



God's Gym: Stories

By John Edgar Wideman

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In *God's Gym*, the celebrated author John Edgar Wideman offers stories that pulse with emotional electricity. The ten pieces here explore strength, both physical and spiritual. The collection opens with a man paying tribute to the quiet fortitude of his mother, a woman who "should wear a T-shirt: *God's Gym*." In the stories that follow, Wideman delivers powerful riffs on family and fate, basketball and belief. His mesmerizing prose features guest appearances by cultural luminaries as diverse as the Harlem Globetrotters, Frantz Fanon, Thelonious Monk, and Marilyn Monroe. As always, Wideman astounds with writing that moves from the intimate to the political, from shock to transcendence.

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God's Gym: Stories By John Edgar Wideman Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Pushing the boundaries of narrative and form, two-time PEN/Faulkner Award–winner Wideman (*Hoop Roots*, etc.) delivers a sometimes electric and sometimes confounding collection of 10 short stories. In the best of these, such as the heartfelt "Are Dreams Faster Than the Speed of Light," about a dying man, and the racially charged "Fanon," Wideman wields his stream-of-consciousness prose to great effect. Often, however, the clever allusions and deft turns of phrase rise one after the other in an almost Sisyphean struggle toward perfection. For instance, in "What We Cannot Speak About We Must Pass Over in Silence," a full page and a half is devoted to describing a coyote "camouflaged by hovering darkness, by mottled fur, a shadow itself, instantly freezing, sniffing the air" as it roams outside a prison. The language is beautiful, but the detour is so long it stops the story dead. The most frustrating example of this calculated experimentation is "The Silence of Thelonious Monk," which starts with a pistol fight between Verlaine and Rimbaud, shifts into the opening lines of a love story and then heads off into an imagined biography of Monk himself. All of which Wideman pulls off with undeniable virtuosity, but it's precisely this sort of narrative acrobatics that too often robs his stories of their power. The full range of Wideman's talents are on display here, however, and even those stories that don't quite live up to expectations are punctuated by moments of brilliance. (Feb. 9)

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

Nearly every review of *God's Gym* draws the parallel between jazz and Wideman's writing. Just as our American music encompasses melody and dissonance, ballads and funk, so there are dualities aplenty at work here. Wideman continues to disdain the border between fiction and reality as he draws from well-known biographical facts for his stories. Characters commit violent acts, but only in their imaginations. His imposition as a narrator annoys some critics, yet none can claim that Wideman, the only two-time winner of the PEN/Faulkner award, isn't in complete control of his skills. And while he doesn't shy away from being a "difficult" writer, he gilds his challenges with resonant emotional truths.

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From [Booklist](#)

Technical virtuosity, without showiness or gimmickry, is Wideman's hallmark, and obviously one of the factors contributing to his receiving the prestigious Rea Award for outstanding accomplishment in the short story. In his latest challenging collection, which numbers 10 stories, he pushes the form's envelope, not to thin lengths but to increased heights of effectiveness. "Weight," one of the best in the collection, assumes the shape of a segment of autobiography as the first-person narrator pays piquant tribute to the quiet strength of his mother (and hence the title of the collection, which comes from the narrator's comment, "The weights she lifts are burdens--her children's, her neighbors, yours"). In "Who Invented the Jump Short," Wideman plays with time and place in a mesmerizingly inventive narrative about, on a metaphysical level, what is truth, and on a more earthly level, race relations past and present. "Sharing" is told from the perspective of a white woman as she relates her encounter with a black neighbor--a brilliant demonstration of Wideman's versatility in adopting voices. Any reader who believes that short stories are too formulaic and constrictive for authors to truly exert their individuality should be required to experience these. *Brad Hooper*

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Users Review

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