



Margaret Wrinkle

THE TENSION OF OPPOSITES: AN INTERVIEW
WITH MARGARET WRINKLE

About Margaret Wrinkle

Born and raised in Birmingham, Margaret Wrinkle is a writer, filmmaker, educator, and visual artist. Her debut novel *Wash* reexamines American slavery in ways that challenge contemporary assumptions about race, power, history, and healing. Published by Grove Atlantic, *Wash* recently won the Center for Fiction's Flaherty Dunnan First Novel Prize and has been named a *Wall Street Journal* Top Ten novel of the year, a *New York Times* Editors' Choice, an *O* magazine selection for "10 Books to Pick Up Now," and a *People* magazine 4-star pick.

Margaret earned a BA and an MA in English from Yale University and studied traditional West African spiritual practices with Malidoma Somé. She has taught at the San Francisco Art Institute and lives in rural New Mexico. Her award-winning documentary *broken\ground* was featured on NPR's *Morning Edition* and was a winner of the Council on Foundations Film Festival. It was made with Chris Lawson about the racial divide in her historically conflicted hometown of Birmingham.

It should come as no surprise that others have crowned Margaret Wrinkle with so many awards and honors. Her novel, *Wash*, has exploded into the literary world like a cannon shot, obliterating what people thought they knew about slavery and the South. This story centers around a 19th-century enslaved man named Washington, or Wash for short. His owner, General Richardson of Tennessee, struggles under financial pressure and turns Wash into a breeding sire. Importantly, Wrinkle does not sugar coat, hide, or dismiss racial tensions that have haunted America in the past and still do so today. Instead, violent truths bleed out through the pages of *Wash* even as the characters struggle to find healing and resolution.

Consider this moment as Wash compares himself to a stallion fighting in vain against his bindings: "I saw myself rearing against the rope wrapped round my middle. I saw myself striking at that wall stretching

out forever in front of me, till I finally saw the only thing giving was me, over and over, till finally it was plain old tiredness that rescued me. Taut turning to slack, and then my breath coming long and slow, carrying the trembling away and washing me clean while I stood in the quiet of Richardson's barn" (Wrinkle 211).

Here, the reader experiences Wash's internal and physical struggle as he reflects on his captivity. The words of Ron Rash, author of *Serena* and *The Cove*, echo in this passage. Rash calls the novel "bold, unflinching," something that is "certain to haunt the reader for a long, long time."

While speaking about her novel during UAB's Visiting Writers Series, Margaret Wrinkle said, "One of the many things that happened during American slavery was that traditional African indigenous reality collided with modernizing Western European reality to create a new country. This collision between two very different ways of being is still reverberating, still unfolding, still happening now." In this sense, Wrinkle uncovers the wounds of the past in hopes of a future healing. But for healing to take place, there first must be pain. Kevin Baker, author of *Strivers Row*, repeats this idea. He states about the novel, "*Wash* tells a chapter of our past that we would rather look away from. Margaret Wrinkle makes sure that we cannot."

In a way, Wrinkle chains us to the text; we cannot stop flipping the pages. We *must* know how it all ends. In my position on *poemmemoir-story's* staff, I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to interview a writer unafraid to tackle some of society's most uncomfortable topics. I hope you enjoy my discussion with Margaret as she connects us with her characters, with history, and with the shadows within ourselves.

Interview with Margaret Wrinkle

BAM: Let's start with what everyone's talking about: your first novel *Wash*. Or maybe I should say your jackpot—a *Wall Street Journal* Top Ten novel of the year, a *New York Times* Editors' Choice, an *O* magazine selection for "10 Books to Pick Up Now," and a *People* magazine 4-star pick. That's pretty impressive. What does it mean to you that your first book has hit it big?

MRW: It's very surprising, and it's very heartening, but I think I just had to deal with what came to me, the story that came to me to be told. What happens to the book when it goes out in the world—it's really not our business as writers, you know? Obviously, it's very gratifying when it does well, and it's very frustrating when work is not seen. Luckily for me, *Wash* took so long to write and to find an agent and a publisher that, by the time it was published, there were more people who were ready for it. The whole conversation about race in this country has moved forward in the past five years, even to a point I would not have been able to imagine earlier. I do remember worrying about why this book was taking so long to come into the world, wondering whether there was something really wrong, but the timing was perfect. *Wash* came out in 2013, which was the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Movement and the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. I think some of the positive reception has to do with the fact that more people have become more ready and able to talk about these challenging subjects. When I was first working on this story, one friend and I had this joke that there would be six people who would be up for the experience of reading this book, and I was prepared for that. But I'm also really glad that there are more than six!

BAM: I think it's safe to say there were a few more than six. But for me personally, success ironically creates a new outlet for self-doubt. I question myself and think, "This was just a fluke. Can I be as good as I was in that moment?" For you, how does your novel's success make you feel when considering a new project? Is it intimidating, or does the desire to meet that level of success again spur you on?

MRW: I try not to think too much about that aspect of this process. Of course, it's validating to be seen and heard when you've invested as much time as I did. And yes, this kind of reception gives you a certain credibility that allows you to talk about even more tricky and important things. It's kind of like in the traditional indigenous world: the elders give you a task, and when you've fulfilled that task, you think you're going to get a break. But then they give you a bigger task! But that's ok, because there are so many difficult issues that need to be discussed these days.

For me, the most important thing is to keep my focus on my relationship to the world the story comes from. When I'm focused on keeping that relationship authentic and powerful I can't worry too much about the rest. If I did, it would just make me crazy. The work comes to you to be made, and you wrestle with the work; you forge the story the best way that you know how. Whether people like it or don't like it is really not up to you and it's none of your business, as long as you know that you have served the story fully.

BAM: So it sounds like you leave readers to interpret the novel however they wish. Is that your intent?

MRW: It's not so much the meaning of the novel as the evaluation of it that needs to be left up to the reader, in terms of the reviews and the critics and all that. But I do think it's important to give the reader lots of room. I cut a lot from the book, and I think it was partly because, in the process, I learned that you need to leave enough space for the reader to come towards the story, that everything shouldn't be completely spelled out. That way, the reader can co-create the story with you. I grew up without a TV. I read a lot, and I read books multiple times. I like complex books that are different every time you read them, where your understanding deepens each time. But this story will always have certain definite meanings for me. Readers will draw their own conclusions, but obviously I want their interpretation to be somewhat in the same neighborhood as mine as to what the story's about. It's the critical

reception of a book that isn't really any of the writer's business. You do the best you can, but what books get attention and what books don't is so fluky that you can't get too invested in it. Your job is with the writing.

BAM: I think a lot of writers should probably keep that in mind. We get so lost trying to make it perfect for our readers that we forget sometimes it's out of our hands how they'll interpret it.

MRW: In my experience, the material is coming from another world to the writer. The writer then crafts that material for the reader. But the power and intensity of that material depends on the writer remaining deeply connected to the world the story comes from rather than becoming too focused on the reader. I think you do have to think about the reader and you have to be clear and everything, but this is where the editor comes in, whether it's your actual editor, or your agent, or your crucial early readers. The editor is much closer to the reader; the editor's the one who helps the writer make sure that the reader can keep up. That's why the whole author/editor relationship is so important. I think a lot of writers, especially newer writers, myself included, can tend to resist everything any editor says at first because our primary allegiance is to the world of the story. But it's the editor's allegiance to the world of the reader that becomes essential in making the story accessible to a broader audience.

BAM: How did your upbringing inspire you to write a novel concerning slavery?

MRW: I think being born in Birmingham, Alabama in July of 1963 set some sort of template for me. Martin Luther King, Jr. called Birmingham the citadel of segregation, and he chose the city for his campaign that spring because it was so segregated. I'm a seventh-generation Southerner with slaveholding ancestors, but, like a lot of white children in that era, some of my strongest early bonds were with the black people who were being paid to take care of me. So I grew up in a racially charged landscape while

maintaining deep connections on both sides of the racial divide. In fact, my relationship with Mrs. Ida Mae Lawson Washington, who came to work for my parents when I was seven years old, shaped the way I see the world. Even though she passed away in 1989, my ongoing relationship with her family inspired me to work toward racial reconciliation and eventually to write *Wash*.

While teaching in Birmingham's inner city and making our documentary about contemporary race relations in my hometown, I spent years crossing back and forth between Birmingham's black and white communities. That's when I started to get the haunting sense that many of our current racial dynamics and racial landscapes stem all the way back to slavery. And too many of the young black men I knew and taught were living in what seemed to me to be a genocidal situation. In order to understand, and hopefully help unravel, this dangerous dynamic, I knew I had to trace these threads all the way back to slavery. There are so many troublesome parallels between then and now. Too many of the challenges and dilemmas Wash faces in the course of his story are eerily similar to the challenges facing too many young black men today. And people like Michelle Alexander and Bryan Stevenson have been calling mass incarceration the new slavery.

BAM: If such a thing can be pinpointed, where did the inspiration for Wash's character come from?

MRW: What specifically inspired this story was the rumor that one of my slaveholding ancestors had been involved in the breeding of enslaved people. If I hadn't had that potential personal connection, I wouldn't have gone anywhere near this volatile and controversial subject matter. I never found any proof of that allegation, but once I knew that this practice had happened, I felt it needed to be explored.

I started out centering this story around Richardson, the slaveholding character, because he's the one I thought I had the right to write about. He's inspired by this slaveholding ancestor of mine,

but he's also a composite of several white men who were out on the frontier at that time, trying to build empires. I knew it would be important to write about a slaveholder as if he were a relative because that builds a bridge.

Then I finally found a three-line quote from an interview with a survivor of slavery who was asked directly about the breeding of enslaved people. I'm paraphrasing, but he said, "Yes. There was this one man. He was tall and kept to himself. He got to sit in the shade of the willow and he got the extra bacon. Then he was sent away to this place where, nine months later, all these children were born." Once I did more research, I found out that these men who did this work were called "traveling negroes."

When I started thinking about that one man who was about to be sent away on that particular Friday, that's when Wash's voice emerged. He was so clear and so psychologically sophisticated that I had to know more about him. Who had raised him and how did he come to be this remarkable person? Once I had Wash's story, I had to weave it together with Richardson's because I knew they had to be together. My interest was in the relationship between these two very different people and the two very different cultures and traditions that these two people come from, the ways in which the relationship between them encapsulates the clash between their two different cultures.

BAM: Is that why numerous perspectives—including those of Wash, Richardson, and a female character named Pallas—coexist in the novel? And why the usage of first and third person point of view varies throughout? Because your emphasis is on showing how they have become who they are, bridging cultures?

MRW: Yes, the issue of perspective is a huge issue in a story like this. I did start with everything in first person, hearing from Wash, then Richardson, and then Pallas. The voices were tremendously important. They were what I heard first and most clearly. And I knew I had to have all three differing perspectives on the same

story. I think growing up in a segregated place taught me to listen closely to all the ways people talk about each other, all the ways in which the very fabric of reality can be contested.

In our documentary about race in Birmingham, one of the people interviewed says, “Your truth is not my truth.” Another states, “I come from a place where I believe all people are created equal; however, when society is such that people are treated differently based on race, then they have different experiences that then create differences.” This whole idea that our differing perspectives shape the reality of what we see—the fact that we’re all experiencing different realities—was so profound to me that I felt it was important to try to write something that would allow readers to experience this truth for themselves. For example, Richardson’s security depends on dehumanizing Wash, whereas Wash’s survival depends on resisting that dehumanization. And that’s just one huge tension between those two characters.

I knew that I had to have all these different first-person perspectives on the same story because each differing perspective makes it almost a different story. But I started to feel all those voices were becoming too claustrophobic. I needed to step back and, almost like a filmmaker, get a long shot and see the landscape these people were moving through, see everything the characters weren’t telling me. Because when someone is speaking to you in first person, telling you a story, you should automatically assume they’re not telling you the whole story. I wanted to have that ability to stand back and see from a distance.

I knew intuitively that the story needed both first and third person narration but it was a long time before I understood that integrating those two differing ways of telling would be the key to integrating the indigenous and the modern ways of seeing.

BAM: Speaking of writing *Wash*, how long do you think it took you to write?

MRW: It took so long it's embarrassing, so I don't tell anyone. A decade is a conservative estimate. I was doing other things along the way, and I discovered that you have to grow up enough to understand the story that you're writing. You don't always understand it at the beginning. I had a great deal of the story written pretty early on but the real struggle was finding my way to the right structure. Also, as you go along, you learn more; you become a better writer. The back half was more well written than the first half, so I had to go back and get everything up to the same level and that takes awhile.

Here's a testament to how long I was working on the book. When I first started, it was kind of against the rules to combine first and third person. Now that's completely normal. There was an editor early on who was interested but she wanted me to get rid of all the voices and put the whole thing in third person. I knew that wasn't the right thing for the story, but I also doubted that there could be one third-person omniscient narrator who would know enough about all these characters' different realities to tell the whole of their stories. I wanted to question the whole idea of omniscience because historically it has been this false neutral. For example, until very recently, most documentaries were narrated by a middle-aged white man of a certain class and background. It's only recently that somebody like Morgan Freeman could become that voice. I wanted to question the supposed neutrality of omniscience by using the first person voices to place the reader in these very different realities long enough and authentically enough so that they could feel how different they were.

I didn't really understand it at the time, but when I look back, I can see that I've structured—well, I shouldn't say "I structured" it because I didn't do it intentionally, I just followed my intuition. But when I look back, I can see that the novel is structured almost like a documentary film. You have alternating narratives cutting in on each other to create a conversation. Then there's archival footage rolling in between. Those are the third-person scenes. But I didn't know I was doing that in the beginning. I think the most

important thing is learning to follow your intuition and your gut even though you don't understand why you think it should be that way. That was the biggest challenge for me, learning to trust my instincts.

BAM: What were your concerns about being a Caucasian woman writing from the alternating perspectives of both a male Caucasian slave owner and a male African American slave? Because some people might be a little intimidated.

MRW: Well, yes, I was terrified. But this goes back to what you and I talked about earlier—how to separate your writing space from all the issues of publication. With material this volatile, I knew I had to separate those two realms and be vigilant about keeping them separate. I had a small writing group that was working in the method developed by Pat Schneider, which focuses on accessing the subconscious. To paraphrase again, Schneider believes your strongest material lies within your subconscious, already powerfully symbolic and structured. If you can access those depths and bring those potent images up from down there, you won't have to do as much intentional crafting of your own. Her methodology creates a very generative safe space, and I wrote a surprising amount of my first draft in that group.

I remember other writers in the group struggling with various blocks, worrying about what their families might think, and I remember blithely saying, "Just worry about it later." It wasn't so much that I didn't think that the book I was working on would ever be published but that I knew I could not think about both of these things at the same time. I could not think about the truth of my story and how it was going to be received with the same brain and with the same heart I had to live from in order to write it. I could not do those two things at the same time. So I consciously pushed the thought of my work ever being out in the world way, way back. I just said, "I'll worry about it later." Then later came, and it was completely and utterly terrifying. I had a lot of anxiety about it. I drove all my friends—and sometimes my editor—crazy. But by then I was so invested that it was too late to back out.

BAM: It's a catch-22, because the stuff you really don't want to write is what you need to write. It's the honesty, I think. The brutal truth. I was very curious about when you decided to actually pursue publishing your novel.

MRW: You know, I think courage is required whenever you're writing something real; authenticity requires courage. They tell you from first grade on, "Just be yourself." But they don't tell you how hard that is. Authenticity, being authentic, is one of the hardest things to do, and it's one of the things that gets talked about the least somehow. All I know is that you have to consciously build and maintain your courage.

I knew that being a white descendant of slaveholders writing about something as controversial as slave-breeding in the voice of an enslaved black man would be problematic. Each one of those things by itself is a problem; together they create a political nightmare. All I knew was that these three alternating perspectives had to be put together on equal footing, on shared neutral turf. And I knew I was uniquely qualified because I'd been listening to black and white people talk about race my whole life.

I also knew that whoever wrote this book, because it is about bridging differences, would have to write outside of his or her zone of experience. But there were many times when I panicked, fearing that I didn't know enough about traditional West African ceremonies, for example, but then I'd realize that the person who would know that part, who would be completely inside that paradigm, wouldn't know enough about the destructive plantation mythology that still creates so much craziness in the South. I knew this was a huge issue, and it was scary. It was terrifying, but that's why I dealt with it by having the discipline to not let myself think about it until it was too late.

On the gender issue, Nadine Gordimer says every real writer must be androgynous. And I think it goes back to Whitman; we all contain multitudes, and living out the truth of that is in some ways what we're called to do. I think there was a necessary period

of time where we went through identity politics, in part because we had to break out of the default setting which was that false neutral of the straight, white, middle-aged, middle-class man. Now we've come into a time where many of us are trying to write across these divides from all sides.

And yet, there is still the very real problem of access. Who has access to media? Whose voices get heard and whose voices get published? Who decides who gets to write from whose perspective? I've heard this problem called "the unbearable whiteness of publishing," and it has everything to do with power. Who's in control of our shared narrative and why?

This is another huge question and one that inspired me to write *Wash*. The book centers around questions of power. What is it? How is it best used? How is it gained and lost? I've always been interested in what happens when people are put in a position to abuse their power. What do they do? And when people are in a position of feeling powerless, how do they respond? The truth of the matter is that every person, no matter what gender or race, has been in both of those positions: a position to abuse their power and a position where they feel powerless, for various reasons. These are pretty universal experiences.

BAM: That's a very interesting idea about power. Was that one of the main themes you were trying to keep through the novel as you were writing it, or did you realize that was even coming up?

MRW: Another big question. I remember being in ninth or tenth grade and having to write yet another English paper, tracing the themes in *A Passage to India*. I remember wondering if E.M. Forster intended these themes and whether he put them in on purpose, or if they just happened. I'm sure the answer may be different for different people, but now that I've written a novel, I know that for myself, it just happens. If you're lucky.

I believe that every story is a living being with its own logic and

its own rhythm: its own structure and its own beauty. And if you go deeply enough into that reality and surrender as fully as you can to the writing process, then all those bigger symbols and themes will come through you. Along with a bunch of extra stuff which then has to be stripped away.

I remember hearing Antonya Nelson talking about a short story by Michael Cunningham. Her explanation of his process felt true to my experience. First you surrender fully and you get what you get. Then you look closely at what you got. That's when you recognize the themes running through it that came from your subconscious, themes that you may not have initially intended. Then you can trim away the underbrush and clarify these themes. You find ways to highlight the underlying structure that came as a gift through your subconscious.

BAM: What would you recommend to writers seeking to create authentic voices of characters who are far different from themselves, as you have done in *Wash*?

MRW: I think empathy and imagination are crucial, but they must be grounded in real life experiences. The first thing I would say is to spend time with people who are different from you. And spend that time in an open, nonjudgmental, questioning, and welcoming way. I think the more often you can leave your comfort zone, the better. Keep your mouth shut in the beginning and keep your ears open. A lot of people, when they leave their comfort zone, need to make themselves feel safe, and too often they do so by talking, which defeats the purpose because they're still controlling the space instead of discovering anything new.

I was lucky in that I had this strong bond with Mrs. Washington, who worked for my parents when I was small. She was so important to me that her death in 1989 left me sort of adrift. Her family was generous enough to let me spend a great deal of time with them, both then and over the years since then, and I've learned so much from them.

As diverse as the United States is now, I find that a lot of people—particularly white, middle-class and upper-class people—don't spend very much time around people who are not like them. And there's the intellectual crowd, which can be its own clique. But I was kind of traumatized by my education, and maybe to balance that out, I've always spent a lot of time with people who don't read that much, who didn't necessarily graduate from high school, or who were maybe self-taught. They've taught me the most.

BAM: What about research for *Wash*? What trouble did you have with researching?

MRW: I remember hearing Edward P. Jones saying that he got all the books that he thought he needed to write *The Known World*, which is about black slaveholders, but that he never read them. I was a little bit that way. I spent a lot of time in the library at first, before I realized that the written history of slavery is very problematic because it relies so heavily on primary sources. But many of the players in this particular situation had a vexed relationship to the written record. They came from an oral culture, they were denied literacy, and their lives were controlled by written documents. The written historical record will always be inadequate because there are so many primary sources that don't exist.

I did find certain helpful things in the library—runaway slave ads, court transcripts, personal letters and journals of slaveholders—but I had to leave the library pretty soon and go to places where slavery was lived on the land. I spent lots of time looking for lost cemeteries, where the enslaved people are buried.

And I did go to what I guess you'd call plantation museums because they are open as museums and tourists come. But most of those places are still spinning a false narrative about what happened during slavery because they are still caught up in that destructive plantation mythology. You have to continually ask who's controlling the narrative. If your tour guide is wearing a hoop skirt, you need to take everything she says with a grain of salt.

There is one place in North Carolina which is curated by descendants of people who were enslaved there. At Somerset Place, I felt I was getting some truth about the complicated reality of what went on. My experience there was so compelling that some of the historical incidents at Somerset Place inspired fictional incidents in the novel.

In the very beginning of this process, I was lucky enough to come across a quote by Toni Morrison about writing *Beloved*. She said all she'd had to go on was a two-line newspaper article from that era about a mother killing her child, but she didn't want to know more than that so she could imagine the rest. I'd also read Mona Simpson saying she's a great believer in research, but only after doing the writing first. Hearing that really helped me trust my imagination and my intuition.

I approach my writing practice through prayer and meditation, using rituals I designed to get myself into the world of my story. I found if I did those things right, then I was just there and I could see everything happening. It's kind of like spelunking or scuba diving: you travel into another world, and you stay there as long as you can. Then you come back, carrying with you as much of what you saw there as you can. Then you work fast to get it all written down before you lose it.

My own spiritual practices were what led me down the rabbit hole, and once I got there, Wash was clear and insistent. Pallas too. Ironically, I had to work hardest for Richardson. In fact, Wash's presence was so strong it scared me. That's why I went to Malidoma Somé for help. He's a West African traditional teacher and healer, and he taught me a lot about working with the spirits in an indigenous paradigm. In that paradigm, what was happening to me made perfect sense. The ancestors seek a reciprocal relationship with the living. Everything that's ever happened is here all the time and accessible through prayer and ceremony. Everything is animate and interconnected, as opposed to a modernizing Western viewpoint where everything is increasingly

secular and linear, disconnected and separated into categories. Those two different ways of being are what collided during slavery to create a new country.

As a Southerner, I'd always instinctually known I couldn't write a novel about American slavery without equally representing these two different ways of being, but after working with Malidoma, I gained more understanding about the ancestral dynamic of what was happening for me while I was writing. The writing process is a mystery and writers must find their own ways of working with that mystery. I just know that, for me, there's a strong ancestral component to what's happening with this particular story.

BAM: You chose to represent the spiritual elements in a certain way in this novel. Why did you choose that way?

MRW: I think it's really tricky to write about spiritual matters because certain spiritual truths resist articulation. I also felt that the process of writing this book was a journey of discovery for me, and I wanted to write it in such a way that readers might experience a journey of discovery as well, instead of my just telling them what I had learned from my own journey.

I remember one agent along the way who was interested but she wanted the book to be shorter, more linear, so she asked, "Can't you just get one African character to tell another African character all that African stuff?" But in the indigenous perspective, it would be seen as dangerous to give a bunch of abstract knowledge to a person who's asking for it when you don't know whether they're equipped to handle this information. What the indigenous elders would do instead is to set up a situation where that person could move through the experience. And if, in the process, that person proved themselves worthy of carrying the knowledge they seek, then they would have forged that knowledge for themselves along the way. So I tried to stick more to that model, where I'm creating an experience that the reader moves through. If they piece together everything I've left on the trail for them, then they

know. And they've created that knowing for themselves so they truly own it. It's more organic and more authentic that way.

BAM: Rather than just spelling it all out to them in one chapter.

MRW: Right. For example, I was asked to deliver what's called The Chenoweth Lecture, an annual event at the Birmingham Museum of Art. I was very honored, but I had to say in the beginning that I couldn't really deliver a lecture about the process of writing *Wash* because the book centers around this duality created by these two differing cultural paradigms coming together, and the lecture format itself comes from only one side of this duality; it comes out of the modern Western way of being, where I stand up front and say everything worth knowing, and the audience sits there, passively receiving it. But I don't know who you are and you don't take part in the co-creation of the experience. From an indigenous perspective, that's a very vulnerable and dangerous position for me to be in and for the audience to be in as well. Reciprocity is one of the basic energetic laws of the indigenous universe, so it's destabilizing and unwise to have all the energy going in one direction. It felt important to point out that even the lecture format is a cultural creation and it's culturally bound.

BAM: It sounds like we're going back again to the idea of how power is channeled, or where it's channeled.

MRW: Yeah, it's energy and power both. I went into my first indigenous ceremony thinking I was going into it just for research because half of my characters came from a largely ceremonial reality in traditional West Africa. But then of course the ceremony affected me personally and it became a different story. Basically, most indigenous cultures are sensitive to how energy moves in any situation because this is a kind of power. Energy and power are related, so I'm equally as interested in the movement of energy as I am in the function of power.

BAM: I'm curious about readers' reaction to the novel. How have your readers responded?

MRW: I think the main thing, I'd say overwhelmingly, is that readers from all walks are resonating with the experiences of the people they had thought were very different from them. That has been the most rewarding feedback.

One interviewer on a radio show in the Bay Area said, "It's not even really a book! It's more like you're sitting around a campfire and somebody is telling you a story. And somebody else comes in and says, no, it wasn't like that, it was like this. And then somebody else says, no, it wasn't quite like that, it was like *this*." His reaction resonated with me because this story has always felt more like a play than a book to me. And I was happy about his feedback because when you grow up in segregated places, you hear people tell stories about each other that can be so damaging. It was very rewarding for me to create an experience where, when someone tells a story about someone else that's not accurate, that other person can step up and tell their own truth to contest that projection.

I have had such great reactions to the novel. Recently, one black woman said she'd heard about *Wash* and she'd been very critical of the whole project. Then she looked at my picture on the back and thought, "Why does this woman think she has any right to tell this story?" Then, after reading the book and hearing me speak to a Jungian group about my experience with the ancestors, she said she felt the book had clearly been a spiritual transmission, and she thanked me for writing it. In terms of feedback from various aspects of the black community, there's often an initial skepticism that then shifts. However diverse this community may be, as a whole, it tends to have more awareness of these spiritual and ancestral dynamics.

While wrestling with the manuscript, I took a class on revision with A.J. Verdelle, who is an incredible writer. One of the exercises she had each of us do was come up with one sentence that would encompass our whole endeavor. Initially, I thought my sentence was, "Slavery wasn't how we think it was." But then I realized slavery isn't even "was." From the indigenous perspective of

timelessness, everything is now. The dynamics of what happened during hundreds of years of slavery have been passed down and these patterns are still affecting us. That energy is still moving. The energy of the ancestors is still moving through us and has the capacity to determine our behavior—unless we decide to temper that energy.

When I talk about this slaveholding ancestor of mine, many people say, “You shouldn’t feel guilty,” or they ask “Do you feel responsible?” I don’t feel guilty or responsible; I just feel connected to a story that needs to be told. If anything, I feel that the ancestral energy of this slaveholding ancestor of mine—which has to do with power and domination and control—can be inherited and has the power to come down and move through me. But I have the power to choose to either reenact that same destructive energy or to temper it with something else, like empathy or compassion. The only thing I feel responsible for is what I choose to do with the energy I inherited.

One element of the book that readers seem to appreciate most is how certain characters learn to create that inside place that helps them survive. There are characters in the book who are totally dispossessed. They’re enslaved. They’re in a position where they have to learn how to manage their energy in constructive or destructive ways. That’s one question that has always interested me. What do you do with what you are given? Not that I designed it this way, but, as I wrote the scenes of Wash and Richardson in the barn, what was interesting to me is that Richardson is supposedly the one with all the power. But in those encounters, Wash is the one with the power, between the two of them, because of how he chooses to relate, both to Richardson and to himself. A lot of readers have resonated with that fundamental question: how do you manage your own energy so that you have a solid place to live from?

BAM: Are there any echoes of Asian culture or others in the novel with this notion of energy and of harnessing it and so forth?

MRW: Yes. These dynamics are of concern to every major ancient culture, even as modernity has been homogenizing everything. I don't know that much about Asian culture but I'm a huge fan of Haruki Murakami, especially *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. Most of his work deals with a similar duality between two ways of being—the ancient and the modern. He usually has those two different realities going on at the same time.

BAM: And that's possibly why this novel can speak to so many people in so many different ways. Because it has these themes that are so relatable to other cultures as well.

MRW: Yes. I think if you go deep enough in your writing process, you will bring up a whole thing, and that whole thing will be related to every other whole thing because everything is interconnected. David Lynch has a great book about creativity. *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness and Creativity*. He talks about going deep—that's where the power is. Because when something is whole, it contains all these relationships within it and it has all these reverberations.

BAM: It's a broader spectrum.

MRW: Because it's a whole thing and not just part of a thing. It has everything within it; therefore it can relate to every other whole thing. And it stays with you.

BAM: Do you think that helped in getting *Wash* published, even though there's a lot of controversial focuses?

MRW: I think the controversial aspect worked both for and against the book. I remember my agent telling me that—because I hadn't published anything and I was kind of a nobody, and nothing was selling—the manuscript had to be perfect before she sent it out. I did lots of revisions for her, which I'm so grateful about now. Then, two days after she sent it out, Borders went bankrupt. It was really such a terrible time.

I do think the fact that the book centered around slave breeding, which hasn't been written about that much, was one of the reasons that *Wash* got the attention that it did, but the subject material also worked against it too. Some editors who were interested in the book couldn't get it through editorial meetings because of corporate fears about potential controversy. But Grove Atlantic doesn't have that issue because they're independent, and they're known for being daring and taking risks, for publishing challenging work. And there's an interesting backstory to Morgan Entrekin's connection to this book. As I understand it, his ancestors fought on both sides in the Civil War. There were thirteen brothers in one family. Six fought for the Union, and six fought for the Confederacy; but one stayed neutral. That one who stayed neutral became a judge, and he's Morgan's ancestor. To me that says a lot about having a lineage of holding the tension of opposites, which is really what *Wash* is all about.

You asked at one point about the biggest challenge of getting this book published. I would say that it was learning to trust my intuition. I had to sort through a lot of feedback about what I should change, all along the way. While Morgan is a Southerner, none of the people at Grove who worked with me on the project were Southerners, and my agent isn't Southern either, so I had to really trust my gut about what to fight for during the whole process, from editing to publicity to the cover of the book. For me personally, learning to trust my intuition about what the story needed was the hardest part of this journey.

But I do believe that if you turn your attention fully to the life of the story and surrender completely to that connection, if you write the best thing you can, then get people you trust to give you feedback, then work as hard as you can to incorporate the feedback that resonates with you, you will get published. Networking is important, but it comes much later. Try not to worry too much about networking too soon. That's just a distraction. Most of what you need is inside of you.

BAM: Is there anything you wish you could change about the publishing industry?

MRW: Like I said earlier, the unbearable whiteness of publishing. I think there are a lot of reasons for it, but it's a huge problem. There's an awful lot of white people deciding what everyone gets to read. I think it has to do with the class issue, too. A lot of jobs in publishing don't pay well, especially entry-level jobs, so I don't know what the answer is. I just know it's a huge problem.

BAM: What about the cover of your novel? Did you have to fight for what it looked like, and did you win?

MRW: Yes, and I was nervous about it because I was also in the middle of editing and I didn't want to use up whatever leverage I did have because I didn't know whether I'd need it for other battles. But Grove is incredibly responsive and they understood that we couldn't afford to make a misstep with material this volatile. I had to force myself to speak up, but I'm so glad I did, and they heard me. I will say that initially I didn't want a figure on the cover because the story is about all three of them—Wash, Richardson, and Pallas—and the traditions that they each come from, all coming together. I didn't want to put too much of the focus on Wash. Yet it is his story, and without a figure on the cover the title “Wash” is too abstract a word. Is it a storm? Is it about erosion? The trouble is that with fiction, you want the figure somewhat obscured so the reader still has room to imagine the character. However, when you have a figure that you obscure, you're also dehumanizing the person, and slavery is about dehumanization, so it was a tricky process. I just wanted an image where the figure carried an inherent power and agency and I feel lucky we found it.

BAM: Is there anything you wish you could change about the way you write? I tend to overwrite and must painstakingly chop my work down to size. It would be so much easier if I didn't try to give myself carpal tunnel.

MRW: No, I'm kind of like you. I write long. I write long and then cut away because if I start censoring too soon I don't get the good stuff. I think it has to do with pacing, too. If I started questioning whether I could cut this phrase or that one while I'm writing, it messes up my stride. Once I start hesitating, then I'm doomed. I have to go back and reread writers who have the pacing that I love – like Jim Harrison in *Legends of the Fall*. It's a novella that covers an enormous territory. It's very short but each sentence has such a long stride, like a racehorse. So there might be things I wish I could change about the way I write but I don't think it would be wise to try to change those things. You just have to work with what is given to you.

BAM: Do you ever feel like your work is complete, in the full sense of the word?

MRW: Well, I think it's hard because stories are beings, from an indigenous perspective. They're living beings that are moving and changing all the time, so it's automatically artificial to freeze that moving thing into one unchanging printed book. You're stopping time, which is unnatural. But I realized that I could be working on this book and making it better for the rest of my life. So at a certain point you have to say, "The thing that it is on this day, that's what it's going to be." Because if you didn't do that, it would keep morphing through the following week or month or year. It would probably—maybe—keep getting clearer, but it could just keep morphing and breathing and being, when it also needs to go out in the world and have the rest of its life.

BAM: Where is your preferred "writing zone"? I prefer to write in a very quiet environment, which is often problematic. What about you? How does your environment help you get in a creative mindset?

MRW: Since a lot of my work is about the rhythms of the natural world, it's important for me to be in a place where those rhythms are not too interrupted. Being in the city is increasingly hard for me because there's too much interference. I live out in the middle of

nowhere because I feel like I'm listening to something that I can barely hear. I do need quiet. And I need the big cyclic rhythms of the natural world. The moon, the seasons, the lengthening and shortening of the days. The animal tracks and visitations. But I think different phases of the process are different. When I'm writing new, when I'm getting the shape of a story down, that's the most important time. When I'm doing more revision, it's less of an issue. But I can't do much in a coffee shop. I just can't. I also find that when I'm struggling with something, I can struggle with it for two hours. But if I get up and take a walk or take a bike ride, the answer comes in the first five minutes. Movement often brings the solution.

BAM: Who are your literary heroes, and how have they encouraged you when you felt like giving up?

MRW: I would probably say one of my favorite books is *The Bone People* by Keri Hulme, because it's about the Maori and the Scottish, the whites. It's the same dualism that I'm dealing with, that whole question of whose reality is operative and when. And I've relied heavily on Leslie Marmon Silko's work, *Ceremony* and especially *The Almanac of the Dead*. Her lineage is German and Pueblo, so it's that duality again. Her work and what she has to say about her work really helped me. She got stuck in the middle of *Almanac* and hearing what she did to get unstuck was hugely important to me. There's a series of books by the University of Mississippi Press that are collections of interviews with various writers; the whole volume is dedicated to interviews with one writer. The one on Silko proved very helpful.

William Faulkner and Toni Morrison have been very important, along with Alice Walker, John Edgar Wideman, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ben Okri, and Nadine Gordimer. And playwrights too, especially Athol Fugard, August Wilson and Harold Pinter. Caryl Phillips writes a lot about the Diaspora and his work has been such a guide, along with that of Randall Kenan, Paule Marshall, Robert Farris Thompson and Credo Mutwa. When I

read Octavia Butler's book, *Kindred*, I thought, well, she's done it so perfectly there's no point in continuing with *Wash*; I should just walk away. Probably the one person whose work has helped me the most has been Malidoma Somé. I'm sure there are more, but reading interviews with writers has really helped me. The University of Mississippi Press ones and the *Paris Review* ones. The *Paris Review* interviews have been collected and reissued as a four-volume paperback. I have reasons myself for not getting an MFA, but those collections of interviews were my MFA.

BAM: So do you go to those interviews when you're struggling with something?

MRW: I went to them when I needed to build my nerve. Some of the best parts of *Wash* happen to actually be pretty close to the first draft. There was a lot of the middle part that was written later or re-worked, but some of the strongest parts came out that way because I really threw myself in deep when I went to my desk. The writing life is very solitary. I couldn't really see people or talk to people too much before I went into the writing zone, but I could have these companions. So I would read around in those interviews before I'd start writing to give myself courage.

BAM: I think that's a great idea. You learn so much about the way a particular person approaches writing, which is so different for everyone, and that in turn should encourage everyone. It encourages me, at least, to know that even famous authors struggle with things and that they all have their different ways of handling writing's challenges. You can read what they've said about how they write to see if you can pick up tips or just learn about how truly unique the process is for everyone.

MRW: Right. And I think, too, it helps so much to hear so many people say they have no idea what they're doing. Even Bob Dylan—his memoir *Chronicles* helped me so much because he talks about how he had no idea where that stuff was coming from. And I remember hearing A.J. Verdelle talk about a part of her book *The*

Good Negress that she didn't really understand. She felt like maybe she should cut it because she thought she should understand everything in her book. Thankfully, some mentor told her, and again I'm paraphrasing, you don't have to understand everything in your book. If you love it and it really resonates and you don't understand why, you don't really have to wrap your mind around it for it to be real and valid and worthy. And that section of her book turned out to be many readers' favorite part of the book, very poetic and associative and intuitive. I think the main thing is learning how to tolerate not knowing, so you can find your way to something new.

BAM: There's this connotation that writers sit down at their laptops or with pen and paper and they already know what they're going to say. They just have to work on getting it correct, but it's not really like that, is it?

MRW: It's not like that for me at all. I'm writing along as Pallas talks about Phoebe, and I'll be thinking "Who's Phoebe? Who's Phoebe?" and suddenly there's a little more about Phoebe and she'll start to take shape. I would have written the book a lot faster if I could have seen more about where I was going, but the story didn't come from my mind, it came from another world, some bigger place. You kind of have to be lucid dreaming. The book I finished reading this morning, *All the Birds Singing*, has such a powerful feeling of mystery to it. As I was reading along, I kept wanting to know what happened. But I got the sense that the writer didn't quite know what was happening either while she was writing it. To have that feeling of discovery in it, the mystery has to be happening for the writer and reader at the same time somehow. Books that are very well-mapped and outlined and that are an execution of an idea—they're not as compelling to me.

BAM: What about your future plans? Are you going to be working on another book?

MRW: There are always stories in the pipeline, waiting for my attention. But I've been pretty focused on getting *Wash* out to as wide

an audience as possible. This country is still so segregated that it takes kind of a duel push—you have to work in both the white and the black worlds to get this book to its audience. In some ways, this book has been serving as a catalyst for a conversation about race that people seem increasingly able and willing to have, and this feels like work I can do that's important. I'm happy to help this conversation move people along, but as an introvert I'm looking forward to holing up again. I'm ambivalent because it's a huge surrender, as you know, to the world of the novel and all the lives of all the people in it. But I have three friends who are on chapter three of their novels, and I'm so jealous. They're just far enough in to have a secure feeling, with so much discovery still ahead.

BAM: In the meantime, you can enjoy spreading the word about your novel. Is it like sharing your heart a little bit?

MRW: Yes, it is. It's very gratifying. I don't feel like I created the characters, or had much to do with the writing of the book at all, really. They're these remarkable people who came to me, and I enjoy watching them go out into the world. I like visiting book clubs, hearing what people make of the story and of the characters. That's very rewarding. When you put so much into a book it's really nice to see people engaged with it.

BAM: To wrap up, what is the one thing about writing that you would like fellow writers to take to heart?

MRW: The degree of surrender. The potency of the work is directly related to the degree that you are able to surrender to the process. I also think we're each given our little part to say. It's not our business what somebody else is given. Tell your own part.

BAM: I think, if I'm rephrasing you correctly, you're saying that we're all a matter of our circumstances, and those shape who we are? Like, my story to tell is very different from your story to tell.

MRW: I guess I'm saying that the whole story depends on each one of

us telling our part of the bigger story. What I've learned from Malidoma is that everyone is given a gift to deliver into the world, and it doesn't necessarily have to be writing. It can be anything, but you don't get to choose what gift you're given to deliver. All you get to choose is whether or not you're going to deliver the one you're given. You can't take it back and get another one. That's not an option, and I think a lot of people don't understand that. I wish I'd understood this a little earlier. And it's not about your holding onto your part, caught up in trying to judge whether it's good enough or not. That means it's not moving, and it needs to move.

But that's not to say you should just write a first draft and send it out into the world. I remember hearing Dorothy Allison talking to a roomful of writing students. Everyone was shocked to hear her say that anyone in that room could send her their manuscript and she'd read it. We were all thinking, she's going to get inundated. Until she added, "as long as you're past the tenth draft." I was probably on the third draft at that point, and the tenth draft seemed impossibly far away. But by the time I finished the book, the tenth draft was so far behind me I could hardly remember it. I think you should make your story as good as it can be.