The A-List: Black & White
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Each year, the B-Metro team compiles a list of people and organizations that we believe are extraordinary; we call it our A List. Those who landed on this year's list can boast some remarkable achievements, but their mention here goes beyond that—these are the people who are working to make this city better, in whatever way they know how.

Margaret Wrinkle explores race with an award-winning first novel.

There's been a burgeoning tradition of Birmingham-born writers shining the spotlight on the darker stories of our past, from Diane McWhorter's explosive, Pulitzer-winning *Carry Me Home* about violent repression in the Civil Rights era to Sena Jeter Naslund's *Four Spirits*, which presented a rich, fictional account of the same era, with the seminal bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church as its centerpiece.

Last year, writer, filmmaker, and visual artist Margaret Wrinkle, who was born and raised in Mountain Brook but has lived in and out of the South ever since, joined this rarefied group of women writers who have taken on the most sensitive subjects of our past. Her debut novel, *Wash* (Atlantic Monthly Press; released in paperback last November), has already been a *New York Times* Editor's Choice, an *O, The OprahMagazine* Top Ten Pick, a *People* magazine Four-Star Pick, and selected as a Great Group Read by National Reading Group Month. It also recently won the Center for Fiction's prestigious Flaherty-Dunnan First Novel Prize, and Wrinkle herself was the 2013 recipient of the Dora Franklin Finley African-American Heritage Trail of Mobile Griot Award for storytelling of diverse cultural heritage.

In much the same way that McWhorter was motivated to write *Carry Me Home* as a way of confronting the ghosts in her own family's past (including suspicions that her own father took part in meetings to organize vigilante resistance to integration), Wrinkle first conceived of *Wash* when she heard a rumor that one of her ancestors may have been involved in the business of slave breeding. Though she never found any evidence of the rumor's veracity, the idea of telling an imagined version of this man's story took root, and she resolved to see where the idea took her. The story is told primarily through the voices of Wash (short for Washington), a slave chosen by his owner to be the human equivalent of a breeding sire; Pallas, a biracial healer whose longstanding love affair with Wash is a linchpin for their emotional

survival; and Wash's owner Richardson, an ambivalent slaveholder, patriarch, and well-respected businessman in his community. The result is a powerful, poetic, and entirely human exploration of the thoughts, experiences, and hard truths of people—slaves and slaveholders alike.

Crossing Racial Boundaries

Further inspiration came from unresolved issues about race that Wrinkle personally experienced growing up. One was her relationship with Ida Mae Washington, a woman who had started working for Wrinkle's parents when Wrinkle was a child. "Mrs. Washington taught me so much about the world, but relationships like that, as profound as they were, weren't supposed to be acknowledged," Wrinkle says. "So I think crossing racial boundaries carrying divided loyalties was part of what I found so confusing and surreal about Birmingham."

When Washington's health began to decline, Wrinkle started spending part of her visits to Birmingham at Washington's house in Inglenook, where "she felt more comfortable telling me stories about her life and her family," Wrinkle recalls. "I was really happy about the turn our relationship was taking, but I was young and still thought I had a lot of time, so when she died suddenly, I was living in California and my grief just kind of laid me out. I realized I hadn't dealt with my story and how I had come to be the person that I am. That's what drew me home."

She spent nearly a decade studying, learning, and contemplating the roots, narratives, and ongoing realities of relationships between black and white people in Birmingham. She gathered oral histories of black women doing domestic work. She taught in inner-city schools. She literally bought a map, "because I was determined to go to all the places I was not supposed to go as a child," Wrinkle says. "Birmingham was so segregated then, and still is." She even made an award-winning documentary about race in Birmingham, *broken/ground*, with mixed-media and film artist Chris Lawson, that was featured on NPR's *Morning Edition*.

Along the way, *Wash* began to take hold.

One of many things that sets *Wash* apart from Naslund and McWhorter's books (aside from McWhorter's being a nonfiction account) is her timeframe: Wrinkle bypasses Birmingham's infamous and oft-told episodes of 1960s racial strife and violence, delving into slavery as a way of confronting what she considers the true core of our racial history.

"I think going back and forth between Birmingham's white and black communities for those years when I came back is when I realized that in order to understand the current racial landscape, I would have to go all the way back to slavery, which is why I ended up writing *Wash* as a way to understand what was happening now,"

Wrinkle says. “So many of our current racial dynamics stem from patterns that were laid down during slavery that haven’t been fully acknowledged. There’s a direct link between *Wash* and Trayvon, and that’s where the urgency comes in for me.”

While writing *Wash*, Wrinkle, who holds BA and MA degrees in English from Yale, turned not to a writing professor but to a West African teacher and healer named Malidoma Some. “What interests me is the coming together of traditional indigenous West African spirituality and reality with modern European western modernizing thought, which is what happened in slavery,” she says. “Those two different ways of seeing came together, and that collision created the American South and continues to color black/white race relations now.”

In all, writing *Wash* took nearly 10 years, which at first convinced Wrinkle something had gone terribly awry. But she now considers the timing of its release to be about as good as she could have hoped for, with movies like *12 Years a Slave* and *Django Unchained* helping to pave the way for slavery as a topic the public is newly interested in exploring.

“People have become more ready to hear those stories, which is a miracle as far as I’m concerned. And overdue,” she says. “I feel it’s almost a luxury to opt out of the hearing and knowing what actually happened…I hear people talking about *12 Years a Slave* and how horrible the violence is, and I feel like, well, how did you think they got so many people to do so much that they didn’t want to do? Unless we understand the reality of the violence, then we make dangerous assumptions about what was going on during slavery, including delusions that there wasn’t much resistance.”

Ultimately, she hopes that people will understand that the story of slavery belongs to all of us, whether we like it or not. “When I tried to move away from home and act like I wasn’t a Southerner and didn’t have slaveholding ancestors, I was sort of uprooted and disconnected,” she says. “For me, at least, dealing with the legacy, as difficult as it is, has given me a sense of being grounded and rooted finally in my story, for better or worse. It’s freeing for me.

“It’s very heartening that the book has been so well received,” she adds, “but then again, it doesn’t feel like it’s about me at all. It’s about the characters and the fact that after all this time, people resonate with their experiences. I find that very moving.”