

## 'American Histories': John Edgar Wideman's stories show he is a master of modernist collage

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During an acclaimed career that has lasted more than 50 years, Homewood native John Edgar Wideman has established himself as one of the country's most formally inventive writers. He has also consistently provided insight into a range of important issues in his work, from the destructive force of race to the role of literature in society. In "American Histories," his new collection of short fiction, Mr. Wideman continues to ask questions about race, writing, and society, and does so in the most stylistically diverse volume of his career. The result is an important addition to Mr. Wideman's body of writing and a remarkable demonstration of his ability to address social issues through a range of fictional forms and styles.

In the collection's most conventional pieces, Mr. Wideman flirts with what the writer Michael Chabon calls "moment-of-truth revelatory stories." In "My Dead," for example, the difficulty of change crystallizes for the narrator when he attends his brother's funeral and is unable to see his brother as

anyone other than the child he once was. More frequently, though, Mr. Wideman's "conventional" stories offer truths only to question them, or to question the process by which they were determined. In "Writing Teacher," a creative writing professor encourages a student to focus on a moment in her story when an emergency room clerk assumes that a young woman of color doesn't have health insurance. As the professor tries to get his student to focus on this moment, the forces that make the moment possible — the "hundreds of years of history, of pillage, blood, suffering" — multiply and then spill out of the story into the professor's life and our own, washing away the possibility of a stable perspective.

Mr. Wideman includes several "microstories" in "American Histories," the shortest of which has fewer than 100 words. The form works well for Mr. Wideman, highlighting his interest in modernist collage and emphasizing

**"AMERICAN HISTORIES"**  
By John Edgar Wideman  
Scribner (\$26).

the incredible range of material in his fiction. In “Music,” the narrator understands his sister’s description of her dream in a way that depends on the history between them. In “Snow,” a new snowfall prompts an unidentified narrator to ruminate on the unavoidable human practice of imposing explanations on the world. Both stories explore the way that people construct meaning in the world, but they approach this issue in vastly different ways.

“American Histories” also features several pieces that reconstruct lives for historical figures such as John Brown, Frederick Douglass and Nat Turner. As in his recent books “Writing to Save a Life: The Louis Till File” and “Fanon,” Mr. Wideman alternates between imagining lives for these characters and reflecting on his own imagination in these stories, an approach that allows him to explore the ongoing and damaging presence of racism in America without pretending he’s capable of being a neutral observer. Pittsburgh readers should take particular note of “Collage,” in which Mr. Wideman imagines a meeting between Romare Bearden (his fellow Peabody High School alum) and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Part of Mr. Wideman’s appreciation for Bearden involves a quote from August Wilson, reminding us of the extraordinary contributions that this city’s African-American artists and writers have made to American culture since the 1960s.

Mr. Wideman begins his 1994 memoir “Fatheralong” by writing that the pieces in the volume are an attempt “to break out, replace, displace the paradigm of race. Teach me who I might be, who you might be — without it.”

He includes a similar introduction to “American Histories” asking a future American president to eradicate slavery. The similarity between these two openings reminds us that the problem of racism in America remains as deep and as urgent as ever. It also reminds us of the inextricable connection between John Edgar Wideman’s fiction and the destructive social conditions from which it arises.

Like all fiction, Mr. Wideman’s work can’t redeem or overcome these conditions. But maybe it can suggest something about who we might be without them.

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