

## **Margaret Wrinkle's 'Wash' is a harrowing tale of slavery and redemption**

by Lisa Page

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What do writers owe the past, and, more specifically, what do they owe their ancestors' victims? As a white woman born and raised in Birmingham, Ala., Margaret Wrinkle faced those challenging questions. A distant ancestor of hers had practiced slave breeding. Now she has responded to that peculiar historical fact with an original and profound novel called "Wash." The medium of fiction allows her to bypass the sensational and delve into the realm of testimony and truth.

In the early 1800s, Richardson survived the Revolutionary War but lost a brother to the Indians. At his plantation on Chickasaw Bluffs in Tennessee, he is now a man alone in a house full of people. His reputation is ruined, and he is in terrible debt. "I feel more connected to the horses I've raised, the negroes I've owned, and the accounts I've tended than to my wife and most of my children," he muses. Breeding human flesh seems the solution to his problems.

Wash is the young man he forces into service. He is chosen for his intelligence and independent spirit. Richardson's idea is to "put him with three or four per day. Even if only some take, that will mean ten new negroes, worth two hundred apiece once weaned." Richardson enjoys the process and records each transaction in a ledger. He includes the names of the women, their ages, dates of conception and births. His accounts go back into the black.

Meanwhile, Wash is degraded and dehumanized. "Wagon comes for me on a Friday, won't none of the fellas meet my eyes," he thinks. "All they do is look right straight down at the dirt. Stand round muttering like they know something." Wash stays away from the slave quarters, sleeping instead in the top loft of the barn because "with this work he's been put to, enemies come easy."

Gradually, we learn more about this sensitive man and his past. Wash was born on Nags Head Island in the Outer Banks of North Carolina. He swam in the ocean and lived in a way that was, if not free, at least tolerable. His master named him Washington, and his mother, Mena, went along with it. "She had her own name for me and didn't want it in any other mouth. . . . This one was fine. Wash. Every time she said it, she heard waves and saw water sheeting off me. Sweeping me clean." That image of water as purification is a motif used throughout the novel.

At 15, Wash was sent to Richardson's plantation in Tennessee where there was no ocean to swim in. Mena, who had been brought from Africa, stood out because "there was more countryborn than saltwater negroes, even back then." But Wash understood that his mother was "stronger than most. . . . Born with one foot in the spirit world." Wash wasn't so lucky, though. His independent nature made him a target for white boys who envied his intelligence and virility. He was tortured and maimed and even branded in the face with the letter R.

This is a story about survival under outrageous circumstances. Men and women suffer squalid conditions, torture and disease. Wrinkle shows the human cost of slavery — for both blacks and whites — in harrowing detail.

Spirituality is the way out of the pain, and it runs through this narrative like a thread. Mena works with talismans and burnt offerings that help heal Wash. This "medicine" also rescues Pallas, the traumatized woman he loves. Like Wash, Pallas is profoundly damaged, having been the sexual slave to three brothers for years. "I was a child who died and was reborn," she explains. "I came into womanhood the same way I came into childhood, tied to the corner of a cabin. . . . I felt my bones . . . like a bird fluttering and I could almost hear 'em snapping. Nowhere to get away and no one there just a body grabbed and held in his two hands. My body. That was the last time I saw it for awhile."

Wrinkle supplies the voices of these characters in the first- and third-person point of view, illuminating their experiences in a deeply sympathetic and moving way. The novel disappoints only at the end, which seems a little too happy. Love is the redeemer, yes, and so is spirituality, but the conclusion runs thin, given the weight of the rest of the narrative. Still, it's hard to fault that excess of kindness in this ambitious, powerful debut.

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