MARAN IS YOUNG ADULT EDITOR OF THE ADVENTIST REVIEW.

¹ Susan Phelps Harvey, “The Storycatcher,” *Renewed and Ready*, December 2008, p. 41.

² Susan Goodwin Graham, “Joe L. Wheeler: Keeper of the Story,” *Lifewise*, December 2002- January 2003, p. 9.

³ See Joe L. Wheeler, “The Sabbath Comes to Washington,” *Adventist Review*, March 24 and March 31, 1994.

⁴ Oakwood University in Huntsville, Alabama; Southwestern Adventist University in Keene, Texas; and Washington Adventist University in Takoma Park, Maryland.

⁵ Graham, p. 10.

⁶ Joe Wheeler, *The Best of Christmas in My Heart* (New York: Howard Books, 2007), p. 2.

⁷ For a complete listing of books authored and edited by Wheeler, as well as information about book signings and his blog, visit www.joewheelerbooks.com.

⁸ Wheeler, *The Best of Christmas in My Heart*, pp. 3, 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ For more on how *Christmas in My Heart* and Wheeler’s other anthologies came to be, and more “sound bites” from the interview, visit www.adventistreview.org/wheeler.

¹² Thoughts taken from *Mere Christianity*.

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