



# BOOK REVIEW

**Brothers and Keepers by John Edgar Wideman. Vintage Books, New York and London (1984)**

John Edgar Wideman is one of the leading black male writers in the USA and Professor of English Literature at an Ivy League University. Last year he published, to great acclaim, a memoir of his errant father, a migrant from the Carolinas seeking work in Pittsburgh in the thirties. That book 'Father Along' led me to his earlier memoir, published in 1984, but now reprinted in paperback, called 'Brothers and Keepers'.

It is an extraordinarily powerful story that can be taken at so many different levels of meaning and interpretation, partly as it plots the true story of a successful and botched American dream; on the one hand the author's rise from poverty in a black slum in Pittsburgh to the acclaimed status of a leading man of letters; on the other, a portrait of his kid brother, Robby, serving life, without possibility of parole, in a Pennsylvania State penitentiary.

We pick up the story in 1975 in Laramie where Wideman lives with his family and works in the local English Department at the University. Robby is on the run from a murder in Pittsburgh

following an unsuccessful heist on the streets of the City. He and his three teenage fugitive companions call on Wideman. Within days, Robby would be captured and would begin the sequence of trials that would end with a sentence of life in prison. It would be left to John to bear witness to the story, to become his brother's voice in terms of recounting his troubled childhood and adolescence on the streets of Pittsburgh, his gangland involvement, his breaking into the drug world to gain peer status and money and the robbery which led to the murder and life sentence.

The second half of the book is taken up with Wideman's regular prison visits to his brother, often accompanied by his own family. After each visit Wideman would take notes, names, dates, sequences and events and reproduce on paper what he had heard. He would play back those written impressions by later visits or letters to his brother. The brother, Robby, responds in kind, adds his own narrative tone and, finally in this symbiotic process finds his own voice and begins to tell his own story. The last chapters are called 'Doing Time' when Robby comes into his own. The excitable, streetwise, attention seeking, good time boy who John Wideman so beautifully

captures in the early chapters is transformed into the adult, reflective prisoner trying to make sense of another man's death and the frustration and waste of his own life. He takes a degree in engineering, works as a medical aid on the prison Psychiatric Ward and counsels young hotheads on the wing to keep their cool in the daily oppression that is prison life. In a final letter to his brother, Robby lets him know that his appeal to the Federal Court is turned down, at the same time the prison regime tightens.

"Two men to a cell for most of the newcomers, and they don't have enough jobs for the men and then they're cutting back on the school programmes. Big time, no rehabilitation, lock 'em up like animals - then let them out on society crazed and angry. Shit, don't make sense but the people cry for punishment and the politicians oblige them - can they really be so blind?"

Wideman's juxtaposed portrait of two African-American lives is totally compelling, a magnificent piece of writing that gets beneath the surface of things and in which the tensions of race, family, urban life and prison in modern USA are fully exposed.

*John Harding, Chief Probation Officer*

## PROBATION LAW FILE

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Edited by David Kidd-Hewitt and Richard Osborne

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Jan 1996 • 288pp • 216x138mm • Pb • £12.99 • \$19.95 • 0 7453 09119 • Hb • £40.00 • \$54.95 • 0 7453 09127

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