

Book Review: 'Wash,' by Margaret Wrinkle

by Chris Tucker

The Dallas Morning News

February 22, 2013

Slavery is America's original sin. While many of us can't bear to face its legacy, brilliant writers who fearlessly explore it can bring back vital truths. Books like William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Edward P. Jones' *The Known World* and Russell Banks' *Cloudsplitter* form a kind of Truth and Reconciliation Commission of their own.

Add Margaret Wrinkle's *Wash* to that illustrious company. Wrinkle, who also made the award-winning documentary *broken/ground* about race relations in her hometown of Birmingham, Ala., builds a lyrical story of courageous human beings transcending the cruelty and degradation of their slave-holding society.

The main characters of *Wash*, which takes place in the decades leading up to the Civil War, are Washington (Wash), the first member of his family to be born a slave; Pallas, also a slave and a shamanlike healer with hidden maladies of her own; and Wash's owner, Richardson, a white man who fought in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. The son of a wealthy land baron, he hopes to build an empire of his own near the nascent city of Memphis.

As the country expands westward, Richardson finds himself in debt and reluctantly decides to put Wash to work as a breeding sire. Banish any thoughts of lurid trash like *Mandingo* and the racism-tinged Falconhurst novels; in Wrinkle's gifted hands, even this brutalizing subject matter becomes a window into the human spirit struggling against dehumanization.

Wash draws strength and solace from memories of his mother, whose voice he hears constantly, and from his beloved Pallas, both of whom embrace ancient African spiritual practices. Even when he is being treated like an animal in the act of breeding, Wash thinks, "I keep my mind turned toward how I'm handing all my people some new bodies to live in," Wash thinks. "I'm pulling my people back into this world so they can be here with me. ... These here will die and mine will breathe in new air and it will be a new day."

Such scenes in which characters quite self-consciously create their own narratives, stamping their actions with purpose, are frequent in *Wash*; the value of locating

oneself inside a meaningful story — and thus retaining control of one’s life — is a major theme of the novel: We are the stories we tell ourselves. As Wash, Pallas and Richardson alternate as narrators, we see vast, submerged continents of love and pride and fear beneath the public masks they wear.

As for Richardson, he is tormented and driven to alcoholism by his inability to force his own story onto the world. After being blamed for a military disaster in the War of 1812, he spends decades trying to clear his name, even hiring a journalist to tell his tale. He also keeps meticulous records of Wash’s progeny and the community he creates.

The healing power of narrative is seen most of all in Pallas (named by her white owner after the goddess Pallas Athena). Forced to serve as a sexual plaything for a slave owner’s three sons, Pallas suffers from what might today be diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder. She is drawn to Wash, but years of abuse have blotted out her story and made it impossible for her to trust a man. The slow unfolding of their love is one of the novel’s finest achievements.

Auden was right to say that “poetry makes nothing happen” in the so-called real world, but great art holds truths that politicians rarely see. Wash tells us that vital story, a story we can never hear enough.

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