

Private griefs, national tragedies

America's contemporary abolitionist writer

By Erica Wagner

American Histories

John Edgar Wideman

Canongate, 226pp, £15.99

John Edgar Wideman's profound new book begins, as it must, with the American Civil War. The first story in this collection, "JB & FD" imagines a kind of conversation between two of the most important figures of that conflict, the white anti-slavery crusader John Brown, hanged in December 1859 for treason, murder, and inciting slave insurrection, and the black abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who had himself been born enslaved.

The story begins as historical fiction but swiftly moves away from the conventional, its ten sections shifting between the voices not only of Brown and Douglass but also

that of the author himself, looking out of a motel window on a snowy morning, trying to imagine himself into his characters' lives. He considers John Brown as a boy, driving cattle through a blizzard: "I compare his predicament to mine, and I'm ashamed." Empathy is the business of fiction, but the drive towards it has a peculiar urgency in Wideman's work, which has often blurred the boundary between fiction and non-fiction, the personal and the imagined. In Wideman's work another life, a different set of possibilities, is always within reach.

Those other possibilities are rooted in his biography. Born in 1941 in Pittsburgh's

Writing to save a life: John Edgar Wideman's work blends and blurs fiction and non-fiction

African-American neighbourhood of Homewood, Wideman fell in love with reading via his father's Zane Grey Westerns, and his mother's romances – he has recalled coming across Herman Wouk's *Marjorie Morningstar* at a formative age, though his own work calls to mind James Baldwin and Henry James. He attended the University of Pennsylvania, where he excelled both as a scholar and athlete – he was captain of the basketball team. He was only the second black American to receive a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford and is the recipient of a MacArthur "genius" grant. His first novel, *A Glance Away*, was published 51 years ago and there have been 20 books since: fiction, memoir, essays, stories, the forms blended and intersecting, his work garlanded with awards.

It sounds like a burnished life, but it has been haunted by sorrow, and by the bitter legacy of slavery and the war that tore apart the United States, its wounds as yet unhealed. Wideman's younger brother Robert was sentenced to life without parole in 1976 for his participation in a murder; his nephew was murdered, and his own son stabbed a man to death at the age of 16 and is still in prison, more than 30 years later. Personal tragedies – but ones that also reflect the wider issues affecting the black community in the United States.

Wideman has dealt with his family's experiences both directly and indirectly. *Brothers and Keepers* is a memoir, the story of his and his brother's very different lives – and it is also an analysis of the prison system which, in the United States, has become a booming industry. First published in 1984, Wideman wrote a preface for an edition published in 2005. At the time of the book's original publication, he said, there were about 600,000 people imprisoned in the United States; by 2004 that figure had reached two million. It now stands at 2.2 million. In the early 1980s, Wideman wrote, 25 per cent of inmates were people of colour; by 2004 the figure had reached 50 per cent: African-Americans were incarcerated at more than five times the rate of whites.

Wideman makes no excuses: he has written that his brother Robert is "responsible for his actions and must carry forever the awful weight of having participated in a crime that cost a human being's life". But a sense of systemic injustice is unavoidable; "no end in sight", Wideman writes of the damaged generations in "Maps and Ledgers", one of the stories in *American Histories* that address his family's lives.

Along with *American Histories*, Canon-gate is publishing three of Wideman's earlier books in its classic "Canons" imprint. *Brothers and Keepers* is included in the bunch, as well as *Philadelphia Fire* (1990), a novel based on the police bombing of a house belonging to the Black liberation organisation MOVE in 1985; and *Writing to Save a Life* (2016), which examines the life of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old boy murdered in Mississippi in 1955 after he was accused of whistling at a white woman (the book also takes in the little-known story of Emmett's father, Louis, hanged by the US Army in the last days of the Second World War after he was accused of rape and murder in an Italian town).

All of Wideman's work is distinguished by his elegant, sometimes almost stately prose that has rightly seen him at the forefront of American letters. But the structure of his work plays like jazz, layered and interwoven, never content with a single voice, understanding that perspective is various, varied. *American Histories* is both slender and expansive, the themes set out in "JB & FD" are explored and expanded in the 21 pieces that make up the collection. "Free slaves, mad Brown shouts. Free the coloureds, as if colour simply a removable outer shell, as if colour doesn't permanently bind men into different kinds of men," he writes towards the end of that first story. Permanent bondage is, it seems, inescapable, no matter the story's subject.

In "New Start" a man and his wife are lying in bed watching *Downton Abbey*, and it becomes apparent to the narrator that everything observed – not just this cosy television show – is simply information, from that cloying drama to body-cam scenes of a killing that echoes that of Philando Castile, a black man shot by police in 2016 while reaching for his driving licence. In "Williamsburg Bridge" a man sits perched over the East River, calmly determined to kill himself for reasons he turns away from telling us while he describes his situation, the beauty of the river and the bridge, the music of Sonny Rollins, the falling-away from a lover. "Always someone's turn at the edge, isn't it. Aren't you grateful it's me not you today." Wideman's work is full of questions, but almost void of question marks – that flat interrogative has a strange power, as if the questioner is staring the reader in the eye and won't look away.

Yet there is a kindness deep at the heart of Wideman's writing that allows for the possibility of understanding across a divide. The lovely story "Writing Teacher" – Wideman is a professor at Brown University – considers an encounter between a

black writing teacher and a white student; the student has written a story about "a young coloured woman". The story asks the questions that bedevil the practise of fiction in the 21st century: "Does compassion trump technique or technique trump compassion. Is it okay to borrow another's identity in order to perpetrate a good deed. If you don't obtain the other's permission, are you an identity thief." The story ends as teacher and student arrange their next meeting: no answers are provided, only the courage to continue.

Wideman's courage, his gorgeous plain speaking, is triumphant; it is a courage which almost allows the reader to believe that language can conquer despair, though despair is always evident. The opening words of the "Prefatory Note" to this profound collection bring the reader up short: "Dear Mr President". Those words alone, read in a hardback book of stories in 2018, perhaps provoke bitter laughter. Whatever the reader may think of the current occupant of the Oval Office, one thing's for sure: he's not a big reader. The note continues: "I send this not along with some stories I've written, and hope you

Wideman's younger brother was sentenced to life without parole

will find time in your demanding schedule to read both note and stories. The stories should speak for themselves. The note is a plea, Mr President."

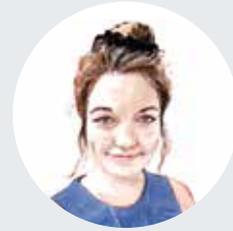
But of course the note is not addressed to one man; Wideman's work is built to last. The note goes on to acknowledge that by the time it reaches the White House, the president may be a woman, or even a black woman: "that would be an edifying surprise". But the plea remains the same, and is startling in its blunt brevity. "Please eradicate slavery."

That is the context within which *American Histories* sits. "History tells as many lies as truths," Wideman writes in recognising the constitutional amendments that freed and enfranchised enslaved men and women in the aftermath of the American Civil War; but history is sometimes not best equipped to give a true understanding of how the past and the present conjoin. As Wideman has shown in book after book, it is the imagination that can allow a space in which a new understanding of all our stories may be forged – and where a more just future may be created. ●

Erica Wagner is a New Statesman contributing writer

WHY YOU SHOULD WATCH...

GLOW



By Anna Leszkiewicz

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