



Colorado Book Club Resource

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR WRITING TO SAVE A LIFE BY JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN

1. Why was Louis Till's confidential service file leaked to the press two weeks before the grand jury convened to determine the fate of Emmett Till's murderers? What effect do you think the file's revelations had on the jury's assumptions about Emmett?
2. How do the statistics on the racial breakdown of American soldiers executed after court martials in World War II found by Wideman influence his assumptions about Louis's trial?
3. When Wideman receives Louis Till's confidential file from the army, its pages aren't numbered and they don't describe the events of Louis's life in order. Why do you think Wideman is driven to number the pages himself? What problem does he encounter when he tries to do so?
4. What does Wideman find in the Louis Till file about how the results of Louis's court martial were authorized for release? Does the limited material that exists lead you to suspect there were correspondences setting the groundwork for the leak that weren't included?
5. What contradictions does Wideman find in the testimony of the Italian residents of the house in which Louis and Fred A. McMurray, a black soldier and his supposed accomplice, allegedly raped two women and murdered one of them? Who was the third soldier at the scene on the night of the rapes, and why do you think he was not charged with a crime?
6. Is Wideman surprised by the desolation he finds when he travels to Promiseland, South Carolina, his father's birthplace, to visit the graves of his father's family? What does the crumbling settlement signify to him?
7. Why did Wideman, as a child, repeatedly decline to visit his grandfather in Virginia despite his grandfather's eagerness to host him? Would you have made the same decision?
8. When Wideman abandons the book he is writing about Emmett Till, he defines his new project as his "yearning to make some sense out of the American darkness that disconnects colored fathers from sons" (page 17). How does his narrative go about accomplishing this ambitious goal?
9. Throughout Writing to Save a Life Wideman focuses on the process in which he writes the book, describing how he came to Louis Till's story and how researching it changed him. How does the focus on process affect your reading experience?



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10. Wideman's approach to discovering what truly happened to Louis Till "assume[s] certain prerogatives" by "allowing [his] fiction to enter other people's true stories" (page 34). He imagines the motivations and thoughts of his subjects as he provides factual context about the social and economic conditions in which they lived. How does taking these licenses reflect that the Louis Till file itself, though narrated in an objective tone, in fact "writes fiction" (page 113)?

Questions from simonschuster.com



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