

FRAMING RICHARD WRIGHT

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🦋 FRAMING RICHARD WRIGHT*

BY HAZEL ROWLEY

Lives are turned into stories every day, long before they are transformed into written versions, and the imaginative inventiveness with which we add color to the stories is part of the delight of living. But what is striking about Richard Wright's life is that the opposite seems to have happened. His life was as bizarre, colorful, and interesting as fiction, and yet, during his life and since, others constantly made the man and his life into a statement. His writing has been treated in exactly the same way. It is as if this rare black butterfly had to be captured, pinned by the wings, pressed into an impression, and labeled.

Friends, journalists, commentators, admirers, and detractors—all have had their pronouncements to make on Wright and his life. Later the biographers and scholars and thesis writers came along. But whereas other writers have been expanded into myth or legend—one thinks of Scott Fitzgerald or Hemingway or Albert Camus—Richard Wright has been systematically trivialized and *reduced*.

He has been put in different frames—different people have quite different perspectives on the man and his life—but in the process the living man at the center of the various portraits has been somehow made to look smaller. So many of the commentators, black and white, have managed to dull the shimmer of his brilliance, to make him seem less courageous than he was, less exceptional. His writing, so electric with passion and energy, is made, somehow, to fade on the page.

Two very different introductions to *Native Son* present a striking example of this. They were written 46 years apart: in 1940, when Harper & Brothers first published the novel, and in 1986, on the occasion of yet another new edition.

Introductions are not critical reviews; introductions are meant to be biased—in favor of the writer. The role of the introducer, surely, is to play the benevolent host who welcomes the new reader, with a gracious gesture, into the room where the feast is to be held. Richard

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Wright understood this. He wrote many introductions to other people's books, and they were always generous.

In 1940, Richard Wright was not an unknown. His book of short stories, *Uncle Tom's Children*, had appeared two years before and been highly acclaimed—by Eleanor Roosevelt, among others. But the publishers clearly believed that this first novel by a black author would gain credibility if a well-known white critic introduced it.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher's introduction was short. She commented on the Dostoevskian depths of human experience plumbed by the novel. She added: "I do not at all mean to imply that *Native Son* as literature is comparable to the masterpieces of Dostoevsky."

"The author shows genuine literary skill," she wrote. But she made it clear that the value of Wright's novel was as a sociological case study. The circumstances in which Negro youths found themselves were comparable, it seemed to her, with those set up in scientific experiments to produce "psychopathic upsets" in rats and sheep. The behavior that resulted, as exemplified by Bigger Thomas, was also similar:

Our society puts Negro youth in the situation of the animal in the psychological laboratory in which a neurosis is to be caused. . . . *Native Son* is the first report in fiction we have had from those . . . whose behavior-patterns give evidence of the same bewildered, senseless tangle of abnormal nerve-reactions.

David Bradley, an aspiring young black writer, stumbled upon Canfield's introduction to *Native Son* while doing graduate research in the British Library in the 1970s. He was shocked that Canfield said things "you would expect an introducer *not* to say." Her words gave him pause to think very warily about the response of white critics to a black writer:

I could not assume I was writing well if white critics praised my work. . . . They might praise it to the skies while finding it inept or unfit, for they might think me not a writer, but a laboratory rat just slightly more articulate than his fellows.

Bradley hated *Native Son*, "with a passion." He hated what he saw as its technical flaws. "It violated most of the principles of novelistic construction I was struggling to master.") He "hated" Bigger Thomas, he hated the cold-blooded way he murdered his black girlfriend, and he hated the dismal portrait of black life generally. It seemed to Bradley that Wright "was pandering to white expectations" and had "sold his people down the river to make a buck."

Canfield's promotion of the novel as a sociological "report" made Bradley wonder whether the reason for the popularity of *Native Son* in the 1940s was that it confirmed the prejudices of white readers. He mused: "I myself did not want a nut like Bigger Thomas sitting next to me on a bus or in a schoolroom, and certainly I did not want him moving in next door."

In 1986, by then the well-known author of *The Chaneyville Incident*, Bradley was asked to write an introduction to a new Book-of-the-Month edition of *Native Son*. He read the novel again. He did not like it any more than he had ever done. In the end he accepted it as a "first novel," with flaws that were typical of first novels. Rather than condemning it as inaccurate, as he had previously done, he now saw it as a reflection of the times in which it was written. He reminded himself that in "Richard Wright's America, a best-selling, financially independent novelist—if he was a Negro—could not lunch with his agent in a midtown Manhattan restaurant, could not buy a house in Greenwich Village, and could only rent an apartment there if he found a landlord willing to defy half the neighborhood." Bigger's story, Bradley told himself, was "no more melodramatic, crude or claustrophobic than the times themselves."

Now . . . I can accept that "Native Son" is, in fact, a valuable document—not of sociology but of history. It reminds us of a time in this land of freedom when a man could have this bleak and frightening vision of his people, and when we had so little contact with one another that the vision could be accepted as fact.¹

Both of these introducers lost sight altogether of Richard Wright's novel. Both dismissed *Native Son* as a work of art. They ignored its emotional power; they ignored its narrative skill. Bradley, by viewing it in terms of a historical document, disregarded the interesting fact that the novel was still widely discussed 46 years on. Scathing about Canfield reading the novel as a report, Bradley read it as a document. Canfield had declared that Wright was no Dostoevsky; Bradley seemed to say that Wright was scarcely even a writer.

Canfield, very much the white subject looking at the "other," felt quite comfortable about comparing the black community to experimental rats and sheep. Bradley, a proud black man who had grown up in the Civil Rights era, was not impressed. For the same reasons, he was deeply offended by the negative picture Wright painted of their race.

The two introductions represent two poles of the same phenomenon—and this is a common pattern in the framing of Richard Wright.

The white critic, looking at Wright from the outside, is patronizing. The black critic, claiming racial identification and sometimes close acquaintance with Wright, brings Wright down to size from the inside.

Among Wright's papers in the Beinecke Library is a letter from William Faulkner. Undated, it was probably written in September 1945:

Dear Richard Wright:

I have just read *BLACK BOY*. It needed to be said, and you said it well. Though I am afraid (I am speaking now from the point of view of one who believes that the man who wrote *NATIVE SON* is potentially an artist) it will accomplish little of what it should accomplish, since only they will be moved and grieved by it who already know and grieve over this situation.

You said it well, as well as it could have been said in this form. Because I think you said it much better in *Native Son*. I hope you will keep on saying it, but I hope you will say it as an artist, as in *Native Son*. I think you will agree that the good lasting stuff comes out of one individual's imagination and sensitivity to and comprehension of the suffering of Everyman, Anyman, not out of the memory of his own grief.²

Faulkner is telling Wright that *Black Boy* is not as good as his previous book where, even then, he was only "potentially an artist"! Faulkner talks only in terms of what the book might accomplish, as if Wright were merely writing a political tract. Once again, the novel is reduced to a message.

It is Michel Fabre, a white French man, who has written the most generous—and scholarly—biography of Wright. Nevertheless, it has a defensive tone. The title is *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* published by Morrow in 1973, and in the introduction Fabre pursues this theme of imperfect achievement:

Wright attempted to act as a critical conscience of our world. If he was never wholly successful, the partial replies to his questions and his incompleting projects still represent a greater gain for mankind than a more perfect success as a traditional writer would have brought.

Coming from France where Richard Wright was frequently featured in the press as a major international writer, Michel Fabre was shocked when he went to America in 1962 and encountered a lukewarm response to Wright. He admits to being influenced by this: "His poor reputation in academic circles . . . led me to question my own enthusiasm."

In black circles there has never been a wholesale celebration of Richard Wright. Langston Hughes disliked the message that *Native Son* was giving to its mainly white readers. In 1946 he wrote a piece for the *New York Age* called "It's About Time."

With all of the millions of colored people in America who never murder anybody, or rape or get raped or want to rape, who never lust after white bodies, or cringe before white stupidity, or Uncle Tom, or go crazy with race, or off-balance with frustration—with all the millions of normal human, lovable colored folks in the United States, it is about time some Negro writer put some of them into a book.³

W. E. B. Du Bois considered *Black Boy* “terribly overdrawn.” He cautioned readers against reading it as a report. “The reader must regard it as creative writing rather than simply a record of life.”⁴

But it was James Baldwin whose words have endured, forever associating Richard Wright with “protest writing.” In “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” the 1949 essay that first brought Baldwin to the attention of the public, Baldwin compared *Native Son* to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, that “very bad novel” (as he put it) by Harriet Beecher Stowe. In both, the Negro is “sub-human”; both novels perpetuate “that monstrous legend” they were written to destroy. Indeed, “the protest novel, so far from being disturbing, is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene, ramifying that framework we believe to be so necessary.” And in one of his dazzling displays of verbal acrobatics, with vague allusions to both the Bible and *Native Son*, Baldwin thrusts Stowe and Wright, white woman and black man, into a lustful battle that can only end in their mutual destruction.

Bigger is Uncle Tom’s descendant, flesh of his flesh, so exactly opposite a portrait that, when the books are placed together, it seems that the contemporary Negro novelist and the dead New England woman are locked together in a deadly, timeless battle. . . . Indeed, within this web of lust and fury, black and white can only thrust and counter-thrust, long for each other’s slow, exquisite death; death by torture, acid, knives and burning; the thrust, the counter-thrust, the longing making the heavier that cloud which blinds and suffocates them both, so that they go down into the pit together.⁵

The black response to Wright has been systematically more negative than the white response, mainly because his writing is seen to confirm white racist stereotypes of black experience. But what about Wright himself, the man Ralph Ellison hailed as “so wonderful an example of human possibility”?⁶

There is undoubtedly another, less rational, element in the black response to Wright—something Cornel West describes in *The Future of the Race*:

White supremacy drums deeply into the hearts, minds, and souls of black people, causing them to expect little of one another and themselves. This

black insecurity and self-doubt produces a debilitating black jealousy in the face of black "success." . . . Understandably, under conditions of invisibility and namelessness, most of those blacks with "visibility" and a "name" in the white world are often the object of black scorn and contempt.⁷

In 1964, four years after Wright's death, Horace Cayton, Arna Bon-temps, and Saunders Redding, three black intellectuals who had known Wright personally, spoke on a panel entitled "Reflections on Richard Wright." Saunders Redding told the audience:

Dick was a small-town boy—a small-town Mississippi boy—all of his days. The hog maw and the collard greens. He was fascinated by the existentialist group for a while, but he didn't really understand them.

Redding was convinced (like most of Wright's American critics) that Wright's "abandonment of the place where he lived" was the cause of what he described as Wright's "unraveling." Wright, said Redding, "no longer had anything to write about." (Wright was, in fact, more prolific during his European years than at any other time.)

Horace Cayton commented:

Dick, you know, did not have a college education. He didn't even have a high school education. In some respects, the first drafts of his manuscripts looked almost illiterate. He had to rewrite his books many times. He rewrote *Native Son*, to my knowledge, at least four or five times. This was his method, and I trace it directly to his lack of formal education.

Numerous first drafts in the Beinecke Library show Cayton's assertion to be wildly untrue. Wright made occasional spelling mistakes, but no more than any other of his (better-schooled) writer friends, like Nelson Algren or Ralph Ellison. As for revisions, would Cayton have presumed that Flaubert's painful search for the right word and constant re-writing of the same sentence was because he was "almost illiterate"?

The most recent biography of Wright, published by Warner Books in 1988, is by Margaret Walker. The trite, sensationalist title, *Richard Wright: Daemoniac Genius*, mirrors the tone of the book. It quickly becomes apparent to the reader that Walker was in love with Wright in the late 1930s, a passion that was not reciprocated, and that she has not forgiven him his preference for white women. A series of rhetorical questions in the preface are recurrent themes in the book: "Wright married *two* white women. What were his reasons, and why did both marriages fail? Third, there was a hint and smell of gossip and sexual deviancy. Was the man kinky?"

Richard Wright was to be painfully disillusioned by the lack of soli-

darity among black intellectuals. He himself was known for his generosity to other writers. He helped Baldwin, he helped Ellison, he was a mentor to Nelson Algren; his papers in the Beinecke Library include dozens of letters from writers thanking him for his encouragement and support. In an undated letter, Chester Himes wrote to Wright: "It is really warming to a new novelist to learn that the petty jealousies, snipings, bickerings, animosities that have plagued Negro writers are being put aside in this new school which it has fallen your responsibility to head."⁸

Solidarity among black writers was important to Richard Wright. Back in 1937, at the very beginning of his writing career, he wrote an important essay called "Blueprint for Negro Writing." In it he expressed the hope that future black writers would tap into the rich body of Negro folklore; he hoped Marxism would give them a "sense of dignity"; he hoped they would see *all* writers, white and black, as part of their heritage, and he hoped they would try to present "the complexity, the strangeness, the magic wonder of life that plays like a bright sheen over the most sordid existence." The essay was, in fact, a celebration of "Negroes' humanity." His final point, in this ten-point manifesto, was a call for solidarity among black writers. The task ahead, for the Negro writer trying to break out of his traditional isolation, was daunting enough:

Writers faced with such tasks can have no possible time for malice or jealousy. The conditions for the growth of each writer depend too much upon the good work of other writers. Every first rate novel, poem, or play lifts the level of consciousness higher.⁹

The very last talk Richard Wright ever gave, at the American Church in Paris, three weeks before his death, as passionate as any talk he had ever given, deplored the "deadly fight" that existed between the black brothers.¹⁰ They lived, he said, in a system of oppression controlled by whites and administered by blacks. Whites did not need to destroy blacks themselves; they had blacks to do it for them. Marcus Garvey, Paul Robeson: once whites found them too dangerous, the black community did the rest. Among Wright's own friends and acquaintances—he was prepared to name names: James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Chester Himes, Ollie Harrington—he had witnessed violent eruptions and fierce brawls. Yes, there was rivalry among whites too. But black rivalry, more vicious and more pernicious, was due to the humiliating position of black intellectuals within the white world.

Why was Wright speaking out about this? Why was he appearing to

be telling tales on his race? "I mention this to whites so that they can, if they have any humanity in them at all, know the ultimate effects of their pressure upon black life, upon the Negro artist and intellectual."

This was always the reason why Richard Wright spoke out. He wanted to tell the truth, as he perceived it. He was not pandering to whites; he wanted whites to understand the impossible situation in which they put black people. He told the audience that blacks themselves were too ashamed to talk about the invidious "system" that humiliated them. And, he well knew, they would not like to hear it from him, either.

From the time he first put pen to paper, Richard Wright became a "signifier" for race. There is no issue that is more emotionally charged than race. What he writes about, and what Wright himself symbolizes, arouses so much passion that it is scarcely possible to see Richard Wright—or his work—through the steam. But what a tragedy! Richard Wright's art has been reduced to a message. The man himself has been stripped of his extraordinary complexity.

My challenge, as I see it, is to restore to Wright something of the "rainbow-like intangibility" that Virginia Woolf saw as the essence of personality. My role is neither a benevolent introducer nor a critical reviewer; I am not an insider; I am a biographer. My aim is to peel back the layers—the decades of *painting over* Richard Wright—to recover a sense of the man himself. A man who was a formidable writer and a passionate public intellectual. A man who, in private, struggled with a great deal more than words on a blank page.

1. David Bradley, "On Rereading 'Native Son'," *New York Times Magazine*, 7 December 1986. This article is adapted from his introduction to the Book-of-the-Month edition.
2. Wright papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University, box 97, folder 1328.
3. Hughes' draft is in the Langston Hughes papers, Beinecke Library (Box 529–65), dated 22 May 1946. He has crossed out the sentence that most obviously refers to Wright: "Sure, it is wonderful for Negro authors to have best-sellers and Books-of-the-Month read by thousands of white readers."
4. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Richard Wright Looks Back," *New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review*, 4 March 1945, p. 2.
5. James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel" (June 1949), *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).
6. Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug" (1963) in *Shadow and Act* (London, Secker & Warburg, 1967).
7. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Cornel West, *The Future of the Race*. (New York: Knopf, 1996), p. 103.
8. Chester Himes to Wright, n.d. Wright papers, box 99, folder 1393.
9. Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," *New Challenge*, Fall, 1937.
10. Richard Wright, "The Position of the Negro Artist and Intellectual in American Society," 8 November 1960, Wright papers, box 3, folder 41.