

(1986–91), a Fellow of the Academy of American Poets (1995), and a Lannan Literary Award for Poetry (2000).

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### Wright, Richard (1908–1960)

A novelist, autobiographer, fiction writer, essayist, scriptwriter, dramatist, poet, and editor, Richard Wright was born in Natchez, Mississippi, in 1908. When Richard was six, his father abandoned the family, forcing his mother to work at low-paying jobs and often causing Richard and his brother, Leon, to go without food. When he was about eight and living in Elaine, Arkansas, where his mother had taken the family to live with her sister, they were forced to take flight in the middle of the night after learning that white men had killed his uncle because they had long envied his successful liquor business. Richard's family eventually returned to Mississippi, where, because of his mother's illness, they lived with his grandmother, forced to endure her religious fervor.

At age 15, Wright, who never completed his formal education because his family continually moved about, started reading widely, becoming influenced by such major writers as H. L. Mencken, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, and Theodore Dreiser. Convinced he could live a better life elsewhere, Wright left the South for Chicago in 1927, where, during the Great Depression, he worked at menial jobs and joined the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers' Project and became an active member of the Communist Party, publishing fiction, articles, and poems in communist newspapers. However, coming to resent the narrow-mindedness of his fellow members, Wright resigned from the party in 1944.

In the interim Wright had published *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), a collection of stories that addressed the racism and violence southern blacks were daily forced to endure. Dissatisfied with the general response to his work, which had won a prize offered by *Story* magazine, Wright decided to write a book that "would be so hard and deep that [readers] would have to face it without the consolation of tears." His next book was the much-acclaimed novel *NATIVE SON* (1940), which addresses the dire consequences of urban ghetto conditions in Chicago's South Side, where blacks lived oppressed lives much as they did in the rural South. Born, like Wright, in Mississippi, Bigger Thomas, the 20-year-old protagonist, lives in a one-bedroom, rat-infested apartment with his widowed mother, his sister Vera, and his brother Buddy. While working as a chauffeur for the Daltons, a wealthy white family, Bigger accidentally kills their daughter, Mary; driven by fear, he mutilates her body and stuffs it in the furnace. Although he tries to escape—and even to extort money from the Daltons—Bigger is caught, tried, and sentenced to die in the electric chair. Wright's protégé, JAMES BALDWIN, celebrated the novel as a forceful statement about "what it meant to be a Negro in America." However, Baldwin also dismissed Wright's characterization of Bigger as a mere stereotype, lacking lifelike representation with his strengths and weaknesses.

Wright next published his autobiography, *BLACK BOY* (1945), which centers on the experiences of a young black boy's quest for identity in the South, in a world governed by Jim Crow laws. Although Wright is interested in exposing and attacking white oppression, he is also interested in unveiling factors other than race in the daily lives of blacks that enslaved and oppressed them, particularly orthodox Christianity, such as the Seventh-Day Adventist faith his grandmother practiced, which, he was convinced, pacified black people into subjugation. He added to *Black Boy* a second autobiographical account of his years in Chicago, urban and modern America, and his experiences in the Communist Party, and published it under the title *American Hunger*. The racial intolerance in the South highlighted in *Black Boy* seems to reenact itself in different ways in

the urban north and in the Communist Party as Wright presents it *American Hunger*.

After enjoying the success of *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, Wright moved with his second wife and daughter to Paris, France, in 1947, where the impact of French intellectuals, especially the existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus, on his writing became evident in his novels *The Outsider* (1953), *Savage Holiday* (1954), and *The Long Dream* (1958). None of these novels matched the public acclaim his early works received, however.

Wright's *The Outsider* is one of the first existentialist novels written by an American author; it is also a "raceless" novel, for Wright is more concerned with the psychological behavior of his character, Cross Daemon, the embodiment of good and evil, than with race. Mistakenly reported killed in a train accident, Daemon assumes a new identity, joins the Communist Party, and kills in an attempt to navigate the meaning of life and of his individual identity. Similarly, *Savage Holiday* is a psychological thriller about a white retired insurance salesman, Erskine Fowler, who gradually becomes a criminal. When Fowler's neighbor's son sees him standing fully naked outside his apartment, after he has accidentally locked himself out, the youth, shocked, falls from the balcony to his death. When Mabel, the boy's mother, discovers who was responsible for her son's death, Fowler is forced to kill her. In *Savage Holiday*, Fowler represents the modern alienated man.

In *The Long Dream* Wright probes the psychological development of Fishbelly, a black southern youth who is forced into maturity by confronting his father's immoral business tactics and the racial power dynamics in the South. Fishbelly's father, a materialist whose wealth comes from his prostitution business, teaches his son that a rich black person is equal to whites. When the police chief arranges his father's murder, Fishbelly discovers that his father's dictum is a myth. When his girlfriend is killed in a fire and he is jailed falsely for raping a white woman, Fishbelly comes to grips with the reality of his true destiny, which seems to be in the hands of the police chief. After serving a two-year sentence for the alleged rape, Fishbelly leaves the

United States for France, where he hopes to start a new life. None of these expatriate novels received much favorable critique. Scholars argued that by becoming an expatriate Wright had washed his hands of the African-American experience in the United States. This view has been challenged and is generally no longer accepted.

Wright's collection of short stories, *Eight Men* (1961), was published posthumously. One of the stories, "The Man Who Lived Underground" was based on Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*. Rejected by publishers in the late 1930s but posthumously published in 1963, his novel *Lawd Today* did not receive positive public response until recently. In a racist urban environment, Jake Jackson and his three friends from the post office sink lower and lower into lust, a life of sexual obsession with white women. Another posthumously published work, a novella titled *Rite of Passage* (1994), which Wright completed in 1945 and later tried to include in *Eight Men* just before his death, unmasks whiteness as a mark of ideology and racial privilege. The story centers on the main character's rite of passage as he moves from being a prospective student to becoming a criminal. The 15-year-old black male protagonist, Johnny Gibbs, is a hardworking student, but his whole life is shattered when he learns that he is a foster child and city authorities demand that he move to live with another family. Unable to deal with the identity crisis, Johnny seeks solace in gang membership.

In addition to fiction, Wright wrote hundreds of haiku poems, which were published posthumously, in 2000. He seemed to turn to a deeper vision of life in haiku while ignoring the Western versions of haiku such as Ezra Pound had written.

Wright published nonfiction works as well, including *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (1941), a textual and photographic documentary about the racial discrimination in the rural South and in the urban North following the Great Migration. He also wrote travelogues, *Black Power* (1954), *The Color Curtain* (1956), *Pagan Spain* (1957), and *White Man, Listen!* (1957). *Black Power* details Kwame Nkrumah's anticolonial strategies in establishing the Gold Coast as an independent Ghana in 1953.

*The Color Curtain* records the Bandung Conference in Indonesia that united the leaders of decolonized nations. *Pagan Spain* explains how the fascist leadership of Franco oppressed religious groups (non-Catholics) and gender identities (women). Within the context of these travel narratives, *White Man, Listen!* emerges as a text shaped by Wright's attempt to dismantle the imperial discourse, writing the history of blacks inside the West, as he maps the territory of what constitutes a Western intellectual.

All in all, Wright's works stand out as a forceful statement on the ideology and racial violence of 20th-century America. In a racist world, Wright's works demand attention. His attacks are directed at white oppression while deconstructing the ideology of whiteness that assumes that racist oppression has produced minimal effects on the black mind. A prolific writer and intellectual, Wright died in Paris on November 28, 1960.

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### Wright, Sarah Elizabeth (1928– )

Novelist, poet, essayist, and activist, Sarah Elizabeth Wright was born December 9, 1928, in Wetipquin, part of the Eastern Shore of Maryland, to Willis Charles and Mary Amelia Moore Wright. As the third of nine children, Sarah witnessed her parents' effort to make a living in the uncompromising environment of Maryland's Eastern Shore. Willis Wright, a man of diverse talents, was an oys-

terman, farmer, pianist, and organist, and Mary Wright helped support the family by doing farm and factory work and serving as a barber. According to Guilford, Wright showed writing talent as a child. Her grade school teachers encouraged her, and the support resulted in Wright's attending Howard University from 1945 to 1949. While at Howard, she received support and guidance from STERLING BROWN and OWEN DODSON and began an acquaintance with LANGSTON HUGHES, who continued to be interested in her writing until the year before his death.

Still searching for an identity, Wright moved to the Philadelphia area and attended Cheyney State Teacher's College (now Cheyney State College) and the University of Pennsylvania. While in Philadelphia, Wright taught school, did bookkeeping, and became an office manager for a printing and publishing firm owned by the Krafts. She also helped found the Philadelphia Writer's Workshop, where she met poet Lucy Smith. With the help of Kraft Publishing, Wright and Smith published a collection of their poems, *Give Me a Child* (1955). In 1959 Wright's move to New York proved to be a vital step in her life. In addition to marrying Joseph Kaye, a man who supported her writing efforts, Wright joined the Harlem Writers Guild, a group guided by her mentor and friend, JOHN OLIVER KILLENS. Wright helped organize the first and second national conferences of black writers in 1959 and 1965; she was among other guild writers, such as PAULE MARSHALL and OSSIE DAVIS, who offered mutual support.

This cultural and artistic stimulation and the creative writing workshops helped Wright create *This Child's Gonna Live* (1969), the novel that has garnered her national attention. She has continued to write for varied audiences, including the biography for children *A. Phillip Randolph, Integration in the Workplace* (1990) and the introduction to *Missing in Action and Presumed Dead* (1992), a collection by African poet Rashidah Ismaili. Wright has also contributed her poetry to such volumes as *Poetry of the Negro, 1746–1970* (1970), edited by Langston Hughes and ARNA BONTEMPS, and *The Poetry of Black America* (1973), edited by Arnold Adoff.