

## **‘Wash’ charts the uneasy beginnings of slavery in the American South**

by Gina Webb

*The Atlanta Journal & Constitution*

February 8, 2013

Margaret Wrinkle, a filmmaker and seventh-generation Southerner, had almost nothing to go on when she decided to investigate a rumor that one of her ancestors was involved in slave breeding. When her research yielded little more than another rumor, Wrinkle decided to fill in the blanks with her debut novel, “Wash.”

She’s done an amazing job. Never has a fictionalized window into the relationship between slave and master opened onto such believable territory — the minds and hearts of two men and a woman who grapple with a troubled, life-long alliance on a plantation in Tennessee during the first half of the 19th century.

Gen. James Richardson, a 70-year-old veteran of the Revolutionary War, is drowning in debt, desperate to save his plantation and businesses in Memphis. An urgent demand for slave labor in the newly minted territories of Arkansas and Louisiana offers Richardson a convenient “get out of jail free” card: He puts one of his slaves, the eponymous Wash, out to stud on a weekly basis.

The money pours in. By 1823, when the book opens, Wash, now 27, has been Richardson’s “traveling negro” for five years, fathering children all over the county. His master, who fought for freedom from the British and spent years in chains as a POW, is uneasy with the arrangement but rationalizes it as no different than another of his enterprises — horse breeding — and prides himself on keeping Wash’s “fine” unbroken strain in the mix.

The first of his family to be born in America, Wash grew up virtually free, raised on a North Carolina barrier island by his mother, Mena, a “saltwater” slave and spiritual adept, trained by West African shamans. Her teachings, which revolve around concepts of self-containment and centering oneself, form the basis for the book’s underlying themes : the importance of the stories we tell ourselves about who we are.

When Wash describes Mena’s rituals — “Said she was laying her staples inside the pantry of my spirit” — he could be describing Wrinkle’s novel, where countless variations on this theme evoke a murmurous chorus of village elders, chanting a ring of protection around their enslaved descendants.

Spanning the years before the American Revolution to the mid-1800s, the story unfolds in a fluid sweep of time and history through the beautifully imagined interior monologues of a handful of narrators: Richardson, Wash and Wash's lover Pallas, a slave doctor. Framing these first-person narratives is a third-person account that pans out to afford a wider perspective.

"Wash" unfolds like a dreamy, impressionistic landscape that, despite dates flagging the sections, requires the reader to pay attention or risk getting lost. Wrinkle covers a lot of ground, both historically and emotionally, exploring a time when the breaking-in period of American slavery was still underway, when rebellions echoed from Haiti and the "sugar islands" and King George's whip hand was only decades behind us.

The slaves we meet in "Wash" form a cabal of spiritually resilient souls. In addition to Wash's mother, Mena, there is Rufus, a blacksmith once considered a sacred figure in his homeland, and two Ibo (Nigerian) warriors. Their old-world beliefs offset their circumstances. They know how to hold back their "African," bury mojos in the walls of their masters' homes, keep talismans and shrines and heal each other with herbs and touch. They protect themselves by reading their owners' moods and carving out a space for themselves. Autonomy is an art, practiced every day.

Or as Wash makes clear by refusing to engage with Richardson, who tries to win the slave's trust: "Made me want to say, I may be broke but it ain't for you to fix it." Wash's defiance is irresistible to Richardson for many reasons, and a clash is inevitable.

Although dialogue between Wash and Richardson never takes place, the counterpoint of their observations and memories creates a conversation that blurs the boundaries between who is free and who is enslaved. Is it Wash, who struggles to remain himself in the face of his dehumanizing obligations? Or is it Richardson, whose grasping for empire and status refuse to line up with the ideals he once cherished?

"The Revolution had opened a window and he, like many of his fellow soldiers, had hoped slavery would slip right out of it. It wasn't only a new country they'd wanted, it was a new world. But that window had closed and slavery had strengthened instead, doubling its grip on all of them."

At the end of this luminous book, Pallas, who reads the ledger in which Richardson keeps track of Wash's offspring, marvels at how the combined stories, oral and written, of slave and master might one day come together.

One thinks of the best literature of the South and "Wash" itself when she says, "Yes, the writing does shrink it all down, but how in the world could everything fit otherwise? As long as you keep your mind's eye good and strong, you can use the words to open a thing back out to how it really was. Just like tracks. A cluster of pads, tipped with the points of claws, can summon up the whole wolf."