

## **Fanon: A Novel**

### **By John Edgar Wideman**

As we enter the world of *Fanon: A Novel*: John Edgar Wideman the reader is informed that in the Igbo tradition, a person doesn't die until the living stop telling their stories. And so Wideman, in deciding to tell the imagined story of Fanon's life ensures that Frantz Fanon, psychiatrist, activist, writer and philosopher, will continue to live so that the world will know him, and will be able to read and study his views on postcolonialism and the nature of revolution in postcolonial societies.

Wideman, in expressing his admiration for Fanon, states that in his view, Fanon is "... a writer committed to telling the truth about color and oppression, a writer who exposes the lies of race and reveals how the concept of race is used to destroy people".

Born in Martinique, Fanon left his country to fight with the French in WWII. He remained in France after the war, studied psychiatry and medicine and eventually published *Black Skin, White Masks*, an analysis of the impact of racism and colonization on the Black man. After becoming head of the Psychiatry Department in Algeria and witnessing the treatment of Algerian soldiers by the French, he resigned his position to fight in the Algerian Independence movement. He died in 1961, leaving behind a critical work on revolutionary struggle, *The Wretched of the Earth* which is a discourse on the effects of colonialism on oppressed peoples and strategies for fighting this oppression by building a broad coalition of resistance.

John Edgar Wideman, the author of more than 20 works of fiction and nonfiction and a Rhodes scholar, has set much of his fiction in his home city of Pittsburgh. He is known for addressing the complexities faced by the Black man in America, the enduring legacy of racism

and the double consciousness, inner turmoil and conflicts that result from living in a society socially constructed by race. Hence, both Fanon and Wideman write on the subjects of identity, race and struggle from critical literary and political perspectives.

Wideman is also motivated to write about Fanon because, in his words, he wants “. . . to be free. I want to write a life for myself, fact and fiction, to open possibilities of connecting with your life, other lives.” In writing *Fanon: A Novel*, a blurring of the genres of memoir, nonfiction, and speculative fiction, Wideman creates a post-modern text that is both a description of the imagined life of Fanon and a meditation on Wideman’s life, on the issues and unanswered questions confronting him, as well as a search for solutions to the personal, social, and political paradoxes encountered in his life.

We come to know Fanon through Thomas, the alter ego created by Wideman to narrate and examine Fanon’s inner life. Wideman, in drawing upon the parallels between his life and that of Fanon, provides us with the metaphor of a physician who must take on the role of the patient in order to heal and “. . . to free a patient from the labyrinth of illness. . .” The persona of Thomas, like the physician, must enter into the life of Fanon in order to captivate his spirit and the story of his life.

Detailed and vividly described images portrayed by Wideman allow the reader to witness his life and Fanon’s as fragments of many experiences, lived and dreamed, as a series of frames in a film script which move back and forth between the worlds of two writers who have been subjected to racism, who have felt compelled to use their writing to wage struggles against injustice, and who have felt what it is like to be the “other”. Wideman’s penchant for detail can be noted in the following description of his walk on the lower east side of New York City. He

informs the reader that he likes to walk to stay fit and that Fanon may sometimes accompany him on his walk:

“Thomas follows or someday leads, and on good days, Frantz Fanon joins us. He gets a chance to sightsee in New York City, an opportunity not offered in his other life. . . . If you cross over the FDR highway on the pedestrian ramp just south of Williamsburg Bridge, descend the temporary wooden steps, (probably concrete and permanent by now), hang a quick left through the ornate gate of a tall black wrought-iron fence, then continue to bear left toward the water by following paths or cutting through construction, you’ll find after a minute or so an unbarricaded entrance to the walkway along the East River.”

This theme of interlocked lives which experience dislocation, marginalization and alienation is woven throughout the novel. Wideman, like Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, identifies with what it feels like to live in two worlds, to put on a mask as a result of having internalized the cultural values that surround him, to exist in settings where he feels divided, distanced and marginalized from those with whom he is living and has lived. Wideman, Thomas and Fanon have donned those masks which have prevented others from seeing who they really are. In this passage, Thomas imagines Fanon dreaming and foreshadows the concept of passing raised in Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks*.

“On the TGV south Thomas practices dreaming. Imagines making up a dream for Fanon. How would Fanon see himself in his dreams. Wouldn’t he disguise himself. Who might he choose to be. Do we choose. A good disguise maybe the key to dreaming. A dose of deception administered to ourselves to cure disbelief. Experiencing alternative possibilities, living other lives too threatening to imagine unless we wear the mask of another’s face, unless we inhabit another’s

body. A taste of being who you can't be so it's easier to be who you are. Or are not. Or wanna be. Or who you were once."

If you are looking for a novel that displays time in a linear way, Fanon is not the one for you. Wideman's novel defies the constraints of imagined time. As he notes, "Anachronisms galore sprinkle this story. If that sort of thing bothers you, you're in trouble." So do not be disturbed when Wideman interjects certain events describing the last year in Fanon's life. Understand that the accounts of Patrice Lumumba's kidnap, torture and execution, Fanon's loss of his battle with leukemia in a hospital in Bethesda, Maryland, the entering of the Mannhattans and Little Richard into Fanon's stream of consciousness, and the image of Fanon bouncing in a Range Rover in Mali, North Africa as he remembers Harriet Tubman's journey to the promised land, are all anachronisms that illustrate the cyclical nature of time and Wideman's need to provide a context for Fanon's role and place in the global world. They are also a reminder that the present, past and future may at times coexist in our minds. *Fanon: A Novel* is a compelling portrait of two very complex men. As a reader, you are motivated to go back and reflect on Fanon's life, his views, and his journeys to France, Algeria and Mali and to examine the resonance that *Wretched of the Earth* and *Black and Skin White Masks* have for struggles of liberation today.