

## **Whispers Become Novel**

by Kathaleen Roberts

*The Albuquerque Journal*

Feb. 5, 2013

A seventh-generation Southerner, Margaret Wrinkle had always known her ancestors were slaveholders. But when the writer and filmmaker heard whispers of slave breeding lurking within in her genealogical tree, she was shocked.

Rather than bury or deny the possibility, Wrinkle, who lives outside Santa Fe, started a unflinching journey to discover the truth.

She never found the proof she sought, except for a three-line quote from a former slave describing a tall, isolated and difficult man who was sent away for the weekend.

“Nine months later, all these babies were born,” Wrinkle said.

Then she discovered an interview with a former slave describing a man forced to work as what he called “a traveling Negro.”

Most historians deny slave breeding existed; many African-Americans insist it did, as evidenced in their own oral histories. Wrinkle knows of no other book focused on the topic. Her debut novel, “Wash” (\$25, Atlantic Monthly Press), is the result. Its release coincides with the 50th anniversary of the civil rights movement and the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation.

Already hailed by Publisher’s Weekly, Kirkus Review and Vanity Fair, the book opens with the voice of Richardson, a once-imprisoned Revolutionary War veteran who heads west to Tennessee from Baltimore to escape slavery and mounting debt. But slavery follows him. As Richardson struggles to stay afloat, Wash (short for Washington) emerges as his breeding sire. A young woman named Pallas encourages the dehumanized Wash to find solace in the spirituality and faith inherited from his shamanic African mother. The book shifts from the heart of whiteness to the shimmering spirituality of ancestral Africa and back again in alternating first-person monologues.

“I kept it to myself for a really long time,” Wrinkle said. “I was fearful — I knew it was very politically incorrect to write in Wash’s voice. But it just came.”

To Wrinkle, the journey to the subject of slavery was a natural arc from her award-winning documentary “Broken/Ground,” about the racial divide in her historically conflicted hometown of Birmingham, Ala. Frustrated by the number of stories she believed had been silenced, she attended some of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s post-apartheid amnesty hearings in South Africa.

“Birmingham used to be called the ‘Johannesburg of the South’ because it was so segregated,” Wrinkle said. “I thought a lot of the misunderstandings were because people hadn’t heard each other’s stories. That whole process really profoundly affected me.”

Before becoming a filmmaker, Wrinkle had taught in a racially mixed alternative school in Birmingham in the 1990s. She used painting, photography and video to strengthen the literacy of her students from a large nearby public housing community bearing the lowest income, per zip code, in the nation. Fourteen-year-old African-American boys grew up discovering that others feared them simply because they were black, Wrinkle said, adding that many of the teenage boys she encountered informed her portrayal of Wash.

When Wrinkle returned to the States in 1998, she stumbled across the rumor that an ancestor may have bred slaves in the same way they bred livestock. She researched the story for years.

“It points out the limitations of the historical record,” she said. “A lot of things written down didn’t go from the families to the libraries.”

If a family did engage in slave breeding, any written evidence would likely be stashed in an attic, burned or buried, she added.

“It raises questions of proof,” she continued, “but reminds me that history is just another story.”

The book “Weevils in the Wheat,” containing interviews with former Virginia slaves, is one of the few history books to list slave breeding in its index, she added.

The character of Wash germinated in Wrinkle’s mind after reading that single three-line quote. There were some advantages to his heinous job, she said. “He got extra food. He got to sit in the shade. (But) nobody liked him.”

The conflicted slave-holding patriarch Richardson, in turn, feels like he has little choice to turn slave breeder, given the economic structures of his time.

“A lot of people paid their debts with slaves, so what do you do?” Wrinkle asked.

“I had to write (Richardson) with compassion because it would make the story more powerful,” she said. “It makes it more tragic.”

The story surfaced in three distinct voices. Giving each character an equal footing becomes transformative, revealing the ways our contemporary racial landscape has been scarred by the past, she added.

Wrinkle scoured the South for more information, traveling among abandoned buildings, old plantations and community libraries. She jigsawed these guideposts into composites for the book. She also took photographs, some of which are reproduced in “Wash.”

“The barn is from a place in North Carolina,” she said, “and the house is from a place in Tennessee.”

Most white Southerners tend to either demonize or lionize their ancestors, Wrinkle added.

“I didn’t want to live like that,” she said. “I don’t feel responsible, and I don’t feel guilty. It was just what happened.”

A recent reading and photo exhibit in Birmingham drew a racially mixed crowd of 380, Wrinkle said. “This is hard. Nobody’s supposed to talk about it. If Wash lived it, the least we can do is talk about it. It is a haunting.”