

(Artspeak) Lest We Forget...

Written by Irma McClaurin, PhD
Thursday, 19 March 2009 14:05



I have learned over time that it is always good to listen when Elders speak. And when someone as prolific and sanguine as John Edgar Wideman opens his mouth, we'd be fools not to hungrily hang onto his every word. Wideman is one of the most profound writers living today, as well as a two-time winner of the PEN/Faulkner award and a MacArthur Fellowship recipient. His reading last month (February 5, 2009) from the latest work-in-progress (and what will be his tenth book), both provocative and unsettling, was part of the Givens Foundation's Fifth Annual Nommo African American Authors series (http://www.mespa.net/African_American_Literature_Givens_Foundation.html).

Wideman is known for tackling difficult subjects—the difference in the personal choices and subsequent life trajectories of he and his brother is the compelling subject matter of *Brothers and Keepers*

; the memoir was originally published in 1984, reissued in 1995, and again in 2005, and chronicles Wideman's life as a Rhodes scholar and basketball athlete scholar, who grows into an award-winning novelist and professor of creative writing and literature, while his brother travels the path seemingly fated for many Black urban youth of today-- drugs, theft, and a rite of passage in prison, often the consequence of making poor decisions and being in the wrong place at the wrong time. In allowing us a window into his life, Wideman forces us as readers to confront the real meaning of the aphorism, "...but for the grace of God, there go I."

We are captivated because we know that at some point in each of our lives, we all have probably marveled at how grace miraculously changed us. For me, *Brothers and Keepers* is a reminder of how grace (always accompanied by lots of hard work and perseverance) intervened in my own life course. Without it, and a profound belief in hope, I could have easily fallen victim to the path predicted for me by social workers and sociological studies. As a young Black girl growing up in the projects on the Westside of Chicago, the daughter of a female-headed household, the prediction was that I would lead a life marked by an early teenage pregnancy at 15, which would result in a permanent membership in the welfare system. This script included a scenario of minimum wage jobs and underemployment, if I didn't finish high school or obtain my GED. It was also assumed that my first child would be followed by several others and a string of "babies' daddies," who contributed little financially; these

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conditions would eventually condition me and my expanding family of children to a life of domestic violence and absentee fathers. Fortunately, “grace” stepped in, and along with my determination and hope, allowed a different narrative to be written, and set me on a path to success.

In Wideman’s latest, and still unfinished, novel, he takes us on a journey where we encounter the character Clemmett, who never speaks, but sweeps out the balls of hair in a barber shop. We have met people like Clemmett; we see them every day on the streets, in the supermarket, or Laundromats, and we wonder about the course of their lives. We are curious enough to wonder, but we never speak to them. Yet playing in the back of our minds is that mantra—but for the grace of God....

As Wideman read through the yellow-lined, handwritten pages of this latest adventure in the imagination, he introduced us to another character based on Louis Till, the father of Emmitt Till (the 14-year-old Chicago boy who ventured down south, was brutally murdered and returned home in a casket in 1955). And what Wideman revealed through this fictional account, one deeply rooted in his personal excavation of archives and visits to cemeteries, is what he described as “intersections of history and horrors.” We learn that Louis Till was hanged and dishonorably discharged for the alleged rape and murders of white Italian women in Europe, while at home in America, his son (Emmett Till) was brutally beaten and lynched for allegedly whistling at a white American woman. Wideman introduced us to the tragic symmetry of circumstances, events, the deep reach of social injustice across generations, and the loss of lives.

His latest work triggered questions of “why now” from the audience. Why write such a horrific and troubling story now, as America seemingly stands on the precipice of hope and redemption through its election of the first Black President of the United States. Wideman’s responses were as provocative and disturbing as his unfinished novel. He wants his audience and readers to think about how history and horrors intersect --Auschwitz, Rwanda, the Sudan, the American south, to name a few. He also wants American readers to recognize that despite this uplifting moment in history, the country has a lot of unfinished business. Wideman intimated that perhaps Louis Till’s trial, conviction and death in 1945 is as much “unfinished business” as is the acquittal of his son’s, Emmett Till, murderers in 1955. And he asks us to consider what impact the knowledge of Louis Till’s unheroic death and the leak to the media of his military record (usually a private document) had on how the public viewed Emmett Till. It would be one year shy of half a century (2004) before the state of Mississippi attempted to bring justice to Emmitt Till. But for the grace of God....

As a writer, Wideman is interested in “honesty and truth”—his own, his readers, his country. And he openly challenged the audience to move beyond the allure of having elected a Black president, and consider whether we are at a moment when we must ask to what extent does honesty and truth guide the current political actions of Republicans, who are sending an implicit vote of no confidence to this first Black President? Wideman, by reminding us that we are not that far removed from a past in which a racialized system of social injustice ruled the day and bent the law and its application towards its own end, challenges all of us to view the current deliberate political assaults on President Barack Obama’s leadership, as a logical extension of

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America's troubled racial past with deep roots in the present.

Yes, we have journeyed far in the last four months since the November election. We have come far, but then again not that far. Wideman is an elder keeper of the truth who remains ever vigilant, lest we forget ...but for the grace of God.....

For more on John Edgar Wideman:

http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Africana_Studies/people/wideman_john.html

<http://journalism.nyu.edu/portfolio/books/book379.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Edgar_Wideman

<http://aalbc.com/authors/johne.htm>

<http://www.answers.com/topic/john-edgar-wideman>

For more on Emmett Till:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emmett_Till

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/10/21/60minutes/main650652.shtml>

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Irma McClaurin is an anthropologist/writer and also Associate Vice President for System Academic Administration, as well as Executive Director of the Urban Research and Outreach Center at the University of Minneapolis. Her latest essay, "Walking in Zora's Shoes or 'Seek[ing] Out de Inside Meanin' of Words': The Intersections of Anthropology, Ethnography, Identity, and Writing," was just published in Anthropology Off the Shelf: Anthropologists on Writing (Wiley 2009). The views expressed are entirely her own.

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