

John Edgar Wideman is a lonely writer

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—People experience life differently. How you see yourself shapes how you see everything else. Identity may not be destiny, but it's undeniably important.

John Edgar Wideman graduated from Peabody High School in Pittsburgh, Pa., in 1959. He was senior class president and valedictorian. I graduated in 1963.

Peabody was an urban pot where not much melted. Its students were a mix of Protestants, Catholics and Jews. It was a hodge-podge of ethnicities. About 15 percent of the students were black. Economically, students ranged from middle class down to the bottom. Tensions existed between the various tribes, which came out occasionally in words or fights. But there was always a little inter-tribe dating and some friendships. After I graduated, a teacher told me that the then-principal described this student body in a faculty meeting as: "We have about 15 percent Negro, 25 percent Jews, and the rest are white."

Had we overlapped, Wideman and I would have known one another even though we would have been moving in different circles. Teachers and administrators we shared helped him. Peabody was his launching platform. Had its teachers been hostile, he would have had a harder time.

Wideman received an academic scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania where he was Phi Beta Kappa and an All-Ivy-League forward in basketball. He received a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford where he studied 18th-Century British novelists. Later, he was awarded a MacArthur genius grant. He's written 10 novels as well as non-fiction books and collections. He's won national writing prizes. He currently teaches at Brown University.

I've read some of his books over the years and usually found them reader-unfriendly. I've always been curious about how he wrote about Peabody. I finished his most recent work, Fanon: A Novel (2008), this week. (An interview with Wideman can be found at www.radioopensource.org/speaking-of-race-john-edgar-widemans-fanon.)

This novel is Wideman's search for identity through his multi-level relationships with the writings and life experiences of Frantz Fanon, the Martinique-born psychiatrist who argued that people oppressed by the violence of colonialism were justified in using violence to free themselves.

That argument underpins the American war for independence.

Fanon fought for the Free French in WWII, was wounded, received the Croix de guerre, earned graduate degrees afterward in Lyon and ended up in Algeria as a psychiatrist and writer. The French who were fighting to hang on to their Algerian annexation in the 1950s considered him a “terrorist.”

Fanon wrote two books -- Black Faces, White Masks, and The Wretched of the Earth -- that were deeply influential in revolutionary movements in Cuba, Palestine, South Africa and the United States, notably with the Black Panther Party. Both books are about identity—who defines it, what the definition means, how non-white identity is concealed behind a white mask to survive.

Fanon died of leukemia at 36. He had been treated unsuccessfully in the Soviet Union. The Central Intelligence Agency arranged for him to be treated at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Md., where he died in 1961.

Fanon has been John Edgar Wideman’s lodestar since the 1960s.

Wideman’s paean to Fanon is a jumpy narrative collage whose intricate constructions often get in the way of the story. Sentences run on for a page; paragraphs for several pages. Stuff is packed into other stuff like the contents of a hoarder’s closet.

Postmodern writing has always seemed to me to be overly intellectual, deliberately obscure, self-indulgent and narcissistic. Poetic, layered prose need not be a rabbit hole with no exit. Complex ideas can be written simply. On the other hand, nobody has given me money for being average, let alone a genius.

(A literary biography and favorable review can be found in Keith E. Byerman, The Life and Work of John Edgar Wideman [2013].)

Wideman’s idols are Fanon, his mother who made much of little and the artist Romare Bearden, an earlier Peabody graduate.

Material from Wideman’s personal life -- his mother’s last years in Pittsburgh’s Homewood neighborhood, a meeting with Jean-Luc Godard where he tries to interest the French filmmaker in turning Fanon into a movie and cuts to his brother, Robby, who is serving a life sentence, his nephew who was murdered and his son who is jailed for killing a schoolmate -- is threaded into the narrative. These vignettes illustrate Fanon’s insights, reflect different effects of colonialism and anchor the author in specific realities.

Fanon is about Wideman’s anger, grief and guilt.

Wideman is black. I am white. We see the world and ourselves through our skin color—he more consciously than I. Were I living in a predominately black society that had once enslaved, segregated and denigrated people of my color, I would be more like him.

Wideman has enjoyed great professional and personal success as a writer. Publishers welcomed him. Universities sought him. Critics praise him for his postmodernism and his subject matter. Reviewers treat him carefully. White institutions have blessed him, embraced him and kept him.

Still, Wideman remains profoundly angry at the racism he sees as underlying his family's tragedies and the treatment of people of his color generally.

That he escaped while many don't gnaws at him. Special privileges and benefits for the talented few is the more subtle side of modern racism. If a Wideman can overcome systemic racism, then it's convenient to lay the failure of so many others on their individual shortcomings.

While most of his writing is anchored in issues of color and Homewood, a black neighborhood that's been on a downward slide since the 1950s, Wideman fled into the white world that victimized those he left. His teaching career has been spent at the University of Pennsylvania, University of Wyoming in Laramie and Brown University—not at historically black colleges.

He was married to a white woman for 35 years. Subsequently, he married a white French woman. He taught English at Wyoming for 12 years where, he said, he was “running from Pittsburgh, from poverty, from blackness.” He felt relieved when he was not in Homewood and guilty when he returned for having “the charmed circle of my life.”

The racism that he sees and feels has circumscribed his life's work. He's derived comforts from writing about the uncomfortable while his brother and son sit in jail. His success depended on escaping. If, like his brother you mess up, you don't escape. John never messed up.

Unlike Fanon, Wideman never joined a political struggle that challenged the conditions he explores as a writer. Fanon took risks. He was a member of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN), a journalist who saw revolutionary violence as Algeria's only path to independence. Wideman tucked into the ivory tower and spent many summers in Maine.

All of us search for an identity that fits. Wideman finds no peace in the identity he inherited -- black guy from Homewood -- or any of those he's developed on his own—literary personality, angry voice of those who are

stuck and silent and Fanon lite. Only Wideman can tell us how often he has had to wear a white mask to survive in white society

When a student asked him why he writes, Wideman answered: “I write because I’m lonely.” That, I think, is what racism has done to John Edgar Wideman.

Most non-academic readers will find Fanon a laborious read. If I had written this way in Miss DeFrance’s English class where Wideman had preceded me, she would have given me even lower grades. Her consistent comment on the top of my papers was, “This won’t do, Curt.” She was right.

Had our places been switched at birth and Wideman had grown up white outside of Homewood, I wonder who he would be today. And had I been in his place, I wonder which prison I would be sitting in.

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