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Jim Crow Stories

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RICHARD WRIGHT

(1908-1960)



Richard Wright was born in Roxie, Mississippi. His grandparents had been slaves and his father had abandoned his family when he was six. His mother worked as a cook to support the family. They suffered from extreme poverty, especially after his mother became sick. Wright wanted to write from a very young age and he was overjoyed when, at the age of 16, a local newspaper printed one of the first stories that he wrote. Although no one in his family encouraged his dream, he refused to give it up. He worked at a number of jobs in the South but was unable to accept the prejudices and insults of Jim Crow. He kept reading and thinking about becoming a writer.

Did you know ...

Wright secretly borrowed a library card so that he could check out books.

"Lynching is a terror that has many forms; there is lynching of men's spirits as well as their bodies, and spiritual lynching occurs every day for the Negro in the South."



In 1927, he left Memphis, Tennessee to migrate to Chicago. There, after working in unskilled jobs, he was given an opportunity to write. He joined the John Reed Club in Chicago, an organization set up by the Communist Party to recruit writers into its ranks. Wright joined the Party, and in 1937 he went to New York to write for the Daily Worker, the Party's newspaper. His first book, UNCLE TOM'S CHILDREN (1938), was greeted with critical praise. His next work, NATIVE SON (1940), the story of a black man who inadvertently kills a white woman, made him famous. The book was a best-seller and was staged successfully as a play on Broadway (1941) by the great director Orson Welles. Wright



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himself played Bigger Thomas, the book's main character, in a motion-picture version made in Argentina in 1951.

In 1944 he left the Communist Party because of political and personal differences. His next book, *BLACK BOY*, told the wrenching story of his childhood and youth in the South, detailing the extreme poverty in which he lived, his experience of racism and white violence, and his growing awareness of literature. His books made Wright the voice for an entire generation of black Americans. After World War II, Wright settled in Paris; among his political works of that period was *WHITE MAN, LISTEN!* (1957). Toward the end of his life, Wright had become very much involved in the Pan-African movement. He also was engaged in a literary quarrel with a new generation of black writers including James Baldwin. Wright's autobiographical *AMERICAN HUNGER*, which recounts experiences with the Communist Party after moving to the North, was published after his death in 1977.

--Richard Wormser

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