Richard Wright

Writer
1908–1960

The impulse to dream was slowly beaten out of me by experience. Now it surged up again and I hungered for books, new ways of looking and seeing.

—Richard Wright

When Richard Wright was four years old, he accidentally set the house on fire. As his punishment, he was beaten so badly that he lost consciousness and almost died. When he grew older, he suffered not from beatings but from poverty and hunger. Hoping for a better life, the Wrights moved from Mississippi to Memphis, Tennessee, when Richard was very young. Shortly after they arrived there, Wright’s father deserted the family. After he left, there was never enough money to eat. At one point, things were so bad that Wright’s mother placed him and his younger brother in an orphanage. Unhappy, he ran away but soon was caught. Shortly after this incident, his mother took her two boys to live with relatives in Arkansas.

The murder of Richard’s uncle, and his mother’s subsequent stroke, forced the Wrights to move again. This time they moved to Jackson, Mississippi, to live with Richard’s grandmother. The next few years were unhappy ones. Wright could not get along with his grandmother, and the family had very little to eat.

One encouraging thing about living in Jackson was that Wright was able to attend school regularly. Although his mother taught him to read, he had little formal schooling before the age of twelve. His love of reading and vivid imagination inspired him to become a writer. In the segregated society in which he lived, however, such an ambitious goal seemed impossible for a poor African-American child.

Discrimination and racial hostility tore at Wright’s self-respect. He dreamed of saving enough money to leave Jackson, but the menial jobs he managed to get did little more than provide him with food money. One day, in desperation, he stole a gun and some fruit preserves. With the money he made from selling them, he bought a ticket to Memphis.

In Memphis, Wright found work in an optical shop. Borrowing a library card from a friendly white man, he began reading whenever he could. Although he had gone no farther than the ninth grade, he soon became familiar with the writings of many of America’s finest authors.

About 1927, Wright moved to Chicago, hoping to find greater freedom and opportunity. He worked as a dishwasher, porter, postal clerk, and insurance salesman. But when the depression crippled the U.S. economy in the 1930s, Wright, like thousands of others, found himself unemployed. Frustrated and miserable, he joined the Communist Party, which promised racial justice. In 1944, he quit the party, believing that the Communists were using African-Americans more than they were helping them.

Wright’s dream of becoming a writer began to come true after he moved to New York City in 1937. Within a year, a collection of his stories, Uncle Tom’s Children, was published. These stories reflect the prejudice and discrimination Wright experienced while growing up in the South. Two years later, with the support of a Guggenheim Fellowship, his most famous novel,
Native Son, was published. It sold 200,000 copies in fewer than three weeks and established Wright as one of the country's leading authors. Unlike his earlier work, which portrays the rural South, Native Son explores racism and oppression in the North as it affects a young African-American man named Bigger Thomas.

Following the success of Native Son, Wright completed a folk history called Twelve Million Black Voices. In 1945, he finished Black Boy, the story of his childhood and youth. Even more popular than Native Son, this book reveals the terrible poverty and racism that stunted the lives of most southern African-American children at that time.

Following his move to Paris in 1946, Wright became the leader of a group of writers, artists, and other intellectuals. He wrote The Outsiders in 1953 and The Long Dream in 1958. In 1961, Eight Men was published, a book that includes his famous story "The Man Who Lived Underground." His second autobiography, American Hunger, was published in 1977 after his death.

Wright is considered one of the finest authors this country has ever produced. His insights into American society shocked the public and exposed the terrible effects of racial prejudice. Starved, beaten, and rejected as a child, and forced to face unrelenting racial prejudice and discrimination as an adult, Wright made his way north and then overseas. He persevered, he said,

full of a hazy notion that life could be lived with dignity, that the personalities of others should not be violated, that men should be able to confront other men without fear or shame, and that if men were lucky in their living on earth they might win some redeeming meaning for their having struggled and suffered here beneath the stars.
historical significance. Negro History Week began in February 1926 between the birthdays of Washington, Lincoln, and Frederick Douglass. The association published history kits with materials to be used for exhibits, lectures, skits, and curriculum development.

Although Woodson’s scholarly works and articles addressed the needs of scholars, Woodson felt that the association needed a periodical aimed at the needs of elementary and secondary school teachers. To reach this audience, Woodson began publishing the Negro History Bulletin in 1915. He believed that children who learned about the accomplishments of their African American forebears would become productive, emotionally balanced adults.

Because of Woodson’s indefatigable efforts, his ideas slowly caught on and by the Bicentennial Year (1976), Negro History Week became Black History Month with a celebration of the achievements of African Americans extended to encompass the entire month of February. The name of Woodson’s organization was changed to the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History.

The fact that the nation now commemorates Black History Month proves that Woodson’s mission was successful and his sacrifices beneficial. Today, African American history programs are celebrated not just in February but throughout the year because of the work of pioneers such as Woodson.

Woodson died in Washington, D.C., on April 3, 1950. Many of his colleagues agreed that Woodson, “through his scholarly writings, is responsible more than any other single person for familiarizing the American public with the contribution of the Negro to world history.”

— DEBRA NEWMAN HAM

RICHARD WRIGHT

1908-1960

Writer

Richard Wright was one of the most important writers of the twentieth century. During his remarkable literary career as a novelist, dramatist, essayist, autobiographer, and poet, Wright documented the experiences of African Americans in a hostile and racist society. Among his notable early works are Native Son, a novel portraying Chicago’s black ghetto, and the largely autobiographical Black Boy.

Born on September 4, 1908, in a sharecropper’s cabin on a plantation in Roxie, near Natchez, Mississippi, Wright was the first-born son of Nathan Wright, a sharecropper, and Ella Wilson Wright, a schoolteacher. Two years later, the Wrights had another child, Leon Alan Wright.

Life for the Wrights during the first two decades of the twentieth century was extremely difficult. The experiences of poverty and racism in the racially segregated South greatly influenced Wright’s literary works. Poverty forced Ella Wright and her two sons to move in 1911 from the farm to Natchez, Mississippi, to live with her family. Nathan Wright eventually abandoned farming to become an itinerant worker. He later joined his family in Natchez where he found work in a sawmill. In his efforts to improve the family’s economic status, Wright moved his family by steamboat to Memphis, Tennessee, in 1913.

The move to Memphis proved a new experience for Richard Wright and his brother. Their mother worked as a cook to support the family, and his father drifted into the atmosphere of Beale Street, with its bars, blues singers, and available women. Richard and Leon Wright learned to prefer street life to staying home alone.

By 1914 Wright’s father had deserted his family for another woman, which resulted in further financial hardship. With Richard’s mother working only at low-paying, menial jobs, Wright and his brother were frequently left without food. In his autobiography, Black Boy (1945), Wright records his incidents of privation:

Hunger had always been more or less at my elbow when I played, but now I began to wake up at night to find hunger standing at my bedside, staring at me guantly. The hunger I had known before this had been no grim, hostile stranger. It had been a normal hunger that had made me beg constantly for bread, and when I ate a crust or two I was satisfied. But this new hunger baffled me, scared me, made me angry and insistent.

Because of their destitute condition, Wright’s mother often sent Richard to his father’s job or home to beg for money. Wright wrote in Black Boy: “As the days slid past the image of my father became associated with my image of hunger, and whenever I felt hunger I thought of him with a deep biological bitterness.” Because of this, Wright remained estranged from his father into his adulthood.

When Wright’s mother became ill in 1915, her sons were sent temporarily to the Settlement House, a Methodist orphanage. Around the summer of 1916, when his mother recovered from her illness, she moved the family first to Jackson, Mississippi, then to Elaine, Arkansas, to live with her sister and her husband, Silas Hopkins. Wright became very fond of his uncle and spent a considerable amount of time with him. His first encounter with racial violence occurred, however, when a group of white men murdered his uncle in order to seize his valuable property. Fearful for their own lives, the Wrights and his aunt fled to West Helena, Arkansas. Wright was about nine years old when this incident occurred.

Following this event the family moved several more times over the years, disrupting the children’s education. In addition, their mother’s illnesses made regular attendance at school nearly impossible. Nonetheless, Wright showed an early interest in writing and, in ninth grade, saw his first story, “The Voodoo of Hell’s Half Acre,” published in the Southern Register, a black newspaper in Jackson, Mississippi.
Writing career begins to flourish  By November 1925, Wright returned to Memphis, where he found work as a dishwasher and delivery boy for the Merry Optical Company. Wright's mother and brother joined him in Memphis. Wright continued his passion for learning by reading magazines and the literary works of H. L. Mencken, Fedor Dostoievski, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, and Theodore Dreiser. To gain access to such works, he forged a note to present to the librarian at the "whites only" public library. Wright was strongly influenced by the works of Mencken, whose writings awakened him to the possibility of social protest.

Wright and his family left Memphis for Chicago in 1927 in search of better economic opportunities. Chicago, for Wright, was an interesting and stimulating city that was not as racially oppressive as the South, although this urban center had other problems associated with a large metropolitan city. After a series of menial jobs as dishwasher, porter, insurance salesman, and substitute postal clerk, the Depression forced him into unemployment and relief.

In 1931 Wright published the short story "Superstition" in Abbott's Monthly Magazine, a black periodical. During the 1930s he became acquainted with Communist activities in the African American community. He was particularly interested in the views of Communist organizers and orators who were affiliated with the League of Struggle for Negro Rights. In 1932 Wright began attending meetings of the mixed-race Chicago John Reed Club—a Communist literary organization whose purpose was to use art to achieve revolutionary results. Wright's talents won him easy acceptance in the left-wing literary circle of the John Reed Club. Wright began to read and study the publications of the International League for Revolutionary Writers, New Masses and International Literature.

Elected executive secretary of the Chicago John Reed Club, which was predominantly white, Wright organized a lecture series that allowed him to interact with a variety of intellectuals. He published several revolutionary poems in magazines such as Left Front, The Antw, International Literature, and New Masses. By 1934, the party decided to disband the John Reed Club and ceased publication of Left Front, leading to Wright's disillusionment with his place as an artist in the party.

In 1935 Wright was hired by the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), which was a division of the Works Progress Administration, to assist with the research on the history of Illinois and the Negro in Chicago. Wright continued to publish poetry in small journals, and he began submitting manuscripts for his first novel, Gospool, to publishers. Over the next few years it was rejected repeatedly. Finally, in 1935, it was posthumously published as Last Toni Today by Walker and Company. Wright traveled to New York in 1935 to attend the American Writer's Congress, where he spoke on "The Isolation of the Negro Writer." He also published a poem about lynching in Partisan Review during the same year, and he wrote an article for New Masses in 1935 entitled "Joe Louis Uncovers Dynamic." By 1936 Wright published "Transcontinental," a six-page radical poem that was published in International Literature.

Wright transferred to the Federal Theatre Project, where he served in the capacity of adviser and press agent for the Negro Federal Theatre of Chicago. He also became involved in the dramatic productions of this group and finished two one-act plays based on a portion of his unpublished novel. Wright joined the new South Side Writers' Group and took an active role in this organization, which included members such as Arna Bontemps, Frank Marshall Davis, Theodore Ward, Penton Johnson, Horace Cayton, and Margaret Walker.

By 1936 Wright took a major role in organizing the Communist party-sponsored National Negro Congress, and reported on it for New Masses. His short story "Big Boy Leaves Home" appeared in the FWP anthology The New Cahan (1935), where it attracted mainstream critical attention.

In 1937 Wright turned down a permanent position with the Postal Service and moved to New York City to pursue his writing career. After residing briefly in Greenwich Village he moved to Harlem, where he became the Harlem editor of the Daily Worker. He also helped launch the magazine New Challenge, which he said in Black Boy was "designed to present black life in relationship to the struggle against war and Fascism." Wright published "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" in American Staff: WPA Writers' Anthology (1937).

Wright's influential essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing" appeared in the first and only issue of New Challenge, in 1937, which presented a Marxist criticism of earlier black literature. During this time he developed a friendship with the young and upcoming writer Ralph Ellison and he wrote a second novel manuscript, "Tarbaby's Dawn," which was regularly rejected by publishers. Yet, his short story, "Fire and Cloud" (1938) won first prize of $500 in Story Magazine's writers' contest. After being hired by the New York Federal Writers' Project, Wright had the opportunity to write the Harlem section for New York Panorama and "The Harlems" section for The New York City Guide (1938).

Wright hired a literary agent, Paul Reynolds Jr., in 1938 who assisted him with the publication of Uncle Tom's Children: Four Novellas with Harper and Brothers. Uncle Tom's Children was published in March to wide acclaim. As a result Wright was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship of $2,500 in March of 1939. This award allowed him to continue his writing and resign from the Federal Writers' Project.

Wright met Ellen Pobjar, daughter of Polish Jewish immigrants and a Communist party organizer, in Brooklyn and they developed a friendship. Wright considered marrying Pobjar but instead he began dating Thena Rose Meadman, a dance teacher of Russian-Jewish ancestry. He married Medman in August 1939 at the Episcopal Church with Ralph Ellison as his best man. It was not a successful match. By 1941 Wright began divorce proceedings because he had very little in common with his wife. Shortly after his divorce, he married Ellen Pobjar on March 12, 1942. From this marriage they had two daughters. Julia Wright was born April 14, 1942, and Rachel Wright was born on January 17, 1949.

Wright's story "Bright and Morning Star" (1938) appeared in New Masses and was included in two books of Best American Short Stories. He soon joined the New Masses editorial board and began work on a new novel. About this time he wrote Margaret Walker (Alexander), also an African American writer, to send him newspaper clippings relating to the Robert Nixon case in Chicago. By October, he finished the first draft of his novel relating to the case, which he called Native Son. By June he had completed the second draft of Native Son.

Native Son, published by Harper and Brothers Publishers in March 1940, became the Book-of-the-Month Club main selection. Less than six weeks after its publication, Native Son sold one million copies and he was on the best-seller list for twelve to fifteen weeks. Moreover, every major newspaper and periodical in the country reviewed Native Son. According to some critics, Native Son was a powerful, intense, and stirring novel. Other critics took a more critical stance with the work. In Birmingham, Alabama, for example, Native Son was banned from the public libraries. In New York Wright gave a talk at Columbia University on March 12, 1940, on "How Bigger Was Born."
Richard Wright

Wright continued his travels and accompanied sociologist Horace Cayton to Chicago to write an article about the South Side of Chicago. The article was never published but Wright and Cayton began a long friendship. Wright traveled to Mexico with his family in 1940. During this time his wife's demands and his work put a strain on their marriage. He left Mexico alone in June and traveled throughout the South. There he visited his father, who was poor and working as a farm laborer. Although Wright tried to reconcile his differences with him, they still remained distant. Wright also traveled to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, to begin talks with Paul Green about the stage adaptation of Native Son. He later became unhappy with Green's work. Consequently, Wright and John Houseman revised it with Oson Welles as director. His play, Native Son, opened on June 15, 1940, at the St. James Theater and ran until March 24, 1941.

When he left the South, Wright traveled to Chicago to conduct research for a new book on African American life. His story "Almost a Man" appeared in the O. Henry Award Prize Stories of 1940. Wright was elected vice-president of the League of American Writers and was the guest of honor along with Langston Hughes at a reception to launch the magazine New Atlanta.

The period of the 1940s was an extremely busy and critical time for Wright. He was involved in many activities including travel abroad, debates, lectures, and writing. His writings continued his previous themes of racism, oppression, poverty, migration, bondage, and nationalism. Uncle Tom's Children was reissued with two additional essays: "Bright and Morning Star" and "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow." In September 1940, Wright was elected a vice-president of American Peace Mobilization, a Communist sponsored group that opposed America's involvement in the World War II effort. He criticized President Franklin Roosevelt's racial policies in a June 27 speech to the NAACP, although the Communist party pressure forced him to lessen his critique. Wright expressed opposition to the war first by signing an antwar appeal by the League of American Writers, and second by publishing "Not My People's War." Both items appeared in New Masses in 1941. However, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Wright signed a petition, which appeared in New Masses, supporting America's entry into the war. Wright avoided the draft because he was his family's sole support. However, he tried unsuccessfully to secure a special commission in the psychological warfare or propaganda services of the army.

In January 1941 the NAACP awarded Wright the Spingarn Medal; in his acceptance speech, Wright criticized the Roosevelt administration's racial policies.

Wright's creativity also led him to become involved in music. His "Note on Jim Crow Blues" prefaced blues singer Josh White's Southern Exposure album, Paul Robeson, accompanied by the Count Basie orchestra, recorded Wright's blues song, "King Joe" (1941). Wright's work Twelve Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States was published in October 1941. This was a sociological study of African American history and their migration patterns from the rural South to the urban North. Wright's focus changed as he became interested in psychanalysis as a result of his reading Frederick Douglass's Dark Legend. He continued to publish articles in magazines including "The Man Who Lived Underground" in Accent (1942) and "What You Don't Know Won't Hurt You" in Harper's Magazine.

Wright traveled to Fisk University in April 1943 with Horace Cayton and delivered a talk on his experiences with racism. Because of the strong audience reaction that he received, he began to write the novel, American Hunger, in December 1943. The Book-of-the-Month Club informed Harper that it only wanted the first section of American Hunger, which described Wright's southern experiences. Wright agreed to this demand and titled the new volume Black Boy. The second section was published posthumously in 1977. "American Hunger," Harper published Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth in March 1945 to favorable reviews. This novel remained on the best-seller list from April 29 until June 6. Black Boy was denounced as obscene in the U.S. Senate by Democrat Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi. Wright took issue with Bilbo's position and countered his attack on Black Boy by taking part in several radio programs including the nationally influential "Town Meeting," where he argued the question, "Are We Solving America's Race Problems?" Quoted in Conversations with Richard Wright, he rhetorically responded by saying that

It is here in America that the Negro has given the greatest demonstration of his capacity to attain to the highest levels of civilization and America, although grudgingly, has shown a willingness to accord him an opportunity. If America were not solving the race problems, then neither a Paul Robeson nor a Marion Anderson could have emerged to win the plaudits of a civilized world. Nor could the genius of George Carver have been dedicated to the advancement of science and the enrichment of his country.

In 1942 he parted ways with the Communists because of his disillusionment with the party. Wright aired his split with the Communist party in his essay, "I Tried to Be a Communist" which appeared in the Atlantic Monthly (1944), causing New Masses and Daily Worker to denounce and disown Wright. During this period the Federal Bureau of Investigation began to interview Wright's friends and associates. Wright continued some leftist activities, developing friendships with C. L. R. James, a Trinidadian historian and Trotskyite, and his wife Constance Webb.

Continuing his amazing level of productivity, Wright completed "Melody Limited" in 1944, a story about a group of black singers during Reconstruction. Introduced to existentialist literature and philosophy during the late 1930s by Dorothy Norman, a New York Post editorial writer and editor of Twelve Of Year, Wright began to study the subject. The Wrights moved to Greenwich Village in 1945. In order to circumvent racial discrimination they used their lawyer as the middle man to purchase a house. He wrote the introduction to Black Metropolis (1946), a sociological study by Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake. As young writers emerged, Wright befriended many, including James Baldwin, with whom he assisted in winning the Eugene F. Saxton Foundation Fellowship in 1945.

In 1946 Wright, Fredrick Wertham, and others founded the Lafargue Clinic, a free psychiatric clinic in Harlem. When Wright met Jean-Paul Satre in New York, Satre extended an invitation to him to visit France. Wright requested a passport but he met opposition from the government. He traveled to Washington for an interview and enlisted the aid of Dorothy Norman, Gertrude Stein, and French cultural attaché, Claude Leli Smeus, who sent him an official invitation from the French government. The strategy worked and the passport was issued. On May 1, Wright left New York for Paris, where Gertrude Stein welcomed him. He assisted Leopold Sedar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Alain Leopold, and others in the Negritude movement by establishing the magazine Presence Africaine. He left Paris in December of 1946 and returned to New York.
Becomes an expatriate During his time in France, Wright decided to move his family to Europe permanently. They arrived in Paris in August 1947 and the French translation of *Native Son* came out in the fall. Wright deepened his interest in existentialism by reading Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger and hanging out with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Camus's *The Stranger* strongly impressed Wright, and he began working on an existentialist novel, which became *The Outsider*. The translation of *Black Boy* by Gallimard won the French Critics Award in 1948. He visited Italy to support the Italian translation of *Native Son*. He continued his travels to London by way of Belgium, where he saw a performance of *Native Son*.

Wright joined Sartre and Camus in the leadership of the Rassemblement Democrate Revolutionnaire (RDR), an organization of intellectuals who criticized both the United States and the USSR. At the RDR's writers' congress, held in Paris on December 12, 1948, Wright delivered a long speech which was translated by de Beauvoir. Wright and Sartre moved toward Communism.

On March 30, 1951, the film version of *Native Son* opened in Buenos Aires, where it was titled *Sangre Negra*. Wright himself portrayed the main character,igger, his acting in this version was considered awkward by American critics, yet praised by the Milan (Italy) press. In February 1952, Wright traveled to England, where he completed a full version of *The Outsider*. It published by Harper and Brothers in March. Despite initially selling well, the novel's momentum did not last because of mixed critical reviews.

Wright continued his quest to write and publish. His next book required him to collect materials on Africa. Wright traveled during the summer of 1953 to the British colony of the Gold Coast (which became Ghana following its independence in 1957). During the trip he met with pro-independence leaders, as well as with ethnic group rulers. His travels throughout the continent allowed him to visit slave-trades for the chases. On September 22, 1954, Wright's book about Africa, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pain*, appeared to mixed reviews in America but enthusiasm in France. In 1955, Baner Books published the paperback *Savage Holiday*, Wright's novel about a white psychopathic murderer.

Wright returned to Paris in December 1956, where he started working on a novel set in Mississippi. In February 1957, *Passing Spirit* appeared although it failed to sell well, despite favorable reviews. In the spring of 1957, Wright worked on a new novel, and he took his wife on a visit to Italy. In July 1957, Wright traveled to West Germany to talk about African American servicemen about their experiences. Doubleday published a collection of Wright's lectures entitled *White Man, Listen!* in 1957, which was based on interviews by African American servicemen and their experiences.

In 1958, Wright finished *The Long Dream*, his novel about Mississippi, and he began to work on its sequel, "Island of Hallucination," which was set in France. When *The Long Dream* was published by Doubleday in October 1958, it received poor and even hostile reviews. Wright contemplated moving to England during this time; however, his mother became seriously ill, and on January 14, 1959, she died. By February 1959, Wright sent his agent at Doubleday, Paul Reynolds, the manuscript for *Island of Hallucinations* on which Wright's new editor, Timothy Seldes, asked for substantial revisions. This work was a sequel to *The Long Dream*. In the spring of 1959, his play "Daddy Goodness" opened in Paris.

Wright's "Big Black Good Man" was included in *Best American Stories of 1958*. The stage adaptation of *The Long Dream* opened on Broadway February 17, 1960, to poor reviews and closed within a week. The French translation of *The Long Dream* did better that its English version but it did not sell well enough to satisfy Wright. He began a new novel, "A Father's Law," during the summer of 1960, but when he returned to Paris in September, he became ill. Wright was afflicted with anorexia nervosa. On November 8, 1960, Wright delivered a lecture on black artists and intellectuals at the American Church, during which he accused the American government of being the source of its own downfall and fragmentation between these two groups. On November 26, 1960, he received Langston Hughes at his home, but later in the day he checked into the Eugene Gibe Clinic for diagnostic examinations. Two days later, at 11:15 p.m. on November 28, Wright died. The cause of death was listed as heart attack. On the third of December, Wright was cremated along with a copy of *Black Boy*. His ashes remain at the Pere Lachaise cemetery.
Richard Wright was one of America's prizest literary giants of the twentieth century. His books and articles have been translated into numerous languages throughout the world. He exposed oppression and racial discrimination to the world, and his autobiographical works revealed his experiences as an African American male growing up in the Jim Crow South. His works are classic pieces that are used in classrooms throughout the United States—

VIVIAN NJERE FISHER

MALCOLM X

1925-1965

Political and religious leader

Malcolm X is known for his religious and political activism and for his controversial advocacy of black unity. The intensity of his conviction and the eloquence with which he articulated his beliefs remain inspirational, as does the courage with which he conducted himself despite hostility from various racial factions.

Malcolm X was born Malcolm Little on May 19, 1925, in Omaha, Nebraska. His father, Baptist minister Earl Little, was a staunch supporter of Marcus Garvey, a black separatist who led a back-to-Africa movement in the 1920s. As a result of Earl Little's activism, his family ran afoul of the Ku Klux Klan organization, which eventually ran the Little family out of Omaha.

During the next few years the Little family moved regularly. When Earl Little died, Malcolm X's mother, Louise Little, relied on welfare assistance to maintain her family. The strain eventually proved too much for her, and she was admitted to a mental institution, whereupon Malcolm and his siblings were consigned to various foster homes. Despite these hardships, Malcolm maintained high marks as a student. But when his achievements and aspirations were diminished by a teacher's racist comments, Malcolm withdrew from school and took to working menial jobs.

Malcolm, then living with a sister in Boston, began consorting with gamblers and criminals, including drug dealers. Soon he was operating his own prostitution ring and selling narcotics, to which he ultimately became addicted. He then began committing robberies to obtain the funds necessary for supporting his drug habit. His criminal activities, in turn, marked him for observation by the Boston police. In 1946, after an arrest for robbery, he was convicted and sentenced to ten years in prison. He was only twenty years old.

While in prison, Malcolm initially maintained a dangerous profile. He used drugs and antagonized other inmates. He did, however, make the acquaintance of a convicted burglar, Bashir, who regularly patronized the prison library. Malcolm also developed an interest in reading, and he soon began studying political science, black history, and philosophy. In the course of his readings Malcolm discovered the existence of the Black Muslims and the Lost-Round Nation of Islam. This religion, which considered leader Elijah Muhammad as a messenger of the Muslim god, Allah, advocated black separatism. Malcolm was powerfully effected by Elijah Muhammad's message, and he converted to the Black Muslim faith. It was at this time that he assumed the name Malcolm X.
Richard Wright, born in Roxie, Mississippi, was raised in a family that suffered constantly from poverty. When Wright's father deserted the family in 1913, Richard's mother moved them to Tennessee and then Arkansas, until she became ill, and put him and his little brother into an orphanage. Rescued by his maternal grandparents, who brought the boys to Jackson, Mississippi, Richard began to attend school regularly for the first time. His mother had taught him to read and he had decided early that he would be a writer, but the racism in Mississippi was so extreme that no opportunity would have presented itself. In desperation, Wright pulled off a small robbery and used the money from the sale of a gun and some fruit preserves to buy a ticket to Memphis.

In 1927, he moved to Chicago and started writing for Left Front and New Masses. When the Depression struck, Wright was chosen for government writing projects that kept him employed and further increased his skill. In 1935, Wright chose the Joe Louis/Max Baer fight as the subject of a short piece defining “the heart of the Negro:” “Here’s the fluid something that’s like iron. Here’s the real dynamite that Joe Louis uncovered.”

In 1937, Wright moved to New York, and in 1938 his first collection of stories, Uncle Tom’s Children, appeared. Built on his experiences with intense and violent racism in the Deep South, these stories defined the strength of the African-American character trying to succeed against all odds. Well received, Uncle Tom’s Children was followed by Wright’s first — and most famous — novel, Native Son, which follows the character Bigger Thomas through the trials of being black in the North, held down in a “cold and distant world; a world of white secrets carefully guarded.”

Twelve Million Black Voices, Wright’s folk history, was published, quickly followed by Black Boy in 1945, which told Wright’s own story of growing up in the rural South. Though there are questions as to its authenticity as an autobiography, the fundamental truth of Black Boy gained it a following as respectful as that of Native Son.

Wright left America for Paris in 1946, where he continued to write amongst a group of other intellectuals, artists and writers including Gertrude Stein, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. The Outsider was published in 1953, Savage Holiday in 1954, The Long Dream in 1959 and Eight Men in 1961.

After Wright’s death in Paris, James Baldwin (see no. 85) observed: “Wright’s unrelentingly bleak landscape was not merely that of the Deep South, or of Chicago, but that of the world, of the human heart.”
The literary flowering of the Harlem Renaissance continued with far less fanfare and self-consciousness through the Great Depression and World War II.

Zora Neale Hurston grew up in Eatonville, Florida, and by the middle of the 1920s had published in Opportunity, earning a reputation as a skilled writer of short stories. She studied with Alain Locke at Howard University and then earned her B.A. from Barnard College in 1928, where she studied under the influential anthropologist Franz Boas. As a graduate student in anthropology at Columbia, Hurston spent several years conducting field research and collecting folklore across the South. She received two Guggenheim fellowships and published two scholarly essays on her studies. In 1930, she collaborated with Langston Hughes to write the play Mule Bone. She published her first novel, Jonah's Gourd Vine, in 1934, and a collection of black folklore entitled Mules and Men in 1935.

But Hurston cemented her literary legacy with her 1937 masterpiece, Their Eyes Were Watching God. At the time, black male critics—especially her nemesis, Richard Wright—treated the book harshly, accusing it of using minstrel-like methods to pander to white racist tastes, rather than serving as a testament against white racism. The novel is an exploration of a young, poor black woman’s successive victimization by black men, focusing on the protagonist, Janie Crawford, and a series of mentally and physically abusive relationships. Janie liberates herself from her second husband’s oppression by standing up for her right to speak, defending herself verbally, and finding her voice. Eventually, following this husband’s death, she finds a fulfilling relationship with Tea Cake (Vergible) Woods, but she ultimately is forced to shoot him to save herself from his rabid attack. Hurston died penniless in 1960, but a generation of feminist critics and readers, fueled by Alice Walker’s interest in her work, would reestablish Hurston’s reputation and install her in the canon.

Arna Bontemps also published his most recognized work during the Great Depression. Bontemps grew up in Los Angeles and in 1923 graduated from Northern California’s Pacific Union College, a Seventh-Day Adventist institution. Like many aspiring black writers, he moved to Harlem and, just as Hurston had done, published in Opportunity. In 1931, he moved to Huntsville, Alabama, to work for Oakwood College. While in Huntsville he wrote both serious novels like God Sends Sunday (1931) and children’s fiction like You Can’t Pet a Possum (1934). In 1936, he published his most influential work, Black Thunder, an exploration of Gabriel Prosser’s failed slave revolt in 1800. The book established Bontemps as one of the country’s most important black novelists. In 1939, he completed Drums at Dusk, a novel about the Haitian Revolution. Uncertain about the future, he earned a library science degree from the University of Chicago in 1943 and became the long-serving librarian at Fisk University.
He continued to write adult fiction and poetry. He edited a number of poetry collections and a variety of other collections of black writings, most notably The Harlem Renaissance Remembered, as a visiting professor at Yale University in 1969.

Richard Wright, one of the twentieth century's most important black writers, also came to prominence during these years. Frustrated with menial jobs and the climate of repression in the South, Wright moved to Chicago in 1927. There he worked for the Federal Writers' Project and discovered the Communist Party, one of the few political parties that sought black membership and fully supported the civil rights movement. He moved to Harlem in 1937, where he served as an editor for the communist Daily Worker newspaper, and in 1938 he published a collection of short stories, Uncle Tom's Children, all of which deal in some way with racial oppression. Two years later, Wright published his most acclaimed work, Native Son. It is the masterwork of African American naturalism. The novel's success made him the most famous black writer in the world.

Its plot centers on Bigger Thomas, a black man who accidentally kills the young white daughter of his wealthy employer and, in an attempt to hide the evidence, dismembers and burns her corpse in the family's furnace. Fleeing a citywide police dragnet, Bigger murders his girlfriend, Bessie. Wright intended the book's themes of race, violence, and sex to show how racist culture could twist the lives of its victims, but some African Americans criticized it for focusing on a brutish black murderer. Nevertheless, the novel proved an astonishing success, making Wright the first black author to produce a Book-of-the-Month Club selection.

Wright's next book was also a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. Black Boy explored his own life in the South. Before its publication in 1945, Wright had left the Communist Party, as detailed in his essay "I Tried to Be a Communist." In 1947, he left the United States for France, where a number of black expatriate writers and artists went to live, including James Baldwin, Wright's disciple. Wright closely associated with French intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, as well as other expatriate writers such as Gertrude Stein. In addition, he had frequent interactions with African and Caribbean intellectuals associated with the Negritude Movement, such as Leopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire. Wright published several books in Paris, but none had the traction or force of Native Son and Black Boy. He remained in Paris until his death in 1960. While he played little direct role in the civil rights movement, his writings were held up as the model of the committed author in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s.

Wright's first novel is such a dominant force in the African American literary tradition that some scholars have termed the period between its publication in 1940 and the end of the Black Arts Movement as "The Age of Richard Wright." But very few black writers of the contemporary generation utilize his naturalistic style of writing.
tion that might have perished forever if he had not given his gifts to preserving them—he was the first to bring back glad tidings of the Island's fair land to his New York friends, who had always thought of Massachusetts as a nice place to come from, but not to go to unless bound and gagged.

Mr. Burleigh had come to stay at Shearer Cottage in the Highlands, a quiet boardinghouse operated by Boston friends, who had recommended the seclusion of the lovely wooded area, where New York's busy lights seemed as remote as the island stars seemed near.

He was very good to the children of his friends. There were seven or eight of us who were his special favorites. He gave us money every time he saw us. We did not know any better than to spend it in one place. With abundant indulgence he would give us some more to spend in another. He rented cars and took us on tours of the Island. He told us about his trips abroad. To be with him was a learning experience.

There is a snapshot of him in a family album. Under the snapshot, in the handwriting of that aunt who could take us or leave us, there is the caption: "H.T.B., the children's friend." He was rich and well known in important circles at the time. There were a dozen glowing captions that would have applied. I think it is a tribute to him—and perhaps to my aunt—that she chose this simple inscription.

Mr. Burleigh's summers were spent working as well as sunning. Every weekday morning he went to a church in Vineyard Haven where he had used the piano. Many of the spirituals sung around the world were given arrangements within God's hearing in an Island church.

In the course of time Mr. Burleigh grew to regret the increasing number of New Yorkers who brought their joyous living to his corner of the Highlands. He had extolled this sacred spot, and they were taking over. Who can say they did not share his vision? They simply expressed it in a different way.

Adam Clayton Powell came to summer at Shearer Cottage when he was a boy. He came with his father. His mother stayed home. Adam came to our house to play every day, and every day Adam's father came to ask my mother if his son was somewhere around. We were sorry for Adam that a boy as big as he was had a father who was always following him around. I can see that great tall man, who looked so like Adam was to grow up to look, striding up the road to ask my mother in his mellifluous preacher's voice if he had seen his boy. He would hold her in conversation, and she would turn as pink as a rose. He seemed to make her nervous, and we didn't know why. Sometimes he would come twice a day to see if Adam had lost his way between our house and Shearer Cottage. He never did, but all that summer his father couldn't rest until he had seen for himself...
came to my mind. I was black and she did not care. Or so I thought ... I was persisting in reading my present environment in the light of my old one. I reasoned thus: Though English was my native tongue and America my native land, she, an alien, could operate a store and earn a living in a neighborhood where I could not even live. I reasoned further that she was aware of this and was trying to protect her position against me.

(But not until I had left the delicatessen job that I saw how grossly I had misread the motives and attitudes of Mr. Hoffman and his wife. I had not yet learned anything that would have helped me to thread my way through these perplexing racial relations. Accepting my environment at its face value, trapped by my own emotions, I kept asking myself what had black people done to bring this crazy world upon them?)

(The fact of the separation of white and black was clear to me; it was its effect upon the personalities of people that stumped and dismayed me. I did not feel that I was a threat to anybody, yet, as soon as I had grown old enough to think I had learned that my entire personality, my aspirations had long ago been discounted; that, in a measure, the very meaning of the words I spoke could not be fully understood.

(And when I contemplated the area of No Man’s Land into which the Negro mind in America had been shunted I wondered if there had ever existed in all human history a more corroding and devastating attack upon the personalities of men than the idea of racial discrimination. In order to escape the racial attack that went to the roots of my life, I would have gladly accepted any way of life but the one in which I found myself. I would have agreed to live under a system of feudal oppression, not because I preferred feudalism but because I felt that feudalism made use of a limited part of a man, defined him, his rank, his function in society. I would have consented to live under the most rigid type of dictatorship, for I felt that dictatorships, too, defined the use of men, however degrading that use might be.)

(While working in Memphis I had stood aghast as Shorty had offered himself to be kicked by the white men; but now, while working in Chicago, I was learning that perhaps even a kick was better than uncertainty ... I had elected, in my fevered search for honorable adjustment to the American scene, not to submit and in doing so I had embraced the daily horror of anxiety, tension, of eternal disquiet. I could now sympathize with—though I could never bring myself to approve—those tortured blacks who had given up and had gone to their white tormentors and had said: ‘Kick me, if that’s all there is for me; kick me and let me feel at home, let me have peace!’

(Color hate defined the place of black life as below that of white life; and the black man, responding to the same dreams as the white man, strove to bury within his heart his awareness of this difference because it made him lonely and afraid. Hated by whites and being an organic part of the culture that hated him,
another job. It would have implied that the Negro did not like to work for the white boss, that he felt he was receiving just consideration and, inasmuch as most jobs that Negroes held in the South involved a personal, paternalistic relationship, he would have been risking an argument that might have led to violence.

I now began to speculate about what kind of man Mr. Hoffman was, and I found that I did not know him; that is, I did not know his basic attitude toward Negroes. If I asked him, would he be sympathetic enough to allow me time off with pay? I needed the money. Perhaps he would say: "Go home and stay home if you don't like this job," but I was not sure of him. I decided, therefore, that I had better not risk it. I would forfeit the money and stay away without telling him.

The examination was scheduled to take place on Monday; I had been working steadily and I would be too tired to do my best if I took the examination without the benefit of rest. I decided to stay away from the shop Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. But what could I tell Mr. Hoffman? Yes, I would tell him that I had been ill. No, that was too thin. I would tell him that my mother had died in Memphis and that I had gone down to bury her. That lie might work.

I took the examination and when I came to the store on Tuesday Mr. Hoffman was astonished, of course.

"I didn't sink you would ever come back," he said.
"I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Hoffman."
"Vat happened?"
"My mother died in Memphis and I had to go down and bury her," I lied.
He looked at me, then shook his head.
"Rich, you lie," he said.
"I'm not lying," I lied stoutly.
"You wanted to do some sink, so you zayed ervay," he said, shrugging.
"No, sir. I'm telling you the truth." I piled another lie upon the first one.
"No. You lie. You disappoint me," he said.
"Well, all I can do is tell you the truth," I lied indignantly.
"Vy didn't you use the phone?"
"I didn't think of it. I told a fresh lie.
"Rich, if your mudder die, you wouldn't tell me," he said.
"I didn't have time. Had to catch the train," I lied yet again.
"Where did you get the money?"
"My aunt gave it to me," I said, disgusted that I had to lie and lie again.
"I don't want a boy vat tells lies," he said.
"I don't lie," I lied passionately to protect my lies.
Mrs. Hoffman joined in and both of them hammered at me.
"Ye know. You come from ze Zouth. You feel you can't tell us ze truth.

But we don't bother you. We don't feel like people in ze Zouth. We treat you nice, don't we?" they asked.
"Yes, ma'am," I mumbled.
"Zen vy lie?"
"I'm not lying," I lied with all my strength.
I became angry because I knew that they knew that I was lying. I had lied to protect myself, and then I had to lie to protect my lie. I had met so many white faces that would have violently disapproved of my taking the examination that I could not have risked telling Mr. Hoffman the truth. But how could I now tell him that I had lied because I was so unsure of myself? Lying was bad, but revealing my own sense of insecurity would have been worse. It would have been shameful, and I did not like to feel ashamed.

Their attitudes had proved utterly amazing. They were taking time out from their duties in the store to talk to me, and I had never encountered anything like that from whites before. A southern white man would have said: "Get to hell out of here!" or "All right, nigger. Get to work." But no white people had ever stood their ground and probed me, questioned me at such length. It dawned upon me that they were trying to treat me as an equal, which made it even more impossible for me ever to tell them that I had lied, why I had lied. I felt that if I confessed I would give them a moral advantage over me that would be unbearable.

"All right, say and work," Mr. Hoffman said. "I know you're lying, but I don't care, Rich."
I wanted to quit. He had insulted me. But I liked him in spite of myself. Yes, I had done wrong, but how on earth could I have known the kind of people I was working for? Perhaps Mr. Hoffman would have gladly consented for me to take the examination, but my hopes had been far weaker than my powerful fears.

Working with them from day to day and knowing that they knew I had lied from fear crushed me. I knew that they pitied me and pitied the fear in me. I resolved to quit and risk hunger rather than stay with them. I left the job that following Saturday, not telling them that I would not be back, not possessing the heart to say good-bye. I just wanted to go quickly and have them forget that I had ever worked for them. . . .
fellow author, Chester Himes, wrote that Wright was the first African-American writer to break into the big time, and by so doing could make a powerful contribution to world literature.9

With the success of Native Son, Richard Wright’s future burned bright. Yet, despite his thrilling new life, Wright never forgot his family. Soon after his book became a best seller, Wright went back to Mississippi to visit his friends and family. But after living in big cities like Chicago and New York, returning to the South was an uneasy experience.

The poverty, illiteracy, and prejudice Wright saw on his return trip made him wonder why he had wanted to see and feel his past all over again. It did not seem to him as though the South had progressed much at all, despite the fact that slavery had long since been abolished. Wright realized the only thing that had really changed in all this time was himself.

Richard Nathaniel Wright was born on September 4, 1908, and named after his two grandfathers. An African-American midwife with little training helped bring him into the world.

Richard’s birth took place in an unpainted log cabin on a remote plantation twenty-two miles east of Natchez, Mississippi.1 Years later Wright said that he was born so deep in the middle of the woods that you could not even hear the nearest train whistling as it went by. The only sounds you could hear were the owls hooting.2 No civil records were kept for blacks born at that time, but Richard’s birth was recorded in the family Bible.
Richard Wright

Richard’s grandparents had been slaves in that region of Mississippi, working on a cotton plantation. At the time, cotton was king in Mississippi—it was the principal crop. But the plantation was a hellish place for slaves. They were forced to live in rat-infested shacks and work from daybreak to dusk. Nearly starved and frequently beaten, many slaves died at a young age. Even after the Civil War and the freeing of the slaves, many African Americans continued picking cotton for plantation owners. It was the only life they knew.

Most freed slaves became sharecroppers, or tenant farmers. In this arrangement, former slaves were given a small bit of land to work but were dependent on the landowners for provisions, including seed and fertilizer. Although they were no longer anybody’s “property,” they lived in perpetual debt to the plantation owners. It was a system only slightly better than slavery.

Richard’s paternal grandfather, Nathaniel Wright, must have had a bigger vision and a stronger will than many other former slaves. When the Civil War ended, the military government gave him the land he had farmed as a slave. He was not a sharecropper but a landowner who benefited fully from his own sweat and toil. The farm was in Stanton, approximately twelve miles east of Natchez. The work was very hard, but

Son of the South

with the whole family pitching in, they managed to survive without becoming beholden to anybody.

Although Nathaniel had several children, not much is known about them. One son, Solomon, continued to work beside his father. A younger son, Nathan, went to work as a sharecropper on a farm about ten miles away from his father’s.

One night Nathan walked a few miles to a party at the Cranfield Methodist Church. There he met Ella Wilson, a slender, dark-eyed woman who was a teacher in Cranfield’s one-room schoolhouse. She taught geography, arithmetic, and spelling, earning $25 a month. In those days, schools in the South for African-American children were organized around the cotton-growing season. They were open only from November, after the harvest, until early March, when it was time for planting.³

Nathan was attracted to Ella, and she quickly returned his affections. But Ella’s family looked down on the blossoming romance. They thought Nathan, an illiterate sharecropper, was beneath their daughter. The Wilsons had taken enormous strides to distance themselves from their roots as slaves. Ella’s father, Richard Wilson, had escaped from slavery to join the Union forces in the Civil War. He had married a midwife-nurse, and most of their children worked in towns rather than laboring on the land. The Wilsons were proud to be teachers, carpenters, and preachers.
When Ella announced that she was going to marry Nathan Wright, her parents expressed their disapproval and hesitated to give their blessing.⁴

In spite of her family’s protests, Nathan Wright and Ella Wilson were married. A son, Richard, was born in 1908. Then, two years later in 1910, Ella gave birth to another son, Leon Alan.

Unfortunately, from the very beginning the marriage was plagued by obstacles. Nathan found sharecropping on his land an almost impossible task. It required more hands to do the work than the young couple could offer. Ella tried to pitch in on the farm and take care of their two young children at the same time, but the burden was overwhelming. They just could not turn a profit. So in 1911, the Wrights packed up and moved into Ella’s family’s home in Natchez.

The name Natchez comes from the American Indians who had settled there. The town was a bustling port on the Mississippi River, where ships loaded and unloaded passengers and cargo at all times of the day and night. It had a population of about twelve thousand people, half of whom were African American. In Natchez, former slaves had the chance to change their lives and earn a living doing something other than sharecropping. Nathan Wright found work in a sawmill, but the hours were long, the air was foul and thick, and the wages were low.

Nathan Wright would come home exhausted and
yearning for peace, quiet, and a chance to sleep. Ella was always telling her sons to “hush up” and “be still.” This was not easy for young boys to do, and Richard would remember those times vividly. Years later he began his autobiography, *Black Boy*, with one of his most dramatic Natchez memories. One day, playing with burning coals in the fireplace, he accidentally set fire to the curtains and almost burned the house down. It ended with a severe beating by his mother.⁵

Even though Richard’s father worked long, hard hours at the mill, the Wrights still lived in poverty and depended on Ella’s parents for a roof over their heads. Having tried unsuccessfully to become independent and make a better life for their family, Nathan and Ella decided to move on. The family boarded a steamboat and traveled up the Mississippi River to Memphis, Tennessee. They hoped a big city would give them the chance to change their lives for the better and offer their two young sons the kinds of opportunities Nathan never had.

Life was very different in Memphis, which was a huge city compared to Natchez. The population was ten times bigger. Instead of treading on soft country soil, Richard found his feet pounding on hard concrete. It was difficult adjusting his country perspective to a city vision. Everywhere he looked there were buildings with people rushing by.

The only place the Wrights could afford to rent was a small, dark, two-room tenement. It was a far cry from Richard’s grandmother’s airy and sunny house in Natchez. Nature, which had once brought Richard comfort, was nowhere to be found in Memphis. “The stone buildings and concrete pavements looked bleak and hostile to me. The absence of green, growing things made the city seem dead... for days I was afraid to go into the strange city streets alone,” he later wrote.⁶
Richard Wright

Richard's father found work as a night porter at a drugstore. It was less physically demanding than his mill job, but he still needed to sleep during the daylight hours. Just as in Natchez, the brothers had to play quietly whenever their father was home. Richard and Leon eventually mustered the courage to take their boyish energy out onto the streets of Memphis. They ran down concrete sidewalks, peering through store windows and scavenging trash bins for discarded magazines and newspapers.

Unfortunately, their parents' marriage, once lit by youthful romance, had cooled. After several months in Memphis, their father stopped coming home regularly. The gaps in his absence grew longer and longer. Richard thought it might be the excitement of the city streets keeping his father from their dull tenement life. Within a year's time, Nathan abandoned his family entirely. It turned out he had been having an affair with another woman and he moved in with her.

Now the responsibility to support her sons rested completely on Ella's shoulders. She had no luck finding work as a teacher, so she took a job cooking for a white family. Although she made lavish meals with the finest ingredients for her employers, she had little food to serve her own family. Richard and Leon often went without enough to eat. Richard felt the pangs of hunger gnawing in his stomach. "Hunger stole upon me so slowly that at first I was not aware of what hunger really meant. Hunger had always been more or less at my elbow when I played, but now I began to wake up at night to find hunger standing at my bedside, staring at me gauntly," he wrote later.\(^7\)

Richard was angry with his father for abandoning the family and blamed him for the poverty and lack of food. Every time the emptiness echoed in his stomach, a picture of his father would flash across his mind, filling him with an unforgiving bitterness he could practically taste.\(^8\)

Finally, a window of opportunity opened. In 1915, when Richard was nearly seven years old, he was enrolled in school for the first time. There might have been other chances for him to go to school, but his mother could never afford the clothes he needed. Although he had not had any formal instruction before starting school, he had picked up simple math, such as adding and subtracting, from the coal delivery man, and had learned reading from his mother. Ella had helped him (when she had the time) to read the abandoned books and Sunday newspapers he found in trash cans and on the street. Years later, Richard still remembered looking at a newspaper describing the sinking of the Titanic.

Even though Richard was smart, he was extremely shy and self-conscious in school. He had plenty of reasons for feeling uncomfortable: A year older than most of the other boys, he had no father and was
dressed shabbily. He was even too frightened to tell the teacher his name and address, and it was a while before he could talk in class. However, some of the boys tried to coax him to relax and join in the fun, and they soon became his good friends.

Before long, Richard was in the swing of the school’s social whirl. Then hard times struck again. Richard’s mother fell ill. Until Grandmother Wilson could come to Memphis and help out, all the responsibilities of running the household and taking care of his younger brother weighed heavily on Richard’s shoulders. After his grandmother arrived, Richard was able to return to school—but only briefly. A short while later, his grandmother left. Any hope Richard had of staying in school was shattered.

Richard’s mother, too weak to earn a living, could not afford the small tuition. Before the end of the school year she was forced to put both her sons into a Methodist orphanage called the Settlement House. With no money to buy food for her children, Ella felt she had no other choice.

Conditions were harsh in the orphanage, where children were subjected to severe discipline, hunger (only two meals a day), and taunting by the other boys. The boys had many chores, including pulling weeds from the lawn of the orphanage. One night Richard tried to run away, but he was caught, brought back, and beaten. Eventually, Ella Wright managed to get enough money to take her sons out of the orphanage and bring them back home.

On the go again in the spring of 1916, Ella Wright took the boys to her parents’ new home in Jackson, Mississippi. Richard moved many more times during his childhood. Between his birth and age sixteen, Richard would live in a dozen places. Moving around so much would create powerful memories that he could later use in his writing.

Seven-year-old Richard had a wonderful summer at his grandparents’ house. Among his many adventures, a schoolteacher living there introduced him to fiction. She told him the story of Bluebeard, and Richard’s fantasies took flight. He began using his imagination in a whole new way. The young boy’s narrow, parched life began to expand. The seed of fiction had been planted in Richard’s fertile mind and he would soon create unforgettable stories.
publication. Unfortunately, no copies of this story can be found today.

In the summer of 1924, Richard worked for an optical company, cleaning the workshop and making deliveries. He also did chores for a white family, who often fed him a hearty breakfast and dinner.

Short of his seventeenth birthday, in June 1925, Richard was ready to graduate from junior high school. Because he had the highest grades in his class, he was chosen as valedictorian and asked to give a speech at graduation. It was an honor that would make anyone proud. But sometime before the big day, the principal handed Richard a prepared speech to read at the ceremony.

Richard was outraged. He told the principal that people were coming to hear the words of a student, not the principal. He refused to deliver the principal’s speech. They argued, but Richard held firm. When the day came, he read his own speech. He had agreed to cut out some of his strongest comments so that he would not offend the authorities. Still, it was a powerful speech. He railed against the inferior education blacks were provided in the South.

Richard Wright was almost seventeen years old, had graduated from junior high school with honors, and had seen enough troubles to last a lifetime. Now he was about to begin a new journey—and to face the world on his own.

Richard Wright spent the summer after his graduation bouncing from job to job. He worked as a delivery boy, a bellboy in a big “whites only” hotel, and a ticket taker in a local movie theater. He enrolled in summer classes at Lanier High School with friends, but he soon dropped out.

No matter where he went, Wright found himself battling the racism of the Deep South. One day these struggles would play a major role in his fiction. At the time, though, a good friend tried to help Wright deal with all the racism. He told Wright that he should
be more deferential with white folks; that he should always be on guard and not speak his true mind.  

Wright could not do that. Instead, he made plans to leave Jackson, setting his sights on Memphis, Tennessee. But Wright was giving most of his salary to his family, so he did not have enough money to make the move. Desperate to leave Jackson, and not seeing another way out, he began to steal. At first he joined with the other employees at the movie theater who were reselling tickets and pocketing the money. Then, one day, he broke into a storeroom at Jackson College, stole canned goods, and sold them to restaurants. Wright was never caught—but he never stole again. He knew stealing was wrong.

Finally, Wright had saved enough money to move away from Jackson. On a Saturday night in November 1925, the seventeen-year-old said good-bye to his mother and took off for a new life in the big city of Memphis. He promised his mother he would send for her as soon as he could.

Memphis had changed radically since Wright’s time there ten years earlier. It was now the industrial capital of the South. The city was growing rapidly, and its population was nearly two hundred thousand. Approximately one-third were African Americans.

Wright arrived in Memphis on a chilly Sunday morning. He dragged his suitcase down the streets looking for a place to live. Wright had heard that

Memphis was a dangerous place. As he walked down Beale Street, he kept his eyes open. He was on the lookout for shady characters like pickpockets, con men, and prostitutes. But it was Sunday, and the streets of Memphis were empty. After walking several blocks, Wright stopped in front of a large house with a sign in the window: ROOMS.

Although Wright was relieved to find rooms available for rent, he was wary of what awaited him through those doors. He mustered his courage and walked in, but he must have still looked worried. A large, light-skinned black woman named Mrs. Moss greeted Wright and tried to put the nervous young man at ease. Without mincing words, she told him that just because her home was on Beale Street did not mean it was a whorehouse. She explained that she owned the house. Wright would be safe there. She added that she was a member of a church.

With her welcoming manner and reassuring words, Mrs. Moss completely wiped away Wright’s anxiety about Memphis. Here he was on Beale Street, with its bad reputation, and he had met a warm, friendly person. Perhaps for the first time in his life, Wright felt that not everyone was mean-spirited. There were actually kind people in the world. He moved into Mrs. Moss’s home that very morning.

But there was one small hitch. Mrs. Moss had a daughter the same age as Wright. The landlady decided
that Wright would make a perfect husband for her teenager. She even promised Wright that he would inherit the house if he married her daughter. But Wright was in no way ready to think about marrying and settling in Memphis. He refused any more of Mrs. Moss’s invitations to dinner because they made him feel too uncomfortable. The situation was so awkward that he was determined to move out of the house as quickly as possible.  

Meanwhile, without any difficulty, Wright found a job as a delivery boy in an optical company. He would skip lunch and run errands for the company’s employees just to earn some extra money. He set his mind on quickly saving as much money as he could. He wanted to bring his mother and brother to Memphis. Wright thought that Memphis was a better place to live than Jackson. In Memphis it did not seem to matter as much if your skin was black or white. He felt there was less racial tension.  

During lunch hours when he was not running errands, Wright would hang out with other African-American youths who worked in the same building. They all held menial jobs. The subject of their discussions usually revolved around how their bosses mistreated them. There were many examples of the whites’ disrespect for their black workers.

One day a group of white workers enticed Wright into a fight with another African-American youth. The winner would get $5. The confrontation was set for a Saturday afternoon in the basement of a building on Main Street. The whites placed bets while Wright and his opponent, both shirtless and wearing boxing gloves, fought four vicious rounds. Wright won the bloody confrontation but felt shame and anger for his actions. He collected the prize money nonetheless.

In the mornings before leaving for work, Wright would read a local Memphis newspaper. One day he came across an editorial attacking the writer and editor H. L. Mencken. Mencken was editor in chief of a magazine called American Mercury and also wrote editorials for a Maryland newspaper, The Baltimore Sun.

What aroused the Memphis newspaper’s wrath was a specific editorial by Mencken. In very strong language, Mencken had attacked the backwardness of the South. Criticism of the South appealed to Wright. He yearned to read more of Mencken’s work. But where could he get the author’s books? Wright could not afford to buy any books, and the public library was closed to African Americans.

Desperate, Wright borrowed a card from a white man he worked with. Then he forged a note. It said: “Dear Madame: Will you please let this Nigger boy have some books by H. L. Mencken?” It did the trick, and the librarian handed over the author’s books.

Wright spent the entire night reading Mencken. Some of the words were difficult, and he had to look
them up in the dictionary. Mencken had strong views. This made Wright think about the power of words and how they could change the way people saw the world.

Reading continued to be a passion for Wright. He wanted to become familiar with all the writers Mencken praised. He devoured realistic novels by such authors as Sinclair Lewis and Theodore Dreiser. Inspired, Wright bought some paper and decided to try his hand at writing. But he found his attempts to be unsatisfactory.

Wright saved money and moved from his place at Mrs. Moss's into a roomier apartment. He was then able to send for his mother and brother. After his mother arrived, he began to eat better. Regular meals enabled him to read faster and tackle a wider range of material.

Dreams of moving to the North, "the promised land," beckoned Wright. He knew he could not remain in the South if he wanted to have a bright future. He believed that as long as he stayed in Memphis, he would be living a life just a few steps better than a slave's. His brother, Leon Alan, got a job and together the two young men saved for their escape to the North.

Meanwhile, Aunt Maggie, deserted by her husband in Detroit, came to visit. During her stay, they all decided on a move to Chicago. The plan was for Richard and Aunt Maggie to leave first and establish a base in Chicago.

In November 1927, two years after arriving in Memphis, Wright was off on a new adventure. He and Aunt Maggie boarded a crowded train for Chicago. They were among the millions who migrated northward during those years.

Wright's first impression of Chicago depressed him. It seemed gray, flat, and cold. Chicago was then a city of almost 3 million people. Its African-American
population had grown significantly since the war, and in this respect the city ranked second to New York. Chicago did not have enforced rules for segregation, as the South did. There were no signs saying "COLORED ONLY," but the races were segregated in other ways. African Americans lived in ghetto-like areas, primarily on the South Side of the city. Families were crowded into teeming tenements. The backs of their apartments streamed with billowing laundry on clotheslines.

In the winter, Chicago, known as the Windy City, was much colder than Memphis or Mississippi. Temperatures were often below zero, and an icy wind blew in from Lake Michigan. The wind also brought foul smells into the ghetto from the nearby stockyards.

Once again, Wright took various odd jobs, working as a delivery boy, a dishwasher, and a busboy. But he had bigger plans. Early in 1928, shortly after their arrival in Chicago, Wright took the government’s civil service exam to qualify for a job in the post office. He passed easily and started working in the post office that summer. But there was a problem.

After a few months on the job, Wright was required to take a physical exam. As a result of malnutrition, he weighed only one hundred ten pounds. This was less than the mandatory minimum of one hundred twenty-five pounds. Determined, Wright stuffed himself with large portions of food, gained weight, and passed the next physical, which was given in March 1929.

Work at the post office paid fairly well. Ella and Leon Wright joined Richard and Aunt Maggie, and they moved into a four-room apartment on the South Side of Chicago. Richard continued to read and write every chance he got, but this left little time for any kind of social life.

Not many people were out having fun around this time, anyway. In October 1929, the stock market crashed. The United States plunged into what was called the Great Depression. Businesses went bankrupt and shut down. Millions of people lost their jobs. Wright, who had been hoping for a permanent position at the post office, was told that employees were being fired and there were no permanent new openings. Then Wright lost his part-time postal job.

Hunger once again knocked at Wright’s door, but it could not quell his passion for reading and writing. Although he was called back to the post office, it was only for a brief time. Wright tried to get work as either an editor or a reporter for an African-American publication, but he was not hired.

Still, the stage was set. Wright’s literary career began slowly. In April 1931, he sold a story to an African-American magazine, "Superstition" was heavily influenced by Wright’s reading of Edgar Allan Poe. In the story, three African-American businessmen recount eerie tales of people who had mysteriously died. The story would have
brought Wright some money, but because of the Great Depression, the magazine folded before Wright received payment.

The Depression was affecting more and more people. The ranks of the unemployed grew. Tenants were evicted from apartments, and furniture was thrown onto the streets. Hungry people lined up at soup kitchens for free meals. When Wright went out in the morning looking for work, all he saw were downtrodden men, poorly clothed, hanging around on corners with nothing to do. All the benches in the South Side parks were filled with these men. Their hopelessness felt contagious.11

At last, Wright found employment. A cousin helped him get a job as an insurance agent for a funeral home. Wright went door-to-door selling new burial policies and collecting premiums on old ones. He was struck by the poverty of the African Americans he visited. Their apartments were gloomy and run-down, filled with cheap, broken furniture. Their children wore shabby clothes. And most of the policyholders could not even read.

Wright worked solely on commission. There was no salary, but he would get a little money for each policy he sold. At the end of the day, he was drained. He had no energy left to read or write. Worse, he discovered that the insurance company was dishonest. It was taking advantage of its customers, selling policies that would never pay off. Wright’s conscience nagged him, and he quit his job.

Meanwhile, the Great Depression worsened. Jobs grew even scarcer. Wright was forced to sell his watch and move the family to a smaller, cheaper apartment. Their new home was completely run-down. Wright’s mother cried when she saw it. Her son was shattered and felt like a failure.

One morning there was no food in the house for breakfast and no money to buy any. Filled with shame, Wright went to the Bureau of Public Welfare for food. That is when he knew he had to turn his life around. He had come to a juncture, and it was time to move in a different direction.12
Meanwhile, there was a good deal of discontent in the John Reed Club. The officers thought the writers were not out on the streets enough, not really relating to the down-to-earth struggles of the workers. They stopped the publication of the literary journal *Left Front*.

Wright then joined another group, the League of American Writers, and his circle of literary acquaintances grew wider and closer. Jane Newton, the wife of a prominent Communist of the time, often invited writers, artists, and musicians to her home for coffee. The writers would share their works in progress. Still youthful and slender, Wright delivered his work in a soft voice smoothed by the slow, lilting rhythm of his southern accent.5

In 1935, Wright hitchhiked to New York City to attend the first American Writers' Congress. When he first saw the bustling metropolis, Wright was amazed. He was used to the flatter Midwest, with its smokestacks, factories, and grain elevators. But now he saw, just outside the city, neat homes sitting on carefully landscaped grounds. People strutted purposefully down the streets, not making eye contact, in a hurry to reach their destinations. The energy of the city, radiating sparks of possibility, burned into Wright's soul. From the moment his eyes fixed on New York, Wright knew he wanted to see more.

Although Wright felt immediately drawn to New York City, its doors did not swing open with welcome. The first thing Wright did when he arrived at the American Writers' Congress was to ask the organizers of the event about his sleeping accommodations. He was under the assumption that they had reserved a place for him to stay. Embarrassed, they admitted rather sheepishly that they mistakenly neglected to arrange housing for Wright. Where was he to sleep?

Undaunted, Wright remained at the congress until the end of the evening. He was captivated by a series
of inspiring speeches. By then, the organizers had come up with the name and address of someone they believed would be willing to offer Wright a place to stay.

It was pitch dark when Wright made his way to the downtown streets of the city. He clutched the address in his hand, checking street numbers and names until he came to his supposed host’s home. Wright knocked on the door. It was opened slightly by a white man who, upon setting eyes on Wright, immediately slammed the door. Racism, it seemed, though not overt, still hung like a veil in New York.¹

Luckily, Wright was able to contact a fellow Chicago writer, who gave him a different address. He slept on a kitchen floor that night. For his remaining nine-day visit in New York, Wright unpacked his bags and got some shut-eye at the Harlem YMCA.

All the hassles were worth it. During the congress, Wright’s literary star grew brighter. Another African-American writer praised Wright, ranking him with the older and more famous black poet Langston Hughes.² Wright also made a brief speech at the congress. On May 1, he marched down New York City streets with other writers in a huge May Day parade. It was exhilarating.

Wright also saw several Broadway plays while in New York, including Tobacco Road and Waiting for Lefty. This first taste of Broadway would linger in his mind, and in later years, several of his own works would be presented on Broadway stages. Inspired by his exciting trip to New York, Wright resumed his writing with even greater energy after he returned to Chicago.

The next couple of years were especially important in Wright’s literary career. In 1935, the respected journal Partisan Review published his long poem “Between the World and Me.” It described a lynching—a brutal murder by a lawless mob. Lynching victims were usually strung up and hanged from a tree. These murders were still taking place and usually involved white mobs hanging black victims.

That same year, Wright’s first nonfiction piece appeared in New Masses, a magazine published by the Communist Party. His article “Joe Louis Uncovers Dynamite” describes the heavyweight championship match between the black boxer Joe Louis and his white opponent Max Baer. Wright’s vivid prose portrays the pride African Americans felt after Joe Louis’s stunning victory.

Over the course of five years, Wright wrote and rewrote a novel that he called “Cesspool.” It tells the story of workers in a post office. Semi-autobiographical, it is based closely on Wright’s own experiences. As in James Joyce’s Ulysses, a novel that greatly influenced Wright, the action in “Cesspool” takes place over twenty-four hours. In Wright’s novel, the day is Lincoln’s birthday. It is an ironic comment on the main
character's lack of freedom. Wright retitled the book Lawd Today! before he submitted it to publishers. One after another, they rejected the book. It would not be published until after Wright's death.

In February 1936, the Communists appointed Wright to head a panel on black culture and history at the National Negro Congress and to report on the congress's proceedings. Wright's account reads like stage directions:

**Time:** An era of lynching . . . a time when living standards of Negroes are sinking to lower and lower levels. **Place:** Chicago—the Eighth Regiment Armory, a huge black structure which houses the crack Illinois Negro 8th, a regiment whose ranks were decimated in Flanders "to make the world safe for a democracy" the Negro people have never known.³

Also in 1936, Wright's lengthy short story "Big Boy Leaves Home" appeared in The New Caravan, a prestigious anthology of short stories. The critics loved it, and it led to Wright's promotion in the Federal Writers' Project. Along with a boost in morale, the better job also gave Wright a bigger salary. He was now able to move his family to a larger apartment. There, for the first time in his life, Richard Wright had a room of his own.

Not all was as smooth as silk, however. Tensions continued to grow between Wright and the Chicago Communist Party. Wright resisted what he saw as the party's put-down of intellectuals, particularly of writers.
and celebration. There were thriving performance centers such as the Apollo Theater and lively dance halls like the Savoy Ballroom. Wright also discovered that there were more professional African Americans living in Harlem than anywhere else in the United States. It was home to many accomplished musicians, including jazz great Duke Ellington. Wright slid smoothly into the artistic scene.

Wright began work as the Harlem editor of the Daily Worker, a national Communist newspaper. Over the next year, he contributed dozens of articles of various lengths to the paper. Wright wrote about political meetings and demonstrations in Harlem, about the trial of the “Scottsboro Boys,” and about artistic and literary events.

Wright’s salary at the Daily Worker was slim. It was less than he had been earning in Chicago, and he had to wait six long months to be transferred from the Chicago branch to the New York branch of the Federal Writers’ Project. While he waited, the young writer lived close to the edge. He was forced to move several times because he could not afford the rent. Despite these hardships, he continued to write. When his second novel, Tarbaby’s Dawn, was rejected by several publishers, Wright was disappointed but not defeated.

In 1937, he was introduced to Ralph Ellison by the poet Langston Hughes. Ellison had come to New York from Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and thought of becoming a composer. He became Wright’s closest friend, and their friendship had a lasting impact on the world of literature. Inspired by Wright’s writing, Ellison decided to abandon music and devote himself to writing. Fifteen years after they first met, Ellison’s novel Invisible Man was published to rave reviews.

When Wright was in his thirtieth year, his life seemed to snap into shape. In December 1937, he was reinstated with the Federal Writers’ Project and began to receive a decent salary. This made it possible for him to quit his job with the Daily Worker. That same month he learned that his story “Fire and Cloud” had won first prize among six hundred entries in a competition sponsored by Story Magazine. When a reporter for the New York Amsterdam News asked Wright what he was going to do with the prize money, Wright said that he was going to buy “shoes, an overcoat, and a nice juicy steak.”

Then, Harper & Brothers, a top New York book company, agreed to publish Uncle Tom’s Children: Four Novellas. Wright had written these four stories when he lived in Chicago. They portray the violence perpetrated against poor African Americans in the South. In “Big Boy Leaves Home,” a white woman comes upon four black youths swimming naked on a summer’s day. She shouts for her fiancé, who comes running and shoots two of the boys. The character Big Boy in turn kills the white man, then flees.
The terror and violence grow in the following three stories: “Down by the Riverside,” “Long Black Song,” and the prizewinning “Fire and Cloud.” The book was widely praised and led to Wright’s much longed for contract for a new novel.

Also in 1938, Wright moved in with the Newton family. The Newtons were old friends from Chicago who now lived in Brooklyn, New York. Every morning at the crack of dawn, Wright left the Newton home and walked to Fort Greene Park carrying a yellow legal pad, fountain pen, and bottle of black ink. He would climb to the highest point in the park and write page after page, stopping only now and then to gaze down at the landscape of brownstones, tenements, and fleets of ships lining the Brooklyn Navy Yard. (In 2001, the Fort Greene Park Conservancy and the arts organization 651 ARTS installed a memorial reading bench in the park in Wright’s honor.)

Wright would return to the Newton house around ten in the morning. He and Jane Newton would meet in the kitchen. While she cleared away her family’s breakfast dishes, Wright would read his work-in-progress aloud. It was Native Son.

Jane listened carefully and then offered suggestions. After their discussion, Wright would go up to his bedroom and type what he had written that day. Jane said that she was impressed by “the positively public way” the novel took shape.
Richard Wright

There is a popular saying “Life imitates art,” and that is what happened with *Native Son*. Wright was already halfway through his book when a homicide case started getting a lot of attention in Chicago. It involved a black youth who was accused of murdering a white woman during a botched robbery attempt. This story was so similar to the theme of *Native Son* that Wright started using actual newspaper stories about the case in his book. The clippings were sent to Wright by Margaret Walker, a friend and fellow writer who lived in Chicago. Wright completed the first draft of his novel, 576 pages long, in only four months.

Wright modeled Bigger Thomas, the leading character in the book, after various young men he had known. He wrote that these youths, who did not abide by the racist ways of the South, “were shot, hanged, maimed, lynched . . . until they were either dead or their spirits broken.”

Wright intentionally chose to make Bigger Thomas a brutal, twisted, and unsympathetic hero. After the reviews of his first book, *Uncle Tom’s Children*, appeared, Wright said that he “had made an awfully naive mistake in writing a book which even bankers’ daughters could read and weep over and feel good.” He resolved never to write a tearjerker again: “I swore to myself that if ever I wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears.”

In November, Wright received an advance payment of $400 from the publisher. That same month he went back to Chicago to gather more material for *Native Son*. Wright worked night and day, editing and rewriting. He read portions of *Native Son* to his friends as well as to his agent. He carefully considered their comments and suggestions. It was mentally trying for the novelist. “I sweat over my work. . . . I wish I could say it just flows out, but I can’t. I usually write a rough draft, then go over it, page by page. It’s work.”

In June 1939, Wright handed the finished manuscript to his publisher. It was nine months before the novel reached the bookstores. Once it did, *Native Son* was a tremendous success. Harper & Brothers was a huge publisher, so the book got plenty of publicity and media attention. When the Book-of-the-Month Club made it a well-advertised selection, major sales were guaranteed. Richard Wright had hit the big time.
in Chicago. But this was not easy to do. As an African American, it was hard to avoid being cheated by what Wright called “real estate sharks.” Fact and fiction came together again. Wright had written about a similar housing problem in *Native Son*. In the book, Bigger’s lawyer points out that blacks are made to pay much more than whites for comparable apartments—another aspect of racism.

In May 1939, Wright left the Newtons and Brooklyn and moved to the Douglas Hotel in Harlem. Around this time, Wright fell in love with two women, both white. One was Ellen Poplar, a Communist organizer in Brooklyn. Ellen was petite with an alabaster complexion and tight black curls that framed her face. Wright met her at the Newtons’ home, and they were intensely attracted to each other.²

Wright was also drawn to Dhimah Rose Meadman. Born in Cairo of Russian parents, she was a tall brunette and a modern dancer. She had performed in the Soviet Union and was also a Communist. Wright seemed determined at this point in his life to get married. He proposed to Ellen Poplar, the real love of his life, but she hesitated, worried about how her parents would react to an interracial marriage.

Wright’s heart was broken, but not too long after Ellen’s refusal, he proposed to Dhimah. On August 12, 1939, they were married in the Episcopal Church on Convent Avenue in Harlem. Richard’s good friend
Ralph Ellison was the best man. Dhimah, who had been married before, had a two-year-old son. Wright moved with them and Dhimah's mother into a large Harlem apartment.

With the release of *Native Son* in March 1940, there was a whirlwind of exciting activity, including plenty of parties and interviews. Wright was a hot media star with the spotlight of celebrity focused on him. At the same time, Wright often thought about leaving the United States. When he read an article by an old Chicago friend about how some Americans were living in Mexico for $100 a month in huge houses with grounds, gardens, and swimming pools, Wright was intrigued. He showed the article to his wife, and she loved the idea. He immediately wrote to the author of the article, asking him to find a house for them in Mexico. He told his friend, "Boy, I'm fairly itching to get down there."

Before he could get away, Wright had to complete an assignment for *Life* magazine. He was to write the text for a photo documentary on Chicago's South Side—the setting of *Native Son*. He was accompanied on a tour of the ghetto by a *Life* photographer and by sociologist Horace Clayton, who became a lifelong friend.

In the spring of 1940, Wright, along with his wife, her pianist, his stepson, and his mother-in-law, boarded a ship for Mexico. They settled in the small city of
Cuernavaca, in a spacious ten-room house surrounded by a lush garden. Their luxurious property included a big swimming pool that glistened under the bright, sunny sky. Wright had traveled a long distance from New York to Mexico, but an even longer way from the tenements of Memphis and Chicago to his Mexican paradise.

Wright felt hopeful. At first glance, he was struck by the racial unity in Mexico. It was a place where whites and Indians worked side by side in apparent harmony. But he said that he also recognized "Anglo-Saxon tourists and industrialists [who sought] to introduce social hate and racial discrimination."5

Cuernavaca had a large American colony, so Wright did not make much progress learning Spanish. But he was not just lazing about under the heat of the Mexican sun. He studied guitar, learned to swim, and wrote an article, "How Bigger Was Born," while working steadily on his next novel. Still, he missed the United States and looked forward to mail. Wright was interested in knowing how Native Son was being received. While the sales were brisk and reviews generally favorable, some fellow Communists were still critical of his work.

Surprisingly, after less than three months in their Mexican paradise, Wright decided he had to go back to New York. Unlike his wife, he was uncomfortable in their new, well-heeled life. Living with servants in a wealthy American enclave while the rest of Mexico was poor and struggling made Wright feel too guilty to enjoy his lifestyle. Also, despite his desire to keep his private life a secret, there were rumors spreading that his marriage was not a happy one. He complained to friends that his wife was unbearably bossy and bourgeois.6

Wright decided that en route to New York he would visit his family in the South. It had been thirteen years since he had left. However, he could not travel safely in

Wright was happier in New York than in Mexico, where he was uncomfortable being a rich man in a poor country.
Mississippi with a white wife, so Dhimah and her entourage returned directly to New York by boat while Wright headed to his old home state.

He crossed the border from Mexico into Texas, took the train from San Antonio to New Orleans, and then went on to Natchez. He stayed with cousins and visited his uncle Thomas and his father, who was still working on a farm there. Wright later wrote an article about his poignant return to the South and its blatant racism: "What I saw made me wonder why I had wanted to see and feel it again."

While Wright was in Mexico, his career had continued to leap ahead. Producers wanted to make Native Son into a Broadway play, with the possibility that it might later become a movie. They asked Wright to help shape the stage version of the book. Deciding that he needed help with the dramatization, Wright turned to playwright Paul Green. Wright had seen some of Green's plays and liked the way the liberal white southerner portrayed African Americans.

Before returning to New York, Wright stopped off in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where Green was a professor of dramatic art at the university. Wright and Green worked together for several days on the play. The next month, Wright came back to visit Green for a few weeks of intensive collaboration.

Wright was delighted about the prospect of seeing Native Son on a stage. He also looked forward to the income it could bring. But his personal life was not as promising. Back in New York, he moved in again with the Newmans in Brooklyn while Dhimah returned to their uptown apartment. Fairly soon after the separation, divorce proceedings were begun.

Wright was not a bachelor for long. Not long after his return, he saw Ellen Poplar again, and almost at once they fell back in love. In March 1941, shortly before Native Son opened on Broadway, he married Ellen. Wright knew in his heart that his marriage to Dhimah had been a mistake. And true to his heart's voice, he and Ellen stayed together for the rest of Wright's life.
hundreds of thousands of copies of his books. Wright earned plenty of money from his literary success, enough to buy a large house on Charles Street in Greenwich Village. He was often an honored guest at literary events, and he appeared in the pages of newspapers and magazines across the country. Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of deceased U.S. president Franklin Delano Roosevelt, admired Wright's works.

But when it came to everyday life, none of these accomplishments mattered. On the streets of Greenwich Village, Wright noticed the hateful glares of some of his white neighbors. White shopkeepers called him "boy," even though he was a thirty-nine-year-old man. No local white barber would accept him as a customer. Wright had to go one hundred blocks north, to Harlem, an African American neighborhood, to get a haircut from a black barber.

The insults were nothing new to Wright. He had grown up around race hatred. He made it his mission as a writer to fight racism with words. But his writings did not sway the shopkeepers, neighbors, and waitresses who saw his skin color and treated him as inferior. And his words were powerless against the department store clerk who refused to let his five-year-old daughter, Julia, use the store's restroom.

Wright could not bear the thought of anybody treating his daughter as a second-class citizen. From an earlier trip to France, he saw that the French and other Europeans were color-blind compared to Americans. So, at the end of July 1947, the author of Native Son left his native land behind, in search of a place where skin color did not matter. Wright and his family moved to Paris, France. There he found the racial tolerance he craved. But no matter where he made his home, in Richard Wright's works and in his life, skin color would always matter.

RICHARD NATHANIEL WRIGHT was born in an unwelcoming time and place for African Americans. The time was September 4, 1908, forty-five years after the end of slavery in the United States. Richard’s grandparents had been slaves. In 1908 black people were free, but theirs was a limited freedom. Although white people no longer owned black people as slaves, whites kept blacks out of public schools, good jobs, nice neighborhoods—out of anything and anyplace the white people wanted for themselves.

The place was Adams County, Mississippi. Leading white citizens lived in stately mansions built before the Civil War (1861–1865). Black citizens were forced to live apart from whites, in separate neighborhoods. And Jim Crow referred to the racist system of laws and customs that white Southerners had created to deprive African Americans of their basic rights.

Richard's father, Nathan Wright, could neither read nor write. He was a sharecropper—a farmer who owned no land of his own.
but farmed a white person's land. Richard's mother, Ella Wilson, had a modest education and had worked as a teacher for black children. But after she and Nathan Wright got married, Ella gave up teaching. The couple lived on a farm east of Natchez, Mississippi. Their home was a flimsy wooden shack.

**FROM FARM TO TOWN**

Ella and Nathan worked hard. But sharecropping was full of pitfalls. Sharecroppers had to get loans from merchants to buy seed and tools. In exchange for the loans, the sharecroppers pledged portions of their harvest to the merchants. They also turned over part of their harvest to the landowners, as rent for living on the farm. As a result many sharecroppers struggled constantly with debt.

Ella and Nathan could not beat a system that was stacked so heavily against them. In the fall of 1910, they had another baby boy, Leon. By the next year, they had given up the farm. Ella, Richard, and Leon moved in with Ella's parents, the Wilsons, in Natchez. Nathan worked as a traveling laborer before finding steadier work at a Natchez sawmill. Then he moved in with the Wilsons as well.

Natchez was a small port city on the Mississippi River. The population, half black and half white, was strictly segregated, or separated by race. The Wilsons were not wealthy, but their house in the town's black section was far more comfortable than Ella and Nathan's shack. The countryside around the town offered views of fields and woods.

Richard was a curious, observant boy. He later wrote of his delight in seeing "long straight rows of red and green vegetables stretching away in the sun to the bright horizon." He also remembered the earthiness of rural life: "There was the experience of feeling death without dying that came from watching a chicken leap about blindly after its neck had been snapped by a quick twist of my father's wrist."

Although the black citizens of Natchez suffered the pains and humiliations of Jim Crow, Richard did not yet grasp any distinction between black people and white people. In his own family, skin color varied across a wide range. His father, Nathan, was dark. His mother, Ella, was much lighter. And then there was Grandmother Wilson, Ella's mother. She was considered black under Southern law because she had some African ancestry. But her skin was white. She had Irish and Scottish ancestors, and with her smooth dark hair and sharp, narrow features, she looked much like the white people who lived in another section of town. For Richard, the notion of two different races seemed strange.
MEMPHIS STRUGGLES

In 1913, when Richard was four years old, Nathan and Ella decided to leave Natchez. They bought tickets on a paddle-wheel boat and traveled to Memphis, Tennessee, a city of nearly 100,000 people. Nathan hoped he would find a better job there.

Like Natchez, Memphi s was strictly segregated. The Wrights rented two rooms in the black section of the city. Unlike the Wrights' home in Natchez, however, their Memphi s neighborhood offered no pleasant views of fields or woods. It was grimy and urban, with few places for Richard and Leon to play.

Nathan Wright struggled to earn enough money to provide for his family. He found work as a night maintenance man at a drugstore. At home during the day, he expected his children to be quiet so he could sleep. This created tension between Richard and his father. Richard began to resent his father, whom he viewed as unkind and distant.

More and more often, Nathan went out to relax in the nightclubs on Beale Street, Memphi s's main strip where African Americans could enjoy music and other entertainment. He brought home less money for Ella to buy food. Sometime in 1914, he stopped coming home at all.

"WHY COULDN'T I NOT EAT?"

The responsibility of providing for Richard and Leon now fell to Ella. She hired herself out as a domestic servant for white families, helping cook and serve their meals. These jobs did not pay much, and the family often went hungry. Hunger became Richard's central concern. It made him even angrier at his father.

Sometimes Ella took the boys to work with her. Richard stood in the kitchen where his mother prepared delicious food for her white employers and waited to see if there would be any leftovers.

"Watching the white people eat would make my empty stomach rum and I would grow vaguely angry," he later wrote. "Why could I not eat when I was hungry? Why did I always have to wait until others were through?"

Most days when Ella went to work, she left behind a loaf of bread and a pot of tea for the boys. Neighbors kept an eye on Richard and Leon, but the two were mostly on their own. They found amusements in the streets, along with other children whose parents were at work. Some of their games were harmless pranks, such as tying a dead snake on a string and flinging it in front of unsuspecting passersby.

Ella Wright worked hard to care for her two sons. This photo of her was taken later in her life.
at first he was so shy in the classroom that he became speechless when the teacher called on him.

Hunger was still a constant in Richard’s life. One Sunday his mother invited the preacher from her church and a few neighbors to the apartment for a fried chicken dinner. Richard was thrilled at the prospect of such a fine meal. The first course was soup. The others ate their soup and turned to the platter of chicken in the center of the table. Anxious that there would be no chicken left for him, Richard found himself unable to swallow his soup. But Ella insisted that he eat his soup before getting any chicken. The preacher enjoyed one helping of chicken and then another. The platter’s contents diminished. “That preacher’s going to eat all the chicken!” Richard screamed. The preacher laughed.

Ella sent Richard away without dinner that day. Richard continued to like fried chicken—but he never did like church.

A WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

A few months after Richard started school, Ella became very sick. She felt weak and suffered pain, but no one could figure out exactly what was wrong. Grandmother Wilson came to help for a while, but she could not stay in Memphis. Her own husband had arthritis, and she needed to go home to care for him.

With Nathan Wright out of the family’s life, Ella had few options. She could not look after her boys or work when she was so ill. Neighbors pitched in, but she needed a more reliable solution. In early 1916 Ella placed Richard and Leon in an orphanage for black children.

Richard hated the orphanage. It was a two-story structure in the middle of a grassy field. Instead of hiring someone to mow the lawn, the director made the children yank out overgrown grass around the building. Richard’s world turned upside down
as he found himself in a place without parents, without friends, and without a neighborhood.

After a few weeks, Richard ran away. A police officer discovered him walking through the streets and took him back to the orphanage. The director punished him with a spanking. Ella felt bad for her son. She took Richard to beg Nathan for money, but Nathan claimed to have none to spare. So Ella turned to one of her seven siblings. She and the boys would move to Elaine, Arkansas, where her favorite younger sister, Maggie, lived. Maggie and her husband invited Ella, Richard, and Leon to move in with them. It was the best offer the family had.

SUMMER AWAKENINGS

Before going to Arkansas, Ella and the boys stayed with her parents for several months. The Wilsons had moved from Natchez to Jackson, the capital of Mississippi. They were not as well off as they used to be. Richard Wilson's ailments kept him from working, and Margaret Wilson, a trained midwife, also worked less as she grew older. Still, they lived in a house with a garden.

Although the Wilsons lived on a city street, Richard and Leon could walk to nearby woods, a swamp, and the Pearl River. Richard enjoyed fishing with his grandfather and brother. He had fun playing outdoors with local children. And he appreciated one other thing in particular: "There was the drugged, sleepy feeling that came from sipping glasses of milk," he later wrote, "drinking them slowly so that they would last a long time, and drinking enough for the first time in my life."

While spending the summer of 1916 in Jackson, Richard discovered the world of fiction. To help make ends meet, the Wilsons rented a room in their house to a young teacher named Eloise Crawford. Richard saw her reading novels and asked her to tell him the stories.

Crawford hesitated to share her books with Richard. She knew—as did Richard—that Grandmother Wilson strongly disapproved of novels. Granny followed a very strict form of the Seventh-day Adventist religion, a Christian denomination. She believed that lying was a sin and that fiction was a form of lying because it was not true.

Richard persisted, and Crawford finally agreed to tell him one of the stories she was reading—the story of Bluebeard. In this suspenseful, bloody fairy tale, a curious young woman becomes the
Living in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1916, Richard discovered the world of fiction. He also learned about racial discrimination.

eighth wife of Bluebeard, a rich but mysterious nobleman. Bluebeard is known for two things: his frightening appearance and the disappearances of his first seven wives. Crawford started to whisper the story to Richard. He later described his reaction: "The tale made the world around me be, throb, live... My sense of life deepened and the feel of things was different, somehow... The sensations the story aroused in me were never to leave me."

Crawford did not get to tell Richard how the story ended, however, because his grandmother discovered them on the porch. She scolded them both furiously. They were both going to burn in hell, she told them.

Richard did not care. He was overtaken by the power of words. "I had tasted what to me was life, and I would have more of it, somehow, some way," he wrote.

Besides fairy tales, Richard was introduced to something less enchanting during his summer in Jackson. For the first time, he learned about the huge gap between black and white people in the South. He observed that white people enjoyed privileges that black people were denied. White people lived in their own parts of town, which were nicer than the black sections. White people could dine in any restaurant they wanted, while black people could eat only in black cafes. White people rode in comfortable train cars, while black people had to travel in the no-frills cars at the rear of the train.

Richard also heard from his black neighbors that white people disliked black people so much that whites sometimes beat and even killed blacks. He did not know of specific cases. He knew only that the world around him was more complicated, unfriendly, and dangerous than he had ever imagined.
IN THE LATE SUMMER OF 1916, Richard and his family moved, as planned, to Arkansas to live with Aunt Maggie and her husband, Silas Hoskins. Uncle Silas owned a successful saloon in the town of Elaine. He and Maggie welcomed Ella, Richard, and Leon into their home, a comfortable bungalow. Richard enjoyed his aunt’s company, especially after the strict atmosphere of Granny’s house. He also enjoyed the abundance of food.

“Can I eat all I want?” he asked when he first sat down to supper and saw platters of food piled high.

“Eat as much as you like,” Uncle Silas said. Richard’s uncle did not have to tell him twice.

Life in Elaine was sweet for Richard. He had plenty to eat. He had places to play. But the race hatred Richard was learning about soon struck home. Uncle Silas’s successful business made some white citizens jealous. They threatened to kill him. One day, just a few months after Richard and his family had moved to Elaine, Uncle Silas did not return home from his saloon. Dinnertime came and went, and still he did not show up. Then a neighbor brought the terrible news: a white man had shot Uncle Silas to death.

Screaming, Aunt Maggie started running down the road toward the saloon. But the neighbor reported that the whites in town said they would kill Silas’s family next. Ella forced her sister back into the house. A few hours later, the two women and the two children ran away from their home, their belongings packed hastily in a wagon. They fled to West Helena, a nearby town. Aunt Maggie could not even retrieve Uncle Silas’s body, so they could not give him a funeral.

POVERTY AND PAIN

In West Helena, the family moved into the poor black section of town. Ella and Maggie supported themselves by working in white people’s homes. While the women were at work, Richard and Leon took to the streets. Ella left the boys ten cents for lunch, which they spent on gingersnaps and Coca-Cola. Richard absorbed the fear and anger that the other neighborhood children felt toward whites—hatred in return for hatred. And he heard from the other children that many black people wanted to move to the North. There, they said, white people did not hate black people as much as Southern whites did, and blacks could get better jobs.

Aunt Maggie did move North, to Detroit, Michigan. Ella and the boys remained in West Helena. In the fall of 1918, Richard and Leon started attending the neighborhood school for black children. At ten years old, Richard had had hardly any schooling. Still, he was able to read and write, and he was a fast learner. But Ella fell sick suddenly, with the same unknown illness she had experienced in Memphis. Once again, Richard had to leave school, this time to earn money. He did odd jobs, such as delivering lunch to
workers in the railway yard and carrying firewood and laundry to people's homes.

Ella's health worsened. One day Richard found her in bed. She was paralyzed, unable to move the left side of her body. Neighbors helped care for her and the boys and sent word to Grandmother Wilson about what had happened. A doctor determined that Ella had suffered a stroke. Although Richard disliked his grandmother's strict and dour ways, he found himself desperately hoping that she would come and help him.

**HUNGER AGAIN**

Granny traveled to West Helena and brought Ella, Richard, and Leon back with her to Jackson. Ella's brothers and sisters gathered at the house to help sort out matters. The adults decided that Leon would go to Detroit with Aunt Maggie. Richard would live with his uncle Clark in Greenwood, Mississippi, not far from Jackson.

Although Uncle Clark and his wife, Aunt Jody, had a nice house and plenty of food, Richard could not get comfortable there. He started school in Greenwood but found it hard to concentrate. He begged to go back to his mother. Finally Uncle Clark bought him a ticket and put him on a train to Jackson.

At the Wilsons' home, Richard had his mother but not much else. He suffered from hunger again. Between the Wilsons' poverty and Granny's religious dietary restrictions, there was not much to eat. Pork, a mainstay of the Southern diet, was forbidden. For breakfast the family ate cornmeal mush. Supper was likely to be greens. Richard wanted to earn money so that he could buy better food. Many children in the neighborhood had jobs on Saturday. But Grandmother Wilson would not let Richard work on that day, which was the Sabbath, or holy day of rest, in the Adventist faith.

"Once again I knew hunger, biting hunger," Richard wrote later. "No food that I could dream of seemed half so utterly delicious as vanilla wafers. Every time I had a nickel I would run to the corner grocery store and buy a box of vanilla wafers and walk back home, slowly, so that I could eat them all up without having to share with anyone. Then I would sit on the front steps and dream of eating another box."

**TROUBLE IN THE FAMILY**

Richard was not the only young person in the Wilson household. The youngest Wilson daughter, Addie, had just finished high school.
She was only nine years older than Richard, but she was his aunt. Addie, like her mother, was a Seventh-day Adventist. She lived with her parents and taught at the nearby Adventist church school.

In September 1920, Richard turned twelve and returned to school. He wanted to go to the public school for black children, the Jim Hill School, but Grandmother Wilson wanted him in the Adventist school. Richard's aunt Addie was the only teacher at the school, so he sat in her classroom along with thirty other students of all ages.

Richard was already chafing against the strict religion and discipline at home. At school, too, he faced correction and authority from his young aunt. One day Addie found walnut shells on the floor near Richard's seat. She gave him a rap on the knuckles for eating in class. When Richard started to explain, she ordered him to the front of the classroom, where she struck his hand repeatedly with a switch. It hurt, but he did not cry. He was not going to let his aunt think that he cared.

At home after school, Aunt Addie came at Richard again with a switch. Not only had he eaten walnuts in class, she complained, but he was also disrespectful to her. Something in Richard snapped. He had had enough. With his aunt pursuing him, he grabbed a knife from the kitchen and turned on her. When he refused to drop it, they ended up wrestling on the floor. Grandmother Wilson and Ella, still limping from her stroke, heard the commotion and broke up the fight.

Richard had not eaten the walnuts in class. Another boy had. But that did not matter to his family. To his grandparents and aunt, he was trouble. To his mother, he was a constant source of worry.

**HUNGRY FOR STORIES**

One good thing came out of Richard's rebellion. He was allowed to enroll in the Jim Hill Public School in the fall of 1921. As far as Grandmother Wilson was concerned, he was a lost cause to her faith. He might as well go to a nonreligious school.

Although he was thirteen, Richard was placed in the fifth grade—two years behind his age group—because he had had so little schooling. In just a few weeks, however, his teacher promoted him to sixth grade. Richard was proud of himself. He mastered his lessons quickly. Since he could finish his schoolwork before the other children, he started bringing magazines to class to read.

Richard also liked becoming part of the group of kids at school. But he felt differences between himself and the others. At lunchtime, when the other children bought sandwiches at the neighborhood store, he could not. He was too proud to admit he
did not have enough money. As his classmates bit into their sardine sandwiches and asked him why he didn't have lunch, he said, “Aw, I'm not hungry at noon, ever.”

Of course Richard was hungry for lunch. He was also hungry for something else. He had a voracious appetite for stories, especially crime and horror and fantasy stories. Reading led to writing. As he later explained, “Some people go to the sea shore and see people swimming and they want to swim too. When I started to read I wanted to write.” And so he started writing stories.

"YOU'LL NEVER BE A WRITER"

Richard finally got the chance to work during the summer after sixth grade, in 1922. A neighbor, Mr. Mance, sold burial insurance to poor black farmers across Mississippi. The insurance would pay for their casket and burial when they died. He asked Richard to travel with him to help customers fill out insurance forms.

Driving with Mr. Mance from one sharecropper's shack to another, Richard saw a side of black life that depressed him. The farmers and their children could not read or write. While Richard appreciated the endless glasses of milk his hosts gave him, he felt bad that they were poor and illiterate. “I saw a bare, bleak pool of black life,” he wrote later, “and I hated it.”

But he did like the money he earned. When he started back to school in the fall of 1922, he badgered his grandmother about getting a job that included Saturday hours. After he threatened to run away, she relented.

Nearly all jobs for young black teens involved working for white people. And this, Richard learned, involved paying respect, even when employers treated him poorly, and holding his tongue, even when he was longing to speak. When Richard applied for his first job with a white family, the woman who interviewed him asked him whether he was a thief. Without thinking, Richard laughed. The woman asked for an explanation. Richard pointed out that if he were a thief, he would not tell her. When he saw her getting angry, he hung his head and said quietly that he did not steal. She hired him.

Richard did not mind the duties—chopping wood, bringing in coal for the stove, washing, sweeping, and waiting on the family at breakfast. But on his first day, his employer expressed surprise that a black boy would remain in school for seventh grade. When Richard explained that he wanted to continue his schooling so that he could be a writer—one of the first times he said that out loud—she responded, “You'll never be a writer. Who on earth put such ideas into your nigger head?” Richard did not return to work the next day.

He got other jobs. With the money he earned, he bought clothes and lunch at school. He bought schoolbooks, as well as the cheap novels and crime magazines he loved. He now knew, like so many other black people, that working in the white world was frequently humiliating and unfair. But at least Richard and his friends from school could compare notes and joke about it.

DREAMS OF ESCAPE

As Richard began seventh grade, his mother’s health improved. She and Richard talked about getting their own home again. But events clouded their dreams. Grandfather Wilson died in November 1922. Soon afterward, Ella suffered more paralysis from another stroke.

The next fall, in 1923, Richard got a job with the first friendly white family he had ever met. He was in eighth grade at Smith Robertson School. Still an excellent student, Richard dreamed more and more of writing stories and publishing them in magazines and books. Soon he went beyond dreaming; in the spring of 1924, Richard wrote his first complete short story.
Little is known for certain about this story, because no copy has survived. Richard later said he called it "The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre" and that it was about a villain who plotted to steal a widow's home. He took it to the Southern Register, a weekly newspaper by and about the black citizens of Jackson. The editor agreed to publish the story in installments over three weeks. He could not offer payment, but he was one of the only adults in Richard's life who encouraged his interest in writing.

Richard's first experience as a published author brought him attention—almost none of it positive. His grandmother called fiction the devil's work. Aunt Addie pointed out that using the word "hell" in the title was a sin. Richard's mother worried that his writing stories would make people think he was "weak-minded."

None of these reactions made Richard doubt his desire to become a writer. Instead, he felt angry with the people around him. He imagined moving to a place where he could follow his dream of writing books, where people would consider his writing a good thing. He dreamed of going to the North.

Events during the summer of 1924 reinforced Richard's feeling that he needed to leave the South. Local white men murdered a classmate's brother when they learned that he was romantically involved with a white woman. At first the young man was reported shot to death—but he was not so lucky. Instead, the white mob subjected him to a lynching and tortured him to death.

The lynching depressed and frightened Richard. The rules for black people in the South were harsh and unforgiving. "The penalty of death awaited me if I made a false move," Richard wrote, "and I wondered if it was worth-while to make any move at all."

**IN HIS OWN WORDS**

In the spring of 1925, Richard and other ninth graders at Smith Robertson School prepared for graduation. The principal, W. H. Lanier, selected sixteen-year-old Richard and four other top students to speak at the ceremony. Richard wrote a speech addressing the ways in which the Jim Crow educational system robbed black people of the chance to become complete human beings.

Before graduation Lanier brought Richard into his office and handed him some papers. This was the speech—written by Lanier—that Richard was to read at graduation. Lanier made it clear that Richard would not give a speech criticizing white people. After much effort, the principal had just persuaded Jackson's white leaders to allow him to open the first public high school in Jackson for black children. Lanier did not want to jeopardize the new school.
Richard (back row, fifth from right) stands with his ninth-grade graduating class at Smith Robertson in 1925. Richard, always a good student, excelled at Smith Robertson and ended up graduating at the top of his class.

Richard would have none of it. He would deliver his speech or no speech at all. Hearing of the conflict, his family and friends urged him to do as the principal asked. Richard was adamant, and Lanier relented. If Richard toned down his more strident passages, he could give his own speech. Richard was willing to compromise that much. On May 29, 1925, dressed in his first suit with long pants, he delivered “The Attributes of Life.” He spoke from memory. When he finished speaking, he walked out of the room and away from his classmates and teachers and went home.

**THE WAY OUT**

Richard’s goal was to leave Mississippi and eventually make his way to Chicago, Illinois. As a first step, he planned to go to Memphis. First he had to save enough money to buy a train ticket and to support himself as he was settling down in a new place.

While some of his friends went on to tenth grade in the fall of 1925 at the new black high school—Lanier High School, named for Principal Lanier—Richard went to work. He got a job at a clothing store but was soon fired because he did not behave the way his bosses thought black people should: cheerful and servile. He ran into trouble at other jobs for similar reasons. A black friend from school tried to coach Richard on how to act around white people. He should get out of their way. He should not speak his mind. He should definitely not act smart. Learning to act the fool was much harder for Richard than learning his school lessons.

Richard grew impatient. It would take many months of work to save the one hundred dollars he wanted in his pocket before leaving Jackson. With hesitation, but also with determination, he decided to raise the money illegally. A classmate told him about a movie theater run by a white man where some black employees had a scheme to steal money from ticket sales. The owner was looking for a new ticket collector, and the employees were hoping for someone to join their scheme. Richard got the job. He helped cheat the owner out of his cash. In two weeks, Richard had his one hundred dollars.

To pad his pockets a little more, Richard stole canned food from nearby Jackson College and a gun from a neighbor. He sold those items and bought a cheap cardboard suitcase, some clothes, and shoes. On a cold, rainy Saturday night in November 1925, he bid his mother good-bye. He promised to send for her and Leon. Then Richard walked to the railroad station and boarded a train to Memphis. He rode, as required by Jim Crow, in the all-black car.
IN THE DECADE since the Wrights had lived in Memphis, the city had grown. Black people made up more than one-third of its population of 160,000. Although racism was alive and well in Memphis, African Americans enjoyed a vibrant culture and community. The Beale Street nightclubs were thriving. Memphis was the capital of the new style of music known as the blues. A black bandleader named William Christopher (W. C.) Handy introduced this plaintive music.

New in town, Wright immediately got a job as a dishwasher at the same drugstore where his father had once worked. He found a cheap place to stay. Soon he found a better job at an optical company, running errands and washing eyeglass lenses, which were smeared and dirty after being processed in the optical machinery. Wright earned extra money doing deliveries and other small tasks for the white employees. They called him “boy” and used racial slurs in their matter-of-fact way, but Wright had learned to mask his anger at the daily humiliations of the Jim Crow South. He ate his lunch—usually a hamburger and a bag of peanuts—with other black men who worked in the same office building. Talk often turned to the way white people treated them. “Each of us hated and feared the whites,” Wright later noted, “yet had a white man put in a sudden appearance we would have assumed silent, obedient smiles.”

WORDS AS WEAPONS

Although Wright lived simply to save his money to move North, he allowed himself the luxury of buying reading material. His
reading tastes were changing from crime stories and sensational tales to literary magazines such as Harper's and the Atlantic Monthly. When he came across words he did not know, he looked them up in a pocket dictionary he carried with him.

In the spring of 1927, when Wright was eighteen, he read an article in the paper that changed his reading habits even more—and, in a way, even changed his life. The article was an editorial, or opinion piece, attacking a man Wright had never heard of before: H. L. Mencken. Mencken was an author who also edited a magazine called the American Mercury. From the tone of the editorial, Wright could tell that Mencken, a Northern white man, had progressive ideas about black people's rights. Wright had to see what Mencken had written that had so infuriated the white Southerner who wrote the piece.

Wright faced one problem: black people were not allowed to use the public library in Memphis. Undaunted, he approached one of his white coworkers for assistance. Wright's plan was to pretend he was at the library to pick up books for the white man. This had the ring of truth, as Wright had gone to the library in the past on such an errand. But this time he would bring a note signed by the coworker asking the librarian to give Wright the books. He would present the coworker's library card and, if things went as planned, get the books—for himself.

The white coworker went along with Wright's idea. That day, Wright composed the note. "Dear Madam," he wrote, "Will you please let this nigger boy have some books by H. L. Mencken?" Wright believed that using the common racial slur gave the note an authentic touch. And he asked the librarian to select the Mencken books simply because he did not know the titles of any of them.

The plan worked. The librarian selected two volumes by H. L. Mencken and handed them to Wright.

That night he dug into the books. His eyes opened to a world where people—some people, at least—were not afraid to say and write unpopular ideas that were sure to offend others. Mencken sharply criticized much about American culture. He ridiculed politicians, people who went to church, Southerners, writers he did not like—anything and anyone.

"I stood up," Wright recalled. "trying to realize what reality lay behind the meaning of the words. . . . Yes, this man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as weapons, using them as one would use a club. Could words be weapons? Well, yes, for here they were. Then, maybe, perhaps, I could use them.
as a weapon? No. It frightened me." But in addition to the fear, Wright felt excited and awakened.

**CHICAGO BOUND**

Wright kept reading and awakening. He read Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Stendhal, and Ivan Turgenev. Their novels realistically depicted society's flaws. Wright's sophistication grew, but he was careful to seem like an unschooled black man. He kept up his scheme at the library. "When a book I wanted wasn't in, I would never ask for another," he later told an interviewer. "Oh, no! I would go out, change the list, and come back again." He knew he was crossing a line between the white and black worlds.

As he expanded his horizons, Wright still lived in the limited world of the Jim Crow South. He supported himself with his menial job at the optical company. He scrimped on meals. Other than his hamburger lunch, he ate bread and milk for breakfast and a can of pork and beans for dinner most days. He lived in a modest rented room. His scrimping paid off. By the fall of 1927, Wright had saved enough money to bring his mother and brother to Memphis. They were all that much closer to moving to Chicago.

Soon afterward, Aunt Maggie came back from Detroit to join the family. She was optimistic about job opportunities up North, and her enthusiasm was infectious. The family decided that Richard and Maggie would go first. In Chicago they would get jobs, save money, and send for Ella and Leon as soon as they could afford to.

In late 1927, Wright and his aunt boarded a train for Chicago, the second-largest city in the United States at the time. Aunt Maggie dreamed of opening her own beauty parlor. Wright had dreams, too. They were not just about getting a job or being able to afford a comfortable apartment and nourishing food. At age nineteen, he dreamed of a new life, one in which he could be comfortable in his own skin and his surroundings would nourish his mind and soul.

**LAND OF KITCHENETTES**

Wright and his aunt moved into a boardinghouse in Chicago's South Side. The South Side was an expanse of run-down apartment buildings chopped up into "kitchenettes"—tiny dwellings where black families lived in one room with a small kitchen area. White people had moved out of the neighborhood in the early 1900s, when African Americans from the South started heading north to Chicago. (This mass exodus from the South to the urban North lasted for more than half a century and became known as the Great Migration.) Chicago's South Side had become a ghetto of 200,000 black residents. The white owners of South Side buildings and businesses were happy to collect rent
and sell liquor to black residents, but they were not interested in spending money to improve the neighborhood.

The morning after his arrival, Wright ventured into the cold Chicago winter in search of work. He took the streetcar to a white area, where he was more likely to find a job. On the streetcar, black people sat next to white people, which was unheard of in the South. In the storefronts, there were no “Whites Only” signs. Wright stopped at one of the stores, a delicatessen owned by a Jewish family, the Hoffmans, who had recently emigrated from Europe. They offered him a job. His duties were to make deliveries, clean the store, and keep the shelves filled with food.

The Hoffmans were friendly, and the deli was a decent place to work. But Wright felt uncomfortable. Unlike him, the Hoffmans could barely speak English. Unlike him, they were foreigners. Yet they owned a store and lived in a nicer part of town. They could do these things because they were white, and he could not because he was black. Wright realized that even though he had left behind the overt Jim Crow racism of the South, he still faced race discrimination. As he took the streetcar each day to the white neighborhood where he could not live, to the store he could not own, he grew resentful of his kindly, English-mangling employers. One day he simply stopped going to work.

Wright did not quit without a plan. The United States Post Office hired black men as clerks. To be considered for a job, applicants had to take an exam, which tested their knowledge of the Chicago area and their memorization skills. Wright took the test in the spring of 1928 and waited to see whether he would be hired.

**LEARNING AND EARNING**

That summer Wright learned that he had passed the exam and was hired for a temporary job at the Chicago post office. He was happy. He worked an eight-hour shift, either during the day or during the night. The schedule gave him plenty of free time to read and write. In Chicago, unlike Memphis, Wright could check out library books under his own name, without a white person’s help. Wright took his reading and writing very seriously. He loved novelists who belonged to what was known as the school of realism. Their stories illuminated the everyday lives and problems of powerless people, and the writers did not shy away from harsh depictions of the seamiest side of life. He read Joseph Conrad, Thomas Hardy, and D. H. Lawrence. He especially liked Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky, whose stories portrayed the oppression the common people of Russia experienced under the czars’ rule. Wright was methodical in his reading. "I would read all of a writer’s books before passing on to another," he explained.

With the earnings from his post office job, Wright could afford to bring his mother and brother to Chicago. They all lived together in cramped quarters, and Wright had no privacy. But he had achieved his goal: he had moved his family out of the South.

**SEARCHING FOR STORIES**

At the end of the summer of 1928, Wright’s temporary post office job ended. He wanted a permanent position, but first he had to pass a physical exam. Applicants had to weigh at least 125 pounds (57 kilograms)—and Wright did not. He stuffed himself with milk and meat to bring up his weight, but he could not make up for a lifetime of undereating. He failed the physical exam. He got a job in a café and over the winter ate as much as he could, looking ahead to the next post office exam in the spring.

In March 1929, twenty-year-old Wright reached the 125-pound (57 kg) mark and passed the physical. While waiting for a permanent job, he was hired at the central Chicago post office as a mail sorter and substitute clerk.
"I FELT BLEAK"

While Wright was waiting for a post office job to open up, the nation was changing in ways that dashed his hopes for an orderly life of eight-hour workdays and nights of reading and writing. In 1929 the U.S. economy started to go into an economic depression. As business slowed down, people used the mail less. With less mail to handle, the post office needed fewer clerks and mail sorters. Wright's hours were cut. Then, on October 29, 1929, the prices of stocks sold on the New York Stock Exchange plummeted, ushering in the economic catastrophe known as the Great Depression.

At first Wright did not think the stock market crash would affect him much. Like millions of other Americans, however, he found his life dramatically altered by the depression. By the spring of 1930, the post office no longer needed his services.

Before he turned twenty, Wright had left the South to live in Chicago and devote himself to writing. This photo was taken in Chicago in 1928.

Once again Wright improved his family's standard of living. Food was plentiful. The family moved to a larger four-room apartment. Finally he enjoyed the privacy he craved. He worked nights and devoted time during the day to his reading and writing.

At this time Wright mostly wrote short stories. Although he spoke "standard" English, he wanted his writing to capture the feel and experience of the ghetto. He filled pages with efforts to depict black speech patterns. He wrote and wrote but was not satisfied with his efforts. What his stories lacked, he believed, was a connection to the real workings of society. He did not yet have solid ideas about the world that could be expressed in his writing.

Many Americans lost their jobs during the Great Depression. Breadlines like this one in Chicago were common.
The Great Depression

The Great Depression began on October 29, 1929, the day when companies' stock prices on the New York Stock Exchange fell dramatically. The depression affected all Americans. Banks closed because they had lost money that they had invested in the stock market. People who had put their money in banks were left without funds.

A vicious cycle gripped the nation. People could not buy as many goods and services as they once had. Without customers, businesses lost money. Without money, businesses could not provide jobs. And without jobs, people could not afford food, furniture, clothing, heating fuel, or rent.

Those who were poor before the stock market crash were left with nothing. Landlords threw out residents who could not pay rent. People slept in parks and picked food out of trash cans. Charitable organizations tried to help, but the U.S. government did not yet have a strong system for helping people in need. The effects of the depression—millions of people out of work and a slowdown in business and manufacturing activity across the country—continued for more than a decade.

Wright got a lucky break that summer when he was rehired for part-time work, but in the fall he was out of a job again.

Through it all, Wright continued writing. He started a novel—which he called Cesspool—that drew on his experiences working at the post office. In April 1931, Abbott's Monthly, a magazine with a black readership, published one of Wright's short stories, called "Superstition." The suspenseful story was not the serious literature Wright was striving to produce, but he did celebrate his first fiction sale. Unfortunately, Abbott's ran out of money and shut down before he received his payment.

Wright took whatever temporary jobs came his way. But things only got worse. Leon suffered from stomach ulcers and could not work. Desperately short of funds, the family had to move to a cheaper apartment. "The place was dismal; plaster was falling from the walls; the wooden stairs sagged," Wright later wrote. "When my mother saw it, she wept. I felt bleak. I had not done what I had come to the city to do."
SETBACKS AND SICKNESS

Paul Reynolds read the manuscript for Island of Hallucinations and did not think it could be published. In the novel, Fishbelly Tucker has flown to Paris, only to find the American expatriate community there in turmoil, with spies and rumors and backbiting. Wright’s new editor at Doubleday did not like it any better. Lacking encouragement and inspiration, Wright set the novel aside.

In the spring of 1959, Wright had plans to travel to Africa again. He tried to obtain funding for the tour, but none of the cultural organizations he approached would back him.

With sales of The Long Dream poor, and no major publication on the horizon, Wright faced serious financial difficulties. He and Ellen decided to leave Paris for London, where her career could flourish. To finance the move, Wright had to sell his beloved Ally farm and give up the spacious apartment on rue Monsieur le Prince. Ellen and the girls moved to London in the summer of 1959, while Wright rented a two-room apartment in a quiet Paris neighborhood. British immigration officials had balked at granting him an immigration visa. Still, he assumed that he would be able to immigrate to Great Britain and join his family in London in a few months.

Then, at the end of June 1959, Wright became very sick with dysentery, an intestinal disease that causes severe diarrhea. Doctors speculated that he had contracted the disease during his travels in Africa. The illness came on suddenly and forcefully. He was exhausted, suffered abdominal pain, and ran frequent fevers.

Even while sick, Wright explored new creative opportunities. A South African writer introduced him to Japanese haiku poetry, and he became fascinated by it. He put together a new collection of short stories, which World Publishers agreed to publish under the title Eight Men. He toyed with the idea of starting a magazine that would explore the psychological and social underpinnings of murder and other serious crimes. The project did not materialize.

By the fall of 1959, Wright had recovered enough to visit his family in London. British immigration officials harassed him when he entered the country, and he realized that his request to immigrate permanently might not be granted. Shortly after Wright returned to Paris, he had to make another trip to Great Britain for the funeral of his old friend George Padmore, who had helped lead the Gold Coast to independence. The death of yet another influential person in his life deeply upset Wright.

To make matters worse, he encountered more resistance from British immigration officials when he met with them to discuss
his immigration request. Although the officials did not flatly deny his request, Wright concluded that the government did not want him in Great Britain. He blamed it on racism and the government’s desire to keep voices of dissent out of the country. Wright stopped pursuing his immigration visa. He would live in Paris, separate from his family.

PILES OF POETRY

Wright lived alone in Paris, but he was not completely on his own. He cooked for himself but employed a maid to clean and do his dishes. He saw good friends. To earn money, he wrote liner notes—essays included in record albums—as well as articles. Wright felt hopeful about a stage version of The Long Dream, written by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Ketti Frings, set to open in early 1960. When the play opened on Broadway on February 17, 1960, however, reviews were so poor that Frings decided to close down the production after only five shows.

After this failure, Wright was unhappy and unwell. His intestinal distress continued, often leaving him feverish and exhausted. He found a new doctor, who prescribed a bland diet and daily doses of bismuth, a pinkish-white metal used in medicines for upset stomachs. The doctor admired Wright’s work and treated him without charge. Wright followed his doctor’s prescriptions faithfully, but he could not gain back his strength.

In his weakened condition, Wright seemed to find solace in writing haiku. The poems each have only three lines and seventeen syllables. He carried a notebook full of haiku wherever he went. He counted syllables on napkins while seated in Paris cafés. He wrote as he lay in bed. He produced more than four thousand haiku by the spring of 1960.

Similar to the way he used to spread sections of his Native Son manuscript around his room, Wright fanned his haiku around

I give permission
For this slow spring rain to soak
The violet beds.

Make up your mind, Snail!
You are half inside your house,
And halfway out!

Wright wrote thousands of haiku, including the two shown here, which he typed up and hung around his office as a means of organizing them.

him so he could organize the poems into a possible book. His daughter Julia, who was eighteen years old, went to Paris to spend time with him. She later wrote, “I remember how he would hang pages and pages of [haiku] up, as if to dry, on long metal rods strung across the narrow office area of his tiny sunless studio in Paris, like the abstract still-life photographs he used to compose and develop himself at the beginning of his Paris exile. I also recall how one day he tried to teach me how to count the syllables: ‘Julia, you can write them, too. It’s always, five, and seven and five—like math. So you can’t go wrong.’”
Wright's haiku reflected his own life and the natural world around him. They sometimes revealed his wit, which was known to his friends and acquaintances but rarely seen in his novels:

O finicky cat,
Forgive me for this spring rain
That disgusts you so!

By the summer of 1960, Wright had selected 811 haiku and sent them off to an editor and friend at World Publishers. Much to Wright's disappointment, the company did not want to publish them.

ENDING ALONE

Wright pulled himself out of a period of depression to work again on Island of Hallucinations and to start a new short story. He still planned to return to Africa for a visit. And he was cheered by Julia's decision to leave Cambridge University to attend the Sorbonne University in Paris. She arrived in September 1960.

On November 8, Wright delivered a lecture at the American Church in Paris. In his speech, he presented an angry and depressing survey of black artists. Using examples from his own life and the lives of other black writers, he described a white-controlled world of publishing and arts that caused black artists to turn against each other, competing for the few slots available to blacks. He described a world in which U.S. agents spied on everyone. He even suggested that the U.S. government sponsored Communism and other revolutionary movements so that it could keep control of dissenters.

It was a strong and somewhat strange speech, but Wright was proud of it. He hoped to revise it and turn it into something he could publish. But Wright soon became sick with fever, dizziness, and intestinal problems. Friends and Julia cared for him at his small apartment. Although Wright felt a little better, he checked into a Paris clinic for tests on November 26.

By November 28, he was feeling stronger. Extensive medical tests had uncovered no explanation for his illness. He spoke by telephone with Ellen, who was in London. He reassured her with the news that he seemed to be better. He put in a call to his friend Oliver Harrington, who was not at home. Wright then sent him a telegram: "Ollie please come to see me as soon as you get this." Wright was scheduled to go home the next day.

About eleven o'clock that night, Wright died, alone in his room in the clinic. He had had a fatal heart attack at age fifty-two.