



Remembering Reet and Shine: Two Black Men, One Struggle

Michael Schwalbe

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Matthew Mason and Anthony Atwater, two working-class African Americans who lived and died in the American South, led double lives. To family and the black community, they were local men, fathers, and companions. In the dominant white world, where they earned their wages, they were known by their nicknames, Dr. Reet and Shine.

In this dual biography, Michael Schwalbe finds these monikers to be both endearing and degrading. Like other black men of their era, Mason and Atwater created personas. Mason became "Dr. Reet," a witty entertainer to his white employers. Atwater became "Shine," a streetwise stud who was skilled in love and violence. Each persona seemed like a solution, but bore unanticipated costs.

Grandson of a slave and born to a sharecropping family in 1911, Mason worked for fifty years for an all-white aristocratic fraternity, though most of his children would go on to professional careers. Atwater, born in 1933, showed great promise as a child and had ambitions to be an engineer, but by middle age had brought himself close to ruin. Both men struggled with alcoholism, both men created personas to help cope with the strains of their lives, and both men emerged from years of emotional turmoil to find peace.

Mixing biography, memoir, and journalism, *Remembering Reet and Shine* delves into the southern past, following Mason and Atwater as they age, decline, and die. It also explores the great contradiction of American manhood that arises between the expectation of control and the reality of powerlessness. This moving account does not herald heroes or saints, but raises the profile of ordinary men trying to reconcile the demands of manhood with the limits imposed by social forces beyond their control.

Michael Schwalbe is a professor of sociology at North Carolina State University. He is the author of *The Sociologically Examined Life* and *Unlocking the Iron Cage: The Men's Movement, Gender Politics, and American Culture*.



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