

## **A Birmingham Novelist's Debut**

*Continuing a dialogue about slavery brings new insights.*

an interview in *Weld for Birmingham*

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In a starred review, *Publisher's Weekly* hails Birmingham native Margaret Wrinkle's debut novel *Wash* as "deeply researched, deeply felt." A writer, educator, award-winning filmmaker, visual artist, and seventh-generation Southerner (now transplanted to the Southwest), Wrinkle took a dark family legend on a journey of fictional redemption.

In honor of Black History Month, Grove Atlantic Publishers will launch *Wash* in February.

*Weld* spoke with Wrinkle from her home in New Mexico about Birmingham's influence on the novel and other realms of roots.

**Weld: Born in 1963, you were an infant during the year's pivotal Birmingham events. How did growing up in Alabama motivate your interest in working for social justice?**

**Wrinkle:** It was still pretty segregated. There was some diversity at Altamont when I was in high school and a lot more diversity at Yale, where I went to college. Perhaps because I grew up in such a segregated place, I've always found it compelling to bring together what has been kept separate.

My parents are Southern intellectuals, and I grew up with tons of books in the house. They were determined not to be insular, to give us a global view, and they gave my sister and me experiences traveling outside of the South. They also got rid of the television set when I was 5, because I was taking things I saw on television too literally and having nightmares. They told us that the TV was broken, and we didn't question the fact that it remained broken for the next 10 years. As a child, I read constantly, and the characters in books became like people in my life.

Ida Mae Lawson Washington, who worked for my parents from the time I was 7, was an early and a strong connection for me until her death in 1989. She had a big influence on my life.

**Weld: In what specific way does Ida deserve credit for inspiring *Wash*?**

**Wrinkle:** I was living in California when she died. I came home for three months to work on a documentary about black women in domestic service, and, after spending time with her family, I decided to give up a Yale Ph.D. program in English to instead earn a teaching certificate in elementary education. From 1992 to 1997, I taught in inner city Birmingham schools and used painting, photography, video, and writing to

work with children from the poorest income ZIP code in the United States. I taught them to read by asking them to tell their own stories.

**Weld: How did your experience as a documentary filmmaker contribute to your creation of a fictional story?**

**Wrinkle:** When I was teaching, my film partner Chris Lawson and I led our students through the making of their own documentary, called *Set the Record Straight*, about life in their community. I responded to these experiences by working with Chris to make our own documentary about race called *broken/ground*. I started to get a haunting sense that we are still deeply affected by patterns laid down during slavery and began to see how many of our cultural differences could be traced all the way back to that original clash between Africa and Europe.

**Weld: In your novel, there are three main characters, but the central figure (from whom the book draws its title) is a black slave named Wash, a “traveling Negro” man hired out by his owner to father children with female slaves. Was this a common practice in the South?**

**Wrinkle:** Slave breeding is such a controversial topic that finding sources willing to even mention the possibility proved difficult. There was a rumor in our family that an ancestor might have been involved in this kind of thing. I needed to know what that connection might mean for me. I should be clear that I never found any proof that my ancestor engaged in this practice. The dearth of historical evidence forced me into a fictional realm. Whether or not my ancestor was involved in the breeding of enslaved people, he certainly owned, worked, and traded them.

In general, the lack of historical material on slave breeding turned out to be a great gift because it forced me into my imagination.

**Weld: One reviewer described *Wash* as “a significant and hugely troublesome book.” Do you take “troublesome” as a complimentary adjective?**

**Wrinkle:** Continuing a dialogue about slavery brings us to new insights. Our society is still profoundly affected by patterns from those days. It’s a central dynamic in American culture and a dynamic still at play among young black men. We continue to feel the reverberations of the original situation, and what we do today will reverberate a long time from now.

**Weld: Do you draw this conclusion from your study of the influence of the West African culture, a central thread in the book?**

**Wrinkle:** It is an incredibly sophisticated and ancient culture. The West African perspective, in which ancestors are critically important, is a present to help us. They believe that the living and the dead have an active reciprocal arrangement. Knowing that you’re going to be around as an ancestor can be a moral motivator. We need to put the West African and European cultures side by side and integrate the best from each.

I learned about Dagara tribal ways from West African traditional healer and teacher Malidoma Some. The Dagara believe that unresolved errors can be handed down to surviving relatives, but they also believe that these relatives can cleanse some of this damage so that future generations may inherit purity.

**Weld: In writing the book — the genesis of which was your own family's ancestral legend — did you have a sense of atoning for a forebear's possible wrongs?**

**Wrinkle:** Through the writing of this book, I did manage to forge a more realistic connection with this ancestor of mine. The fact that I'm claiming him doesn't mean that I think he's a good person. He's simply a part of my inheritance. Having to enter into his reality certainly expanded mine.

Telling Wash's spiritual journey meant that I had to make one of my own in order to be able to see beyond the Western paradigm within which I was raised.

**Weld: How difficult was it for a well-educated, 21st century white woman to translate the experiences of an illiterate young black man, living in involuntary servitude in early 19th century Tennessee?**

**Wrinkle:** From the minute Wash appeared in my imagination his voice was so clear to me. Fiction allows us to travel safely into other worlds to connect with those whose circumstances might be very different from ours; it strengthens our capacity for empathy by carrying us beyond our own limited experiences. Reading fiction also helps us understand — people aren't that different after all.