

A conversation with . . .

Margaret Wrinkle



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

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. *WASH* is a novel initially inspired by this connection to a 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.

2. How did you do your research and what were your best sources of information?

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 quite mutable. Conclusions drawn from the same evidence change almost decade by decade as the bias of the writer 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 central material came from visiting slavery-related sites throughout the South. I became fascinated by how the story of slavery gets told and by how much of it has been buried.

I did find one three-line quote which launched me into Wash's story but in general, the lack of historical material on slave breeding turned out to be a great gift because it forced me into my imagination. I'd read Toni Morrison say she hadn't wanted to know any more than the two line newspaper story about Margaret Garner killing her child before writing *Beloved*. Mona Simpson has also said that she's a great believer in doing research but only after she's done the writing first. For the most part, I followed a similar plan. I wrote first, then did research to confirm the discoveries I had made during the writing process, except in cases where I needed to know certain technical specifics like how to smelt and forge iron or what exactly happened with regards to slavery at the Constitutional Convention.

3. You were born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, the same year Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. chose the city for civil rights campaign because it was the citadel of segregation. How did growing up during that tumultuous time inform your writing of this story?

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 twenty years and she taught me much of what I knew about the world. Thomas Jefferson Goodwin is a remarkable huntsman who was working at that time for another family. He taught me about horses and the natural world. But because these profound interracial relationships unfolded within a still rigidly segregated society, they were never supposed to be fully acknowledged.

Being fully engaged with 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.

4. How did you come to teach in inner-city Birmingham and how did that experience influence WASH?

I had entered a PhD program in English at Yale, intending to work toward social justice, but after moving home and spending time with the Lawson Washington family, I realized that too many of the students I went into teaching to empower were being written off before they had reached the fifth grade. I left the PhD program and earned my certification to teach elementary school instead.

I used painting, photography, video and writing to strengthen literacy in an alternative school in one of Birmingham's largest public housing communities, one which had the lowest income zip code in the nation. Working with my film partner Chris Lawson to lead our students through the making of their own documentary, called *Set the Record Straight*, about life in their community schooled us on the difficulties of navigating multiple and often conflicting racial agendas.

I responded to these experiences by working with Chris to make our own documentary about race called *broken\ground*. Crossing back and forth between Birmingham's black and white communities, carrying hard truths between divided sides, I started to get the haunting sense that we are still deeply affected by the patterns laid down during slavery. I began to see how many of our cultural differences and difficulties could be traced all the way back to that original clash between Africa and Europe.

The frustrating dilemmas faced by too many of my students provided another compelling reason for me to explore the contemporary effects of these old dynamics. Many of the teenage boys I worked with would eventually inform my portrayal of Wash.

5. How did making *broken \ground* serve as a precursor to writing this novel?

In documentary film, you can use editing to create a conversation between people who might not be speaking to one another, people who may not ever be in the same room. Cutting back and forth between their differing responses allows you to gather everyone's stories together in the same space on equal footing. Perhaps because I grew up in such a segregated place, I've always found it compelling to bring together what has been kept separate.

It also became clear to me that many misunderstandings stem from the festering of stories left untold. But both blacks and whites both tend to have a hard time telling their racial truths on camera. Looking back from here, I can see that I made the leap into fiction because it was the only medium that could hold all the truths I needed it to hold.

All those hours conducting and transcribing interviews honed my ear and screening the film in various communities taught me a lot about perspective. I can also see in retrospect that I structured this novel like a documentary film which uses both alternating interviews and archival footage.

6. The novel is written in overlapping narratives, with each character getting a chance to tell their own story, including Wash, the enslaved man used as a breeding sire by his owner Richardson. Was it challenging for you to write in the voice of an enslaved black man? Why did you feel compelled to do that?

Yes it was, but once again, I didn't feel like I had much choice. I knew I'd catch hell for it, but Wash's voice was just so potent and clear that it felt undeniable. He emerged as a character of such force and psychological sophistication that I had to discover his story.

Since much of my teaching has been focused on strengthening my students' access to their own voices, I understand that my speaking for Wash is an unavoidably loaded issue. But I'd learned from filmmaking that Wash and Richardson and Pallas had to stand together in the same space on equal footing for the book to work.

These three voices had to come together to capture the whole picture. I also believe that my having slaveholding ancestors makes slavery my story too. What we need to remember is that involvement with slavery has had a profound impact on the white psyche for generations and that damage needs to be explored.

7. One of the defining characteristics not only of Wash, but also of Pallas, the enslaved healer with whom he forms a strong bond, is their adherence to traditional West African spirituality, which has been passed on to them from ancestors brought on ships from Africa. Why did you feel like this was an important element to include in the book?

Since Wash's spiritual journey is one of the central story lines, there would have been no book without this West African spiritual component, just as there would have been no such thing as the American South.

I knew from the beginning that any story of American slavery had to include both traditional African and modern Western paradigms, which can seem so different as to be opposed. The

traditional African (or indigenous) perspective tends to be more mystical and metaphysical, existing more in the realm of timelessness. While the Western tradition has its own mystic thread, the modern Western perspective has become much more secular and linear, bound by chronological time.

I think we underestimate how these cultural differences continue to influence our behavior. I wanted to weave these two contrasting paradigms together in a way that would lead modern readers to question their current assumptions about race, power, history and healing.

8. Do these differences have something to do with why you used both first and third person narration?

Yes! The central challenge of writing WASH was finding a way to integrate the linear demands of the modern novel with the timeless ancestral energies of traditional African cosmology. The third person narrative, which is forward moving and largely set in the present tense, follows the linear modern novel format while the nonlinear first person narratives mirror a more indigenous reality, which is unbound from the construct of time and reflective of oral storytelling. I had to use both ways of seeing to capture the whole story.

The alternating first person monologues were crucial. After having worked with many traumatized students, I knew that telling your story, both for yourself and to yourself, is one central way to heal and to gain mastery over your own life. But the intensity of first person perspective soon became too much. It needed to be balanced with a more cinematic long shot which could hold all the characters in the same frame.

At the same time, it also seemed essential in any serious exploration of a traditionally oral culture, especially one that was not only denied literacy but was also controlled through the use of written documents, to question the notion of a central, omniscient narrative authority and its assumed neutrality. Letting the characters interrupt the third person narrator, cutting in to agree or disagree, seemed a more appropriate way to represent the welter of competing truths that coexist in any segregated situation.

9. How did you go about researching the spiritual traditions and ceremonies of West Africa, in order to include them in the novel?

My West African characters lived a substantial portion of their lives within a traditional ceremonial reality but it's tricky to research an oral culture that has long been invested in protecting its secrets from anthropologists who might take sacred ceremonial knowledge out of context. I read a lot but I also found ways to participate in various indigenous ceremonies so I could better understand the energetic architecture of those characters' lives. 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.

10. What was the most difficult part of writing this book?

It was challenging to hold the fullness of both Wash and Richardson in the same space for long enough to bring about some transformation without the whole book threatening to explode on

me. After all, Richardson's success depends on Wash being dehumanized while Wash's survival depends on the opposite.

And while the condition of slavery is inherently dramatic, it poses serious challenges to the traditional idea of a narrative arc. How do you generate suspense leading to a climactic event when your characters are enslaved into the foreseeable future? I didn't want to rely on the most obvious solutions of runaways and rebellions because they don't represent the reality of the vast majority of enslaved people.

It was also challenging to protect the rhythms of an oral culture within a written text and to provide the necessary clarity while leaving enough mystery so that the reader can take the same journey of discovery that I did.

11. Did your relationship to this ancestor of yours change as a result of writing this book?

Yes, it did. Many white Southerners feel conflicted about having slaveholding ancestors. We either demonize them, lionize them or leave home and try to forget all about them. I remember starting out full of anger and blame when I first stumbled across that rumor. But once I realized that I had to either deal with the potential sins of my fathers or else live without my ancestors and untethered to my lineage, the choice became clear.

We're all familiar with the Old Testament idea of the sins of the fathers being visited on future generations but it was West African traditional healer Malidoma Some's explanation of his Dagara tribal ways that set the template for my exploration of this issue. While the Dagara believe that unresolved errors can be handed down to surviving relatives, they also believe that these relatives can cleanse some of this damage so that future generations may inherit purity.

I don't know about purity but 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. He turned out to be a good teacher because we all carry within us the potential to abuse our power.

12. Atypically for a novel, WASH contains actual photographs that you took. Why did you choose to include them?

The photographs started out as visual note-taking during my visits to slavery-related sites throughout the South. But once I got home, the images started giving rise to scenes and even themes.

I 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. I wanted the reader to learn to read across differing systems because that's what many of the characters have to do. I feel that our current narrow emphasis on textual literacy has led to our becoming dangerously underdeveloped in terms of our visual, spiritual and emotional literacy.

13. What books have been important to you?

My parents' decision to get rid of the TV when I was a child put books at the center of my life early on. I was certainly steeped in Faulkner, especially *The Sound and the Fury*. One high school teacher took a small group of us to see the actual bridge at Harvard where the fictional Quentin Compson committed suicide. But I was frustrated by the gaps scattered throughout Faulkner and I remember always wanting to hear more from Dilsey.

African and African diaspora writers started to fill in these gaps. Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ben Okri, Nadine Gordimer, John Edgar Wideman, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Octavia Butler, Paule Marshall and Caryl Phillips are all important to me, along with the writings of traditional African healers Malidoma Some and Credo Mutwa. All of Robert Farris Thompson's work on the African Diaspora was invaluable, especially *Flash of the Spirit*, and there's a whole lineage of work dealing with Western slavery that shaped my thinking.

Seeing Hans Haacke's installation exploring Steven Biko's death, along with the plays of Athol Fugard, Elsa Joubert and August Wilson accelerated the long process of waking me from my white innocence. Attending some of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's amnesty hearings also influenced me immensely. But the one single work that probably had the most impact was Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*. The experience of reading that book transformed my understanding of the time space continuum and freed me to embrace what was happening to me in the writing of *WASH*.

14. So the work of others was important in deciding to turn to writing fiction and, ultimately, in writing WASH?

Having been transformed by art, I wanted to make art that could transform. My time spent as a teacher and making *broken\ground* had already taught me that by the time people meet in the streets, it's too late to generate much understanding. But because reading 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.