

Review: ‘Wash’ clears view of America’s greatest sin

by Adam Parker

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Among America’s biggest problems is its failure to come to terms with its greatest sin: slavery.

We know the wound is insufficiently healed. We see its legacy every day in the way forms of racism persist. And we watch, often too passively, as some among us act to prevent healing — exemplified most profoundly by the common attitude that “the past is the past,” that the great-great-grandchildren of slave owners cannot be held responsible for the actions of their ancestors, that blacks should just get over it already.

We know, of course, that these arguments are attempts, sometimes deliberate, sometimes subconscious, to evade the truth. And the truth is: We need much more of it, along with a lot of reconciliation. Maybe this can eventually happen. Maybe not. Meanwhile, the wound festers. Consider the Trayvon Martin case.

So it comes as a terrific surprise, a shock really, to read Margaret Wrinkle’s novel “Wash,” which is all about slaves and slave owners in the early years of the new Republic. It is a graceful book filled with the brutality of slavery and the humanity of those involved. It does not avoid the truth. It does not cut corners.

It presents people in full dimension and in context, showing how slavery was a complicated and perverse phenomenon that easily educed the evil in some people, but could not simply be dismissed as a mere distortion of history. An entire economic system, a whole culture depended on it. If you were unfortunate enough to be born into this system and culture, whether black or white, you were pretty much stuck.

This is not to say that the abolitionist pursuit was either misguided or futile (Wrinkle touches on it in her novel). Many thoughtful people fought against slavery, and that opposition succeeded in chipping away at the institution. Eventually, it won the day.

Let’s admit right off that writing novels about slavery is a difficult endeavor indeed. Few have succeeded in conveying the nature of the system while simultaneously presenting believable and sympathetic characters. But this did not

stop Wrinkle, a native of Birmingham, Ala., who grew up with an intimate knowledge of unresolved racial issues. The title “Wash” reflects the name of its slave-protagonist, Washington, but it also might be an allusion to the writerly effort to scrub the grime from the issues so they may be seen clearly.

‘Eyes on the clouds’

The story is set in the early 1800s, in Western Tennessee, which saw an expansion of the domestic slave trade as settlers ventured forth into the country’s heartland, and it presents characters engaged in a particularly distasteful aspect of slavery: human breeding for commercial purposes.

Wash is the child of Mena, a captured African woman purchased in Charleston by the soldier-landowner Richardson. He lends Mena to his friend Thompson, a humane recluse who takes the young African with him to a remote North Carolina island, where he chooses to live out his remaining days.

Mena, it turns out, is pregnant. On the island she gives birth to Wash (named by Thompson) and steadfastly holds onto her culture and heritage, passing her knowledge slowly and surely to her young son. Thompson tolerates the “mojo,” affording Mena and Wash plenty of slack.

His interest in Mena is infused by affection. In one particularly lovely sequence in which Thompson discovers her pregnancy, he teaches her how to swim:

“Soon as she lay back, soon as her dark billowy dress lay drenched against her front, I saw her belly for the first time. It reared up so round, I couldn’t believe I hadn’t seen it before. She was good and pregnant. Five months by my best guess. My mouth dropped open as she lay there floating in my palm but she kept her eyes on the clouds. Wouldn’t look at me but she started breathing shallow just like I’d showed her. When I took my hand away, she floated on her own.”

Eventually, the old man dies. Mena and Wash are claimed by Thompson’s two brutal sons and put to work on a Tennessee plantation.

Wash finds the adjustment difficult. He has grown up to be a hard-headed outsider, unwilling to forfeit his “African” or forget his ancestors. He is tall, dark, handsome, mysterious, and he strikes fear in his fellow slaves who hug their Christian bible and worry about anyone too reluctant to cast his eyes downward in the presence of whites.

This gets him a load of trouble, and Wrinkle renders it with all the violence and cruelty it demands, but without excess, always attuned to the context and history of the time.

The story is told from the differing perspectives of its main characters; Wrinkle writes mostly in the first-person, shifting quickly from one to another, but she also inserts sections written in the third person. It's a testament to her achievement that this mash-up unifies into a cohesive, flowing narrative. The reader is pulled along, eager to understand what is going through the minds of each of these fascinating people.

Clinging to identity

It is perhaps first and foremost a sweeping *psychological* portrait, a lesson in how people under stress adapt, how they connect with one another even when forces beyond their control regularly tear them to shreds.

“It’s always the dead who got to stretch out to the living,” Wash says. “You get so you can read a living man’s mind. See straight into his heart. But what you got to tell him ain’t always what he wants to hear, and the living can be some kind of hardheaded, acting blind to us even when we could save em some real time and trouble. But some things stay slow to learn and I know it can seem easier to slog on the hard way. I remember making that exact same choice myself.”

We learn about Richardson’s ambivalence toward slavery, his dependence on Wash, both for commercial gain and human interaction. We learn about African traditions and how they were tenuously conveyed to the U.S. and into the hearts and minds of those able to listen. We learn about the dysfunctional dynamics among slave communities and between whites and blacks. Above all, we enter the minds of Wash, Mena, Pallas and Rufus, each clinging hard to their African identities in the face of overwhelming odds.

To read about how the young Pallas, destined eventually to become an accomplished medicine woman and companion of Wash, was sequestered in an isolated cabin for the purpose of providing sexual relief to the young sons of a slave owner, how she emerged nearly dead inside but somehow found the strength (and the help) to reclaim her soul, is to come face to face with just one of the terrible legacies we have yet to confront fully as a society. It is a particularly heartbreaking passage in this remarkable book, yet full of hope and humanity.

Or there is the story of Rufus the blacksmith, who takes the young Wash under his wing. After the woman he loves is sold away, he descends into a pit of alcoholism and depression, never to emerge whole again.

And there is Wash himself, confused by the changing circumstances into which he has been thrust, yet eloquent and insightful at the same time. The character is fully formed, endearing and sympathetic. He grows and learns, sometimes fretfully, “falling back into the grip of his story,” sometimes with such grace and poetry the reader is left trembling.

“It was pretty soon after that day when my time came for me,” Wash recounts. “I guess living full on like I did wore me out. I’d learned not to let my anger light me up so bad, and Pallas stayed steady helping me smooth my edges. But still, my day came much sooner than I thought it might. ... It came right on me out of the clear blue sky. Didn’t have no time to fight it. Felt myself lifted up out of myself, like I’d felt plenty of times before, but I could tell this time was something different. I could tell this time I wasn’t coming back, so I turned my eyes to Pallas.”

The reader, privy to the immense psychological and physical abuse Wash must endure, is left marveling at how his mind and soul could have remained intact. In the end, it was his heart that gave out.

Wrinkle renders all of this with a carefully simplified language that somehow rings true. She is concerned less with capturing the precise nuances of actual speech and more with finding a way to reveal authentic thoughts, ideas, expressions. Her special vernacular is perhaps the key that unlocks this Pandora’s Box without permitting the furies of slavery to fly off in all directions. Instead they swirl and churn before us, contained by the intelligence of the writer and the beauty of her novel.

It seems to me that “Wash” achieves something extraordinary: a full-fledged confrontation with one of the most difficult aspects of our nation’s history. With a careful, thoughtful application of her pen, Wrinkle has given us an honest and important expression of hope. She has illuminated the darkness of slavery and invited us to explore it as the accomplices we surely are.

With “Wash,” Wrinkle has given us a firm foothold that leads in the direction of truth and reconciliation. We would do well to take this step. And to thank her for her help.

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