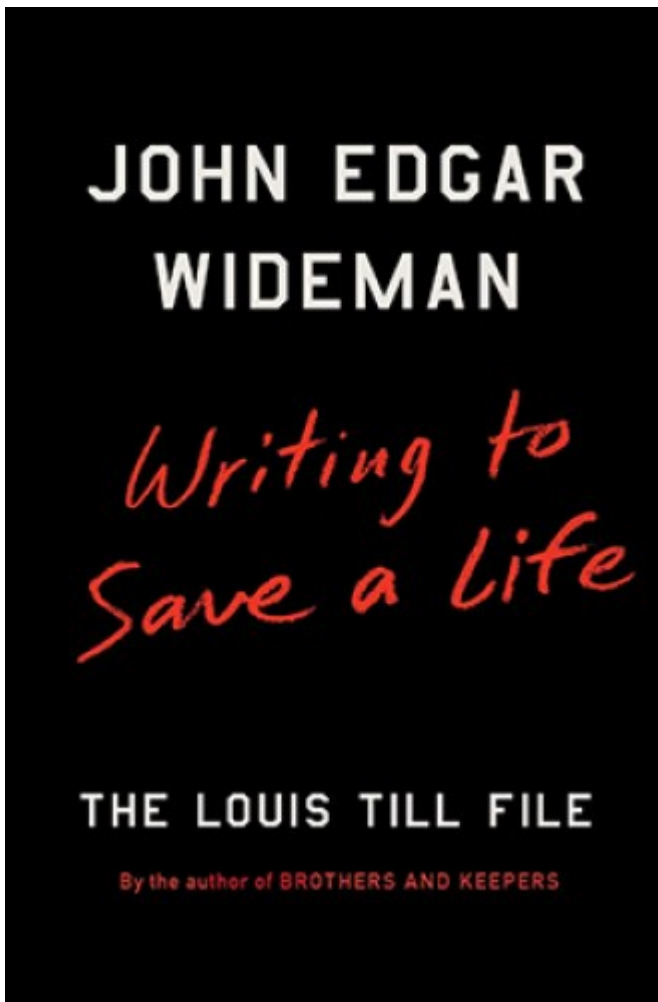


Inventing a voice for Louis Till

John Edgar Wideman counters the official record of Emmett Till's father with a more empathetic version.

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [March 15, 2017](#) issue

In Review



Writing to Save a Life

The Louis Till File

By John Edgar Wideman
Scribner

“Wrong color, wrong place, wrong time.” This is John Edgar Wideman’s conclusion about the death of Louis Till, Emmett Till’s father.

Wideman, a novelist and essayist, was 14 when another 14-year-old black boy, Emmett, was murdered in Mississippi. In this book, Wideman has written an account not of Emmett, but of his father Louis, who was killed while serving in World War II.

Wideman uses the twin deaths of father and son to explore father and son relationships, the conjunction of racism and family life, justice and injustice, truth and its deliberate destruction. *Writing to Save a Life* is a mix of memoir, biography, history (and an acknowledgment of history’s failures), imagination, and cultural commentary, as Wideman tries to piece together what happened to Louis while he served in the army in Italy.

Today the story of Emmett’s father is not usually recounted in the telling of the boy’s death and its aftermath. News articles might mention that before he left for Mississippi, Emmett’s mother gave him his late father’s signet ring to take with him. But in 1956, the circumstances of Louis’s death were released to the public in an effort to exonerate his son’s murderers.

Louis was hanged by the U.S. Army in 1945 for “assaulting, raping, and killing two women.” Southern white newspapers accused the “Yankee” press of hiding the truth about Emmett’s father and made the connection explicit: “like father, like son.” Their attempt to clear Emmett’s murderers was effective.

Wideman himself has a “like father, like son” question. His fascination with the Tills is connected to his relationship with his own father, as well as his pain over the incarceration of both his younger brother, Rakhim, and his son, Jacob.

Private Louis Till was serving in the army when he was convicted of assault, rape, and murder. He was held at the same compound and at the same time as the poet Ezra Pound. Pound did not hang, as Till did, but the two crossed paths, and Pound remembered Till in lines from his *Pisan Cantos*.

*Till was hung yesterday
for murder and rape with trimmings*

Pound marks Till in the *Cantos* with a Chinese pictograph that means “no, not”—a negation. The poet reminds his reader that Ulysses named himself “no one” to fool the blind Cyclops and hints in his enigmatic way at a connection between Ulysses and Till.

Wideman is aware of Till’s silence. In the existing records Till does not testify, so Wideman tries to imagine himself into Till’s mind and invents a voice for him, as here, imagining Till’s view of Pound: “Private Louis Till, incarcerated in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations, United States Army Disciplinary Training Center, Metato, Italy, must of wondered what kind of motherfucker so bad they weld steel bars to his cell. Old skinny white motherfucker army gon hang, they say. Poet, they say.”

This project in imagination, this “asking dust to do what dust cannot do, assume shape, substance, breathe and speak again,” bothers Wideman. He knows that it is false history just as the file that he receives with the Louis Till papers is manufactured history. “I’m reporting imagination as fact. Unscrupulous as any army investigator. Worse because I claim to know better. Want my fictions to be fair and honest.”

But his act is not the same as that of the army investigators. While both may be acts of the imagination, Wideman’s is marked by empathy. He tries to imagine himself inside the prison, inside the thoughts of investigators, inside the people who signed off on various documents. He doesn’t want to excuse them, but he does try to pull himself toward them, adopting their voices like a mimic and creating backstories for them that can help him to understand what is not spoken in the file. The army investigators are not motivated by empathy. They want to say, “Case closed.”

Wideman’s desire for empathy is not simply because he is trying to understand or sympathize with various characters in the tale. He is not, finally, on a historical mission. As he is imagining the lives and thoughts of the prisoner, Louis Till, he is simultaneously imagining the lives and thoughts of his own imprisoned brother and son. When he writes, “Breaks rules because if a prisoner doesn’t break the rules, rules break your heart, my brother, my son, all the colored prisoners I know and have read about assure me,” his words read like a note slipped through the bars.

They urge the ones he loves and himself to stay alive. “I work for an incarcerated son and brother locked inside me every moment that I struggle with the Till file. . . If I return to Till’s grave, I will confess to him first thing that the Louis Till project is about saving a son and brother, about saving myself.”

The book ends with a collection of images and memories, as Wideman grapples with how to make sense of his long and seemingly fruitless engagement with Louis Till. He steps no closer to the truth. But his attempt to grasp the significance of all these incarcerated and cut-short lives draws him closer to his own heart and his own life, the one he is trying to save.