

Sent for You Yesterday Short Guide

Sent for You Yesterday by John Edgar Wideman

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Characters

The narrator of *Sent for You Yesterday* slips in and out of other people's perspectives as easily as he downs a can of Iron City beer. Doot holds the book together, juggling all of the stories, memories, and points of view in his attempt to understand his family and identity. A minor character in some of the stories, Doot mainly serves to enact the literary devices which weave through the novel. By the end of the book Doot holds past and present, dead and living characters, in himself, learning "to stand, to walk, learning to dance."

Doot tells stories divided into three sections: The Return of Albert Wilkes, the Courting of Lucy Tate, and Brother.

Within those three parts, with their multitude of inhabitants, the perspective shifts from character to character, mainly encompassing Albert Wilkes, John French, Carl French, Lucy Tate, Brother Tate, and Samantha.

Albert Wilkes is a jaunty, free-wheeling piano player who killed a white policeman and fled Homewood, to return seven years later and take up where he left off. His music infuses the narrative and offers a way to transcend despair. His friendship with John French links the first two sections of the book. John French is a man torn between lifestyles: He loves his family but remains drawn to Albert's penchant for staying up all night gambling and playing music. These two represent the elder generation of the book, the lords of a Homewood which used to be full of promise.

John's son Carl French spans the time frame of the novel. We see him as a young boy, sent out by his mother to search for his wayfaring father. He courts Lucy Tate and is shadowed by Brother Tate, and he recounts their years as "The Three Musketeers." At the end of the book, an old man on methadone, he cheers on his nephew Doot. An older version of Doot, he is both a participant in and narrator of events.

Like Carl, Lucy Tate spans the book.

We see her as a girl described by Carl's mother as "fast," and then as Carl's friend and lover. She also remains at the end of the book as a link between Albert Wilkes, whose music she loved and whose death she witnessed, and Brother, whose life and death she struggles to understand.

The most compelling character in *Sent for You Yesterday* is Brother Tate, who does not speak and who has "no color," according to Carl. Other characters see Brother as an albino, a ghost, a shadow. He bests Carl at scare games, learns to play the piano without instruction, draws portraits of Homewood residents with wings on them, and, while he does not speak, never misses a thing. In him are embodied the tensions of race and cultural decay, and when he stakes his emotional life on his son, Junebug, it seems inevitable that both die young.



Junebug is the son of Brother and Samantha, a Zulu-like woman who labors to produce black children to replace the ones taken by society.

When she gives birth to a white child by Brother, she loves the child desperately but cannot set herself against the remainder of her children who hate him. She wants to "teach them all to love," and when Junebug dies her mind falters and she isolates herself.

It would seem easy to get lost in this myriad of characters but they are coherent, especially in the context of the trilogy. Wideman set the basis for this unfolding in *Damballah* (1981) and followed it up in *Hiding Place* (1981).

The characters, whether they are mentioned once or explored in depth, do form a meaningful pattern. By offering such a mixture of perspective, across characters and through time, Wideman evokes a rich personal and collective history.

Social Concerns

the center of John Wideman's *Atwork* is the issue of race: what it means to be black in America. *Sent for You Yesterday*, the third volume of *The Homewood Trilogy*, weaves a rich tapestry exploring family, community, and culture, with the issue of race a striking part of the design.

Characters grapple with the social and personal tensions of race, striving to understand their own identities and the cultural history which has affected them. As in life, the people in the novel come in varying shades, from Brother, an albino, to his lover, Samantha, reminiscent of a Zulu woman in stance and color. Wideman encapsulates the tension between black and white in the character of Junebug, the son of Brother and Samantha, who dies in a kerosene fire, perhaps pushed by his black brothers and sisters. "People ain't easy to see," says Carl French (himself a light-skinned character), and the novel constitutes an attempt to see clearly the physical makeup and psychological aspects of its characters.

The interplay between shades of black and white is almost entirely centered in the African-American ghetto of Homewood in Pittsburgh, but the reverberations extend beyond the black community. The novel is a meditation on identity, a concept important to people of any color, in any community.

Equally important is the issue of family. *Sent for You Yesterday* embeds story within story as Doot, the narrator, limns the boundaries of his family history. In retelling the stories he has heard, Doot constructs his family and his own place in it. This act constitutes an emotional foundation for the novel and is a springboard for the reader to do the same, using his or her own family stories as a basis.

Another thread in the tapestry of the book is the idea of community. Homewood is described in detail, with street names, stores, particular houses, and an atmosphere of disintegration in which Brother thinks he can feel the "dry hot stale wind of thousands of trifling souls, old souls stuffed in drawers." The community, dilapidated but rich with memories and stories, echoes a vibrant past and anticipates a dissolute future. The portrait, then, is both hopeful and despairing, all the while offering a realistic look at an urban ghetto and its population.



Techniques

The hallmarks of Wideman's style in *Sent for You Yesterday* are the shifts in point of view and in time, and in the combination of Black English and Standard English. Critics have split in their opinions about the success of these techniques, with some finding the devices confusing and others hailing them as vivid and poetic.

Doot, the narrator who opens and closes the book, begins by describing Brother Tate, a "silent, scat-singing albino man who was my uncle's best friend." Then, in the space of a sentence, the point of view shifts: "I am not born yet. My Uncle Carl and Brother Tate hurry along the railroad tracks . . ." Later shifts do not even contain a small marker; the stories are simply told from Carl's point of view, or Albert Wilkes's, or Samantha's. In one section the perspective shifts so that Lucy Tate describes Doot who was describing Lucy and Carl telling stories.

This nimble juggling act sets Wideman in the tradition of Faulkner and Welty. In some of his other books, the shifts in point of view are distracting or confusing, but in *Sent for You Yesterday* Wideman utilizes Doot to maintain a stable core. The shifts are not distracting but meaningful; they place the reader in each character's head, offering intimate (sometimes contrasting and sometimes corroborating) portraits of events.

Likewise, the shifts in time might seem to fragment the story; in actuality they create a sense of time beyond our typical understanding. Time for the characters in *Sent for You Yesterday* is not linear. Stories pile upon stories, not necessarily in chronological order. The past is as close as the present, as when Doot will not wear his grandfather's hat because he wants to ask him if it is all right. Carl French compares time to a "circle going round and round so you getting closer while you getting further away and further while you getting closer." This circularity gives the novel a timeless quality.

Another hallmark of Wideman's work is his ability to intertwine Black English and Standard English. In his earlier novels, *A Glance Away* (1967) and *Hurry Home* (1970), Wideman relied more upon traditional, formal English. In *Sent for You Yesterday* he begins with colloquial speech: Hey Bruh.

Hey man.

What you thinking, man?

I had this dream. This real bad dream.

Nightmare?

Worse than that. Night mare. Day mare. Afternoon mare. Every damn time-of-day mare. Whatever you want to call it. That dream had me by the nuts.

Contrast this with a later passage: If he closes his eyes he can see an ocean, red and wild as his blood, an ocean surging past the shimmering curtain of heat rising from the



steel rails, an ocean rushing to the end of the world. He would run away that far if he could.

In both instances Wideman is in complete control of the prose. He demonstrates agility in balancing streamof-consciousness, dialogue, description, and lyricism — surely part of the reason he was awarded the prestigious PEN/Faulkner award for Sent for You Yesterday.

Themes

Widernan's work is unique in its layering of themes, all connected yet echoing distinct aspects of human life.

The central theme becomes that connection — the drawing together of disparate experiences in a shimmering kaleidoscope of emotion, history, meditation, and narrative. Making up the kaleidoscope are these themes: the fragility of ties, the construction of identity, the basis of heritage, and the nature of reality.

Fragile ties, to life and between people, are deftly rendered. Characters enter and then leave the world, their departures a commentary on the vulnerability of life. The death of Albert Wilkes, a blues pianist and cop killer, is implicit in his reappearance in Homewood. Junebug perishes in a fire on the Fourth of July. Brother is hit by a train, supposedly dead beforehand.

The link to life is tentative in this novel, with characters wounded, crazy, and dead, veering off like tops.

Likewise, ties between people are shifting and unconstrained by traditional markers. For instance, Carl French, Brother Tate, and Lucy Tate are inextricably bound together, but they all drift in different directions and reunite sporadically. Albert Wilkes rejoins his white lover after seven years away, severing and then jauntily renewing his ties with her. Strong bonds exist, but they are unconventional, internal loyalties, marked by shifts and changes rather than continuity.

Continuity is found in the larger perspective of the novel, in the examination of heritage and its components of family, stories, and race. While individual family members may veer in radically different directions, the idea of family remains intact. Doot traces his family through their intertwining stories, and the family structure sustains the narrative.

Similarly, the act of storytelling continually informs the search for heritage. By recounting events from his family history, Doot envisions his heritage (simultaneously created and shared by the characters in the stories).

This form of family storytelling is one of the binding elements of the novel.

The struggle to understand oneself is another constant of *Sent For You Yesterday*, and that search is aided by family and by story. The novel demonstrates how identity is formed and how it shifts over time, affected by external and internal events.

Finally, the nature of reality is an important theme of the novel. Memories, dreams, and time overlap, forming a reality which is not linear. Doot recreates Homewood from stories he has been told as well as the slender details he remembers from living there at five or six years old. Dreams and reality echo one another, as in the images of trains: An unnamed narrator describes his nightmare of being stuck on a train at the beginning of



the book; Brother dreams of being trapped inside a rattling boxcar; Albert Wilkes rides a train; Brother and Carl play a scare game, waiting to jump out in front of trains; and Brother dies in front of a train. The train images, manifested in dream and reality, mesh together. Similarly, time shifts and drifts throughout the narrative. Events are told, retold, flashed behind and in front. The past becomes the present, the future embedded in the past.

Taken together the themes resonate and play off one another. The whole becomes a vibrant kaleidoscope which offers a unique perspective of human existence — jumbled, piercing, and moving — which affects the reader on an almost subliminal level.

Key Questions

Wideman is credited with having a unique voice in contemporary American literature because of his experimentation with literary techniques and his ability to evoke simultaneously a family, community, and cultural history. *Sent for You Yesterday* is a lyrical book, brimming with pride and emotion. Readers will enjoy discussing its multitude of characters and the connections between stories.

1. In *Damballah* "A Begat Chart" is included; in *Hiding Place* a genealogical chart prefaces the book. Using this material, trace the relationships between characters in *Sent for You Yesterday*. How are they related?
2. Many of the characters engage in unsavory or illegal activities. Which characters gain the reader's sympathy?

Why?

3. Brother Tate has no color and no speech. What statement is Wideman making in this character about race, suppression, and identity?
4. Junebug encapsulates the conflict of white and black. What do you make of his brief life and death?
5. Look at the women characters in the book (Lucy, Samantha, Freeda, Old Mrs. Tate, Albert Wilkes's lover). What is your reaction to Wideman's portrayal? Are the goals and ambitions of the women different from those of the men?
6. Consider the portrait of Homewood. What picture of life for urban blacks does it offer? Is that picture relevant for contemporary African Americans?
7. For whom is Wideman writing?
Blacks, whites, people of all color?
8. Examine the conception of race in the book. Would you characterize the conception as bitter, realistic, or optimistic?
9. Why is storytelling so important to Doot? What place do stories have in modern society?
10. What stories might be told in tracing your own family heritage?

Literary Precedents

Given Wideman's concern with heritage, it is fitting to trace his own literary heritage. His literary ancestors are both black and white, including renowned African-American writers like Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison, and Caucasians like Mark Twain, Eudora Welty, and William Faulkner.

In the generational span of his novels and in the illumination of family ties, Wideman might be compared to Toni Morrison. Like her, he renders a variety of characters over an extended period. Also like Morrison, he admits ghosts as characters whose presence is strange but not extraordinary. The dialect is similar to that used in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), but the book also echoes the colloquial language used in the works of Mark Twain and John Steinbeck.

Wideman's other literary connections may be found in Southern writers like Welty and Faulkner. In the lyrical, unhurried rendering of family relationships, Wideman might be compared to Welty. In his deft rendering of place, his ability to evoke a whole community and people in it with realistic characters, Wideman is often compared to Faulkner. Critic Don Strachan has called Wideman "the black Faulkner, the soft-cover Shakespeare".

Related Titles

Sent for You Yesterday is Part III of The Homewood Trilogy. The characters, setting, and stories in Sent for You Yesterday have their beginning in Damballah and Hiding Place, the two books which Wideman wrote because he had trouble with Sent for You Yesterday.

Throughout the trilogy, Homewood is the central setting, although Damballah begins in Africa and in Hiding Place Tommy, the main character, visits Aunt Bess's cabin outside of Homewood.

Characters resurface in all three books, as do stories. John French is a staple, with his gadabout ways examined from several perspectives. John's daughter Lizabeth appears more than once, usually linked with the caterpillar story (she eats a bite of caterpillar and John French eats the rest). Reba Love Jackson, a blues singer, is given her own story in Damballah and mentioned in passing in another part of the trilogy.

As the characters resurface they do not change identities, they are simply portrayed more fully. Aunt Bess and Uncle Carl appear briefly in Damballah and become main characters in Hiding Place and Sent for You Yesterday, respectively. The overlapping stories allow characters to surface, once or many times, and by the end of Sent for You Yesterday Homewood and its inhabitants have become a part of the reader's internal landscape.



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