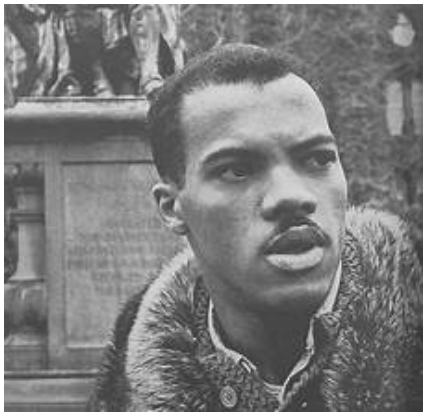
INTRODUCTION



John Edgar Wideman

(1941-)

John Edgar Wideman's literary achievements since the publication of his first novel, *A Glance Away*, provide a compelling example of the diverse cultural and creative influences operating within the imaginations of contemporary black authors. Having grown up in the black community of Homewood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Wideman began his odyssey away from those roots--a central theme of his writing--when in 1959 he was awarded a Benjamin Franklin scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania, where he became a Phi Beta Kappa scholar and distinguished himself in creative writing and intercollegiate basketball. His assimilation into the world of academe continued when, as a Rhodes Scholar, he attended New College, Oxford, from 1963 to 1966 and as a student of English examined the origins of the novel, particularly eighteenth century innovations such as Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent.* (1759-1767), which furthered his interest in the possibilities of contemporary narrative form.

Wideman received a Kent Fellowship to the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa in 1966. Since 1967, he has served on the faculties of several universities, including the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Wyoming, and the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. As a novice teacher of Afro-American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, he immersed himself for the first time in the complex literary tradition forged by black American writers, an experience he claims "absolutely transformed" his subsequent creative endeavors. Wideman's prose experimentation synthesizes and comments upon twentieth century aesthetic concerns. His early works, *A Glance Away*, *Hurry Home*, and *The Lynchers*, are stylistically indebted to T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and William Faulkner, for they share modernist preoccupations with myth and ritual, fractured narrative, surreality, and polyphonic voicings.

Yet Wideman also demonstrates a postmodernist affinity for fantasy and other modes of imaginative entry into the convoluted reality constructions of the psyche, seeing such means as an expressive medium for conveying the incoherencies of daily life, particularly the jarring and irreconcilable paradoxes of racism. Although not restricting himself to realist or naturalistic tableaus that elicit moral outrage, Wideman has made the black American experience the locus of his creative exploration and postmodernist experimentation his means of investigating the essential conundrum of racial categorization itself.

Many of Wideman's fictional techniques express his belief in the accessibility of a collective racial memory transcending temporal and spatial divisions through the sustaining energies provided by family, community, or culture. His aim is to expose the inner dynamics propelling his characters' lives and to articulate that mystery through the creation of a chorus of distinct but overlapping private voices whose thoughts assume the immediacy of speech. Wideman's efforts to fuse a novelistic whole from seemingly disparate narrative strands in such works as the PEN/Faulkner Award-winning *Sent for You Yesterday* or

Reuben rest in part upon a similar theoretical supposition that from fragmentation the imagination can generate potentially healing linkages and echoes, an activity always bathed in postmodernist suspicion that the cloudiness of human vision isolates one completely from real communion with others.

Wideman has achieved the loudest critical acclaim for *The Homewood Trilogy*, comprising a short-story collection, *Damballah*, and two novels, *Hiding Place* and *Sent for You Yesterday*. Set in the Homewood of his youth, Wideman's imaginative return to his cultural past is a journey through which he explores the intricate and mysterious interweavings of history, memory, and tradition. *Damballah* and *Hiding Place*, published concurrently, offer fictive meditations on the multigenerational past of a black family as it recapitulates the social history of Homewood itself. *Sent for You Yesterday*, the culminating work in the series, draws its title from a blues song and itself becomes a "blues" rendering of Homewood's history as it has been mythically sustained in the collective memory of the community and particularized in the integrative imagination of the narrator.

With the publication of *Brothers and Keepers*, Wideman made explicit the links between his biography and the fictional plottings of his previous work, particularly *The Homewood Trilogy*. In *Brothers and Keepers*, Wideman steps out from behind the mask of fiction to write a painfully analytic and introspective first-person account of his relationship with Robby (his brother, Robert Wideman), a former drug addict and petty criminal serving a life sentence in prison. Although nonfiction, the book employs a familiar array of Wideman's literary devices: a sophisticated alternation of voices shifting between formal English and street colloquialism, a dislocated chronology and colliding narrative forms, a metafictional foregrounding, and a dissection of the creative process itself and its power to obscure and slant far more effectively than it can elucidate or represent. The themes that dominate Wideman's fiction also operate in this text, particularly the power of family and community to support the individual, and the countervailing pressures working to erode the cultural health of the black community and the faith of even its most resilient members.

The family tragedy surrounding Wideman since the 1970's deepened in 1988, when his eighteen-year-old son Jacob was convicted of murdering a teenage traveling companion and received a life sentence in the Arizona prison system. Wideman's career-long meditations upon the mysteries of human character in and above its social milieu thus have profound and haunting personal dimensions that explain the power of his creative imagination.

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