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"Wideman at his best . . .

One of the best books ever
written about the sport."

— *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

A photograph of a man, John Edgar Wideman, crouching on a basketball court. He is wearing a black t-shirt and blue jeans, and is smiling at the camera. In the background, other people are visible on the court, and a basketball hoop is partially visible.

hoop roots

PLAYGROUND BASKETBALL, LOVE, AND RACE

john edgar wideman

Author of *Brothers and Keepers*

MARINER BOOKS

HOOP ROOTS

John Edgar Wideman



A Mariner Book

Houghton Mifflin Company

Boston • New York

First Mariner Books edition 2003

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Houghton Mifflin Company, 215 Park Avenue South,
New York, New York 10003.

Visit our Web site: www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wideman, John Edgar.

Hoop roots / John Edgar Wideman.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-395-85731-7

ISBN 0-618-25775-6 (pbk.)

1. Wideman, John Edgar—Childhood and youth.
 2. Authors, American—20th century—Biography.
 3. African American authors—Biography. 4. Basketball.
- I. Title.

PS3573.W6 Z467 2001

813'.54—dc21

[B] 2001026455

Book design by Melissa Lotfy

Typefaces: Sabon, Akzidenz Grotesk

Printed in the United States of America

QUM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PRAISE FOR
HOOP ROOTS

"A book that should be read aloud to jazz, a layered memoir of himself, his grandmother, and all the 'poor and colored' youngsters who dribbled their way out of 'a house of women' into the crucible of manhood and free expression called playground ball." —*New York Times*

"Combining memoir, history, and social commentary, *Hoop Roots* is an elegant tribute not just to the sport that earns millions for its best practitioners but also to the simple pleasures of playing ball." —*Details*

"A poignant paean to the sport he loves . . . These basketball stories [are] about the many jazzy rhythms of his life—music, love, family, and ultimately being black in America."

—*Boston Globe*

"More than a memoir, it delves simultaneously into bits of history, folklore, and the rich tapestry of African-American culture." —*Washington Post Book World*

"Buried at various depths in *Hoop Roots* are love letters to basketball, his family, his youth, and his race."

—*San Francisco Chronicle Book Review*

"Wideman's unabashed valentine to basketball . . . He spins powerful memories of family, music, culture, and mortality in a voice that is alternately literary, nostalgic, outraged, and inspired." —*Elle*

"[Wideman is] the most powerful and accomplished artist of the black urban world." —*Los Angeles Times*

Books by John Edgar Wideman

A GLANCE AWAY

HURRY HOME

THE LYNCHERS

DAMBALLAH

HIDING PLACE

SENT FOR YOU YESTERDAY

BROTHERS AND KEEPERS

REUBEN

FEVER

PHILADELPHIA FIRE

THE COLLECTED STORIES OF

JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN

FATHERALONG

THE CATTLE KILLING

TWO CITIES: A LOVE STORY

HOOP ROOTS

Hoop stories—
in homage to W. E. B. Du Bois and *The Souls
of Black Folk*—model, guide, beacon

For Catherine

Many bead artists, discussing . . . what happens to them during the beading process, describe transformations not unlike altered states of consciousness. The act of beading requires intense concentration and small-scale, delicate repetitive action—something that makes time pass without notice and causes the eyes to go out of focus, blurring one's vision and creating a dreamlike state. The gestures of beading begin to take over, to have their own momentum, life, and energy with which the beader is in synchrony. Beading is thus both a physical as well as a metaphysical experience in which artists become both masters of and mastered by their medium.

—Henry John Drewal and John Mason,
Beads, Body, and Soul

BOOKS BY JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN

Sent for You Yesterday "He can make an ordinary scene sing the blues like nobody's business." — *New York Times*

Winner of the prestigious PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction, this stunning first book in Wideman's Homewood trilogy reimagines Homewood, the black Pittsburgh neighborhood of the author's youth. ISBN 0-395-87729-6

Hiding Place "Wideman moves into the very heart of the black experience in urban America." — *Philadelphia Inquirer*

This volume of John Edgar Wideman's prizewinning Homewood trilogy opens with a man lying dead in a parking lot. Tommy didn't kill him, but the police will shoot first and ask questions later. ISBN 0-395-89798-X

Damballah "Perhaps the most gifted novelist of his generation." — *The Nation*

Wideman's acclaimed Homewood trilogy continues with this collection of interrelated stories, spanning the history of the Pittsburgh community founded by a runaway slave. ISBN 0-395-89797-1

The Cattle Killing "Fiercely beautiful and deeply affecting." — *Vanity Fair*

In plague-ridden eighteenth-century Philadelphia, a young black preacher searches for a mysterious African woman. His struggle to save them both plummets him into the nightmare of a society violently splitting itself into white and black. Winner of the James Fenimore Cooper Prize.

ISBN 0-395-87750-4

Two Cities: A Love Story "Its unrelenting power comes from its savvy exploration of love, loss, [and] forgiveness." — *Essence*

A redemptive, healing novel, *Two Cities* brings to brilliant culmination the themes Wideman has developed in his previous books. It is a story of bridges—bridges spanning rivers, bridges arching over rifts dividing our communities, our country, our hearts.

ISBN 0-618-00185-9

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*Different pieces coming from different places—
read them in sequence or improvise*

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More

We went to the playground court to find our missing fathers. We didn't find them but we found a game and the game served us as a daddy of sorts. We formed families of men and boys, male clans ruled and disciplined by the game's demands, its hard, distant, implacable gaze, its rare, maybe loving embrace of us: the game taught us to respect it and respect ourselves and other players. Playing the game provided sanctuary, refuge from a hostile world, and also toughened us by instructing us in styles for coping with that world. Only trouble was, to reach the court we had left our women behind. Even though we'd found the game and it allowed us, if not to become our own fathers, at least to glimpse their faces, hear their voices, the family we'd run away from home to restore would remain broken until we returned to share the tales of our wandering, listen to the women tell theirs.

NO BOOK. Only a wish I can make something like a book about a game I've played for most of my life, the game of playground basketball I love and now must stop playing. At fifty-nine I'm well past the age most people would consider the natural, inevitable time to give up what's clearly a young person's sport. According to this conventional wisdom I've been stealing for years, decades, stretching unreasonably my time on the court, lacing on sneakers, abusing my body, running up and down as if it never has to end. My three kids are grown and I have a granddaughter in North Carolina old enough to chatter with me on the phone and as I write these words a horrifically bloody century has just ended, my marriage of thirty-plus years has unraveled, and each morning my body requires more coaxing, more warming up to maneuver through the thicket of old aches and pains that settle in during sleep. Still, for some reason basketball feels important. I'm not giving it up willingly. I dream about it. I'm devoting passion and energy to writing a basketball book. Writing something like a book, anyway, because for me what's more important than any product this project achieves is for the process to feel something like playing the game I can't let go.

So this writing is for me, first. A way of holding on. Letting go. Starting a story so a story can end. Telling playground basketball stories, and if I tell them well they will be more about

basketball than about me. Because the game rules. The game will assert its primacy. I need the game more than it needs me. You learn that simple truth as a neophyte, an unskilled beginner enthralled, intimidated by the unlikely prospect that you'll ever become as good as those you watch. Learn this truth again, differently, the same truth and a different truth as a veteran observing the action you can barely keep up with anymore and shouldn't even be trying to keep up with anymore. You play for yourself, but the game's never for you or about you. Even at your best, in those charmed instants when the ball leaves your hand and you know that what's going to happen next will be exactly what you want to happen, not maybe or wishing or hoping, just the thrill coursing through your body of being in the flow, in synch, no fear of missing or losing or falling out of time—even in those split seconds which are one form of grace the game delivers, the game is larger than you, it's simply permitting you to experience a glimmer, a shimmer of how large it is, how just a smidgen of it can fill you almost to bursting. When you were born the game was here waiting, and the beat will go on without you.

I think of this game and see my first son, Dan, best ten-year-old free-throw shooter in Wyoming, slowly bowing his head, his knees nearly buckling, eyes filling with tears, looking suddenly so tiny out there alone on the foul line in a cavernous Nebraska high school gym when he realizes his best is not going to be good enough that particular day to win the eleven-and-under regional-free throw contest. His brother, Jake, at thirteen sinking two sweet, all-net jumpers in a row from the corner to win a tough, tight pickup game in the university gym when finally both my sons are old enough to hold their own and play with me on the same team against college kids. See their sister, my daughter, Jamila, leading her Stanford University women's team, number one in the country, into an arena packed with 14,000 fans, a huge roar of rooting for and against them greeting her and her teammates as they trot onto the court, then the

eerie quiet two and a half hours later, two and a half hours of some of the most riveting hoop I've ever watched, as Jamila, totally exhausted, collapses into her mother's arms after performing heroically and losing in overtime her final college game.

Whatever you make of this book, I need it. Need it the way I've needed the playground game. Need it like I needed this rain softly falling now, finally, after a whole day so close to rain I found myself holding my breath till dark in expectation of the first large, cooling drops. A sweltering June day I climbed a steep trail up a mountain and hiked through woods surrounding two small reservoirs where people skinny-dip and sunbathe naked, as if the summer of love never ended. Rain in the air, in the sky, on my mind all day. Gray heaps of clouds drifting in, gradually trumping what's been mainly blue. Then the sky scrubs itself stark blue again. The threat of rain never going away, however, even in the brightest streaming down of sunshine, and I can't stop needing it, daydreaming cool rain breaking through. Need to write something like a book because last week back home in Pittsburgh, in the morning I visited my brother Robby who's serving a life term in Western Penitentiary and in the afternoon of the same day visited in a VA hospital the body of my father whose mind has been erased by the disease Robby and the other prisoners call *old-timers*. Need it in this season of losses, losses already recorded in stone and imminent losses, virtual losses, dues paid and dues still to pay heavy on my mind, never far from my thoughts whatever else I might find myself doing in this transitional time, season to season, epoch to epoch, century to century, young to old, life to dying, giving up things, losing things I never believed I'd have to relinquish.

Playground basketball only a game. Why, given my constant struggling and juggling to fit a busy schedule into days without enough hours, does basketball sit there, above the fray, a true and unblemished exception to the rules, the countless hours committed to it unregretted. Why was basketball untouchable

over the years as I devised and revised blueprints for making the most profitable use of my time. Why am I missing the playground game, yearning for it now even before it quite slips away. Why when I know good and well it's time to stop playing hoop, time to reconcile myself to the idea of moving on, why do I continue to treat these ideas as unacceptable. Why can't I shake the thought that this break from the game can't be final. If I'm patient, hang around, give myself a little time to heal, to get right, I'll be back out on the court again, won't I.

If I knew the answers, I probably wouldn't need to write the book, or the something like a book I'm pushing for, would settle for, anxious it may be less but also hoping for more than a book. No answers sought here. No book. My need enough. My desire to lose myself in doing something like playing the game.

Growing up, I needed basketball because my family was poor and colored, hemmed in by material circumstances none of us knew how to control, and if I wanted more, a larger, different portion than other poor colored folks in Homewood, I had to single myself out. I say *if I wanted more* because *if* was a real question, a stumbling block many kids in Homewood couldn't get past. It's probably accurate to say that anybody, everybody wants more. But how strong is the desire. How long does it last. What forms does it take. How many young people are convinced they deserve more or believe they possess the strength required to obtain more or believe they actually have a chance for more. The idea of race and the practice of racism in our country work against African-American kids forming and sustaining belief in themselves. Wanting more doesn't teach you there are ways to get there. Nor does it create the self-image of a deserving recipient, a worthwhile person worth striving for. You need the plausibility, the possibility of imagining a different life for yourself, other than the meager portion doled out by the imperatives of race and racism, the negative prospects impressed continuously upon a black kid's consciousness, stifling, stunting the self-awareness of far too many. Including black

kids not poor. Imagining a different portion is the first step, the door cracking between known and unknown. A door on alternative possibilities. If you want more and you're lucky enough, as I was, to choose or be chosen by some sort of game, you may then begin to forge a game plan. If you believe you're in the game, you may be willing to learn the game's ABCs. Learn what it costs to play. Begin making yourself a player.

I figured out early that hard, solo work the only way to get certain things about hoop right. Every chance I got I practiced alone the shooting, dribbling skills other kids had somehow mastered. Fear part of it. Fear of failure. Of humiliation. Love just as important as fear. Unconditional love from my family. A sense someone cared, someone rooted for me, someone expected me to do well. I didn't want to let those folks down nor behave on the court in a fashion they might be ashamed of. If I wanted more, I must risk failing, and it helped immeasurably to know that somebody somewhere supported my effort to play well. Would support me if I didn't play well. If no one cared, why bother. Why beat myself up. Set myself up for disappointment. Love helped me imagine I possessed the power to invent myself, make more of myself, become a player.

Fear and love, love and fear raised the stakes of the game. Engendered the beginnings of a hunger, the hunger driving the serious players I admire most, who never seem satisfied no matter how well they perform, players who consistently push themselves as if more hustle, more speed, more brawling competitiveness is never too much. Players who refuse to settle into a comfort zone, who won't accept limits, who attack the game with the same unstinting voraciousness as the game when it attacks them, consuming the best of their bodies and spirits.

The pampering and privileges I received because I was male and the oldest child in the various households of our extended clan certified love in abundance and also stimulated my desire for more. The slightly larger share my mother sometimes tried to slip me when she divided a cake or pie under the hawk eyes

of my siblings I took not only as a sign of love and eldest status, as they did. The tiny bit extra also reinforced a sense of entitlement. Without exactly knowing it, I was beginning to single myself out, practicing in the interior world of daydream and fantasy, where no one could eavesdrop, how it might feel to exercise power and authority, fire and a voice I had almost no reason to anticipate my material circumstances—colored and poor in Homewood—would ever grant me.

Growing up in a world where adults heaped love on kids in any and every fashion they could manage, the women lavishing daily, close-up care and attention, the men leaving the house at dawn to line up on the corner where work might or might not arrive, men gone from can to caint, splicing multiple, piecemeal jobs into a precarious living wage, where delicious meals were scraped together from cheap cuts beaten and boiled to tenderness, from government-surplus cheese, powdered milk, and canned, ground, jellied, mystery meat, from chicken's feet, necks, gizzards, beef neckbones, pig's feet, a world in which piles of shiny new toys appeared miraculously once a year at Christmas, the holiday when grownups spent themselves silly, diving deeper, more hopelessly into debt as if one morning of glittering extravagance could erase all the empty-handed ones, in this world of abrupt change, boom and bust, feast and famine where love on one hand acted as a steadying, stabilizing force and on the other hand could exert no control whatsoever over the oppressive economic environment in which both kids and adults were trapped, without that love I would have been a lost soul, but love also created a desperate hunger for more, far more than the people who loved me could provide. Love bred a dark fear of its absence. Because if love disappeared, what would remain. Wouldn't the point be I didn't measure up, didn't deserve love.

As a kid, did I think about my life in terms of wanting more. More of what. Where would I find it. Did I actually pose similar questions to myself. When. How. Why. Looking back, I'm