



The Hairstons: An American Family in Black and White

Henry Wiencek

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The Hairstons are extraordinary families, both black and white, who share a complex and compelling history that embodies the legacy of slavery and shows how that legacy has passed into our own time.

Opening at the remote North Carolina plantation of Cooleemee, *The Hairstons* reads like a gothic tale filled with vexing mysteries. In an attempt to resolve those mysteries, Henry Wiencek crisscrossed the old plantation country in Virginia, North Carolina, and Mississippi, seeking out Hairston descendants and immersing himself in the musty archives of plantations and courthouses. The result is a richly textured portrait of seven generations that examines the ambiguities of slavery and its painful aftermath.

The black family's story traces the triumphant rise of a remarkable people--the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of slaves--who took their rightful place in mainstream America. They are people who tilled the land, built schools and churches, fought for civil rights, and shed their blood in war.

In contrast, it was the fate of the white family, once one of the wealthiest in America, to endure the decline and fall of the Old South. At the heart of their experience lies the story of a lost child. Wiencek's search for the true account of her life peels away layers of lies and myth to reveal a tale the slaveholders and their descendants had kept hidden for almost a century and a half. Surprisingly, it was a tale not of horror, but rather of love and heroism powerful enough to shake the foundation myth of the Old South.

The Hairstons ultimately addresses the universal human struggle to come to terms with the past, and offers a parable of redemption, one that 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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