

Lovers in a Dangerous Time

Two Cities

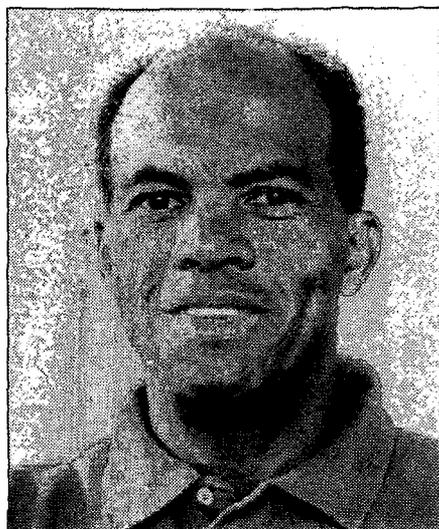
By John Edgar Wideman
Houghton Mifflin
256 pages, \$24

Reviewed by Scott McLemee

In an interview following the publication of his last novel, *The Cattle Killing*, John Edgar Wideman described the relationship of African-Americans to the society around them as one of unrequited love—an acute and somewhat desperate kind of pain. Love itself is always complicated enough—twisting around into hate, and back again, like a Moibus strip—without having the object of your desire express indifference, contempt, amused indulgence. And that's when the beloved—American society—is in a good mood.

The novelist's own relationship with the culture is, if anything, still more difficult. He has received the most estimable prizes given to a literary artist, including two PEN/Faulkner awards and a MacArthur ("Genius") Fellowship. Yet Wideman has never quite shaken a suspicion that tokens of recognition handed to a black intellectual may be just that, tokens. His novels and memoirs have chronicled life in black urban neighborhoods, as well as in those buried cities that constitute the prison system. His fiction is intricate in texture, reflecting an acute sense of literary form as a way of responding to (and perhaps reshaping) habits of awareness. But the modernist self-consciousness of Wideman's prose grows even sharper, given the author's severe ambivalence about how "race" imposes itself on the American mind at every turn.

His books, in short, are demanding. *Two Cities*, his latest novel, is linked by countless threads to Wideman's earlier work—especially *Philadelphia Fire*, his novel about the aftermath of the assault on the MOVE compound. (In 1986, a decade-long war of nerves between police and the hygiene-averse cult ended with the cops dropping a bomb that incinerated an entire city block, killing 11 people, five of them chil-



John Edgar Wideman

dren.) The "two cities" of the title are Pittsburgh and Philly, which across three decades of writing have become Wideman's territory, much as Joyce made Dublin his own. (Faulkner's Mississippi also comes to mind.) Yet for all the complicating echoes from his previous work, *Two Cities* may be John Edgar Wideman's most accessible novel.

It is a love story. And also, in a sense, a ghost story, since the characters always feel the close presence of the dead—the people they have lost, often to violence.

The characters may be ordinary people, but their lives are not simple. A man and a woman meet in a bar in Pittsburgh. They go home together. She is maybe half his age, and the difference is part of the attraction for both parties. Neither wants more than a one-night stand. But something clicks. As weeks pass, they grow closer, telling one another their stories. In Kassima's case they are mostly tales of loss: a husband killed by AIDS while in prison, a son dead from Russian roulette, another the victim of street violence.

One day the couple go to the park, and Robert joins a pick-up basketball game. It takes a turn for the worse. One of the players has an attitude, and a gun. The scene ends with no more than some yelling, but it's too much for Kassima. The risk of losing someone else makes

her withdraw. Robert pursues her, to no avail. She closes him out and talks only to her boarder, an old man known as Mr. Mallory, who spends his days wandering the neighborhood, taking photographs, studying a dictionary and writing letters he never sends.

One day she returns home to find that Mallory has crawled into her bed and died. Upset, she goes to Robert for help. And the flame of romance proves not quite extinguished. They make arrangements to bury the old man. The same day as Mallory's service, the funeral parlor is displaying the casket of a young man killed in gang warfare—and it eventually turns into a scene of confrontation. By the end of the novel, it is clear that, whatever future Robert and Kassima have together, the possibility of violent death will be part of it. Love may be triumphant, but it won't conquer all. It can't.

Such is the plot, reduced to a skeleton. The book's structure emerges from the streams of consciousness of the three central characters. Where one first-person monologue leaves off and another begins is not always sharply marked. The reader has work to do. Yet *Two Cities* is not a literary puzzle—one of those trick novels with false bottoms or unreliable narrators (though Mr. Mallory is a bit eccentric). After all, the blurring and rediscovery of individual identity is part of falling in love: perhaps its most dangerous aspect, but also the most pleasurable, as a couple lies in bed, exchanging the stories that account for who they are, and how they got there.

Mr. Mallory's photography—his odd method for trying to record neighborhood scenes—provides the novelist's image of his own project. He shoots image after image on the same frame, in hopes that the overlap will somehow reveal the essence of things. "I want people to see my pictures from various angles," he explains, "see the images I offer as many images, one among countless ways of seeing, so the more they look, the more there is to see. ... No single, special, secret view is sought or revealed."

The result, of course, is hard on the eyes, as Kassima discovers when she

views the pictures after Mallory's death. "Said every picture was there on the film," she tells Robert, "and one day he would or somebody would figure out a way so everything he was photographing could be printed for people to see. All I could see when I held the film up to light was gray, gray, gray. Gray close to white in some and some closer to black and some with silver veins running through or maybe some different shades of gray."

It is while sifting through Mallory's belongings—hunting without success for some indication of family to contact for the funeral—that the couple gets back together. Each of the major characters in *Two Cities* carries some sense of loss. And the very possibility of moving beyond the peculiar isolation that Mallory has lived means accepting the danger of having yet another hole torn out of their hearts. Wideman is especially good at conveying how the past haunts the present. The dead fear we may forget them, so they intrude on experience, sometimes in very demanding ways.

Among those dead are the victims of the assault on MOVE. And Mallory's picture-taking also alludes back to *Philadelphia Fire* in which the tie between photographs and loss is made explicit. There, Wideman wrote: "The lost child, the parent who grieves for the lost child owns an emptiness as tangible as a photo. You carry it around. ... This emptiness, this not having is so palpable you can pass it around a room."

In *Two Cities*, there is no easy escape from grief. But it is not the end of the story, either. "Our eyes take snapshots," writes Mallory, in a letter not sent:

Like a camera. A million, million frames day in and day out. Too quick to keep track of. Each one disappears instantly, leaving no trace behind. Except from these snapshots we build a world of things with weight, shape, things that move and last. ... Force of habit turns to certainty. We forget how spirit and mind piece the world together glimpse by glimpse. We forget our power. Forget that one naked, sideways stare, one glance away, changes everything. ■

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King of Darkness

King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa

By Adam Hochschild
Houghton Mifflin
366 pages, \$26

Reviewed by James North

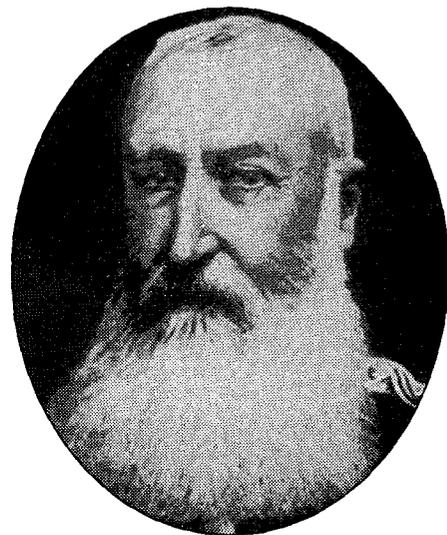
A few years ago, *The New York Times Magazine* actually ran an article that argued for the re-establishment of Western colonial control over Africa. The piece, by British journalist Paul Johnson, contended that the European colonial powers had left the continent in pretty good shape at independence in the early '60s; the Africans themselves had made a mess of things since. Western organization and expertise were needed to repair the damage.

Johnson's nasty article was based on a view of African colonial history that was so dishonest that it amounted to criminal negligence. By publishing it, the *Times* did the equivalent of giving space to a crank who denies the Holocaust in Europe. Fifty years from now, one hopes, scholars will point back to that article as one more pathetic instance of the occasional pseudo-scientific racism that marred the late-20th century.

Anyone interested in the truth about European colonialism in Africa should start with Adam Hochschild's superb new book. Part of the story of Belgian King Leopold's late-19th century private empire in central Africa has been told before. But Hochschild has used recent scholarship to create a comprehensive, formidable and brilliant account.

King Leopold's *Ghost* reads like a well-crafted novel. The characters are vivid, especially the Belgian king himself. A lecherous monarch with the calculating mind of a capitalist, he was also an early pioneer in public relations—he manipulated world opinion to disguise his brutal control of the vast Congo basin as a humanitarian venture. In the end, he may have made \$1.1 billion from Africa—a prodigious fortune back then.

Hochschild also deals with Victorian



conquistador Henry M. Stanley, a best-selling author who styled himself an explorer. His books, all of which included the word *dark* in the title, did much to construct the negative, primitive view of Africa that persists to this day. He also lent his fame to Leopold's exploitation schemes, in which savage white overseers enforced rubber-collecting quotas on Africans. If local people failed to gather enough rubber, colonists destroyed their villages, whipped them, shot them and cut off their hands—usually after murdering them, but sometimes before.

Though Hochschild's account is depressing, he manages to inspire as well. Leopold's brutality eventually prompted the first great worldwide human rights campaign of this century, and its characters should be better known. E.D. Morel—his friends called him the Bulldog—was an English shipping clerk who pored over manifests showing tremendous exports from central Africa, first of ivory, then of rubber. Morel realized nothing was going back into Africa to pay for these raw materials. He understood with horror that the trade imbalance could only be explained by slave labor. He resigned from his job, and spent years leading an increasingly successful international campaign to publicize the atrocities. Morel and his allies made use of then-recent technology, using gruesome photographs—included in this book—to publicize Leopold's crimes.