



# The Hairstons: An American Family in Black and White

By Henry Wiencek

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**The Hairstons: An American Family in Black and White** By Henry Wiencek

## 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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## **The Hairstons: An American Family in Black and White** By Henry Wiencek **Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #201629 in Books
- Published on: 2000-02-19
- Released on: 2000-02-19
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x .85" w x 6.00" l, 1.25 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 361 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

*The Hairstons* traces the complex lineage and fascinating legacy of one of America's largest families. Henry Wiencek explores the lives of black and white members of the Hairston clan, as they have accepted each other as one family, easing the historical divide between the races, and reveals how Southern families have been affected by slavery's legacy and by the burden it continues to carry. 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. For example, from a black Hairston, Wiencek learns of a slave who burned rail fences to cook a hog for his starving comrades; white Hairstons record the incident as an act of slave indolence, a way to hinder the next day's work.

As Wiencek tells the stories of individual Hairstons, he uncovers the layers of a shared history at times painful, shameful, extraordinary, and joyful. Beautifully describing the land of the South and faithfully recounting what he has been told, Wiencek testifies that he "heard history not as a historian would write it but as a novelist would imagine it." The dynamic stories in *The Hairstons* are not solely one family's legacy but a record that reflects America's complicated process of healing and understanding the mark of slavery. --Amy Wan

#### From Publishers Weekly

Covering similar ground as Edward Ball's National Book Award-winning *Slaves in the Family*, Wiencek steps gracefully through the intricate web that links two family trees, one white and one black. Because it's not his own family history he explores, Wiencek doesn't labor under the burden of personal moral accountability that made Ball's book so powerful. He intends his book as a national "parable of redemption"?and he succeeds, admirably, in presenting the Hairstons as a metaphor for the nation while also presenting the specificity of their history, which he learned by traveling through three Southern states in search of interviews and courthouse records. He attempts a balance between the two stories over centuries of ignored heritage and denied kin. At one point, the founding Hairston family owned several plantations and hundreds of slave families over three states. Master Peter Hairston and his former slave Thomas Harston fought on opposite sides in the Civil War, and "the success of one brought the other low." As Wiencek follows the Hairstons from Reconstruction through the civil rights era, he paints a picture of the declining fortunes of the descendants of the slave master and the rise and wisdom of the descendants of the slaves. And yet the name itself is treasured among both family branches, and some of the white descendants can't resist the desire to make contact with the other branch. Commonalities emerge among black and white Hairstons; earnest, if partial, gestures of reconciliation are made. Throughout, Wiencek writes without sentimentality but with great feeling. "I heard history," he writes, "not as a historian would write it but as a novelist would imagine it.... I felt all the moral confusion of a spy." Maps, photographs and extended family trees not seen by PW.

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#### From Library Journal

This profile of the Hairstons, a large family of planters and slaves spreading from Virginia and North Carolina to Mississippi, examines the intricate situations forged by interracial relationships and reveals the

fate of the family in the crucible of war, emancipation, and the struggle for equality. Journalist Wiencek's conversational narrative, based both on archival research and a series of encounters with family members, highlights the contingent construction of historical accounts while revealing the complex and contradictory beliefs and emotions that characterized these tangled relationships, filled with guilt, anger, and ultimately forgiveness without absolution. The result is a voyage of discovery down the stream of history. Wiencek reminds us that no such story, especially one as compelling as this, can be rendered simply in terms of black and white. Recommended for most libraries.

-?Brooks D. Simpson, Arizona State Univ., Tempe

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#### Arthur Pascual:

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#### Marie Clemmer:

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