

Persistence Pays Off for Anthony Wallace

Short story, repeatedly turned down, becomes prizewinner, title story of new collection BY SUSAN SELIGSON

ANTHONY WALLACE PLUGGED AWAY FOR 10 YEARS ON a short story called “The Old Priest.” After being rejected by 12 literary magazines, it was published online in 2011 in the *Republic of Letters*, which was founded by the late Saul Bellow (Hon.’04) and Keith Botsford, a College of Communication professor emeritus and a former *Bostonia* editor. The story won, in swift succession, a Pushcart Prize and the Drue Heinz Literature Prize from the University of Pittsburgh Press, which was sufficiently impressed that it published a collection of Wallace’s stories, titled *The Old Priest*.

The book drew more critical praise and more award nominations, and Wallace (GRS’99), a senior lecturer in the Arts & Sciences Writing Program, was named one of three 2014 finalists for the PEN/Hemingway Award for debut fiction. The prize was won by Zimbabwean writer NoViolet Bulawayo for her novel *We Need New Names*.

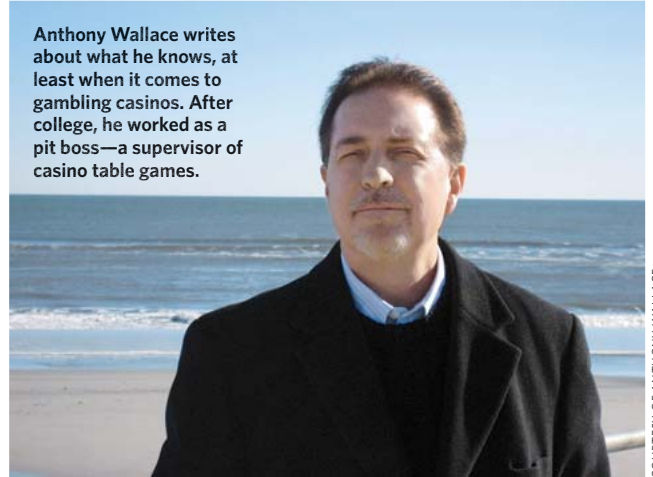
Wallace says some editors who rejected “The Old Priest” took issue either with its length (it expanded to 43 pages over the years) or its second-person voice. The *Iowa Review* did agree to accept the story if Wallace would change it to the first person. He refused. Wallace, who earned a master’s in creative writing from BU 20 years after graduating from Lafayette College with a degree in English literature, has never had an agent and never envisioned anything close to commercial success. But he continued writing, with encouragement and praise from friends and mentors, among them Leslie Epstein, director of BU’s Creative Writing Program, and Chris Walsh (GRS’95,’00), a CAS assistant professor of English and Writing Program associate director, who passed the story on to Botsford.

Being named a PEN/Hemingway finalist thrust the long-hermetic Wallace into the literary light. Bulawayo and cofinalist Mitchell Jackson have New York publishers and agents, and their books have been reviewed in the *New York Times*. Bulawayo was a finalist for the international Man Booker Prize, and Jackson has been interviewed in the *Paris Review*. Wallace’s résumé had no such accolades, but the award, he says, “puts me in their company, at least from the standpoint of recognition.”

Wallace writes about what he knows, at least when it comes to gambling casinos. “I went to Atlantic City after college because the money sounded good, because it sounded like fun, and because I couldn’t think of anything better to do,” says Wallace, who worked as a pit boss—a supervisor of casino table games. “I went to dealer’s school, dealt the games, and worked my way up.”

He says he always felt moved to write, but it was boredom that pushed him into actually sitting down at the keyboard. He had written some stories and poems and published in

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COURTESY OF ANTHONY WALLACE

a few small literary journals before applying in 1998 to the Creative Writing Program. “Leslie Epstein called me up and offered me a teaching fellowship,” he says. “He was so enthusiastic that I decided to come to Boston. His mentorship and support changed my life.”

Unlike Wallace’s other work, “The Old Priest” takes the form of metafiction, in which the writer and his writing of the story are part of the story. “It’s a postmodernist device I initially resisted, but eventually I realized that’s where the story wanted to go—it was built into the thing,” he says. “The narrator is not me, exactly, although we do have some things in common.”

The second-person voice used in “The Old Priest” is a vehicle “often frowned upon as a literary gimmick,” he says. But in this case, “I could feel that spark right from the first sentence. I chose the voice carefully and deliberately.”

In 2001 Michael Prince, a CAS associate professor of English, offered Wallace a job teaching in the Writing Program, and he accepted, happy to be back in Boston and to escape “the god-awful casino.”

When Botsford finally published “The Old Priest,” it was in the online edition, and Wallace was disappointed. “I was thinking about asking him to take it down when National Book Award finalist Salvatore Scibona, who had also published in *TROL* and was one of maybe five people who saw the story, nominated it for a Pushcart,” he says. “It won.”

After the Pushcart, he got a call from Drue Heinz series editor Ed Ochester. “When Ed told me I’d won, I thanked him, hung up the phone, and screamed for about five minutes,” says Wallace, who has written a second collection. “I’m surprised nobody in my building called the police. The news came just as I was on the edge of a cliff, about to throw myself off.”

