

# Black Literary Suite: Wikipedia Edition

Over the last few years, Wikipedia has become a prevalent site for information on a wide variety of historical events and figures, including African American literary works and authors. Nearly half of the books represented in our “100 African American Novels” project are documented on Wikipedia. Some novels, including Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, have extensively developed Wikipedia pages. This particular exhibit highlights the different ways that the world’s most famous online encyclopedia presents information about black writers in our novel collection.

# HBW

The Project on the History of Black Writing

# Wikipedia Vs. Encyclopedia Britannica

Over the past ten years, Wikipedia has become a major source for how internet users access information on various subjects. Some critics question the legitimacy of Wikipedia when comparing the site to more academic and traditional sources such as *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

In a January 3, 2006, *New York Times* article, “The Nitpicking of the Masses vs. the Authority of the Experts,” George Johnson evaluates the findings in the peer-reviewed journal *Nature* to see if there was a major discrepancy between Wikipedia and *Encyclopedia Britannica*. On average, this expert-led assessment of both sources found four serious errors from each source. They also discovered a series of factual errors, omissions or misleading statements. Wikipedia had 162 problems, while Britannica had 123. Johnson concludes, however, that “if Britannica has an edge in accuracy, Wikipedia seems bound to catch up.”

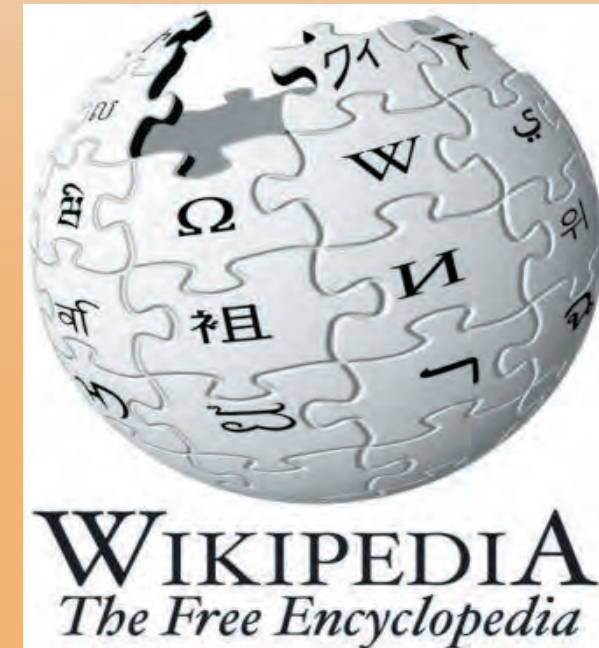


**WIKIPEDIA**  
*The Free Encyclopedia*

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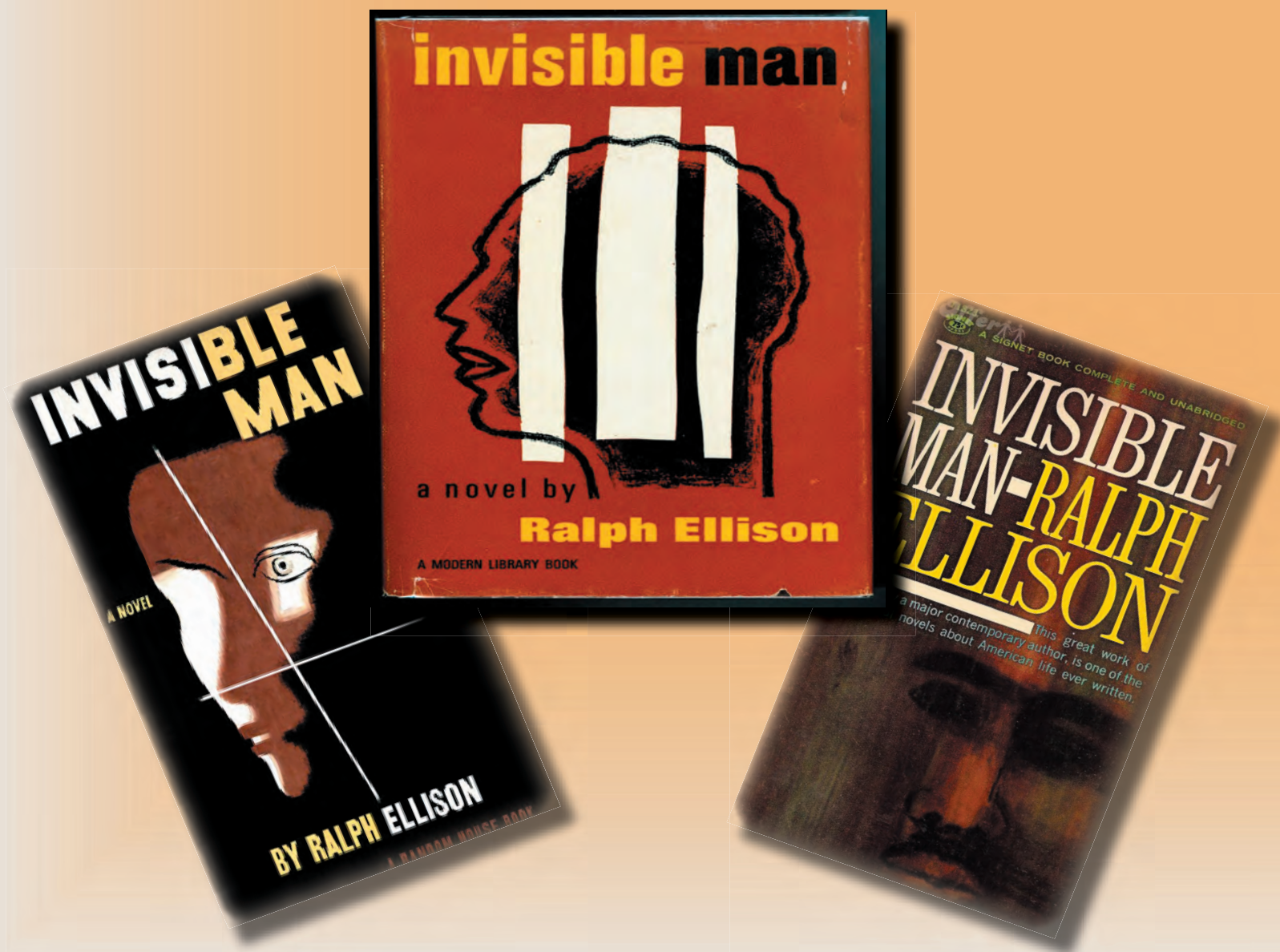
# Wikipedia and Invisible Man

Winner of the National Book Award in 1953, Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* has received numerous accolades. An entry on Wikipedia notes that the Modern Library ranked the novel nineteenth on its list of the 100 best English-language novels of the 20th century in 1998. In addition, *Time Magazine* included the novel in its "TIME 100 Best English-language Novels from 1923 to 2005."

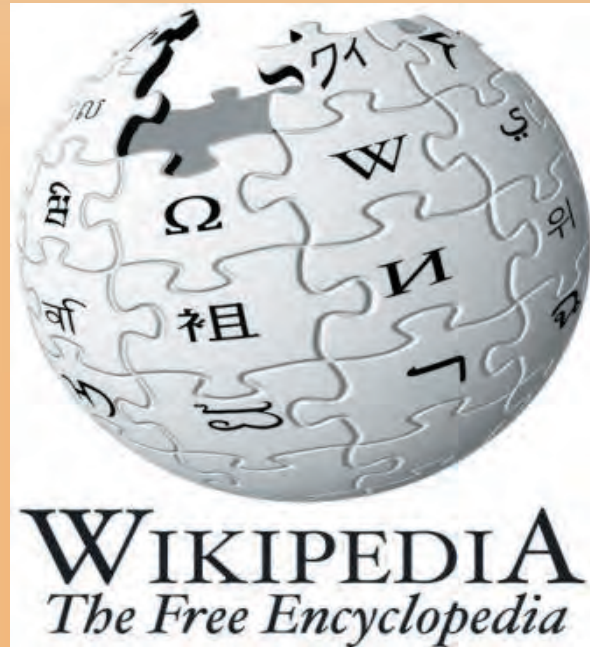


## Notable Information displayed on *Invisible Man's* Wikipedia Page:

- \*In the introduction to the 30th Anniversary Edition of *Invisible Man*, Ellison says that he started writing the book in a barn in Waitsfield, Vermont in the summer of 1945 while on sick leave from the Merchant Marine.
- \*In an interview in *The Paris Review* 1955, Ellison states that the book took five years to complete with one year off for what he termed an "ill-conceived short novel."
- \* The novel's "Battle Royal" chapter was originally published as a short story in 1948, three years before the novel was published.



# Wikipedia and Ralph Ellison



Ralph Ellison is most noted for his magnum opus *Invisible Man* (1952). After moving to New York in 1936 to study visual arts, he met author Richard Wright. After writing a book review for Wright, Ellison was encouraged to pursue a career in writing, specifically fiction.

## Notable Information displayed on Ralph Ellison's Wikipedia Page:

\*Ralph Waldo Ellison was named after American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson.

\*From 1937 to 1944 Ellison published over twenty book reviews as well as short stories and articles in magazines such as *New Challenge* and *New Masses*.

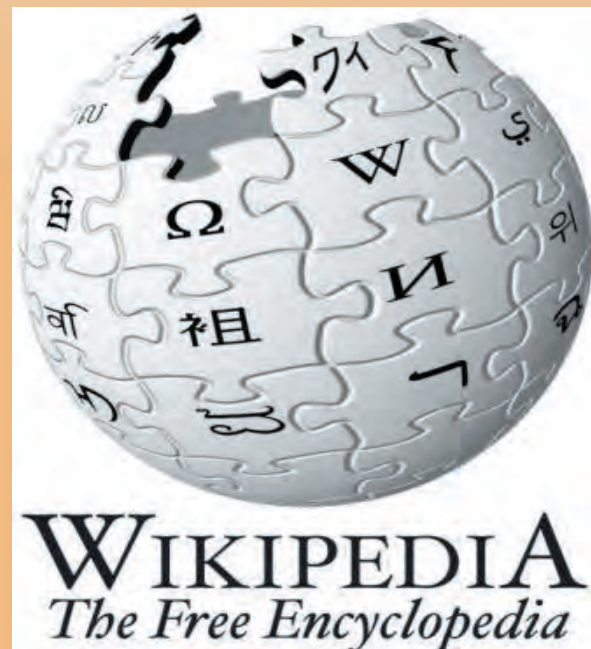
\*In 1999, five years after Ellison's death, his second novel, *Juneteenth*, was published under the editorship of John F. Callahan, Ellison's literary executor. It was a 368-page condensation of more than 2000 pages written by Ellison over a period of forty years.



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# Wikipedia and Toni Morrison



Wikipedia highlights Toni Morrison's work as an editor as being vital to her writing as well as other black women authors. In 1965, Toni Morrison moved to Syracuse, New York, where she worked as a textbook editor. A year and a half later, she went to work as an editor at the New York City headquarters of Random House. The Wikipedia entry on Morrison informs readers that Morrison played an important role in publishing black women writers, editing books by authors such as Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis, and Gayl Jones.

## Notable Information displayed on Toni Morrison's Wikipedia Page:

\* Morrison's third novel, *Song of Solomon* (1977) was a main selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club, the first novel by a black writer to be so chosen since Richard Wright's *Native Son* in 1940.

\*In 1996, the National Endowment for the Humanities selected Morrison for the Jefferson Lecture, the U.S. federal government's highest honor for achievement in the humanities.

\*Commenting on the 1998 impeachment of Bill Clinton, Morrison wrote that Clinton had been mistreated because of his "Blackness": white skin notwithstanding, this is our first black President... After all, Clinton displays almost every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald's-and-junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas.

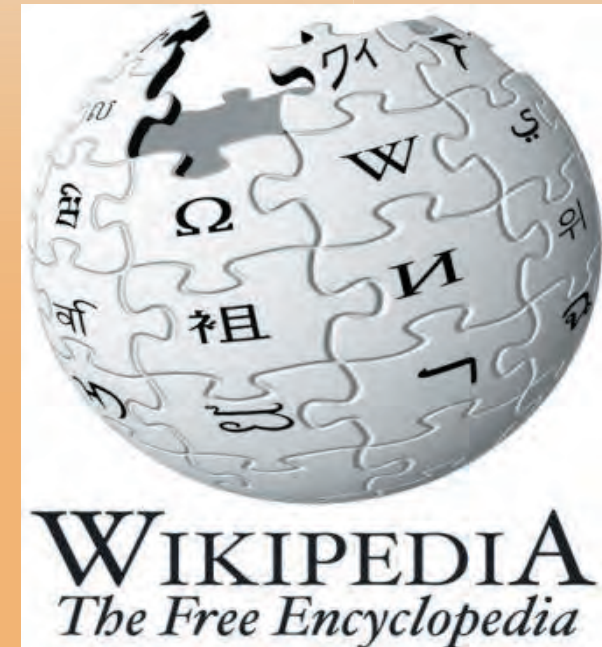


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# Wikipedia and Beloved

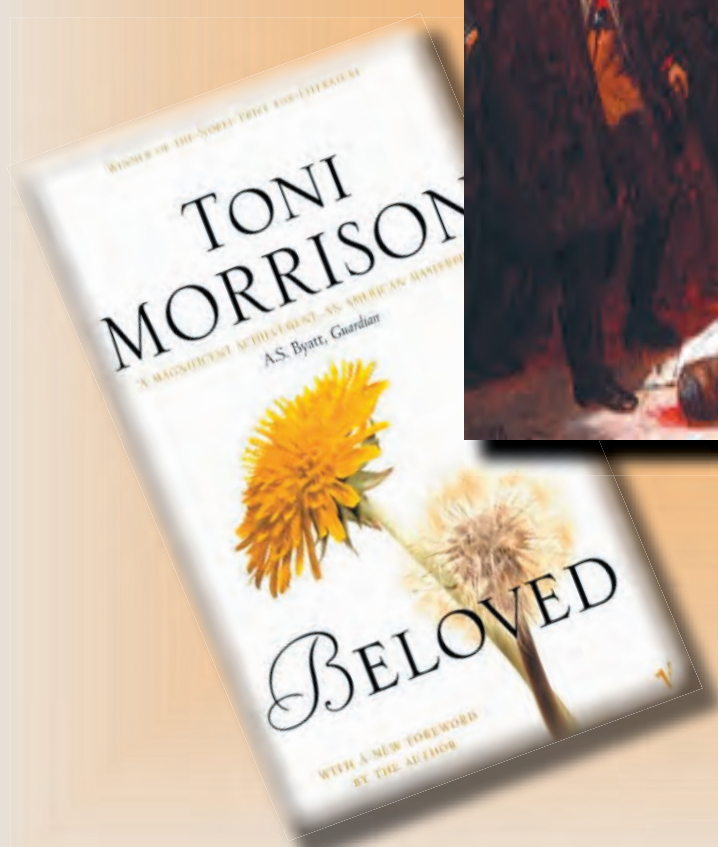
The 1998 Pulitzer Prize Winner for Fiction, *Beloved* was inspired by the story of the African-American slave, Margaret Garner, who escaped slavery in 1856 in Kentucky by fleeing to Ohio, a free state. After a posse arrived to retrieve her and her children, Garner killed her two-year-old daughter rather than allow her to be recaptured. The film has since been adapted into a major motion picture starring Oprah Winfrey and Danny Glover. In addition, Morrison was commissioned to write the libretto for a opera, *Margaret Garner*, first performed in 2005.



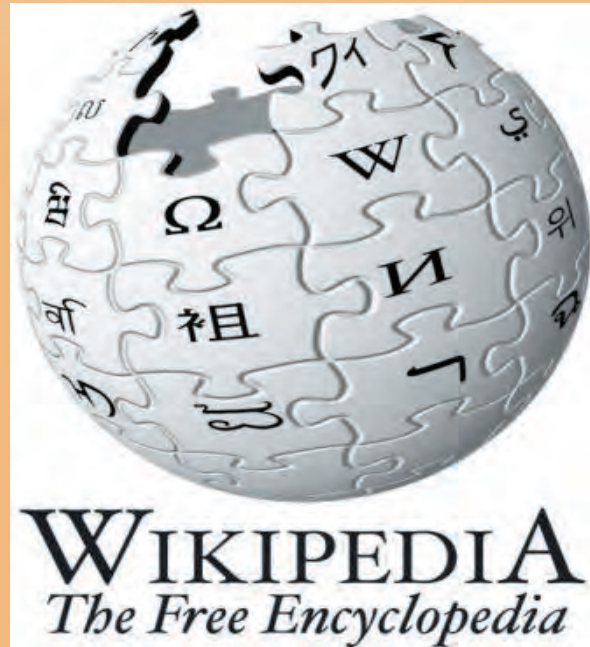
## Notable Information displayed on *Beloved's* Wikipedia Page:

\*When accepting the Frederic G. Melcher Book Award, Morrison stated “there is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby” honoring the memory of the human beings forced into slavery and brought to the United States. “There’s no small bench by the road,” she continued. “And because such a place doesn’t exist (that I know of), the book had to.”

\*Inspired by her remarks, the Toni Morrison Society has now begun to install benches at significant sites in the history of slavery in America with the first “bench by the road” being dedicated on July 26 on Sullivan’s Island, South Carolina, which served as the point of entry for approximately 40 percent of the enslaved Africans brought to the United States.



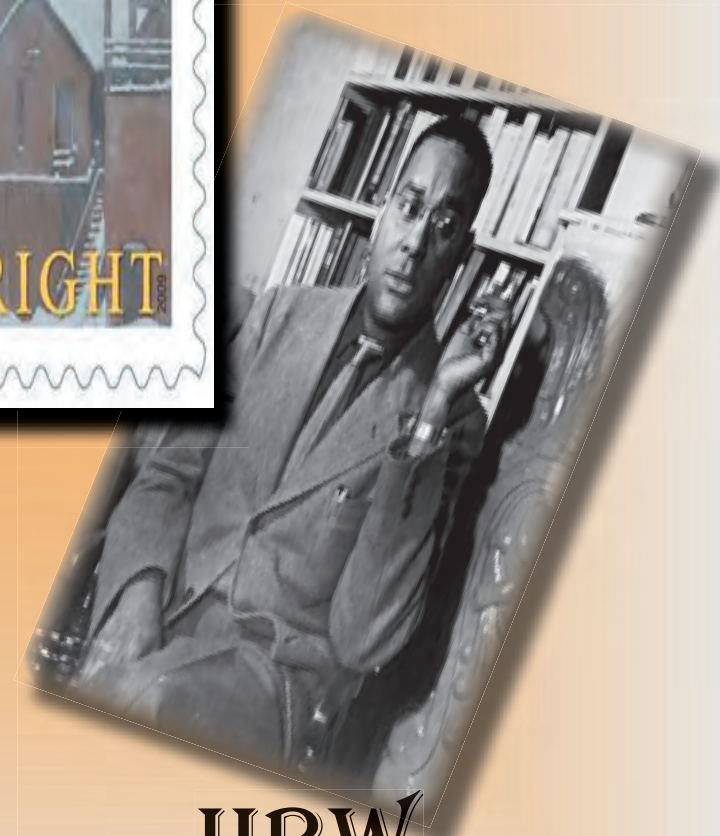
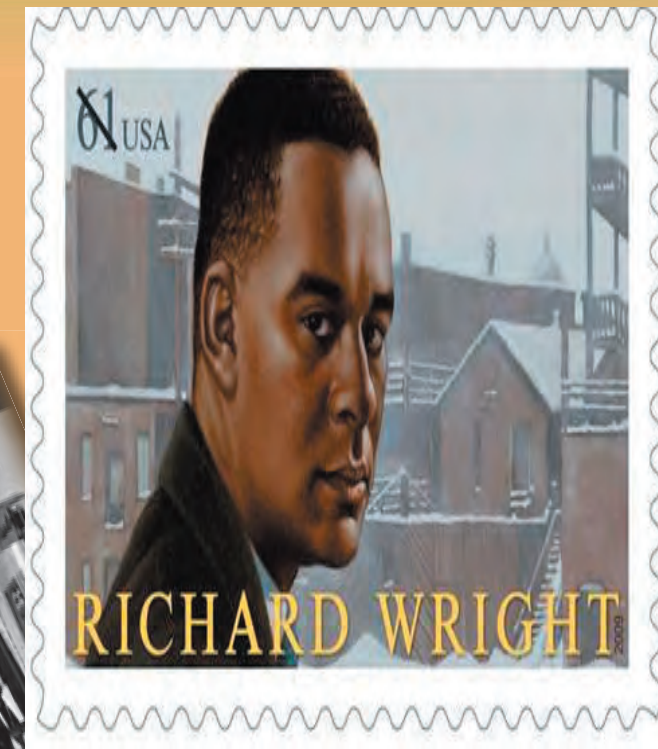
# Wikipedia and Richard Wright



Richard Wright's collection of short stories, *Uncle Tom's Children*, won him a Guggenheim Fellowship, which allowed him to complete his critically acclaimed novel *Native Son*.

## Notable Information displayed on Richard Wright's Wikipedia Page:

- \* Wright became the editor of and wrote over two hundred articles for the *Daily Worker* and helped edit a short-lived literary magazine *New Challenge*.
- \* Wright moved to Paris in 1946, and became a permanent American expatriate.
- \* Wright was invited to join the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which he rejected, correctly suspecting that it had connections with the CIA.

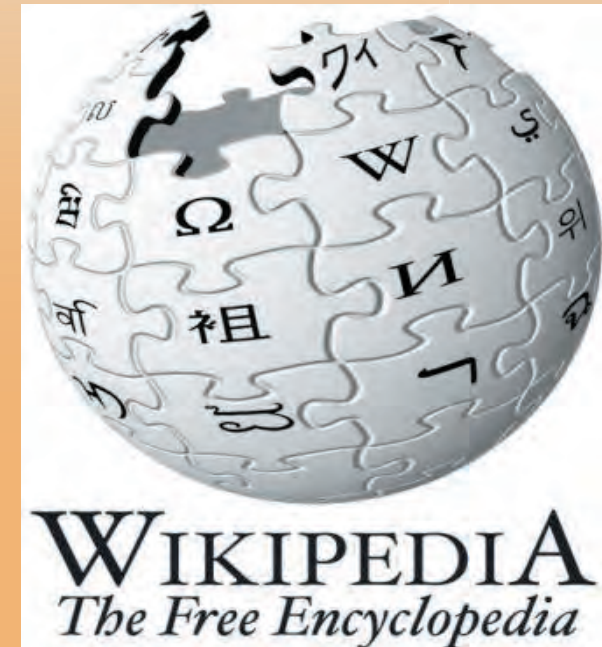


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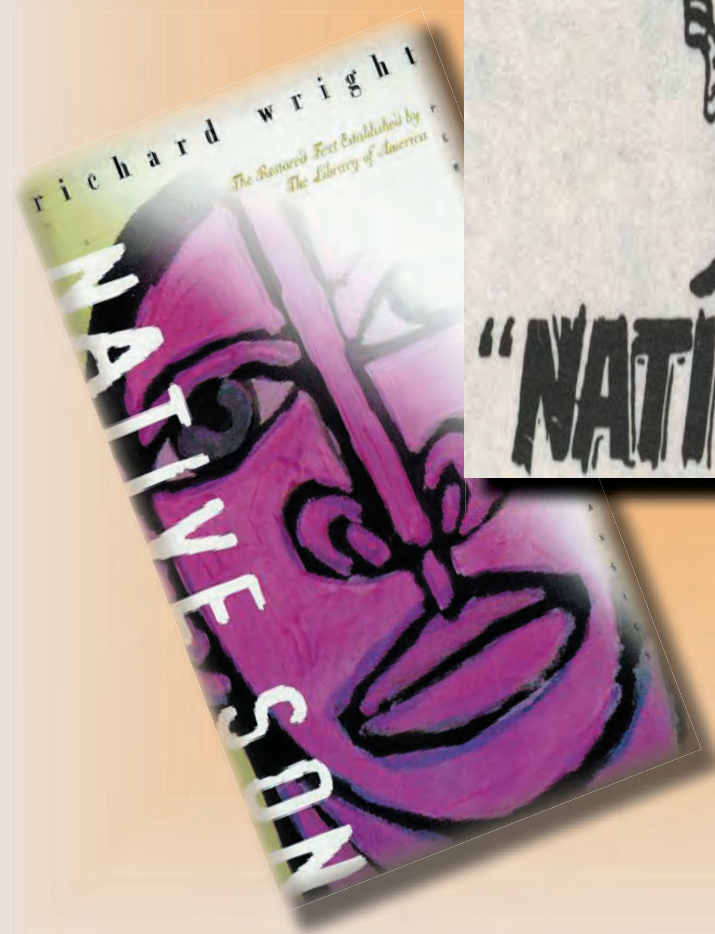
# Wikipedia and Native Son

Richard Wright's *Native Son* was an immediate best-seller, selling 250,000 hardcover copies within three weeks of its publication by the Book-of-the-Month Club on March 1, 1940.



## Notable Information displayed on *Native Son's* Wikipedia Page:

- \* James Baldwin said about the novel: "No American Negro exists who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in his skull."
- \* Franz Fanon wrote about the novel in his 1952 essay *L'Expérience Vécue du Noir*, or "The Fact of Blackness," that "In the end, Bigger Thomas acts. To put an end to his tension, he acts, he responds to the world's anticipation."
- \* *Native Son* was the original title of Chicago writer Nelson Algren's first novel *Somebody in Boots* to Bettina Drew's 1989 biography *Nelson Algren: A Life on the Wild Side*, Algren bequeathed the title "Native Son" to Wright.





# Wikipedia and The Color Purple



Below: The musical opened on Broadway at The Broadway Theatre on December 1, 2005.



Above: The movie debuted on December 18, 1985.



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The Wikipedia page for Alice Walker's 1983 Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Color Purple*, reveals that informs readers that the title of the book is an important symbol. The color purple is equated with suffering and pain but as Shug tells Celie, "You must look at all the good and acknowledge them because God placed them all on earth."

The novel has been produced as a major motion picture starring Whoopi Goldberg, Danny Glover, Margaret Avery, and Oprah Winfrey; as a Broadway musical starring Fantasia Barrino, Renee Elise Goldsberry, and Kingsley Leggs; and as a BBC 4 (domestic British Radio) radio broadcast starring Nadine Marshall. Each version—the novel, the movie, and the musical—has fairly developed wiki entries, making *The Color Purple* one of the more fully developed and diversely covered works on Wikipedia out of the 100 novels in our study.

# 49 African American Novels On Wikipedia

The following three panels showcase novels in our “100 Novels Project” and their corresponding Wikipedia pages. Out of 100 novels in our project, 49 novels have Wikipedia pages of some sort. We have organized the novels into three categories and by chronological order: Extensive, General, and Limited Overviews:

\**Extensive overviews* offer publication information, plot summaries, character lists, references to pop culture and criticism (such as TV, Movie adaptations, etc.) as well as major motifs.

\**General overviews* provide a general plot summary and, sometimes, historical information concerning the novel as well as critical reception.

\**Limited overviews* provide publication information and a short/concise summary of the novel.

## *Extensive Wikipedia Overviews*

### 1900s

*The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) James Weldon Johnson

### 1940s

- *Native Son* (1940) Richard Wright

### 1950s

- *Invisible Man* (1952) Ralph Ellison
- *Go Tell It on The Mountain* (1953) James Baldwin

### 1980s

- *The Color Purple* (1982) Alice Walker
- *Beloved* (1987) Toni Morrison



# 49 African American Novels On Wikipedia

## General Wikipedia Overviews

### 1850s

- *The Heroic Slave* (1852) Frederick Douglass
- *Clotel: or, the President's Daughter* (1853) William Wells Brown

### 1900s

- *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) Charles Waddell Chesnutt

### 1920s

- *Cane* (1923) Jean Toomer

### 1930s

- *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) Zora Neale Hurston

### 1950s

- *The Outsider* (1953) Richard Wright
- *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) Paule Marshall

### 1970s

- *The Bluest Eye* (1970) Toni Morrison
- *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) Ernest Gaines
  - *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) Ishmael Reed
  - *Sula* (1974) Toni Morrison
  - *Dhalgren* (1975) Samuel Delany
- *Patternmaster* (1976) Octavia Butler
  - *Roots* (1976) Alex Haley
- *Song of Solomon* (1977) Toni Morrison
  - *Kindred* (1979) Octavia Butler

### 1980s

- *Annie John* (1985) Jamaica Kincaid

### 1990s

- *Middle Passage* (1990) Charles Johnson
- *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993) Ernest Gaines
- *Parable of the Sower* (1993) Octavia Butler
- *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) Edwidge Danticat
- *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999) Sister Souljah
- *The Intuitionist* (1999) Colson Whitehead

### 2000s

- *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006) Colson Whitehead
- *Sag Harbor* (2009) Colson Whitehead

# 49 African American Novels On Wikipedia

## *Limited Wikipedia Overviews*

### 1900s

- *The Sport of the Gods* (1902) Paul Laurence Dunbar

### 1930s

- *Not Without Laughter* (1930) Langston Hughes

### 1940s

- *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) Chester Himes
  - *The Street* (1946) Ann Petry

### 1970s

- *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) Alice Walker
  - *Meridian* (1976) Alice Walker

### 1980s

- *Tar Baby* (1981) Toni Morrison
- *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981) David Bradley
- *Sent for You Yesterday* (1983) John Edgar Wideman

### 1990s

- *Jazz* (1992) Toni Morrison
- *Paradise* (1997) Toni Morrison
- *Parable of the Talents* (1998) Octavia Butler

### 2000s

- *John Henry Days* (2001) Colson Whitehead
- *The Known World* (2003) Edward P. Jones
  - *Love* (2003) Toni Morrison
  - *A Mercy* (2008) Toni Morrison