

**Brothers and Keepers**, By John Edgar Wideman. New York: Penguin Books. 1984. Pp. 243. \$6.95 (paperback).

In *Brothers and Keepers*, we are presented with (at least) two books in one. The first book is a biographical family portrait of the Widemans and their forebears. It focuses on two brothers, John and Robby. John is a success, "a credit to his race" as some of our forebears used to be known. He turned a talent for playing basketball into a successful college career, and became the second Black to win a Rhodes Scholarship.

By 1984, John is happily married, has already published six novels, and is a professor of English at the University of Wyoming. Robby, the baby of the family, did not do as well in school as did his older brother John. Robby's success was made in the street, not on a basketball court. Eventually, dreaming of the good life, and having mounted the high horse of heroin, he took a fall for being an accomplice in a murder committed during an attempted robbery. It won him a lifetime scholarship to the Western State Penitentiary in Pennsylvania. Two brothers. Same family. Different outcomes. But is their story that simple?

No, it is not that simple. Both men were at odds with their world. John, the "successful" one, gives the reader a glimpse into who he is, and the price he has paid and continues to pay for the place he occupies in society. John grew up in the 1950's, in the Homewood section of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He recalls his childhood as one of contrasts—Black and white, rich and poor. In his recollections, he sees himself denying the reality of his life, as well as of Robby's life.<sup>1</sup>

John sees himself running away from his poverty and his blackness, and toward the values and ideals of the white world.<sup>2</sup> This stance set him apart and made him feel guilty around Robby, who he had left behind by making this ideological choice. The depth and breath of this escape became clear to John in his days at the University of Pennsylvania.

At college, for the first time, John lived in a white community. He felt that he had to play a game to survive, to "wear the mask" as Paul Laurence Dunbar once put it. But like the house slave grinning around the master, these attempts to free himself only served to further limit him, and eventually he lost himself to the game he created.<sup>3</sup> Thereafter, returning home from college became an occasion for putting on another mask, and John became aware of being a self outside himself, watching his own alienation as he strove to maintain a homeboy image with his family and childhood peers.<sup>4</sup>

This irony of going home to confront his alienation, and not to fulfill himself, emerges later in the book. For instance, during the Civil Rights, Black Power, and culture consciousness era of the 1960's, John *teaches* Afro-American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, while Robby was *living* its lessons: organizing protests in his high school and in the streets of Pittsburgh. Thus when John admits that he is instinctively distrustful of everyone,

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1. J. WIDEMAN, *BROTHERS AND KEEPERS* 11 (1984).

2. *Id.* at 26-27.

3. *Id.* at 32-33.

4. *Id.* at 33.

including himself,<sup>5</sup> the reader is not surprised. And when he says that he often heard only what he wanted to hear when he visited Robby in prison, the reader understands.<sup>6</sup>

But this is still America. Shortly after Robby is apprehended in Colorado, John, the English professor, is arrested. He is jailed as a suspect in a robbery in Utah, simply because he was Black and the brother of a suspect. During John's brief incarceration, he and Robby became the same—brothers and niggers—worthy only of suspicion in this white person's country.

Robby saw life differently from John. For him, there were two lives—the square world and the world of the ghetto.<sup>7</sup> Like John, he sought to distance himself from reality. But the reality he was escaping was the oppression of the external society, and not his own community. Having made a reputation in the street, and with the ladies, it was impossible to accept the status awaiting him in the larger society of “being nobody in a world that hates you.”<sup>8</sup> He rejected the Wideman image of good grades and athletic prowess, which had been the legacy left him by his older brother and sister. In the family's mind, and in his own, he was a rebel.<sup>9</sup>

The streets were his basketball court and his classroom. The street life of Homewood was one of glamour and reputation. It stood in sharp contrast to the straight world around and outside his turf. Eventually his involvement with drugs, and a couple of drug deals that went bad because of his desire “to be somebody,” combined with some bad luck, and Robby, the player, lost himself to the game. A plot to steal some money turned into a shooting, and that shooting became a murder. After a long time running and hiding, he was captured, convicted and incarcerated. Though he had not pulled the trigger, he was convicted of felony murder under a Pennsylvania statute, and was given life imprisonment without the possibility of parole.

The book reaches the present with Robby in prison. John visits him there, and the two of them get to know each other again, as they discuss the subject matter of this book. Robby has changed. He has achieved self-reliance and self-sufficiency in prison.<sup>10</sup> Like the Phoenix of our ancient African religious mythology, this modern-day African is piecing himself back together. The same traits that led him to rebel, and brought him status in the streets, are helping him to survive, and to do so with dignity.<sup>11</sup> In that sense, he has become his own keeper.

But there are at least two books within these covers. The second book concerns the prison, and the larger society within which it exists. Both John, and to a greater extent Robby, are strangers to these two forces. The prison as an antagonist is attacked vehemently by both men. It is a separate world. John vividly describes how a visitor is forced to become an inmate during the visitation process: the humiliation of body searches and metal detectors, the powerlessness of locked doors and public intimacies, the intimidation of

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5. *Id.* at 202.

6. *Id.* 76-77.

7. *Id.* at 57-58.

8. *Id.* at 57.

9. *Id.* at 106.

10. *Id.* at 201.

11. *Id.* at 195.

loaded guns, cold glances and barred glass<sup>12</sup>. He describes the arbitrary power of the guards over prisoners and visitors alike and the miserable, forced passage of time.

It is a grey place, a locked-away place, a space of gloom where there is little life in bloom, where slow death holds sway, second by second, minute by minute, and day by day. This death-in-life, and sometime birth-in-death reality is analogous to John's drive from the city to the prison. He describes the journey, going from his mother's house, through an industrial area of Pittsburgh and notes that the scenery gradually gets greyer the farther away he goes from home, humanity, and sanity.

But all is not despair. Though prison equals punishment, it also occasionally becomes a training ground, a place for self-examination and the creation, or refinement of self-discipline.<sup>13</sup> For those, like Robby, who use the time to recreate themselves and are not bowed or broken by their sentence of years, the sense of despair, or the scent of danger that lingers there, designation as a threat to society is their reward. Thus for Robby, as for George Jackson, Elmer "Geronimo" Pratt, Assata Shakur, and the millions of nameless brothers and sisters who have been locked up through the years, constant vigilance is necessary in prison, though their fate is largely out of their hands.<sup>14</sup>

It is this truth, this feeling that unites John and Robby one day as they glance at each other in the visiting room. And it is this reality that creates the thought they exchange in that glance, the thought that they ought to fight against the madness that is this prison right then, right there—the thought that it was a good day to die.<sup>15</sup>

All of this occurs within the larger society that forms the backdrop for the book. The area called Homewood, the section of Pittsburgh in which these two men reach their manhood, is a Black community fraught with all the problems, and full of all the possibilities, that are the legacy of all such communities across this country. It is peopled with good families, families like the Widemans. Each family, like their African counterpart, forms a protective shell, encircling its members, allowing individual members, like John and Robby, to bloom.

But why the need for this shell? Does it keep oppressive forces out, or does it stifle its members within? As the Wideman family gives evidence, it functions on both levels. It keeps the sense of separateness and of lesser worth that the dominant society engenders, to a minimum. It allows African people born in the U.S. to develop what John calls a "seventh sense,"<sup>16</sup> a feel for the barriers of survival and sanity,— that nothing is what it seems. This seventh sense creates a systematic skepticism that allows us to survive. It allows a woman like John's and Robby's mother to raise her family with the faith that they have an equal chance for success. But then the reality exposed by the Civil Rights movement and Robby's troubles radicalize her,<sup>17</sup> and she perceives a plan, not a series of accidents, in what is happening to Afro-Ameri-

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12. *Id.* at 52.

13. *Id.* at 35.

14. *Id.* at 84.

15. *Id.* at 190.

16. *Id.* at 221.

17. *Id.* at 170.

cans.<sup>18</sup> Robby's deepest sense of wrong is that he has made his mother's life miserable. Yet he may have also educated her as to a larger reality in the process. These dual perceptions, a sense of a nameless external oppression which is the larger society, and of a palpable internal strength, such as the family, form the landscape onto which this book is painted.

Robby Wideman is symbolic of all Afro-Americans. His life reflects our struggles, our failures, our successes, and our indomitable will to survive. Robby's strength, his will to live and grow, give John added strength. In this sense, Robby is his brother's keeper.

The prison is symbolic of American society at large. Though but a shadowy presence in this book, its power is blatant, obvious and compelling. It is a stark, oppressive reality forced on the Widemans, who must survive, and live within it. Its control is external and dominant. But that control is not total. And within the space that is left, we, like Robby, survive and grow.

This book makes an important contribution. It does leave the reader somewhat unfulfilled, since it, like Robby's sentence, has not been completed. Thus much of what we might learn of Robby, and of John, is omitted, or left unsaid. Nonetheless, it is an entirely sincere portrayal, honest and unashamed. It is a direct and thoughtful book. *Brothers and Keepers* describes the triumph of two Black men, and of their family, over both self-erected and externally-imposed obstacles. It shows love and pain and it leaves the reader with a sense of hope, of life continuing, and of a people growing.

LIONEL MANDY

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18. *Id.* at 72.