

The Richard Wright Newsletter

Letter From the Editors

Greetings on the occasion of the publication of Volume II: Number I of the *Richard Wright Newsletter*. We would like to welcome 35 new members who have joined us since our last issue. Our size is ever increasing and serves as an indicator of the continued significant growth of scholarly and professional activity pertaining to Richard Wright.

A factor in this growth is the overwhelming response to the Library of America's editions of Wright's works. We have reprinted the excellent *NYTBR* article by Arnold Rampersad which appeared shortly after the volumes' publication. Readers should also look forward to the LOA editions of *Black Boy* and *Outsider* in paperback by Harper Collins as well as a revised edition of *Lawd Today* by Northeastern University Press.

Keneth Kinnamon has expanded his unparalleled *Richard Wright Bibliography* with an "Addenda" first presented at the American Literature Association Meeting in San Diego, in May. Additional entries have been included here by Kinnamon. There is no doubt that this bibliography together with the Addenda (to appear annually in the *Newsletter*) will become the standard bibliography in Wright Studies as well as a model for bibliographic work in

literary/critical studies generally.

As a result of the wide circulation of the newsletter at a number of professional conferences and meetings, and especially at the Paris Conference on "African-Americans in Europe," the *Circle* has been in touch with a broad range of scholars and readers, all of whom we thank heartily for their support/membership and look forward to hearing from on a regular basis. For all of you who joined the *RWC* in its founding year, please be reminded that we need you to renew your subscription to maintain the work and staff of the highest quality.

Finally, we would like to thank Kelley Lynn Norman for her dedication and commitment to the *Circle* and the *Newsletter* since its founding. We wish her well as she begins her career as an English teacher. And we welcome graduate student, Tanya Millner, who joined the staff of the Project on the History of Black Writing this summer, and who has enthusiastically accepted the position of editorial assistant for the next two year period. Please direct all inquiries and requests to either of the editors and forward all subscriptions to Tanya Millner. Δ

Jerry W. Ward, Jr. and Maryemma Graham

Too Honest for His Own Time

by Arnold Rampersad

When the Library of America asked me to edit a volume of Richard Wright, I was pleased to do so. I was also apprehensive. Given the history of his dealings with publishers, some tough decisions would have to be made if justice were to be done to him.

Certainly Wright would be well served by being in the Library of America. His work would appear in beautiful and durable volumes, with the promise of being kept permanently in print. And there could be no doubt about his right to be in such company. Of *Native Son*, Irving Howe has shrewdly declared that American culture was changed "forever" with its explosive appearance in 1940; and *Black Boy* belongs on any definitive short list of American autobiographies. With works twice chosen by the Book-of-the-Month Club, Wright had also enjoyed

success and influence unparalleled among black American writers of his era.

Success had come, however, at a price. Certain of his important works, including *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, suffered changes and abridgements that Wright would never have made on his own. The issue for the Library of America was whether we could restore his texts that had been mangled in order to meet the extraordinary demands of his original publishers.

Would the Library of America be prepared to take responsibility with me for undoing changes that were the result, not entirely but in some part, of racism - racism that was seldom conscious of itself, that was expressed in subtle, even benign ways, but racism nonetheless? Most of the major areas of textual controversy in Wright's work can

____. *RICHARD WRIGHT: LATER WORKS*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: The Library of America, 1991.

Articles

- Alexander, Margaret Walker. "Natchez and Richard Wright in Southern American Literature." *The Southern Quarterly* 29.4 (1991): 171-175.
- Blau, Eleanor. "The Works of Richard Wright, This Time Published as Written." *The New York Times* 28 Aug. 1991, sec. C:11.
- Bryant, Earle. "The Transfiguration of Personality in Richard Wright's 'The Man Who Lived Underground'." *CLA Journal* 33.4 (1990): 378-393.
- Chakovsky, Sergei. "The Work of Richard Wright in Soviet Literary Criticism." *Notes on Mississippi Writers* 23.2 (1991): 85-99.
- Estes-Hicks, Onita. "Reconciling *Native Son* and Native Daughters." *The Politics of Education: Essays from the Radical Teacher*. Ed. Susan G. O'Malley. New York: State University of New York Press, 1989: 163-165.
- Gruesser, John. "Afro-American Travel Literature and Africanist Discourse." *Black American Literature Forum* 24.1 (1990): 5-20.
- Mechling, Jay. "The Failure of Folklore in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*." *Journal of American Folklore* 104.413 (1991): 275-294.
- . "The Mysterious Death of Richard Wright; Suspicious Events Raise Questions about Last Days of Novelist." *Ebony* Feb. 1989: 116-118.
- Proefriedt, William. "The Immigrant or 'Outsider' Experience as Metaphor for Becoming an Educated Person in the Modern World: Mary Antin, Richard Wright and Eva Hoffman." *MELUS* 16.2 (1989): 77-89.
- Tangorra, Joanne and John Zinsser. "*Native Son*" (audio tape review). *Publishers Weekly* 3 Nov. 1989: 60.
- Uba, George. "Only a Man: The Folkloric Subtext of Richard Wright's 'Down by the Riverside'." *Essays in Literature* 17.2 (1990): 261-269.
- Ward, Jerry W. "An Open Letter to Michel Fabre." *The Mississippi Quarterly* 43.2 (1990): 235-236.
- Webb, Tracy. "The Role of Water Imagery in *Uncle Tom's Children*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 34.1 (1988): 5-16.
- Wright, Richard. "A Man of the South." *The Mississippi Quarterly* 42.4 (1989): 355-357.
- ____. "To French Readers." *The Mississippi Quarterly* 42.4 (1989): 359-369.

RICHARD WRIGHT CIRCLE MEMBERSHIP

You are invited to become a member of the *Richard Wright Circle*, which is an international association of scholars, teachers, students and other persons who have sustained interest in the life and work of Richard Wright. The *Richard Wright Circle* started in 1990, the fiftieth anniversary of *Native Son*. The *Circle* is dedicated to promoting the teaching of Wright's works in undergraduate and graduate programs, encouraging textual scholarship and preparation of critical editions, galvanizing a network of international scholars to facilitate scholarship and criticism on Richard Wright's literature.

Each member will receive a biannual publication, "Richard Wright Newsletter," containing brief research and archival notes, letters of inquiry, information about new directions in criticism and scholarship, and items on conferences in and outside the United States.

This is a special opportunity to be a part of an interpretive community devoted to Wright's works.

Complete the information below and send a \$10.00 check or money order for a one year membership to the *Richard Wright Circle*.

Name _____

Address _____

Telephone number_(w) _____(h) _____

Area of special interest in Wright studies _____

Other scholarly areas _____

Latest Publication(s) _____

RENEWALS ARE CURRENTLY DUE FOR 1992!

Send form and dues to: Dr. Maryemma Graham, 406 Holmes Hall, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115; (617)437-4549; FAX NUMBER (617) 437-2625.

HEMINGWAY, WRIGHT, AND THE FORGE OF INJUSTICE

By Keneth Kinnamon

In an otherwise admirable two-volume edition of works by Richard Wright recently published by the Library of America, the back flap of the dust jacket contains the following erroneous statement: "Richard Wright was 'forged in injustice as a sword is forged,' wrote Ernest Hemingway." The source of the error would seem to be a hasty reading of the final sentence of the first chapter of my book *The Emergence of Richard Wright: A Study in Literature and Society* (1972). After detailing the white racism, extreme poverty, family disorganization, and inadequate educational opportunity from which Wright suffered during his childhood and youth in the Deep South, I concluded: "To no American writer does Ernest Hemingway's maxim apply more truthfully than to Richard Wright: 'Writers are forged in injustice as a sword is forged.'" The footnote on the same page reads: "Quoted, in a somewhat different connection, by Robert A. Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven, 1958), p. 1." Bone, who did not identify the source, used the quotation as the epigraph of his introduction.

Hemingway's memorable statement appears in the fourth chapter of the *Green Hills of Africa* (1935) in a ruminative passage on literature and war and Paris. After mentioning the direct experience of war or revolution by Tolstoi, Flaubert, and Stendhal, Hemingway turns to another nineteenth century master: Dostoevsky was made by being sent to Siberia. Writers are forged in injustice as a sword is forged." (p. 71). He then proceeds to speculate how exile in Siberia or the Dry Tortugas might prune Thomas Wolfe's stylistic excesses. Even if Hemingway's generalization did not directly follow the specific case of Dostoevsky, it obviously could not refer to Wright, who at the time Hemingway was writing *Green Hills* had published only two minor stories and a handful of proletarian poems, all in obscure publications unavailable to Hemingway in Key West. Applicable to Wright the statement certainly is, but Hemingway did not have him in mind.Δ

PARIS CONFERENCE UPDATE

"Afro-Americans and Europe," conference is scheduled for February 5-9, 1992. Registration is \$30, but waiting list only. Low-cost fares are still available from Omni Travel (617) 864-3600. Hotel list and conference information may be obtained from the DuBois Institute, (617) 495-4192. For further information, write directly to Michel Fabre, Institute du Monde Anglophone, 5 rue de l'Ecole de Medecine, 75006 Paris. Tel (1) 43 26 45 96 Fax (1) 43 25 74 71.

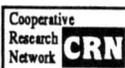
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RECENT PUBLICATIONS

Books

- Bigger Thomas*. Ed. and with an introduction by Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1990.
- Butler, Robert. *Native Son: The Emergence of a New Black Hero*. Twayne's Masterwork Studies. Boston: Twayne, 1991.
- Fabre, Michel. *From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1991.
- Gounard, Jean-François. *The Racial Problem in the Works of Richard Wright and James Baldwin*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1991.
- Kostelanetz, Richard. *Politics in the African-American Novel: James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. DuBois, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1991.
- Lynch, Michael. *Creative Revolt: A Study of Wright, Ellison, and Dostoevsky*. New York: P. Lang, 1990.
- Walker, Margaret. *The Daemonic Genius of Richard Wright: A Portrait of the Man: A Critical Look at His Work*. New York: Warner, 1989.
- Wright, Richard. "Almos' a Man." *Mississippi Writers: An Anthology*. Ed. Dorothy Abbott. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991. 240-252.
- . "From *Black Boy*." *Mississippi Writers: An Anthology*. Ed. Dorothy Abbott. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991. 390-408.
- . and Paul Green. "From *Native Son*." *Mississippi Writers: Reflections of Childhood and Youth*. Vol. IV: Drama. Ed. Dorothy Abbott. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991. 502-515.
- . *RICHARD WRIGHT: EARLY WORKS*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: The Library of America, 1991.

Wright's Explicit Prose Restored

By Jerry W. Ward, Jr.

Keneth Kinnamon's discussion in *New Essays on Native Son* of what had been deleted from Wright's manuscript version of the novel aroused great interest among Wright scholars. Removal of explicit reference to Bigger's sexuality produced, according to Kinnamon, "a softened, less threatening, more victimized Bigger, one over who banker's daughters might weep after all." A crucial element of characterization was missing in the 1940 and other editions of *Native Son* we had been reading for fifty years. The Library of America's publication on October 1, 1991 of a two-volume edition of Wright's works gives both general readers and scholars access to texts as Wright might have wished them printed. In the case of *Native Son*, the new edition brings Wright's understanding of race and sex into sharper focus.

Rampersad justly claims that nullifying "Bigger's sexual drive was to attempt to sabotage the central power of *Native Son* as a commentary on race and American culture," a move initiated by the Book-of-the-Month Club. Thus, reading the unexpurgated text, which Rampersad has edited with impeccable skill, demands that we reexamine many assumptions that have governed interpretations of *Native Son*. In short, as the unexpurgated texts of this novel and other works bring us closer to what Wright meant, they provide fresh challenges to ferreting out racial, sexual,

political, and cultural meanings. Volume one, *EARLY WORKS*, includes *Native Son*, *Lawd Today!*, *Uncle Tom's Children*, and essays "How Bigger Was Born" and "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow." Included in volume two, *LATER WORKS*, are *Black Boy* (the entire autobiography Wright originally titled *American Hunger*) and *The Outsider*. Rampersad provides extensive notes on each of the texts and a detailed chronology of Wright's life. The notes give us valuable clues about how topical references situate Wright's ideas.

"Regardless of the direction we turn in twentieth-century African-American literature," according to the novelist Charles Johnson, "all paths lead to or through the groundbreaking work of Richard Wright. This new edition of his principal works will serve both scholars and readers who hope to better understand the perennial influence Wright has exerted on our dialogue about race and ethnicity." Johnson is right. As we evaluate Wright's works in the context of increasing significance of race and ethnicity, we are fortunate to have the Library of America's unexpurgated texts. Their publication can initiate a new, fruitful phase in Wright scholarship and criticism.Δ

A NEW TOOL FOR TEACHING *NATIVE SON*

Robert Butler's *Native Son: The Emergence of a New Black Hero* (1991), a volume in TWAYNE'S Masterwork Series, is a useful aid for teaching the novel in high school and undergraduate courses. Like other works in this series, Butler's provides a chronology of the author's life and works, discussion of literary and historical context, a reading of the novel that emphasizes setting, structure, characterization, point of view, tone, and theme, and a conclusion which draws attention to the novel as a major achievement "deeply rooted in a number of interrelated literary traditions." (112) Aware of the kind of dialectic for truth the novel is for younger readers who may have blurred visions of the continuing racial and social ills Wright synthesized, Butler has written a book that will help them greatly as they construct meanings from either the 1940 or 1991 edition of *Native Son*.Δ

LIBRARY OF AMERICA EDITION

RICHARD WRIGHT: EARLY WORKS. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: The Library of America, 1991. 960 pp.

RICHARD WRIGHT: LATER WORKS. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: The Library of America, 1991. 928 pp.

Remember *Richard Wright Circle* members can order the volumes at a 20% prepublication discount after August 15, 1991 from The Library of America, 14 East 60th St., New York, New York 10022; (212)308-3360. Indicate whether you want the boxed set (\$70) or a single volume (\$35).

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