THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

LEISURE & ARTS

Bookshelf: The Old Man and the Open Road

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877 words
23 December 1994
The Wall Street Journal
A8
English

It is perhaps safe to say that John Edgar Wideman knows what family pain is all about. In "Brothers and Keepers" (1984) he offered an autobiographical reflection about a brother doing a life sentence for murder; and in "Philadelphia Fire" (1990) he turned to the fate of his son, also behind bars for murder. Now he has written "Fatheralong: A Meditation on Fathers and Sons, Race and Society" (Pantheon, 197 pages, $21), which examines his estranged relationship with his now elderly father through the prism of a road trip the two of them take back to the family roots in rural South Carolina.

The quest for the father has an almost automatic literary poignancy, maybe even more so in the black community, with its high rates of fatherlessness. Perhaps this explains why "Fatheralong" was nominated for a National Book Award this year. Yet, while Mr. Wideman successfully conveys the emotional distance between father and son, his social analysis often reads like a parody of victimology, with his family condition explained away as a consequence of American racism.

The accomplished memoirist in Mr. Wideman shines most brightly when he describes his relationship with his parents. His hard-working father did not abandon the family altogether until Mr. Wideman was 28, but lived apart from them for great stretches and was always a remote, icy figure. Like the God that Mr. Wideman imagined in the gospel hymn "Farther Along," he was "a man who lived in our house who in a way ruled it yet also lived somewhere else, distant, unknown." But his mother was the soul of love.

The impetus for the trip is clearly the father's advancing age, and the realization that "the long talk that fathers and sons never seem to get around to" might not ever happen. As he puts it in as poetic a line as could ever be written about the panic of feeling the sand slipping through the fingers: "The past the present, and the future flatten into one chance, one chance only, and then everything is gone."

Something gets in the way of the long talk he wishes for, however. In a rambling, polemical introduction, Mr. Wideman asks that the reader reject what he calls the "paradigm of race," which assigns an inferior position to blacks. But his reflections and reactions during the trip make it clear that he is obsessed with his own racial paradigm, one in which unrelieved historical grievance mixes with racial paranoia. The search for the father runs off the rails, lost in what essentially becomes a harangue about race.

Before he's even on the open road, Mr. Wideman sees racial exploitation. Passing a recently privatized public-housing project on the way to pick up his father, he curses yet another manifestation of the haves profiting "from yet another pressing of the have-nots," and suggests grimly that an experiment like this proves that greed and genocide are "two sides of the same coin."

In an even grander conspiratorial turn of mind, he likens the U.S. to a "vast orphanage" where the inmates are purposefully left confused about who they are to facilitate a strategy of "divide and conquer." He writes: "This country . . . stands between black fathers and sons, impeding communication, frustrating development, killing or destroying the bodies and minds of young men, short-circuiting the natural process of growth, maturity, the cycle of the generations."

Even the Renaissance comes in for a drubbing, it being the point when blacks were first made to bear the psychic "guilt and punishment for man's dualism, his warring impulses," which are here described as "the incestuous mix of angel and devil, spirit and flesh, light and darkness."

While in the South, Mr. Wideman maintains it is ungenerous for a guest "to peek underneath the tablecloth for crumbs and bloodstains." Yet this is exactly what he does. In one of the more horrific fantasies, he imagines smashing the head of a retired historian who is helping him sort through records of his family's history as slaves. The documents confirmed how much the present is "still being determined by the presumption of white over black inscribed in them." In another aside, integration is dismissed as "a genocidal fantasy," a "scheme for legitimizing a form of colonial adoption."

In the end, Mr. Wideman feels so overwhelmed by what he finds in the South that the purpose of the trip is defeated. The remnants of white supremacy and black degradation "crowd out the possibilities of seeing my ancestors as human beings," he complains, and loom like "a shadow, a wall" between him and his father.

Certainly, no exploration of the fragmentation of the black family could be written without taking into account the tragic history of slavery and Jim Crow, and of their blighting effects, which last to this day, although to far less an extent than Mr. Wideman would argue. But for the author to lay such central blame on them, first for his strained relationship with his father and then for his inability to reconcile it, is itself tragic -- and tedious.

Mr. McGowan is writing a book about identity politics and the press.