

Slavery Re-Examined

by Lanier Isom

Birmingham Magazine

February 2013

Margaret Wrinkle grew up in Birmingham and attended The Altamont School before earning her bachelor's and master's in English at Yale University. Her award-winning 1996 documentary "broken\ground" was featured on NPR and was a winner of the National Council on Foundation Film Festival. A writer, filmmaker, educator and visual artist, she currently lives in Sante Fe, N.M.

In "Wash," her first novel, Wrinkle reexamines American slavery in ways that confound our contemporary assumptions, offering a compelling portrait of both owner and owned. Along the Tennessee frontier in the early 1800s, two men find themselves locked in an intimate power struggle. Richardson, a troubled Revolutionary War veteran, has spent his life fighting not only for his country but also for wealth and status. But when the pressures of westward expansion and debt threaten to destroy everything he's built, he embarks on an audacious plan. He sets Washington, a young man he owns, to work as his breeding sire. Wash, the first member of his family born into slavery, struggles to hold on to his only solace: the spirituality and faith inherited from his shamanic mother.

As he navigates the treacherous currents of his position, despair and disease lead him to a potent healer named Pallas. Their tender love unfolds against this turbulent backdrop while she inspires him to forge a new understanding of his heritage and his place in it. Once Wash and Richardson find themselves at a crossroads, all three lives are pushed to the brink.

Birmingham magazine: The whole topic of slave breeding has always been controversial. Were you hesitant to take it on?

Margaret Wrinkle: Yes, I was, but I didn't feel I had much choice. Once I knew about it, I couldn't turn away. After hearing a rumor that an ancestor of mine may have been involved in this practice, 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, and "Wash" is a novel inspired by my connection to this slaveholding ancestor. Whether or not he was involved in the breeding of enslaved people, he certainly

owned, worked and traded them. My link to him forced me to into a certain closeness, which I knew would be interesting to explore through fiction.

BHAM: You were born in Birmingham in 1963. How did growing up during that tumultuous time inform your writing of this story?

MW: In many ways, it feels like I've been moving toward this story all along. Like many white children of that era, some of my most intense early relationships were with the black people who were being paid to look after me. Ida Mae Lawson Washington did domestic work for my family for nearly 20 years, and she taught me much of what I knew about the world. Thomas Jefferson Goodwin was a remarkable horseman who worked for another family and who taught me about the natural world. But because these profound interracial relationships unfolded within a still rigidly segregated society, they were never supposed to be acknowledged.

Being seen fully by those whom your own culture refuses to validate is a surreal experience which can take years to reconcile. I'd initially tried to leave my racial confusion behind, so I was grown and living elsewhere when Mrs. Washington's death knocked me flat. My overwhelming reaction showed me I had not even started to understand my own story. It compelled me to move back home and cross every boundary I'd been schooled to respect.

BHAM: How did you do your research and what were your best sources of information?

MW: The Birmingham Public Library's Southern Collection has extensive holdings and wonderful archivists who helped me get started. But there's very little written about the practice of slave breeding, and I soon discovered that the written history of slavery is actually quite mutable. Conclusions drawn from the same evidence change almost decade by decade as the bias of the writers shifts with the times. Most of my library research simply fleshed out the general landscape of the era. I found primary sources such as runaway slave ads, newspapers and court transcripts particularly helpful, but most of my best material came from visiting slavery-related sites throughout the South. I became fascinated by how the story of slavery gets told and how much of it has been buried.

BHAM: Are the photographs that you have included in the novel from those visits? Why did you choose to include them and where can we see the entire series?

MW: Yes. The photographs started out as visual note-taking but the images soon gave rise to scenes and even themes. I also liked the idea of using photographs to illustrate a story which takes place before photography was invented because it raises questions about facts and proof and even knowing itself.