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Winfred Rembert: Memoir from beyond the grave

Artist who made Connecticut his home wrote of his near-lynching in Georgia

Tracey O'Shaughnessy Republican-American - August 28, 2021

He was 6 – or maybe 7 – when the plantation owner smirked at him and said, “Come here, n****r,” and led him to the barn.

Winfred Rembert walked slowly behind the man, who pointed to a bunch of jars. “You see those jars?” the plantation owner said.

Rembert looked into the jars until he figured out what was in them: men’s genitals.

“These belonged to Old Bill,” the plantation owner said. “These here, they belonged to Old John. Here’s Old Tom.” And then the words that stuck with him sent him running out of the barn like a bullet: “Don’t let that be you.”



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The cover of Sunday's Accent section, Aug. 29, 2021. Winfred Rembert, who died last spring at 75, never painted that memory. He never tooled the leather canvas, dabbed the dye until the color soaked through in rich red and forest green, so it could hang, like an indictment – or a miracle.

Even painting “Almost Me,” which depicts his own near-lynching at age 21 in his hometown of Cuthbert, Ga., made him so sick to his stomach that it took him years to finish.

“Thank God I’m alive, and while I’m still alive I can talk about it. I can talk about surviving,” Rembert wrote in his book, “Chasing Me to My Grave: An Artist’s Memoir of the Jim Crow South.”

“I am history. I am a witness. I can tell about being almost lynched. And when I die, I didn’t die by the rope. I just died from being an old man. I lived my life out. My children, when I’m gone, can read about it, and that picture will be there to speak for me.”

“Chasing Me To My Grave,” as told to Tufts University scholar Erin I. Kelly, is Rembert’s story, frankly told to her in the several months before he died. Richly illustrated with Rembert’s leather paintings, one of which now hangs at the Yale University Art Gallery, the book is one of wrenching loss and punishing degradation, a graphic depiction of the brutality and torture of the rural South at mid-century. It is also a story of astonishing triumph and perseverance, of a man’s harrowing early separation from his mother and the continuing anguish it wrought, and the power of the human spirit to prevail and express itself through grit, talent and an unrelenting will.

By the end of his life, Rembert, who had almost no formal education, was showing his works in some of the country’s major art museums and selling his paintings for up to \$80,000.

“He had an indomitable spirit,” Jock Reynolds, former director of the Yale University Art Gallery, said. “How can you be almost lynched and beaten and put in chain gangs and towed along in your grandmother’s rucksack and how that spirit is not broken is a friggin’ miracle.”

The book, like Rembert’s vivid, visceral works, is raw and chilling, rousing and joyous, horrifying and heroic. Rembert writes of being given away by his mother as an infant, being dragged along in a cotton sack as the aunt who raised him picked cotton, picking beside her by the time he was 5, and yearning for the mother who abandoned him.

As engaging and charismatic a storyteller in print as he was on canvas and in life, Rembert writes of joining the civil rights movement in 1965. In a demonstration he attended, he writes that he and others were beaten and chased by dogs. After he fled in a stolen car, he landed in jail. His escape from that jail, after more than a year with no charges, no bond and no visitors, led to a near-lynching by a mob. He was stripped and hanged upside down from a tree. He was twisting around when a sheriff’s deputy wielding a Hawkbill knife cut his genitals.

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“He didn’t slice me, but he stuck me,” he writes. “And you talking about pain, and you talking about the blood – blood running down my butt, down the back of my neck onto the ground. I was bleeding like a hog. I was bleeding like an animal or something out there to be killed. And the pain, I’m telling you, I never had so much pain in all my life.”

Rembert, who spoke of the incident at his first exhibit at the Yale gallery, writes he was saved by a man in brown wingtips whose name he never knew. ““Don’t do that. We got better things to do with this n****r,”” Rembert writes. “Now this man, I don’t know who he was. I was hanging upside down and all I saw was his wingtip shoes. The only thing I know is this: He had power. ... He said, ‘Carry him on back to the jail. He gonna die anyway.’ And they cut me down.”

It was 1967.

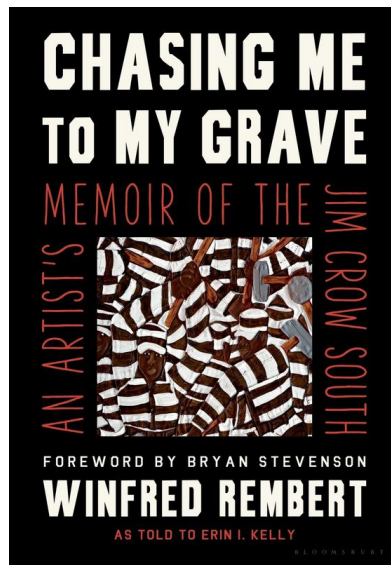
Rembert writes he was later thrown into the trunk of a car, where he used his own T-shirt to staunch the bleeding. He ultimately served seven years, rotating through several Georgia prisons, where he toiled on some of the country’s last chain gangs.

In 2017, Rembert made an audio recording of the incident with his wife, Patsy, for the nonprofit Story Corps. “I’m 71,” he said. “But I still wake up screaming and reliving things that happened to me.”

What’s striking about “Chasing Me to My Grave” is not simply the brutality of Rembert’s story, but its joy, gratitude and affection for the town that mocked, bullied and imprisoned him. He writes, with deep attachments, of the juke joints and pool halls, the dancers and the dandies that made up the Black section of town. And cotton, which he began picking at 5 and whose lustrous whiteness constituted his first memory, looms poignantly in his imagination as his book reveals:

“A cotton field at picking time is a beautiful sight, when you’re riding down the road looking at it. Nothing but white as far as you can see, going off the horizon into the ocean, and there ain’t no ocean there. ... When the sun goes down, the end of the cotton field looks like it’s on fire – a big fire of orange, yellow, and red, fading away into the trees. It’s just beautiful. You see the sun set when you are out there picking, because they want you to keep going as long as you can still see your way up the rows. I got a painting about that sunset.”

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“Chasing Me To My Grave: An Artist’s Memoir of the Jim Crow South,” by Winfred Rembert as told to Erin I. Kelly, (Bloomsbury, \$30, 284 pages, 75 color paintings) will be released Sept. 7. The foreword is by Bryan Stevenson, a lawyer and social justice activist.

“He’s somebody who was able to see a great deal of beauty in the world around him despite some horrific injustice,” Kelly said. “The cotton field pictures are an expression of that. It was a scene that caused him exhaustion, frustration and suffering. Yet he was able to represent it on canvas as part of the beauty of the world around him. It’s that kind of remarkable talent that he had and helped him to survive.”

In works like “Clyde’s Place” and “Inside Cat Odom’s Café,” the self-taught Rembert renders jubilant canvases of elongated black figures, dancing, shooting dice, playing cards, drinking soda pop and playing pool. The images are alive with primary colors, tomato reds, turquoise blues and parrot greens. The figures knit together like pieces of a pulsating puzzle, the canvas so dazzling and kinetic it can feel audible.

“Hamilton Avenue was just fantastic. It has a hold on me, even now. Being introduced to Hamilton Avenue was the best thing that’s ever happened in my life. It was and still is. I never had such a good time.”

Kelly met Rembert in 2015 while working on a book about criminal justice. “I found him so charismatic and compelling and interesting as a person,” she said.

Almost immediately, she said, Rembert began talking about his desire to get his story told. “He felt like he needed to talk about it as well as to do art about it,” she said.

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“It was part of revisiting those experiences. It didn’t help him necessarily get over the trauma. He really wants people to talk about what they went through partly because he wants to be proud of the resourcefulness they had. He wanted to commemorate those who survived it. That was an important theme for him. It was a way of giving tribute to all the people who helped him, who made Cuthbert such a central place for him.”

Kelly said she tried to authenticate many of Rembert’s anecdotes through archival records. She found a single newspaper account of Rembert’s escape and capture from the Cuthbert jail, but said identifying members of the mob that lynched him or authenticating the event was elusive.

“There’s no way to corroborate that unless someone else is at the scene who would talk about that,” she said. “There were members of law enforcement there. It was pretty porous. ... It seemed like the brutality he was describing was very consistent with the treatment of prisoners at the time.”

Although Georgia began to curtail the use of chain gangs in the 1960s, The New York Times, citing the American Correctional Association, said that at least 800 people were still in chain gangs by 1996.

Rembert’s chain gang canvases are some of his most intricate and dynamic. In “All Me,” his most complex and sophisticated work, each prisoner wears the same black-and-white striped uniform, the monochromatic figures moving cheek-by-jowl in a rhythmic knot of color and gesture. The convicts wield mauls whose mahogany handles divide the composition into zebra-like swaths of rhythmic thorns. In other works, like “Chain Gang Picking Cotton,” the figures lean forward to the ground in synchronous waves, their bodies curving into red earth they seem ready to kiss.

In “Chasing Me to My Grave,” Rembert writes of a chain gang he served on in Morgan County, Ga.:

“Morgan was all about work and busting you down. Not just physically but in a mental way, too. Everybody was locked down tight. They didn’t have no movement. There was no playing around, no freedom. And the warden is sitting there outside the fence, with his guards, just looking at you like he owns you or something.

“You had to go out in these caged trucks. You would go out with 10 or 12 guys. You’d climb in the truck, sit down, and they would shackle you to the truck. All these prejudiced guards would talk a bunch of crap to you. They were ignorant, too. I remember one day we were out doing a bridge job. At lunch break, I was sitting there talking to the guard. He had a can and he opened it with a knife. It was a can of dog food that looked like corned-beef hash.

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"I said to him, 'Hey, boss, what are you eating that dog food for?' He said, 'Oh, that's my wife. I told her about mixing the dog cans up with the food!' I think he couldn't read."

While in prison, Rembert learned how to read and write. A fellow inmate taught him to tool leather. Released in 1974, he and his wife moved to Connecticut, where Rembert first began to work on the docks in Bridgeport.

Not until he was in his 50s, at the urging of his wife, did he begin putting his stories onto leather. In 1996, at a community meeting, the couple met Sharon McBlain who, with her husband, Phil, runs an antiquarian bookshop in Hamden. In gratitude for the McBlains' kindness to him, Rembert gave them a canvas painting at Christmas.

With the McBlains' encouragement, Rembert continued his artwork, which hung in the Hamden bookshop and began to sell. Among those who first spotted Rembert's talent was Jock Reynolds, former director of the Yale University Art Gallery. "Some of his best pieces are just knockouts," said Reynolds, who initiated Rembert's first Yale exhibit in 2000.

The memoir ends with the gap in Rembert's story that he was never able to fill – his mother's abandonment of him at age 3 months, and his yearslong search to plug that void. "I think my mother followed me, in my mind, everywhere I went," he writes.

Suffering from several health conditions in recent years, Rembert died on March 31, 2021. As he requested, Reynolds said, Rembert was buried in New Haven's Grove Street Cemetery, "because he always insisted 'I am going to be somebody,'" Reynolds said.

Ironically, Reynolds marveled, Winfred Rembert shares the same resting place as Eli Whitney, inventor of the cotton gin.