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BLURRED RELATIONSHIPS:
THE FACTUAL FICTION OF JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Melissa Bakeman Hartmann

March 2003

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Approved by:


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ABSTRACT

Control is a central issue in any text: does the author's intention or the reader's interpretation better explain the resulting meaning of the text? This question has long been the subject of debate among textual theorists; this essay proposes a middle ground, namely that the author and the reader engage in a collaborative effort to make meaning in a text. This complementary effort is best exemplified in the short fiction of John Edgar Wideman, whose unique blend of family history and fiction creates a not-quite fictional world through which we as readers see him utilize his characters as thinly-veiled models for his own emotions. Wideman's short fiction blurs the boundary between fiction and reality, and calls into question just what we mean by calling a person or event "real."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my thesis committee, Drs. Elinore Partridge, Bruce Golden, and Milton Clark, for their invaluable advice and encouragement during this process. I would also like to thank the late Kellie Rayburn for being a friend and early mentor: you don't know how much you're missed. Lastly, I would like to thank my husband Adam, my daughter Lily and my sons Leo and Eliot, for their strength and support.

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CHAPTER ONE

REDONDO BEACH

Not too long ago, my husband Adam and I were in Redondo Beach taking in the sights and discussing the various topics I was considering for my master's thesis. Although I knew I wanted to work with John Edgar Wideman, I was not sure in what exact context I could do that. I had been introduced to Wideman by one of my professors, and I was interested in the way Wideman weaves fiction and nonfiction together.

As Adam and I continued walking, we encountered many homeless people, but only one approached us. He was an African-American man with long dreadlocks and thoughtful black eyes. His complexion was almost entirely masked by a long, kinky beard and mustache, and the part of his complexion that was evident was mildly pitted. He was wearing a dark khaki green military jacket and faded blue jeans. He smelled of motor oil mixed with gasoline, but it was his eyes and his trembling hands that told the story.

Although he never told us much about himself, including his name, we walked with him up and down the boardwalk discussing writing and the little notebook he

carried with him. In all of his personal turmoil and strife, he still enjoyed writing down simple quotes and memories that he feared would be forgotten if left to his own skills of recollection. It was a simple conversation. He did not pretend to know us and we extended him the same courtesy, not out of disinterest, but simply out of wanting to live in that moment.

To this day, I do not know why a homeless man triggered the later conversation between Adam and myself, but this brief interaction led me to what has become my thesis project. After leaving our newfound friend in a world full of faceless, nameless people, I began talking about that moment. Like already experienced life and interactions, those moments become our history. I explained that once a real moment passes it becomes part of a fictional realm. For example, the above description of the homeless man we met is a product of my memory as well as a creation of fiction. Just by describing him and that day at Redondo Beach, I tiptoe along the border between fiction and nonfiction because it exists in an in-between latitude. We can never relive that exact moment again, so to describe it instantaneously invites embellishment and fictional elements. As I describe him, I create real features that he

had, but the way I describe him is an acknowledgment in my own mind regarding how I, an individual, perceived him.

This recreation is true for all humanity when we describe a historical event that happened in our lives. Although most of our lives are not fashioned for history books, we still weave our own history through the course of our lives. When telling a child about family tradition and history, we attempt to recreate the moment for them, so they can in turn pass that moment on in their own words. Those words will inevitably vary from the original narrator's, as will the original story be changed depending on who is expressing the memory.

Thus, these real life people and events become fictionalized. Yes, there are elements of reality and unwavering truths, but the recollection is an interesting mix of both elements of creation: fiction and nonfiction. For each person, those snippets become a private understanding shared only with close friends and family members. Yet, for a few talented writers, those moments become a cathartic playground for their readers to ponder and by which to learn more about themselves, other individuals, and life going on around them. I believe this

is John Edgar Wideman's playground, the blurred line between fiction and nonfiction.

Like the homeless man who incited my fire for this project, Wideman has recreated family members and events in his fiction. These real life people now live in an in-between place, where fiction and nonfiction waltz together and readers relate to them through their own life experience. Based upon Wideman's own family history, readers create meaning through Wideman's experience and their own experiences, leading to personal understanding. This constructed meaning becomes emphasized when Wideman shares his experience because just as Wideman opens himself to the reader, so too does the reader open to Wideman's text.

This rhetorical strategy not only adds validity to Wideman's experience, but also adds validity to the black community for whom the majority of his fiction was originally intended. The specific rhetorical analyses I will perform come from his short fiction compilation entitled *all stories are true*; although he has discussed his brother's and his son's incarceration in the nonfiction texts *Fatheralong* and *Brothers and Keepers*, my primary interest lies in his short fiction, where the real people

from Wideman's life are transformed into symbolic characters. The next chapter will explain the specifics of Wideman's style and why it appeals to the reader, while the biographical information in chapter three will introduce Wideman's cast of characters, their significance in his life, and the recurring themes they represent in his fiction. Then, once I have established Wideman's palette of characters and themes, I will use chapter four to specifically analyze how Wideman manipulates them for his rhetorical purposes.

So the exploration is underway and I must remind myself that this time spent is also part of my history. Like Wideman's writing, this thesis will be subject to interpretation by various eyes perusing its pages, and each set of eyes will create a new history for my words, as well as a newly-created meaning for Wideman's text.

CHAPTER TWO

READERS AND THE TEXTS

When asked why they read, people respond to the question differently. Some say they read for pleasure and to escape the daily grind, whereas others say it is their way to make sense out of the world or understand life through someone else's perspective. Whatever the reason for the initial activity of reading, the reader plans to take something out of that text. However, as readers sit down to read, they may also consider themselves as originators of the act of reading and expect an outcome based upon a preconceived notion of what the selected text will offer. Based on the specific text, each reader's final outcome will differ significantly, but what about the authors and their place in the text? For example, this essay will consider the role John Edgar Wideman plays in his texts, as character, narrator, and author, in every guise trying to communicate certain themes to his readers. But Wideman's peculiar blending of fiction and "reality" makes his myriad purposes in the text significant because as Wideman's role changes, so too does the set of rhetorical techniques he employs: through Wideman's use of details from his family

history, we cannot be sure at any one time whether he is telling a story with a metaphorical aim or simply relating some aspect of his own life.

What we may safely conclude is that Wideman is doing both things, serving as storyteller as well as confessor, but this brings up another question: to what degree does Wideman, treading as he does amid so many familiar details and themes his readers have also experienced, maintain control over his text? Does Wideman's intention influence his readers even before they open the pages of his texts? This conundrum seems to be under constant consideration from composition and literature theorists alike, and the question becomes, who originates the text? Is it the author, the reader, or a steady mix of both, because you cannot have one without the other? These questions can be traced through the many pages of argument regarding reader response and authorial intention criticism. Yet, before readers or critics can fully explore the realm of meaning, they must first deal with issues involving the author's intention as described in authorial-intention criticism. And when considering the idea of intention, one must look at reader response theory as described by Stanley Fish in *Is There A Text In This Class?*:

In the old model utterers are in the business of handing over ready-made or prefabricated meanings. These are said to be encoded, and the code is assumed to be in the world independently of the individuals who are obliged to attach themselves to it (if they do not they run the danger of being declared deviant). In my model, however, meanings are not extracted but made and made not by encoded forms but interpretive strategies that call forms into being. It follows then that what utterers do is give hearers and readers the opportunity to make meanings (and texts) by inviting them to put into execution a set of strategies. (173)

The old model places authorial intention in importance before the reader's interpretation, basically stating the reverse of Fish's position: authors have eminent domain over their work and the reader is simply discharged of all responsibility except to read. As W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley describe conceptions governing the principle of authorial intention, "Intention is design or plan in the author's mind. Intention has obvious affinities for the author's attitude toward his work, the way he felt, what

made him write" (749). On the other hand, with reader-response theory, the reader assumes the authority, or shall I say the final say, as to the text's meaning. Fish argues that the reader has more, if not all, control over the creation of the text. So the question becomes, who makes the text? I am proposing that both models have a purpose and validity in certain aspects of literature, despite their obvious tension.

In order to make this argument, we must look at the fine points made by each camp in an effort to establish credibility and validity for their arguments. With that in mind, it seems only fitting to begin at the beginning with the assumed initial creator of the text and this discussion, the author. Here we must consider the origin of the word "author," inasmuch as it means "the beginner or originator of anything as a movement or a reform," and the word "authority," which means "the power or right to act or command; a person with power to act or command for another." The similarity between these words is not accidental; by virtue of having the same root, we must conclude that "authors" have at least some "authority" over their texts and; ultimately, the readers of those texts.

Assuming that the author simply by definition has the power to command or act for another, then authorial intention becomes a valid area of inquiry for authors and critics alike when discussing textual meaning. Because authors cannot take themselves out of their writing, anything the author writes must have some meaning, whether intended or not. Basically, readers are the puppets on this written stage, and the puppeteers--the authors--are moving them to their choosing. Do not mistake my language; I use the example of the puppeteer in a non-pejorative sense because there is a predetermined meaning in the text based upon authors' experience and their writing style. This predetermined nature of the text or novel is inescapable because the author's words have the potential to create meaning. If those words lacked this potential, the population of readers would abandon reading because the process would be vacuous.

Yet, not only can the author's language create meaning, but also the author intentionally creates a fictional presence of himself, what Wayne Booth calls the "implied author," in order to further connect with, and ultimately create, the author's audience. Far from being an accident, this is a clearly intentional move on the

author's part because it moves the reader to react in a particular way, as Booth explains:

The 'views of man' of Faulkner and E.M. Forster, as they go about making their Stockholm addresses or writing their essays, are indeed only of peripheral value to me as I read their novels. But the implied author of each novel is someone with whose beliefs on all subjects I must largely agree if I am to enjoy his work ... the author creates, in short, an image of himself and another image of his reader; he makes his reader, as he makes his second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement. (137-8)

Essential to Booth's argument is the fact that the real flesh and blood author is secondary to the person the reader perceives the author to be, thus establishing credibility and reliability on behalf of the reader. And in creating a specific, fictional "second self," the author demonstrates intention because he is no longer satisfied to come across merely as himself, but instead has made a

choice about his presence in the text and a choice about the reader's perception of him.

In addition to Booth's ideas about authorial intention as evidenced by the implied author, so too does Kenneth Burke argue that an author intentionally acts upon and within his own text through the creation of verisimilitude—the creation of "truth," or the appearance thereof, in order to connect, again, with the author's intended reader. The author not only creates an implied self, per Booth's methodology, but also is creating a seemingly truthful, ergo reliable, environment for readers to immerse themselves in— an "implied reality," if you will. As Burke argues in "Formalist Criticism: Its Principles and Limits":

The truth of the data in a literary production by no means guarantees its artistic appeal. But to appeal it must have some kind of verisimilitude. Thus, only verisimilitude, not truth, can engage a reader who does not believe in hell, but who derives aesthetic pleasure from Dante's *Inferno*. Truth enters in a secondary sense, for often accuracy of sheerly factual detail can contribute to our sense of a work's verisimilitude. And regardless of whether or not we believe in the

ontological reality of hell, to go along with Dante's poem we must believe beyond all doubt that such unending sufferings really would be hellish. (50)

The tenets of Booth and Burke's definitions have an important similarity; each requires a complementary understanding between author's intention and reader's intention, inasmuch as the author must create a believable reality, and just as important, readers must accept that reality wholeheartedly, so both sides are working together. But again, this complementary understanding is impossible without the author's initial conception of his (second) self and the world of the text.

This question of understanding between reader and writer is where meaning and authorial intention are introduced to the reader. As Helen Vendler argues in her essay "What We Have Loved, Others Will Love," readers become immersed in the words and their ultimate meaning: "Through the state of reading, like that of listening to a piece of music, is one of intense attention, it is not one of scholarly or critical reflection. It is a state in which the text works on us, not we on it" (32).

According to Vendler, authors continue to have eminent domain over their work, but does the reader have any responsibility in this process of determining meaning? Although the author initiates the language of the text, readers use the information they have cultivated during the reading along with their own experience to understand and/or interpret the text. As Stanley Fish suggests, "No one would argue that the act of reading can take place in the absence of someone who reads--how can you tell the dance from the dancer?--but curiously enough when it comes time to make analytical statements about the end product of reading (meaning or understanding), the reader is usually forgotten or ignored" (22). Fish takes issue with the reader being devoid of any final authority in the interpretation process.

A text cannot have a meaning until a reader is there to create that meaning, thereby blurring the question of who controls the text. This reader-centered process is misleading, however, because the real quest for information occurs at the end of the reading when authors have completed their journey and readers ponder the experience and its relationship to their lives. What experience has a reader had with the text? As with all experiences, readers

and critics expect some type of understanding or questioning of the text and its contents.

Although readers intend to perform the act of reading, however, they each take away something different from the text depending upon their own environment and experiences; thus, they have an impact on the text, not the other way around. As Reed Way Dasenbrock argues in his essay "Do We Write the Text We Read":

We see different things in the world because we hold different interpretive assumptions about the world: where one person sees a sun or moon "in trouble," another sees an eclipse; where one person sees bread and wine, another sees the flesh and blood of Christ ... Just as what we see depends upon what we bring to the seeing, what we read depends upon what we bring to the reading.

(279)

Readers are thus constructing a text because they interpret the text's meaning differently depending upon their own experience; readers take an active role in pulling out meaning as it fits them and their desire for understanding. As Wolfgang Iser states:

In the act of reading, we are to undergo a kind of transformation, such as W. Booth has described in connection with fiction in general: 'The author creates, in short, an image of himself and another image of the reader; he makes his reader, as he makes his second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement.' ... The reader must be able to feel for himself the new meaning of the novel. To do this he must actively participate in bringing out the meaning and this participation is an essential precondition for communication between the author and the reader. (30)

Authorial meaning is set when the author presses the pen against the page, but the interpretation of that text will inevitably vary when confronted by a different reader. The resulting meaning is thus a shared understanding between author and reader, and is not exclusively in either's domain. But there is more to the reader/text transformation than meets the eye because it is occurring on two different levels: first, the interpretation of the text's meaning based upon readers' understanding of the text, or making

meaning based upon what they read; second, the ways in which the text transforms readers' perceptions of the text. Readers, after reading a text, end up with a duly transformed perspective based on their experience.

Both of these transformations by (and of) the reader are important tools in discovering meaning. As Stephen Minot describes in *Three Genres: The Writing of Poetry, Fiction, and Drama*, transformation brings about meaning for the reader: "Transformation refers to basic alterations of events, characters, viewpoint, or setting--occasionally all four. It is so fundamental and so primary that it is sometimes referred to as a process of metamorphosis, a complete change in structure and appearance" (155). He goes on to explain, "We alter chronological sequences, forget that certain characters were present, shift scenes" (155). Readers latch onto those aspects of the text that mean something to them, thus creating meaning. If a particular character or event strikes a chord with readers, then that detail or expression of themselves or their experience is what they will follow throughout the work. And as Dasenbrock explains, "Just as what we see depends upon what we bring to the seeing, what we read depends upon what we bring to the reading" (279). Although the meaning may not

be in direct relationship to the author's intention, readers perceive a shared relationship between the author and themselves; thus, the author gains trust and validity in the eyes of the reader.

This personal relationship the reader develops with the implied author breathes life into the literature for the reader. The implied author becomes a construction for, and by, the reader. As individuals read, they begin to identify with authors and in some cases call authors reliable and in other cases call them unreliable. The closer a reader feels to the author, whether that feeling is structured or only perceived, the more they trust the author they have constructed as a voice of reason or knowledge about the text.

To examine this reader/author relationship further, we can assume a deeper relationship between authors and readers. The author is not only writing about a personal experience for the reader, but also manipulating meaning through a cultural relationship based upon familiar attitudes and understandings of the world around both figures. Thus, the author is transforming (the reader's) meaning through shared experience. Yet, so too is the

reader shaping meaning based on shared cultural norms. As Peter Rabinowitz asserts:

The notion of the authorial audience is clearly tied to authorial intention, but it gets around some of the problems that have traditionally hampered that discussion of intention by treating it as a matter of social convention rather than individual psychology. In other words, my perspective allows us to treat the reader's attempt to read as the author intended, not to search for the author's private psyche, but rather as the joining of a particular social/interpretive community; that is, the acceptance of the author's invitation to read in a particularly socially constructed way that is shared by the author and his or her expected readers. (259)

Therefore, the implied author and reader become familiar strangers for one another, someone both figures feel they know or can identify with based on similar life circumstances or experiences--in turn, more comfort is created between reader and author. Again, the issue of trust is established when the reader and author feel that

each is a part of the other's community. This familiarity makes the author more reliable for the reader and, additionally, more trustworthy. These two attributes are important when establishing authorial intention and the implied author because of the comfort level of the reader. The reader is more likely to feel a sincere closeness with the text and the meaning if they trust the source of the words.

The reader no longer sees the fiction as simply an imagined, confined piece of collected words--it becomes more than that for them. Transformation, implication and meaning build a unique relationship between the key players, i.e., the author and reader. As mentioned above, readers are intertwined with their own experiences and the author's intention which, hopefully, will lead readers to a clearer understanding of the text and its meaning.

The tension between reader response and authorial intention is best understood and reconciled through Kenneth Burke's concepts of identification and consubstantiality:

A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined,

if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so. Here are ambiguities of substance. In being identified with B, A is 'substantially one' with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another. While consubstantial with its parents, with the 'firsts' from which it is derived, the offspring is nonetheless apart from them. In this sense, there is nothing abstruse in the statement that the offspring both is and is not one with the parentage. Similarly, two persons may be identified in terms of some principle they share in common, an 'identification' that does not deny their distinctness. (21)

Thus, the author and the reader can meet at an intersection. The author assumes a relative commonality with the reader, uses that commonality to establish verisimilitude (cf. Burke, "Formalist Criticism") and the reader interprets that verisimilitude in accordance with what the reader perceives to be "real." Each entity brings

in part of themselves and the rest becomes a shared interpretation by the writer and the reader.

Considering Burke's example, I believe that both reader response and authorial intention can live together harmoniously in a text depending upon the text and the writer being considered. For example, when an author like John Edgar Wideman creates a fictional and nonfictional realm for his reader, he simultaneously identifies with the reader while "stacking the deck" in his favor. Wideman's use of "real" people in his fiction allows him to include individuals with a distinct history and closeness to him, while still maintaining that they are part of a larger fiction. The characters can then be scrutinized and interpreted by the reader, thus engaging reader response. But in the same breath, Wideman can determine those aspects of the characters he wants to share with the reader (and expects the reader to understand), thus preserving authorial intention.

As Wideman allows readers into his personal space, he creates a trust and an automatic authority over the characters because these representations of "real" people are thinly guised in fictional elements. These characters have real life histories, unlike completely fabricated

fictional characters. As Rabinowitz notes, the reader becomes part of the community, and Wideman invokes social convention in terms of utilizing the characteristics that constitute a "real" person, thus making the characters "real" in a fictional framework. Readers again can relate to them because they (readers) are real people who may have had the same or similar experiences. The issue of trust is re-established in the mind of the reader by the author. Therefore, Wideman can divulge as much or as little as he wishes in creating authorial intention.

However, on the other end of the spectrum, readers can then create the rest of the story based upon their own experience and their experience with the fiction. Whether it is the author's interpretation or the reader's interpretation, neither is privileged because each utilizes its individual functions, or strategies for writing and interpreting, as outlined by Burke. As Fish proclaims, "The ability to interpret is not acquired; it is constitutive of being human" (172). Although individual readers learn textual conventions, meaning is still found in the author's and reader's own life experiences separate from the text.

CHAPTER THREE

THE GENESIS OF HIS ANGER

When reading Wideman's texts, readers are privy to a unique style that sets Wideman apart from other authors. The difference lies in his use of nonfiction characters blended into his fiction, but these differences are sometimes painful reminders of Wideman's and his family's past and at other times a colorful view of an African-American family living in the rough Homewood streets of Pittsburgh. Within the walls of his texts lies a story for those readers interested in knowing the facts of Wideman's experience and the rhetoric he employs to make a point about society. This divulging of family history and creation of fictional-real-life characters creates a familiarity between Wideman and the readers who identify with his experience, so the melding of authorial intention and reader response takes shape as the story unfolds, both for Wideman and his readers.

Wideman raises many issues in his blend of fiction and nonfiction through narrating his experiences with the white judicial system. Yet, in order to better understand this aspect of Wideman's writing and his characters, we must

explore his past and the past of those people closest to him who comprise much of his fiction. However painful it has proven for Wideman, four of his family members have either been incarcerated or murdered. These true stories are the basis for two of his nonfiction texts, *Fatheralong* and *Brothers and Keepers*; further, his fictional books often change his family members' names, but the characters' lives are remarkably similar to what Wideman's actual family has experienced. In both nonfiction texts, Wideman discusses family relationships between himself and his father, brother and son. Although Wideman's father was never incarcerated like the latter two, he does leave Wideman in a state of loss because he is remote with his feelings and leaves the family. However, the crux of my interest in this chapter lies in Wideman's relationship with his brother in *Brothers and Keepers* and later with his own son in *Fatheralong*.

In the nonfiction *Brothers and Keepers*, Wideman writes explicitly about his brother Robert Wideman's incarceration. In this biography, Robert, or "Robby," is identified as different from the other members of his family. Robby is the rebellious son who wants things he sees his white counterparts possess. Unlike the rest of the

Wideman siblings, Robby hangs with a tough crowd and is often described as roaming the Homewood streets looking for trouble. The relationship that Wideman creates between the young Robby and John is one of a mixture between misunderstood love and two brothers moving in opposite directions: one moves downstream with the flow of society by going to school and becoming a "productive" member of society, while the other battles the current upstream, dealing drugs in the streets and ultimately landing in prison.

Additionally, Wideman prepares readers for his mother's feelings regarding Robby as well as Wideman's own feelings of turmoil associated with Robby, the prison system and the negative emotions associated with being black in a white dominated society. As the story unfolds, readers get a glimpse into the real life situation that put Robby behind bars. Although Wideman understands there must be consequences for his brother's actions, he doesn't agree with the severity of the penalty.

In order to better understand Wideman's anger, however, it is essential to consider the situation regarding incarceration in the United States. The following is a breakdown of blacks and whites in prison in the U.S.

and in Pennsylvania, where Robert Wideman was convicted of his crime. These data show that blacks are disproportionately represented among the prison population; these findings, I believe, are the backbone supporting Wideman's rhetoric, inasmuch as Wideman appears to have an agenda in his writings--both understanding the actions of his black brothers and the punishment associated with such actions, as well as criticizing the unfair practices of the predominantly white judicial system when convicting black individuals for crimes. The following information is taken from *The Corrections Yearbook 1997* and *Statistical Abstract of the United States: The National Data Book 1999*.

- Blacks represent 47.2% of prisoners incarcerated in the United States, while whites represent 42.2% of such inmates, this despite the fact that blacks represent just 12.7% of the general U.S. population, while whites represent 82.5% of that population.
- Blacks outnumber whites in United States prisons, 668,790 to 488,819, despite whites outnumbering blacks in the general U.S. population, 221.3 million to just 33.97 million.

- In Pennsylvania, the numbers are just as revealing. In a state where whites outnumber blacks over 10 to 1 (10, 619,000 to 1,166,000), blacks represent 56.7% of the incarcerated inmates, while whites represent just 33.2%.
- The implications of these data are significant. For example, although whites outnumber blacks 6 ½-1 in the general U.S. population, blacks outnumber whites 1.4-1 in U.S. prisons. Put another way, a white American chosen at random has 1 chance in 453 of being an inmate; a black American chosen at random has 1 chance in 50 of being an inmate. This means that 12.5% of the U.S. population (blacks) represent almost half of the prison population--and the Pennsylvania numbers are even more surprising.
- In Pennsylvania, a white resident has 1 chance in 920 of being an inmate, while a black inmate has 1 chance in 60 of being an inmate.
- In sum, then, a black American is 10 times more likely than a white American to be in prison, while a black Pennsylvanian is *17 times* more

likely to be in prison than a white
Pennsylvanian.

These figures should astound even the most
disinterested party, and the truth of these statistics
resonates in *Brothers and Keepers*. In fact, the title
contributes centrally to the text's purpose. The "brothers"
reference not only notes Wideman's brotherhood shared with
African-Americans, but also the relationship Wideman shared
with his brother, Robby Wideman:

We're so alike, I kept thinking, anticipating
what he would say next, how he would say it,
filling in naturally, easily with my words what
he left unsaid. Trouble was, our minds were not
interchangeable ... as Robby talked I let myself
forget that difference. Paid too much attention
to myself listening and lost some of what he was
saying. What I missed would have helped define
the difference. But I missed it. It was easy to
half listen. For both of us to pretend to be
closer than we really were. We needed the
closeness. We were brothers. In the prison
visiting lounge I acted toward my brother the way

I'd been acting toward him all my life, heard
what I wanted to hear, rejected the rest. (76-7)

Although Wideman's intentions may be revealed in this passage, the reason behind this memoir and its title is simply stated: he wants to understand the blood relationship between himself and Robby, and how two lives could end up being so drastically different. As Keith E. Byerman writes, "Moreover, since the narrator talks in some of his stories about an imprisoned brother, they are efforts to achieve fraternal solidarity, even if the brothers have led very different lives" (3). These concepts of brotherhood and understanding his brother and his actions pervade the pages of *Brothers and Keepers*. In this text, Wideman struggles with the realization that generally, black children grow up deprived, yet he was an exception to the rule. He states in a video documentary, "Black and White," "I think things have gotten worse. I think many things have gotten a lot worse. If our children are being rationed, then black children are going to be rationed even more so because they are at the bottom of the heap" (video).

And it is this anger toward marginal behavior that drives Wideman to understand the experience of his brother

and other African-American men. Robby's deviance and subsequent incarceration were things Wideman's life did not include, but obviously many Black men were affected, as demonstrated by the aforementioned statistics. In Wideman's writing, this anger helps him utilize his family members as real and fictional individuals in his works. His brother Robby exemplifies what went wrong, but contradicting those feelings is the observation that Robby lived more of a black man's experience than Wideman's own white-dominated path.

Indeed, what is interesting about Wideman is his guilt regarding his brother. He feels guilty that he did well and Robby ended up in prison, but he also experiences guilt associated with turning his back on the black race as a young man growing up on the streets of Homewood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. As Robert W. Coleman writes:

Wideman at first identified strongly with white academe and tried to prevent his black experience from intruding. He evidently found the two worlds incompatible and tried to keep them separate while he concentrated on his academic progress. He started to compartmentalize his psyche, creating a black section and a white section, and

followed suit in his actions; in this way Wideman split himself in two. His inner compartmentalization became the source of anguish and isolated him from the black community. (8)

I believe this isolation from the black community and his brother led him to write *Brothers and Keepers* and later prompted him to draw fictitious characters based on real people--masking their identities to better understand his family members and his membership in the black community that he had to mask in order to survive.

Interestingly enough, Robby has not blamed his brother for their divergent paths. Robby simply wanted to stand out in a family where he was the youngest, proclaiming himself a rebel to get attention. As Wideman continues--in his brother's person--during a conversation in prison in *Brothers and Keepers*:

Me and trouble hooked up. See, it was a question of being somebody. Being my own person. Like youns [sic] had sports and good grades sewed up. Wasn't nothing I could do in school or sports that youns hadn't done already. People said, Here comes another Wideman. He's gon [sic] be a good student like his brothers and sister ... but

something inside me said no. Didn't want to be like the rest of yours. Me, I had to be a rebel. Had to get out from under yours' good grades and do [sic]. Way back then I decided to be a star. I wanted to make it big. My way. I wanted the glamour. I wanted to sit high up. (85)

These gestures of wanting to be different from his "square" brothers and sister led Robby down a path that eventually landed him in jail.

Robby Wideman wanted money quickly and easily. He was very different than his older brother John. He wanted the flash and the jive of the 1960s and early 1970s. He wanted to be considered a "Superfly" in the eyes of his family and the neighborhood. All things bad looked good to Robby and even his mother could not persuade him otherwise. So the crime occurred, as John Wideman recounts, factually:

In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on November 15, 1975, approximately three months before arriving in Laramie, my youngest brother Robert (whom I had named), together with Michael Dukes and Cecil Rice, had robbed a fence. A rented truck allegedly loaded with brand-new Sony color TVs was the bait in a scam designed to catch the

fence with a drawer full of money. The plan had seemed simple and foolproof. Dishonor among thieves. A close circle, crooks stealing from crooks, with the law necessarily excluded. Except a man was killed. (8)

The white fence was murdered at the hands of one of Robby's accomplices and Robby was sent to prison with a life sentence for stolen property and being an accomplice to murder; that fact brings me back to the statistics mentioned before regarding the number of blacks in prison versus whites, and the true provocation for Wideman's rage.

While Wideman understood the severity of Robby's actions, the sentencing seemed too harsh, based mostly on the fact that Robby was a black man who was involved in a white man's death. As Wideman stated in an interview with author Ishmael Reed in 1994:

I think there is a direct relationship [with black men being railroaded by the criminal justice system and by politicians]. If you are realistic, you have to admit that in a climate of racism, being born black is already a crime. It has always been a crime. So it's only logical that sooner or later there will be a particular

kind of punishment waiting for you. I think that it's that sense of doom, that sense of anticipation, in young people today that causes such anger and has separated them so absolutely from society, from the generations before them. That sense that you are fated to be a criminal, that you are a criminal already. (132)

Robby was simply caught up in those things, those possessions that he deemed as valuable and unattainable because of the color of his skin. But additionally, the racism that festers under the skin is, in my opinion, what drove Robby to commit crimes and now drives Wideman to write.

But Robby's feelings are understandable, and common, as Patricia and Fredrick McKissack, authors of *Taking A Stand Against Racism and Racial Discrimination*, write:

Drug use, low self-esteem, poor academic achievement, criminal behavior, and other self-destructive forms of despair are the results of mental defeat. If the expectations remain low, so will the results, which only adds fuel to the racist argument, 'What more can you expect from them.' (37)

John Wideman had his writing, his grades, and his athletic ability to set him apart from the rest. But in standing apart, he lost the central core of his being, his blackness, which caused a chasm between not only him and his brother but also the Black community in which he was raised. This loss of Wideman's black identity is explained in an interview with Wilfred D. Samuels in 1983:

I was university trained, university educated; and as you go through as an English major at schools like the University of Pennsylvania and Oxford University, you get a value system imposed on you. You don't just guess what the best is; people tell you what the best is ... and you see yourself on this hallowed ground; you stare and compare, and the messages are pretty clear. And a lot of that is not altogether conscious. It seeps in, just like when you learn to walk and talk. As you grow up, a value system seeps in, and so I was consciously turning my back on blackness; I was just getting acculturated, and the acculturation pushed my writing in certain directions. (18)

Yet, whereas Wideman struggles with his sense of self and the community he is a part of and writes for, Robby knew who he was and embraced his culture, but mostly the negative aspects of that culture, like drinking, stealing and using drugs. However, this behavior was magnified due to Robby's race. Looking once more at the statistics regarding blacks in prison, one cannot dispute the reality of the different rates at which blacks and whites are incarcerated.

So the question of how the two brothers ended up so differently comes to a head. The answer seems simple, but the ramifications are great and vast. One brother saw what he wanted to be, but got sidetracked into the justice system. He wanted to be "Superfly" and impress everyone without contributing the hard work accepted by white society. But that is the crux of the problem as Wideman envisions it: how can a black child growing up see the material expectations of white people without hungering for those same possessions? The Widemans were raised in the ghetto and the scratching and clawing it took to get out also took its toll, however subtly, on the older Wideman.

By white society's standards, John Edgar Wideman is a true success, but, as he has suggested, he lost himself in the process of becoming white. As Jonathan Yardley writes:

No, it won't do to say: You made it out of the ghetto, so why should we excuse your brother's failure to do so? Wideman knows that the story is far too complicated to fit so simplistic a formula. The elder brother [Wideman] knows that moving out of the ghetto into the white world is a process that requires excruciating compromises, sacrifices and denials, that leaves the person that makes the journey truly at home in neither the world he has entered nor the world he has left. (56)

So in order to reclaim his blackness and his brother, he writes and becomes his brother's keeper.

This is where the second part of the title *Brothers and Keepers* needs to be analyzed for its portrayal of Wideman as a brother and a keeper. Like most of Wideman's language, "keepers" has multiple meanings: one keeper is Wideman over his brother, keeping the memory of his family before him and with him alive, while the second keeper is the white society that emotionally and physically kept and

continues to keep Wideman and his brother apart. In fact, the white society is mentioned often in both Wideman's fiction and nonfiction, where the white man is often (ironically) the darker side of the black experience and the derogatory keeper. As Wideman writes:

We are on the keepers' turf. We must play their game, their way. We sit where they tell us to sit ... We suffer the keepers' prying eyes, prying machines, prying hands. We let them lock us in without any guarantee the doors will open when we wish to leave. We are in fact their prisoners until they release us. That was the idea. To transform the visitor into something he despised and feared. A prisoner. (52)

These metaphorical walls and the white prison guards and the white judicial system formed the first wave of keepers Wideman had to experience to regain his brother, while his brother was kept by these same individuals. This creates a problem for Wideman the writer because this white society was one he had been familiar with in academic circles, while now he is just another unknown black man, guilty by association. He continues, this time directly to Robby, "There was an instant of pure hatred. Hatred lashing out at

what I had been forced to become, at them, even at you. The humiliation I'd undergone for the sake of seeing you poisoned the air, made me rigid, angry" (52).

These feelings were brought to the forefront for Wideman, not only because he had to see his brother behind the walls of Western State Penitentiary in Pittsburgh, but also because he had to confront the side of him that was black and had assimilated into a white society. Robby, on the other hand, always knew his blackness, even when he was getting in trouble on the streets of Homewood. It was John Wideman who buried himself in order to fit into a society where he was still an asterisked exception; he was accepted because he was an athlete and a remarkable writer and student.

Yet, within the walls of prison, his achievements didn't matter. It is likely that many of the keepers didn't even know who John Edgar Wideman, winner of two PEN/Faulkner awards and working on his fourteenth book, was. Despite his accomplishments, he was simply the black brother of a murderer, even though Robby had not been the shooter. Then, to add salt to the wound, Wideman and Robby were each struggling with the fairness of his prison sentence, a sentence delivered by the white infrastructure

of our society. And with good reason, according to the article "U.S. Justice Department To Study Alleged Bias In Capital Punishment":

A report concerning the issue of race and capital punishment had been raised before. Issued last fall by Janet Reno, then the attorney general, it showed that in 75 percent of cases where federal prosecutors had submitted their intention to seek a death sentence to the Justice Department for review, the defendant was a minority member, and nearly half of those defendants were black ... Of the cases in which a death sentence was possible, 11.6 percent of non-white defendants charged with murdering white victims were sentenced to death. In contrast, 6.1 percent of whites charged with murdering whites and 4.7 percent of non-whites charged with murdering non-whites received the death penalty. (2)

In conjunction with the fact that blacks are more likely to be prisoners than whites as a percentage of their population, it is no wonder that the keepers are suspicious about those who are being kept. As Wideman aptly concludes

in *Brothers and Keepers*, "Prisoners have no rights the keepers are bound to respect" (82).

As for the second meaning of keeper, we need look only to the blood between brothers. The text, *Brothers and Keepers*, is a testament to regained brotherhood. Wideman is the keeper of the story, both in fictional form and in "reality," and the story brought two brothers together under unique circumstances. As Wideman writes:

The business of making a book together was new for both of us. Difficult. Awkward. Another book could be constructed about a writer who goes to prison to interview his brother but comes away with his own story ... When I stopped hearing Robby and listened to myself listening, that kind of book shouldered its way into my consciousness. I didn't like the feeling. That book comprised the intimacy I wanted to achieve with my brother.

(78)

This change was difficult because Wideman wanted to be true to his brother while still maintaining his own narrative voice. And, as Wideman admits, it is sometimes difficult to listen when you know the words so well:

The problem with the first draft was my fear. I didn't let Robby speak for himself enough. I didn't have enough confidence in his words, his vision, his insights. I wanted to clean him up. Manufacture compelling before-and-after images. Which meant I made the bad too bad and the good too good. I knew what I wanted; so, for fear I might not get what I needed, I didn't listen carefully, probe deeply enough. (195)

Wideman's problem is being his brother's keeper--the need to change him and sanitize the picture, or rough it up to make sense to the white society Wideman was familiar with. Not until Wideman let the grittiness of the situation, both good and bad, come through did he finally reach the brother he had searched for and the society he had lost.

Ten years after the publication of *Brothers and Keepers*, another real life person close to Wideman was immortalized in his nonfiction--another tragic figure, another person Wideman must contend with and understand--his son. Unlike his uncle Robby, Jacob Wideman was tried and convicted of first degree murder. Patricia Smith writes:

In 1988, one of his (Wideman's) two sons was convicted of first-degree murder. Touring with other residents of his grandfather's Maine summer camp, Jacob, 16 at the time, stabbed his roommate in a hotel room in Flagstaff, Arizona. The young Wideman told detectives, 'It was not premeditated. It was the buildup of a lot of emotions.' (142)

Thus began another painful journey with Wideman connecting to his past and his present through writing.

Despite the fact that Robby's story is well documented both in Wideman's fiction and nonfiction, Jacob's story is veiled almost exclusively in his father's fiction. However, at the end of Wideman's nonfiction book *Fatheralong*, through a letter written to his son, we get a glimpse into Wideman's pain:

I hope this is not a hard day for you. I hope you can muster peace within yourself and deal with the memories, the horrors of the past seven years. It must strike you as strange, as strange as it strikes me, that seven years have passed already [since he has been in prison]. I remember a few days after hearing you were missing and a

boy found dead in the room the two of you had been sharing, I remember walking down towards the lake to be alone because I felt myself coming apart, the mask I'd been wearing, as much for myself as for the benefit of other people, was beginning to splinter. I could hear ice cracking, great rents and seams breaking my face into pieces, carrying away chunks of numb flesh. I found myself on my knees, praying to a tree ... speaking to the roots of the pine tree as if its shaft might carry my message up to the sky, send it on its way to wherever I thought my anguish should be addressed. (192)

Wideman's feelings of loss for his son are palpable; I cry when I read this section and am better able to understand the fiction where Jake is entombed. Unlike the many news stories, articles and chapters written about Robby, information on Jake is difficult to find. The first written information about Jake by his father takes shape within fictionalized stories.

Yet, like the story of Robby, Wideman must get the pain of Jake out through writing. In contrast to Robby,

about whom Wideman has spoken repeatedly, Jake is a subject Wideman copiously avoids. As Smith continues:

Wideman refuses to speak of Jacob directly, although the memory of his youngest is evident and pervasive. The gently cracking voice. The slamming of eyes ... 'I guess it's as much about loss'--Wideman shifts uncomfortably on the plush sofa, wrings his hands--'and time'--his heart fills his chest, pounds almost audibly--'and the difficulty of holding onto things and the fear of losing them.' The sun blasts through the window and cuts a clean line from his forehead, slanting towards his chin. His deep breath shudders as he searches for calmer ground. When he speaks again, he takes on an almost professional tone. (143)

And so another youngest in a family is lost and Wideman is compelled to remember him and have him remembered. But Jake is different, because a life sentence looms for him, whereas Robby may see the light of a free day. Yet, the same questions return: why did this happen? He was raised like the Widemans' other two children: how did the outcome go so hauntingly off course, like that of his uncle?

Writing is the process by which Wideman releases his demons, so to speak.

But where does all of this information leave us, as readers? This is where transformation takes place, both for us and Wideman's real and fictional characters. When referring back to the concept of transformation from chapter one of this essay, it is essential to review Stephen Minot's description from his text, *Three Genres: The Writing of Poetry, Fiction, and Drama*: "Transformation refers to basic alterations of events, characters, viewpoint, or setting--occasionally all four. It is so fundamental and so primary that it is sometimes referred to as a process of metamorphosis, a complete change in structure and appearance" (155). These four components of transformation are directly reflected in Wideman's use of nonfiction individuals in his fictional writing, inasmuch as Wideman uses each of these components in order to write about and understand the events in his life as well as those lives of people around him. From his shifts in point-of-view and fictional characters to the historical representation of the Homewood streets and the real life discrimination experienced by his family members, Wideman is setting the stage for his readers to be transformed and

his rhetoric to take shape, as I will demonstrate in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

DECONSTRUCTING WIDEMAN

Wideman's fiction method is best expressed in his 1992 collection *all stories are true*, the title story of which begins with a tree metaphor:

A massive tree centuries old holds out against the odds here across from my mother's house, one of the biggest trees in Pittsburgh, anchored in a green tangle of weeds and bushes, trunk thick as a Buick, black as night after rain soaks its striated hide. Huge spread of its branches canopies the foot of the hill where the streets come together. Certain times of day in the summer it shades my mother's front porch. If it ever tore loose from its moorings, it would crush her house like a sledgehammer. As big as it is, its roots must run under her cellar. The sound of it drinking, lapping nourishment deep underground is part of the quiet when the house is empty. How the tree survived a city growing around it is a mystery. For years no

more than a twig, a sapling, a switch someone could have snapped off to beat a balky animal, swat a child's behind. I see a dark fist exploding through the asphalt, thrusting to the sky, the fingers opening, multiplying, fanning outward to form a vast umbrella of foliage. The arm behind it petrifies, other thick limbs burst from knots of hardened flesh, each one duplicating the fan of leaves, the delicate network of branches, thinning, twisting as they climb higher and farther from the source. Full-blown in a matter of seconds, ready to stand there across from my mother's house forever, till its time to be undone in the twinkling of an eye, just the way it arrived. (4-5)

The vision of this tree shows the reader a multi-layered metaphor for Wideman in his fiction and his real life family--the tree withstanding the world around it for many centuries, even in its vulnerable stage: "For years no more than a twig, a sapling, a switch someone could have snapped off ..." (5). This tree has outlasted so many other trees of its kind, like the Wideman family in his fiction

and in real life whose members have, for the most part, beaten the odds and struggled to survive in the Homewood ghetto in Pittsburgh. As Keith Byerman, in his review of Wideman's short fiction, notes, "[a] tree symbolizes the endurance and character of the neighborhood ... The tree can easily be read as the emblem of the black community in its survival, strength, and undeniable presence " (57).

Similarly, Wideman, as a representative of the black community, is surviving better in the United States than ever before, at least by white standards, his voice metaphorically being heard through his fiction.

Symbolically, then, with the abolition of the Jim Crow laws and the civil rights movement, the black community has eked out a place, albeit tenuous, in a white, male-dominated society, and Wideman expresses this shaky compromise in his fiction.

In the short story "all stories are true," the fictional Wideman is visiting his aged mother, who is being ravaged by chemotherapy for her cancer; the author-Wideman uses the tree as a metaphor symbolizing the fictional mother who has raised her family and nourished them with her own milk, so to speak, while fighting against the symbolic decay, represented by the cancer, brought on by

racism and the defeatist attitude it leaves with the black community. The chemotherapy, at once a "real" attempt at healing, also expresses a symbolic struggle to destroy the virulent hatred and suppressed anger poisoning Wideman's mother, and the black community as a whole. As Wideman writes, "I see a dark fist exploding through the asphalt ... [t]he arm behind it petrifies, other thick limbs burst from the knots of hardened flesh ..." (5), and we see, despite superficial signs of progress, the struggle is ongoing and has a darker tone.

Indeed, her one son John resisted with "fist exploding" through the pressures of growing up black in a white society. He was educated at, and flourished within, predominantly white universities, first the Ivy League at the University of Pennsylvania, then Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, and lastly in a successful career as a university professor, his first position being in another white bastion, the University of Wyoming in Laramie. Wideman himself is aware of the relative whiteness of his career path, acknowledging to Patricia Smith in 1995 that his trajectory has largely taken him between two worlds, which he has not always kept apart successfully.

The metaphor of the dark fist, then, can be a black man's assertion of self-possession, a version of the black power salute; the "hardened flesh" implies a hard-won acceptance, a proud imperviousness to the harsh reality that success, as Wideman represents it, means a certain relativity, of being defined in terms of his relationships with white power structures. As Smith writes of Wideman, "[He] has stumbled upon that terrain, temporarily lost his soul in that muddled area between black and white ... [he has] straddled the lie, roomed with white jocks, spoke the two languages. 'It was like acting,' he has said" (141). Wideman has acted so successfully that the price was a loss of his discrete identity, which he is now attempting to recapture in his fiction. As he explains, "I had to spend so much energy and so much time in totally uncharted space, accommodating and making do. I even forgot sometimes where I was and who I was. I think that kind of amnesia, forced, both conscious and unconscious, is an interesting stage to explore and write about" (qtd. in TuSmith 141).

The latter half of "all stories are true" provides a good example of Wideman exploring this chasm between the black and white worlds, the world Wideman's actual brother Robby (as "Tommy" in the text) knows in prison, and the

white world that Wideman, shown here as the narrator, has known in his own life. At times, these separate worlds collide, as the narrator-Wideman expresses in a conversation with his mother. They are discussing the front porch of their house, and the narrator-Wideman testifies to the solidity of the stones: "Little sweat mixed in the cement makes it stronger, last longer. Why you think the Pyramids been standing all these centuries? Good African blood gluing the stones" (8). His mother asks about the rumor that the Egyptians were black, to which the narrator-Wideman replies, "People migrating and invading and mixing since the dawn of time. Everybody's a mongrel. The wonder is it's taken this long for the obvious to be said out loud" (9). Wideman's implication is that a distinct race, such as "black," is an unknowable concept, an impossibility, because of the centuries of interdependence between black and white, but his mother, representing the modernist to Wideman's post-modernist, resists this idea: "I try to change the faces of the people in the Bible. I can't do it. They still look like the faces I saw in Sunday school, in the little picture books we had to study from. No black faces, except for that one dark wise man with

Jesus in the manger. When I close my eyes, I still can't put black faces on the Bible people" (9).

The symbolic implication of this exchange is that Wideman's mother, the older and more historically steeped of the two, is acutely aware that black and white are separate concepts, virtual opposites, shown by her inability to imagine the faces of history in any other color. Meanwhile, the more current-thinking narrator-Wideman is applying the lessons he has learned in his own life--that black can prosper among white, but in so doing loses his discrete blackness and becomes, in his own word, a "mongrel."

Yet, perhaps Wideman's idea of racial mixing is hopeful rather than actual, because the story abruptly shifts to a discussion of Wideman's brother, Tommy, who is separated from his family in prison. The dominant idea is that Tommy is a symbol of the black community whose longstanding dependence has left it unable to assert its independence, and instead is put away in figurative (and actual) shackles. This prison example parallels the reality of Wideman's actual brother Robby, right down to the fictional details that Tommy has been denied parole repeatedly, has maintained his Muslim name, and has a wife

and child coming to see him soon--all things true of Robby as well. Wideman has written extensively in *Brothers and Keepers* about visiting Robby in prison, and in "all stories are true," Wideman again explores, in a fictional context, some of the deeply held feelings of brotherhood and separation he has about his brother.

At the beginning of this second section of the story, the narrator-Wideman presents the contradiction that prison represents for the black community. Prison is a white institution that serves to join the predominantly black inmates ever closer together in a racial brotherhood on the "inside," creating an ironic solidarity. Yet, prison also divides blacks from their brothers on the "outside," who must live in a white-dominated world in which blacks like Wideman have struggled to create a distinct identity.

The contradiction between black and white that Wideman has confessed to feeling in his own life manifests itself in this section first through his explanation that "my brother's (meaning Tommy's) arms are prison arms. The kind you see in the street that clue you where a young brother's been spending his time" (11). The physical detail of "prison arms" symbolizes at once togetherness and separation; the appearance of "bulging biceps, the rippled

look of ropy sinews and cords of muscle snaking around the bones ... excess flesh boiled away in this cauldron" (11), suggests a commonality among black men, the "brothers," who have been spending time together trapped in a "cauldron" fashioning sculpted physiques. These physiques, ironically, differentiate them from other blacks on the street. "Prison arms" symbolize separation and distinctiveness, inasmuch as they are so easily recognizable by others. These arms set the men apart, even though they are also a sign of the time done together. Prison arms have an antagonistic component as well, that of black anger directed outward, as the narrator-Wideman explains: "Men fashioning arms thick enough to wrestle fate, hold off the pressure of walls and bars always bearing down" (11). The "fate" these men are fighting is indisputably created by their white "keepers," the walls and bars "always bearing down" a representation of the perpetual struggle to avoid falling into the black pitfalls of gangs, crime and drugs that Wideman, unlike Robby, successfully sidestepped.

Yet, the narrator-Wideman feels a certain brotherhood with Tommy, even as they sit together in the prison visiting area, symbolically on opposite sides of the wall, one inside, one outside: "Hot today in the visiting area,

fiery heat like the day we paddled round [sic] in Wade's cement. Row row row your concrete boat. It ain't heavy, it's your brother" (11). This long-ago memory of brothers playing in cement at once evokes a time of bonding between the brothers, playing in a neighbor's concrete, yet if the fluidity of the concrete back then is a symbol of the brothers' freedom to become the people they wished, then the concrete has hardened as the brothers' paths have diverged; the concrete takes on a new meaning, hardening into an immovable separation. The concrete that once brought the brothers together now stands as prison walls that separate them. Symbolically, the narrator-Wideman must tow his incarcerated brother around in his "concrete boat," evoking an impossible, yet inescapable, weight, like the weight a free brother must carry as a memory of his kin behind bars.

In some ways, the narrator-Wideman understands his brother; though he claims to be "hiding from the sun," making Tommy a "blur in the center of the space across the round table," the narrator-Wideman nevertheless is sure that "he will be wearing the same face I am" (11). Hiding, or as Wideman describes his face as a "mask," implies that the sun is illuminating the harsh reality of his brother's

and his situation, his "permanent squint" keeping him from acknowledging the truth. Nevertheless, the narrator-Wideman knows that he and Tommy, by virtue of having the same expression, the same reaction, are forever linked as black men in a white society, the fact that one is incarcerated and the other is not is only a detail.

At the same time, however, Wideman expresses his ambivalence and his inability to truly relate to Robby/Tommy's imprisonment when the narrator-Wideman moves his attention from what Tommy is saying to focus instead on the details of the scene for their own sake, as if he is acknowledging his role as a writer, a chronicler, more so than an actual participant:

The visiting room wall forms one end of the outdoor enclosure. Its other three walls rise forty feet at least, smooth blocks of stone topped by razor wire, a walkway, a guard tower in the far corner. At the base of the sheer stone walls fresh plantings, shrubbery dense and spiky bordering the concrete pavement. A few trees, also recently planted, have been spaced along the inside of the walls, each in a square collar of earth the size of a missing section of paving.

You register these details for later. You think it will be crucial at some point to remember this yard exactly. You are uncertain why. Then, still listening to what he's saying, you realize how little of your brother's life you can share. This yard, detail by detail, is part of what you do share. (13)

By shifting his focus to the physical details of the yard rather than the reality of what's happening inside it, the narrator-Wideman betrays a sense of removing himself from the reality of Tommy's life, as if telling the story accurately can substitute for feeling the same feelings as Tommy. To emphasize his separation, the narrator-Wideman shifts to the second person "you," further distancing himself from what Tommy is saying and experiencing. It is no longer the narrator-Wideman meeting his brother in the yard, and focusing instead on the physical layout of the yard; it is now "you," meaning me as the reader. Now I must experience this yard, I must apprehend its significance.

Rhetorically, the narrator-Wideman has removed himself from the equation, leaving us sitting there with Tommy. The narrator-Wideman is now serving as an arbiter, a judge, and he may now dispassionately evaluate what he sees before

him. Yet in this sense of dispassion, or removal, the narrator-Wideman insists that he and Tommy do share something, the yard, symbolically suggesting that Wideman and Robby share a common history and a common race. But in other ways they are linked only by remaining on opposite sides of the same experience. Wideman writes about the reality of the yard, while Robby lives the reality of it. Tommy asks/tells the narrator-Wideman toward the end of the story "you know what I'm saying" and the latter replies, "I'm trying" (17); the narrator-Wideman mentions the story of the leaf, "this is where you and Denise were when the leaf got out" (15), implying a certain hope for Tommy's release, but Tommy actually lived the story of the leaf and knows better.

In fact, Tommy aptly describes the alienation and defeat he feels through telling the story about the leaf:

We was sitting there but by the time that leaf blew up near the top of the wall both of us on our feet cheering. Other people had got into it, too. Saw what we was watching and that leaf had a whole lot of fans when it sailed over the wall ... after watching it a while you know that leaf has flying out of here on its mind. Every little

whip and twist and bounce starts to matter.

Before you know it you're blowing with your breath to help it over the wall and you know something inside you will be hurt if that silly leaf can't finish what it started. Whole visiting yard whooping and hollering when it finally blew over the wall. (16)

The leaf symbolizes a prisoner's wish to escape, or more accurately the *possibility* of escape: if this leaf can fly out of the prison yard on a breath of wind, maybe, too, these prisoners will one day ride the same wind to their freedom. There is always that chance. By having Tommy tell this story, Wideman is seemingly expressing a fleeting moment of hope for Tommy/Robby's eventual release. This is as much of the story as the narrator-Wideman has ever heard, so to his knowledge, and at this point in the story, the leaf stayed free of the prison yard. Yet Wideman, despite his outsider status, despite his inability to fully relate to what Tommy/Robby is experiencing, gives Tommy one more monologue in the story--a monologue that once and for all establishes the pervasive tone of inevitable defeat, loss and sadness that characterize this collection, if not

also John Edgar Wideman's actual feelings about his brother.

Whatever the relationship of this story to Wideman's personal feelings, we know that this character, Tommy, who has so much in common with Wideman's real brother Robby, who is given thoughts and feelings by John Edgar Wideman himself, is at best a stark realist. Tommy concludes:

The leaf. I told you how it finally blowed free overtop the wall. Couldn't see it no more. Denise grabbed my hand. She was crying and we was bouncing up and down. People shouting. Some even clapped. But you now something. I'm gonna tell you something I don't tell nobody when I tell about the leaf. The dumb thing blew back in here again. (17)

The leaf signifies the black man in white society who cannot help being trapped, to the point of desiring the uncomplicated life of the knowingly oppressed. And Wideman is here expressing a deep pessimism about Tommy's fate, and by extension even Robby Wideman's, the underlying point being that freedom is an impossibility. As in the description of the prison yard, the intended audience is not another character per se but rather "you," which could

mean the reader as easily as anyone else. By apparently personalizing Tommy's final statements, Wideman is seemingly implicating his audience in the truths about black men and prison which, in a way, also implicates us as readers in Robby Wideman's experience. Once again, despite our shared status as outsiders, Wideman has made his readers believe that Tommy in "all stories are true" is not simply a character so much as an archetype, making his status as a fictional character near irrelevant. He can be Robby Wideman as easily as not, and the lessons of Tommy's experience are no less real for the telling.

It is this tension between chronicling a reality, which leaves one on the outside of it and not "knowing" it, and living a reality, being on the inside of it and thus "knowing" it, that lies not only at the heart of this story's title, "all stories are true," but also exemplifies what Wideman is trying to accomplish in his fiction. On one hand, this statement that "all stories are true" is an impossibility, a linguistic paradox: by their very nature, stories rely on fictional people, places and events to construct their narrative, thus creating an artificial "reality" which is not "real." By this definition, any sense of "real" in a story is only a shadow, a suggestion

of similarity, that nevertheless resembles the "real" closely enough to create trust in the reader. Only through the close approximation of "reality" are we able to understand stories in the first place. Though we do not necessarily know these people or these places, they are close enough to the people and places that we *do* know for us to assimilate the story's message for ourselves.

Yet, to refer to these fictional, unreal, accounts as "true," seems to be impossible, by virtue of what we define as true: something empirically demonstrable. And the title of the collection has an eccentricity that seems to argue against the point made by the title. The book's title is printed as black letters on a white background, but in the phrase, "all stories are true," the "l" in "all," the "i" in "stories," the "a" in "are," and the "r" in "true," are printed in gray, thus making those letters stand apart from the larger phrase to form a word of their own: "liar."

Whether this stylistic oddity suggests that Wideman himself is a liar, or any teller of tales is necessarily a liar, or even that readers' preconceived notions for this text make them liars, is unclear. But the implication of the book's title is that whomever is asserting, "all stories are true," is in fact a liar.

And yet Wideman, through the nature of his fiction, challenges the definition of "true," and thus makes possible the seeming paradox that "all stories are true." An initial reading of Wideman's title, "all stories are true," seems problematic because stories cannot be real, or else they wouldn't be stories, and what is not real cannot be true. Or can it? In Wideman's world, the question of "what is true?" is different from the question of "what is real?" creating a subtle distinction between what is seemingly a tightly logical relationship: what is real must necessarily be true, but what is true may not necessarily be real.

For example, imagine the story with which I began this essay, that of meeting a homeless man on the boardwalk in Redondo Beach. At the time we experienced meeting him, he was both real and true; had we been able to freeze the moment and hold it up for inspection, we could describe him and the surroundings, and these details would be assumed to be "true," inasmuch as what we had described had actually happened and was empirically demonstrable. But imagine that we had changed the details somewhat, perhaps made him younger rather than older, wearing a blue jacket rather than a green one, and perhaps he didn't smell of motor oil,

but rather of lilacs. These new, fictional details do not change the fact that we met a homeless man on the boardwalk at Redondo Beach. More importantly, the lessons we took away from the encounter, the new realities that we then understood, those were indisputably true, because we did take those lessons away, and we did understand our realities in a new way.

What Wideman does in the title story of the collection, and in the two successive stories I will go on to discuss, is very much the same procedure: Wideman understands the truth of the black experience in America. He feels the ambivalence of being a successful black man in a white-dominated society, with the very idea of "success" relative. Not only is success relative to people in general (he has a higher salary and a higher degree of fame than I do, for example) but also relative to other blacks, who perhaps did not straddle the boundary between the black and white worlds so carefully--blacks like his brother, Robby.

And while it is certain that Wideman does in fact have a brother named Robby who is incarcerated, we see that Wideman is using the idea of an incarcerated brother, not necessarily his, to express the brotherhood that blacks may feel with one another as they recognize one another from

different social perspectives. John Edgar and Robby Wideman are in reality related by blood, but being related by blood is an easily translatable metaphor for the truth of the black experience, of the kinship that members of an oppressed race may in fact feel toward their oppressors. Though Robby Wideman is in fact in prison for breaking the law, this fact is also a metaphor for the relationship between a black man who does not live by the "white" rules, hence breaking the white "laws," and is put away by his white captors. In the story, Tommy refers repeatedly to the prison officials as "they," and while he never specifies that "they" are white, it doesn't matter: in the relative world of Wideman's fiction, it matters not that Tommy is black and his captors are white, but rather that Tommy has an "other" against which to stand.

This is not to say that Wideman does not contrive a rhetorical advantage by shrouding family members and events in his fiction. Although he could easily create metaphors with wholly invented people and events, in using actual people and events Wideman is able to speak authentically about these people's realities, their relationship to him, and his feelings about them. If, as stated earlier, successful fiction is a matter of successfully relating

characters and events, then the best way to do this is to relate actual feelings and experiences, which gives the descriptions the ring of verisimilitude. And while some may argue that Wideman need not necessarily use fiction as his vehicle, instead of memoirs (which of course have their own narrative responsibilities), I respond that disguising his characters and feelings in fiction gives him license to speak generally, broadly, about relationships without being tied to the specific parameters of his relationships. He is able to avoid the distortion of extrapolating from the realities of his relationships to everyone's relationships, because on one important level the relationships Wideman describes are not "real," though they are true.

And yet, by accurately depicting one reality (his own), he is able to maintain the veneer of relatability. The value of Wideman's technique is twofold, in that he can be widely prescient and personally relatable. Whereas Wideman utilizes Tommy in "all stories are true" as a screen through which to explore his feelings of conflicted love for Robby and more generally a black man's place in a white society, in "welcome" and "casa grande" Wideman looks inward at the painful role of parenthood, a subtle move to reconcile his anguish and confusion about his own son,

Jake, who is incarcerated for life in an Arizona prison. In "welcome," the final story in the collection, Wideman addresses his parental guilt indirectly, through a female narrator who, like the narrator in "all stories are true," is having a conversation with her mother.

What was only implied in "all stories are true," that the narrator-Wideman has lost his brother Tommy, if not literally then figuratively, to prison, is brought out explicitly in this story, as we learn that Hannah, the narrator, has lost her daughter Njeri, to an undisclosed cause. At this stage in the collection, Wideman is invoking a metaphorical loss of innocence, using Hannah to express the feelings of loss that only a parent who has lost a child, as Wideman has lost Jake, can understand. This is a man who will not mention his son by name, preferring instead safer subjects and broad allusions, but who just as obviously feels the deep pain of losing his son to prison.

Similarly, Hannah describes early in "welcome" how, despite an equally palpable pain as Wideman describes, she and her mother studiously avoid the mention of Njeri, though her name is on both of their lips:

And had her mother sighed after she hung up the phone, happy or not happy she'd avoided

mentioning Njeri? Had her mother been trying to take all the weight upon herself the way she decided sometimes to spare her children and be the strong one ... how much had her mother wanted to say Njeri's name? How many times did her mother need to say it to herself as she gripped the phone and said other words into it? She had not said Njeri either. Always other things to talk about. (130)

The "other things to talk about" are a shield that Wideman, Hannah and Hannah's mother hold up to blunt the pain of losing their children. The words are on their lips, though never spoken.

Another jarring similarity between this story and Wideman's relationship with Jake (and Robby) is the notion of family as an endless skein of relationships that cannot be broken by imprisonment or death; Hannah recognizes this during a later conversation with her mother: "Two women talking. During the holiday season. One was her mother. She was the other. The woman's daughter who was now a mother herself," (131). In Wideman's life, as in his fiction, family is a permanent bond that carries on despite the absence of certain brothers or sons.

Wideman emphasizes this point in "welcome" with the example of Hannah's brother, who has, like Wideman, lost his son to prison. Despite Njeri's death, Hannah symbolically equates their losses, suggesting that loss is loss, whether the culprit is death or a more metaphorical death represented by incarceration. As Hannah says of her brother: "If he stays long enough to catch him a second time, alone, that's when I'll ask about my nephew, his son, who's not dead and gone in an instant, but who's lost to him, to us in ways none of us knows words for" (140). Hannah's comment suggests that not only is losing a son to imprisonment similar to losing one to death, but also that losing a son in the way Hannah's brother (and Wideman himself) have is somehow worse: so close, yet so far away. Hannah and her mother had no words for Njeri's death, nor do they have words for what has happened to this second child.

At this point in the story, the narration shifts to Hannah's brother Tom, who symbolically closes with two additional stories. Through Wideman's use of narrative to tell stories that closely parallel, if not replicate, his own experience, he is creating a web of signification in which one story leads to the next and back to the

beginning, an endless string of truths that the reader cannot untangle to show either a definitive beginning and end or a definitive truth and fiction, where the latter symbolizes the former: all stories are true.

Wideman explores this contradiction through the character of Tom by having him experience a different yet no less contradictory set of feelings; he is at this stage in the story musing about the simultaneous pain and joy his family brings him, how paradoxically his family imprisons and frees him, how it "takes [me] a day at least to get undepressed behind that feeling of being caught up again and unable to breathe and everybody I love in some sort of trouble that is past danger worse than danger a state I don't want to give a name to, can't say because I don't want to hear it" (140), a feeling that recalls the delicate avoidance with which Hannah and her mother treated the subject of Njeri. Yet, at this point Tom begins to "sort of gradually settle in. You all remind me of what's good here. Why I need to come back. How this was home first and always will be" (140), suggesting that family is at once a source of heartbreak and reassuring strength.

And, just as Wideman himself in his interview with Patricia Smith used the subject of Jake's incarceration to

illustrate a larger point, using his real-life pain to tell Smith a symbolic story, so too does Tom launch into a symbolic story of fathers and sons and the pain they go through, in the guise of a seemingly meaningless trip to buy some chicken wings. As he tells it:

So I'm on my way to Woodside Bar-B-Que and I see a man and a little boy on the corner at the bus stop on Frankstown at the bottom of the hill across from Mom's street. It's cold cold cold. I'm stopped at the light. So I can see the little boy's upset and crying. His father's standing there looking pissed off, helpless and lost. Staring up the hill for a bus that probably ain't coming for days this late on a weekend. Daddy a kid himself and somehow he finds himself on a freezing night with an unhappy little boy on a black windy corner and no bus in sight no soul in sight like it's the end of the world and I think Damn why are they out there in this arctic-ass weather, the kid shivering and crying in a skimpy K-mart snowsuit, the man not dressed for winter either ... and this is the only way, the best he can do and the wind howls the night gets blacker

and blacker they'll find the two of them, father son man and boy frozen to death, icicles in the morning on the corner. I think all that in a second. The whole dreary story line. Characters and bad ending waiting for the light to change on my way for chicken wings. On my way past that same corner I see the father lift his son and hug him. No bus in sight and it's still blue cold but the kid's not fidgeting and crying anymore, he's up in his daddy's arms and I think Fuck it. They'll make it. Or if they don't somebody else will come along and try. Or somebody else try. To make kids. A home. A life. That's all we can do. Any of us. (141)

Many elements of this story represent the theme of this story collection and have resonances in Wideman's life inasmuch as they speak of fathers, sons and how the role of a parent is equal amounts of loss and joy. For example, the bus that the father and son are waiting for is an example of waiting for salvation, for deliverance; just as a bus transports passengers from one location to another, so too are this father and son waiting for something to transport them away from the "dreary" bleakness of their lives.

Perhaps Wideman is also waiting for deliverance, but there is "no bus in sight," no way for any of them to escape their current realities. The father and son wait, Wideman writes, and yet the pain lingers. The father is "not dressed for winter," implying that he is not prepared to handle this calamity, enhanced by the repeated references to cold. There is no solution in sight, and the father and son are helpless in the cold, so much so that they may well be frozen in these same positions in the morning, which implies that only death can intervene after the endless night--the endless life they both must lead. It appears this is Wideman's way of expressing the cleaving sorrow a father feels at losing his son to prison. Where there are no words, as for Hannah, her mother and Tom, Wideman uses story to put words and feelings where normal conversation cannot reach.

As he tells the story, Tom highlights the apparent irony of his performing a mundane task, buying chicken wings that he loves "salty and greasy as they are I slap on extra hot sauce and pop an ice cold Iron City" (141), while at the same time a meaningful struggle for life plays out in front of him. The juxtaposition of everyday trivialities and profound realities recalls Wideman's only published

account of hearing about Jake's arrest on murder charges. He and his wife were attending a writing conference when they heard the news that their youngest son had been detained on suspicion of murder. The conference became a mere triviality in light of what was happening to Jake. But just as Wideman to this day visits Jake and has continued to acknowledge his son's reality, albeit in elliptical ways, so too does this fictional father and son make the best of their bleak circumstances. Tom notes, "the kid's not fidgeting and crying anymore, he's up in his daddy's arms and I think Fuck it. They'll make it" (141), which suggests a perseverance that recalls "all stories are true," the lead story in the collection.

But Wideman closes "welcome," and this collection of stories, with one additional story that seemingly leaves no doubt as to the autobiographical aspects of his fiction. Tom insists that he must tell "one more thing and then I'll shut up. But I need to tell you one more thing because that's how it happened. Just little things one after another prying me open" (141). This story, like the chicken wings story, bears no immediate resemblance to a father's bereavement over a lost son, but as is Wideman's trademark,

the truth of the story emerges elliptically, though just as powerfully:

There was this fat girl in the Woodside. No, not fat. A big girl, solid, pretty, light on her feet, a large pretty big-eyed brown girl thirteen or fourteen with black crinkly hair and smooth kind of round chubby cheek babydoll face who served me my chicken wings through the iron bars they have on the counter at the Woodside. And while she was using tongs to dig my dozen wings out of the bin she was singing. Singing while she wrapped them in wax paper and stuffed them in a bag. Bouncing on her toes and in the sweetest, purest, trilling soprano singing little riffs in another language of something for this time of year, something old like Bach with Christ's name in it and hallelujah hallelujah you know and it sounded so fine I hoped she'd never stop singing and my eyes clouded up for no good reason right there standing in the Woodside. I'm no crier, Sis. You know me. But I couldn't stop all the way home till I saw those two on the corner again and

knew how much I was missing Will, and then I had to cry some more. (141-42)

Readers should be able to recognize that the symbolism of this final story lies in several aspects: that this girl whom Tom sees serving chicken wings is behind "iron bars" like Robby and Jake Wideman; that she is the same age as Jake was when the latter was simply a fun-loving child, soon to be permanently incarcerated in a man's prison. Perhaps Wideman can, through Tom, see her impending loss of innocence. She is demonstrating faith and hope for a better future while being introduced to the workaday world in a dreary diner at too young an age, while Tom's son and Wideman's son and Wideman's brother have no hope for tomorrow and the leaves that represent freedom just blow right back in the prison yard. It is these details that remind Tom of Will, or perhaps it is the girl's appearance, the emphasis on her youthfulness, her "chubby cheek babydoll face" that recalls the youthfulness of Will, or Jake Wideman, ironically soon to be replaced with the world-weariness of Tommy/Robby, hoping against hope that he may somehow reclaim what he has lost.

However, just as Will in "welcome" seemingly represents Wideman's elliptical method of invoking Jake, in

"*casa grande*," Wideman is bolder with Jake's presence; while the son in this story remains unnamed, so too does the narrator, who in continually referring to "my son" obfuscates the boundary between fiction and reality. This may well be Wideman himself, speaking about his son, in large part because the pains taken to fictionalize the characters we saw in the previous two stories are absent here. Unlike the previous two stories that recall Wideman's family members, this one relies exclusively on the first-person "I," which of course may not refer to Wideman himself but just as obviously does not conclusively preclude it.

The story opens with the narrator explaining that he had recently discovered "a long-lost story written by my son" (18), entitled "A Trip to Jupiter" (18). The basis for my claim that "*casa grande*" is a direct portrait of Jake lies in the fact that Casa Grande is a town in Arizona, in fact the nearest town to Florence, where Jake Wideman is serving his life sentence for murder. The narrator of the story echoes this when he tells of his son writing "A Trip to Jupiter" when he was

ten years old ... eleven years later, just after he'd turned twenty-one and I had celebrated his

birthday with him in the Arizona prison where he's serving a life sentence, I was attempting to write in my journal about the way it feels when the terrible reality of his situation comes down on me, when I exchange for a fraction of a second my life for his. (19)

Perhaps it is ironic that the Spanish phrase "casa grande" means "big house," itself a common euphemism for prison, when combined with the fact that Jake Wideman is in the "big house" as well.

But Wideman, not content with simple one-to-one symbolism, mixes the significances not through characters, as in the previous two stories, but this time through the actual history of this part of Arizona, lending an equally compelling reality to the fictional landscape he has built. Wideman's strategy here is to make this fictional son in the story, who bears a remarkable likeness to Jake Wideman, part of a larger reality by metaphorically likening the fictional son's relationship to his father to the relationship between the Hohokam Indians, who are native to central Arizona, to this land they called "Casa Grande."

As the narrator states:

They say the Hohokam dwelt here. Those who are gone, who are used up is what the word hohokam, borrowed from the Pima Indian language, means. Hohokam cremated their dead in shallow pits ... no one knows where they originated nor why they disappeared completely after flourishing here for hundreds of years, building towns, canals, their Casa Grande I decide to visit since I've come this far anyway, this close, and my heart is bursting so I'll come up for air here, near Coolidge, Arizona, off Route 289, just fifteen miles from the prison at Florence, blend in with the old white people hoping to find in these ruins something they didn't bring with them, hoping to leave something burdensome behind in the dust they do not need or will not miss when the vacation's over and it's home again, home again. (20)

Here Wideman is showing the reader how neatly Jake fits into the historical tapestry of this place. It seems beyond coincidence that Wideman mentions the origins of the word "hohokam" as being those who are gone, those who are

used up, as Jake is gone and will one day be used up. And just as the Hohokams disappeared mysteriously, so too when Jake came to Arizona did he also disappear, unable like the Hohokams to "speak [his] own name, sing [his] own songs" (20). The prison where Jake lives is just a few miles from where the Hohokams once flourished, a fact the narrator calls attention to in noting the distance to Florence and, more accurately, to his son.

But their distance is much further than that. Just like in his childhood story, Jake is now on Jupiter, or may as well be, as far away as he is from his father, alienated on his own little planet amid an Arizona desert where similarly used-up Hohokams disappeared long ago. And perhaps Wideman is referring to himself when the narrator speaks of people "hoping to find in these ruins something they didn't bring with them," inasmuch as Wideman is hoping to connect with his son despite the fact that he did not bring Jake to these ruins, with the meaning of "ruins" as a location and "ruin" as a process both applicable here.

The story closes with parallel metaphors describing Jake and Wideman himself, first Jake as he appears on another planet with his Hohokam, used up and gone predecessors: "On his distant planet he invents the word

hohokam. It slips into his unconscious as a way of understanding where he once was" (21), which is to say Jake was once flourishing in his childhood but just as mysteriously disappeared as did the Hohokams into the earth, ironically into the same place on earth. To this day, no one has definitively stated why Jake committed the act of which he was convicted, least of all Jake himself, recalling the "mysteriousness" shared by the disappearance of the Hohokams. And on an equally distant planet, the barren landscape of Arizona that is foreign to the Northeast-bred Wideman, a father tries metaphorically, and unsuccessfully, to put together a broken life:

I can't help thinking the cacti are deformed. Truncated men missing limbs, heads, fingers, feet. Clearly each cactus is incomplete. Not what it should, could be. Or once was ... each cripple a warped facsimile of the perfect form yet to be achieved by a builder who keeps trying in spite of countless disasters jammed upright, headfirst into the desert sand. (21)

This is an example of Wideman casting himself as the "truncated" man who is "incomplete," which is to say without his youngest son, and naturally Wideman is not what

he "should" or "could" be, nor is he at all what he "once was," which is seemingly a reference to who and what Wideman was before Jake's incarceration. And in his reference to the "builder who keeps trying in spite of countless disasters," Wideman is seemingly invoking anger at a God ("builder") who allows fate to take away a man's son ("disaster"), but nevertheless puts more men on Earth to undergo similarly wrenching losses and resulting incompleteness, as they are forced to walk a pitiless earth: "jammed headfirst into the desert sand."

This story is as powerful, in its mix of metaphor and seeming autobiography, as are "*all stories are true*" and "*welcome*" in their relatively greater tendency toward fictionalization. Taken together, these three stories demonstrate Wideman's fictional method at its most effective. Whether he is spinning "true stories" to tell of actual experiences, or is actually relating the details of his life, Wideman causes us to pause and consider what it means for a set of events, or a group of people, to be "real," or "true." We must go beyond conventional definitions of what "has happened," because as Wideman has shown, the infinitesimal moment that a "real" action occupies is as quickly relegated to the province of

imagination and hence fiction as an event that never "actually occurred" at all.

And thus the overriding theme of Wideman's collection, and more generally his method, is whether these arbitrary distinctions of time, place and temporality are even worth pursuing. We should be less willing to assign unreality to a work of fiction, and reality to an experienced event, when so much of our own lives is known to us only as our imagination reconstitutes it. So to return to the homeless man at Redondo Beach who sparked this project, what we know is that he is a man who I once met. But in my stories, he is a complex character with a story of his own; he takes on a larger-than-life significance by virtue of his indelible place in my imagination, which is where he must forever reside. Though he will probably never know it, he has helped me think about the fiction of fact in a whole new way, and for that I am forever grateful.

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