



The Hairstons: An American Family in Black and White

Henry Wiencek

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Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award

The Hairstons is the extraordinary story of the largest family in America, the Hairston clan. With several thousand black and white members, the Hairstons share a complex and compelling history: divided in the time of slavery, they have come to embrace their past as one family.

The black family's story is most exceptional. It is the account of the rise of a remarkable people—the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of slaves—who took their rightful place in mainstream America.

In contrast, it has been the fate of the white family—once one of the wealthiest in America—to endure the decline and fall of the Old South, and to become an apparent metaphor for that demise. But the family's fall from grace is only part of the tale. Beneath the surface lay a hidden history—the history of slavery's curse and how that curse plagued slaveholders for generations.

For the past seven years, journalist Wiencek has listened raptly to the tales of hundreds of Hairston relatives, including the aging scions of both the white and black clans. He has crisscrossed the old plantation country in Virginia, North Carolina, and Mississippi to seek out the descendants of slaves. Visiting family reunions, interviewing family members, and exploring old plantations, Wiencek combs the far-reaching branches of the Hairston family tree to gather anecdotes from members about their ancestors and piece together a family history that involves the experiences of both plantation owners and their slaves. He expertly weaves the Hairstons' stories from all sides of historical events like slave emancipation, Reconstruction, school segregation, and lynching.

Paradoxically, Wiencek demonstrates that these families found that the way to come to terms with the past was to embrace it, and this lyrical work, a parable of redemption, may in the end serve as a vital contribution to our nation's attempt to undo the twisted historical legacy of the past.

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