Richard Wright biography

SYNOPSIS

African-American writer and poet Richard Wright was born on September 4, 1908 in Roxie, Mississippi and published his first short story at the age of 16. Later, he found employment with the Federal Writers Project and received critical acclaim for Uncle Tom's Children, a collection of four stories. He’s well known for the 1940 bestseller Native Son and his 1945 autobiography Black Boy. Wright died in Paris, France on November 28, 1960.

EARLY YEARS

Richard Nathaniel Wright was born on September 4, 1908 near Natchez, Mississippi. The grandson of slaves and the son of a sharecropper, Wright was largely raised by his mother, a caring woman who became a single parent after her husband left the family when Wright was five years old.

Schooled in Jackson, Mississippi, Wright only managed to get a ninth grade education, but he was a voracious reader and showed early on he had a gift with words. When he was 16, a short story of his was published in a southern African-American newspaper.

After leaving school, Wright worked a series of odd jobs. In his free time he delved into American literature, going so far as to forge a note so he could secure a library card.

The more he read about the world, the more he longed to see it and make a permanent break from the Jim Crow South. "I want my life to count for something," he told a friend.

THE YOUNG WRITER

In 1927, Wright finally left the South and moved to Chicago, where he worked at a post office and also swept streets. But like so many Americans struggling through the Depression, bouts of poverty settled into his life. Wright's frustration with American capitalism led him to join the Communist Party in 1932.

When he could, Wright continued to plow through books and write. He eventually joined the Federal Writers’ Project, and in 1937, with dreams of making it as a writer, he moved to New York City, where he was told he stood a better chance of getting published.

COMMERCIAL AND CRITICAL SUCCESS

A year later, Wright published Uncle Tom’s Children, a collection of four stories. The book proved to be a significant turning point in his career. The stories earned him a $500 prize from Story magazine and led to a 1939 Guggenheim Fellowship.

More acclaim followed in 1940 with the publication of the novel Native Son, which told the story of 20-year-old African-American male Bigger Thomas. The book brought Wright fame and freedom to write. It was a regular atop the bestseller lists and became the first book by an African-American writer to be selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club. A stage version (by Wright and Paul Green) followed in 1941, and Wright himself later played the title role in a film version made in Argentina.

In 1945, Wright published Black Boy, which offered a moving account of his childhood and youth in the South. It also depicts extreme poverty and his accounts of racial violence against blacks. The book greatly advanced Wright's reputation, but after living mainly in Mexico (1940–6), he had become so disillusioned with both the Communist Party and white America that he went off to Paris, where he lived the rest of his life as an expatriate.

He continued to write novels, including The Outsider (1953) and The Long Dream (1958), and nonfiction, such as Black Power (1954) and White Man, Listen! (1957), and was regarded by many writers as an inspiration. His naturalistic fiction no longer has the standing it once enjoyed, but his life and works remain exemplary.

Wright died of a heart attack on November 28, 1960 in Paris, France.

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