

Review: *Wash*, by Margaret Wrinkle

Kirkus Reviews

November 4, 2012

Wrinkle bears witness to the inhumanity of slavery in this chronicle of a Southern family in the early 19th century.

Richardson, an American soldier captured during the Revolutionary War, comes out of that experience in debt and unwilling to resume his previous life, so after the war, he begins to acquire several slaves. Although he'd just been looking for males, one female, Mena, catches his eye, and he purchases her as well. She bears a son, Wash (or Washington), who grows up under Richardson's watchful eye. It becomes a shocking but natural progression for Richardson to analogize breeding farm animals to breeding slaves, for to Richardson both are simply valuable commodities. Because the worth of a female slave is enhanced when she has children, Wash becomes a "stud" slave. Amid this unimaginable dehumanization, Wash tries to hold on to the West African legacy he's inherited from his mother, and he takes up with Pallas, a healer who's also holding on to her African heritage. Wrinkle moves us effortlessly through narratives recounted by Pallas, Wash and Richardson, so we get three perspectives on the events. She also recounts much of the narrative through a more distancing third-person point of view, a perspective that helps put all three major characters in the same frame. It's a measure of the evil of the system of slavery that Richardson is accounted a "good" owner. As he reflects, "Even a fool knows that whipping is best avoided. Makes them harder to sell. But if it needs to be done, I'll do it myself." His stubbornness is matched by that of Wash himself, who manages to maintain and assert his dignity in an environment that systematically tries to deprive him of it.

A moving and heart-rending novel.