

# Big Fish:

## THE MYTH and THE MAN

BY BARBARA BENNETT



COURTESY OF ALGONQUIN BOOKS OF CHAPEL HILL

**BARBARA BENNETT** received her PhD in American Literature from Arizona State University. She is currently an Associate Professor at North Carolina State University. Her books include *Comic Vision, Female Voices* (Louisiana State University Press, 1998), *Understanding Jill McCorkle* (University of South Carolina Press, 2000), *Soul of a Lion* (National Geographic Books, 2010), and *Smoke Signals from Samarcand: The 1931 Reform School Fire and its Aftermath* (University of South Carolina Press, 2018). Read her interview with Jill McCorkle and Lee Smith in *NCLR* 2016 and her essay on Jill McCorkle's *Ferris Beach* in *NCLR* 2006.

Although *Big Fish: A Novel of Mythic Proportions* was Daniel Wallace's first published novel, he admits that he had written about five previous novels that never got published. When he wrote *Big Fish*, he claims that the book "felt better but not necessarily more publishable."<sup>1</sup> He started with New York publishers because his agent felt it was a good novel that would be picked up, but fifteen publishers passed on it before Wallace thought of Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, a good publisher that was "just getting on the map." In fact, it was a perfect venue, having already published such Southern writers as Clyde Edgerton and Jill McCorkle. Algonquin Books published Wallace's debut novel in 1998. Wallace was excited, of course, and pleased with the early reviews, one of which mentioned the mixing of "the mundane and the mythical" and the theme of the "redemptive power of storytelling."<sup>2</sup> A few academic articles have been written about the novel, but the film has garnered much more attention in publication. Wallace admits, "It did well for the kind of book it was" and had "a lot of foreign sales before the movie" ever came out. The book sold modest numbers and went into paperback. Since then it has remained in print and been translated into twenty-four languages.

Wallace never thought of *Big Fish* as "movie fodder" because, he says, "there's no real storyline. It is nothing like a movie." But it was optioned – as many novels are that are never made into movies. The screenplay was written by John August, who is also responsible for the screenplays for *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Corpse Bride*, among others. With August's inspired screenplay and the vision of producer Tim Burton, whose quirky mind produced such movies as *Edward Scissorhands* and *Beetlejuice*, Wallace's novel was bound to look magical and eccentric as a film. As Kim Hollis describes *Big Fish* the movie, it "is a quintessential Burton film in that it celebrates people who inhabit the fringe of society,"<sup>3</sup> a characterization of John August's work as well.

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Wallace, *Big Fish: A Novel of Mythic Proportions* (Algonquin, 1998); quotations from the novel will be cited parenthetically. Personal interview, 29 June 2017; unattributed quotations throughout this essay are from this interview.

<sup>2</sup> Quotations are from *Publisher's Weekly* 9 Sept 1998: [web](#) and Bob Minzesheimer, "In the belly of *Big Fish*, a son finds the father he dreams of," *USA Today*, 14 Jan 1999: [web](#).

<sup>3</sup> Kim Hollis, "Book vs. Movie: *Big Fish*," [boxofficeprophets.com](#), 21 Sept. 2004: [web](#).