THE INTERVIEW ISSUE
Featuring conversations with Wright Scholars Michel Fabre and Hazel Rowley

MICHEL FABRE
BY MARYEMMA GRAHAM

Michel Fabre is currently professor emeritus at the Universite de Paris III. He is a renowned Wright scholar whose career began with his acclaimed biography Richard Wright: Unfinished Quest (1973, 1993). Fabre along with his wife Genevieve, also a noted scholar of African American Culture, founded the Centre d'Etudes Afro-Americaines et des Nouvelles Litteratures en Anglais (CETANLA), which has served as an academic and cultural center sponsoring symposia and conferences. Other works by Fabre include The World of Richard Wright (1985), Richard Wright: Books and Writers (1990), From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980 (1991), and The French Critical Reception of African American Literature from the Beginnings to 1970: An Annotated Bibliography (1995). Having been at Harvard, Iowa, the University of Mississippi, and the University of London, Michel is a frequent traveler to the U.S. Likewise, African Americans traveling to Paris have been frequent visitors in the Fabres' home. This interview was conducted in their home at 12 Montsouris, Paris, France, September 27, 1997.

MG: Your biography of Richard Wright is still considered the definitive biography of Richard Wright. It has made its own history and I wanted to know what your sense of that history is, how you see the book since its publication? Has it had the impact you wanted to have?

MF: The book has created its own history. I was given the chance to rewrite the book when it was republished by the University of Illinois Press, but I didn't feel I wanted to. I changed a few things which were factual errors pointed out to me by people and that was all. I suppose because I don't want to say I was tired of Wright, but for some twenty years I had been inundated with information on Wright so I knew that much work was going on. I felt that this was very good, and it was important for me to let the book go the way it was. I worked with Keneth Kinnamon on Conversations with Richard Wright. I worked with Robert Skinner on Himes, and with Edward Margoilies, I wrote a biography, The Several Lives of Chester Himes, recently published by the University Press of Mississippi, a book which took us three years to get published.

MG: How do you see your biography in relationship to the other biographies that have appeared?

MF: I felt Margaret Walker did a biography and had a different side. I disagreed with her on many points, but still think what she has to say must be taken into account. Eugene E. Miller did a book on Wright's style, a very good book on Wright's style. I would say the more the better especially when it's written by people who are really good schol-

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Plus the latest Richard Wright Bibliographic Supplement!
From the Editors

After seven years of producing the Richard Wright Newsletter, we are passing the editing duties on to James A. Miller of The George Washington University. We thank the graduate students at Northeastern University who have served as editorial assistants for their dedicated and invaluable work; Diane Putnam deserves special thanks for her superb work under pressure. Members of the RWN Advisory Board have given us much needed support throughout the years as have Julia Wright and Keneth Kinnamon, our official bibliographer. And, of course, we are indebted to members of the Richard Wright Circle for the financial and intellectual contributions to the newsletter.

September 4, 1998 marks Wright's 90th birthday. We encourage members to organize student symposia or to sponsor lectures on Wright's legacy at their institutions. We ask also that members review our suggestions in the Spring/Summer 1997 issue for the Richard Wright Centenary (2008).

Our work has been stimulating and rewarding, but we must now turn our energies to new projects. We give our blessings to James A. Miller as he engaged a new scholarly challenge. We are confident that the newsletter will continue to be a source of information and inspiration for the study and teaching of Wright's life, works, and enduring legacy.

Maryemma Graham
Jerry W. Ward, Jr.

I am very excited to end the Richard Wright Newsletter's tenure at Northeastern University with this issue, featuring interviews with Michel Fabre, noted Wright scholar and biographer, and Hazel Rowley, who is approaching Wright's life and work from a new and different perspective. Each interview reveals the writer/researcher at work and serves as an excellent model for approaching Wright and biography in general.

This issue also contains a very interesting piece which details Native Son's controversial candidacy for the Book-of-the-Month Club in 1940. The discussion about and alterations of the novel that came out of that debate serve as a reminder of the kind of fear provoked by a character like Bigger Thomas and what lies behind that fear for some readers. The Club's judges and their positions are explored and reveal much about popular literature and the racial climate of the 1940's in America.

As for myself, I am extremely pleased and proud to have worked on the Richard Wright Newsletter for the past two years. Thanks to Maryemma Graham and Jerry Ward, who have always been patient and trusting, and from whom I’ve learned a good deal. I will continue to follow the Circle and Richard Wright studies even as I move on to a new place and a new position this upcoming year.

Diane Putnam
Editorial Assistant

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The editors welcome all news relevant to the life and work of Richard Wright. The Richard Wright Circle is supported by the departments of African American Studies and English at Northeastern University.
FROM THE NEW EDITOR:

To the members of the Richard Wright Circle:

When Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward, Jr. asked me to assume the editorship of the Richard Wright Newsletter, I agreed to do so without any hesitation. In its seven years of existence, the Newsletter has not only demonstrated the continuing relevance of Richard Wright's work to contemporary cultural and social issues, it has also helped to shape the current resurgence of Wright scholarship. I look forward to continuing the tradition of excellence established by my predecessors. Beginning in September, 1998, the new home of the Richard Wright Circle and Newsletter will be:

Department of English, The George Washington University
Washington, D.C. 20052

I look forward to working with you.

James A. Miller.

At 20 E. Woodlawn Street in Natchez, Mississippi, a marker was unveiled on February 20, 1998 to identify the "Childhood home of noted American author Richard Wright, while he lived with grandparents Richard and Margaret Wilson in the Woodlawn neighborhood. Author of Native Son and Black Boy, Wright was born outside Natchez in rural Adams County in 1908. His lifelong quest for freedom led him to Paris, France, where he died in 1960."*

Students from the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science raised $900.00 toward the cost of the marker; the Historic Natchez Foundation matched with a $400.00 donation. According to Rob Jolly, a senior at MSMS, the students had two motives. They wished to show appreciation to Natchez for hosting them during their annual field trips and to demonstrate their pride in Wright's contributions to American letters.

The Richard Wright Circle is grateful to these students for so meaningful a contribution to keeping the memory of Richard Wright and his legacy alive.

*Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1998.
ars. We need different outlooks from other scholars especially on those things I only sketched.

About two or three years ago, I was contacted by an Australian woman Hazel Rowley, who was interested in Richard Wright and was very hesitant about approaching me because she thought there might be some competition. So when she approached me, I asked myself how I was going to deal with it. And I felt that I should let her have access to all I have since it's much easier to find documents here which are otherwise scattered all over the world. Everyone was discouraging her at the time, and I encouraged her to go on with it. I read her biography on Christina Stead and knew she could do good work. So I let her use my archives.

MG: What has been happening in France in terms of Wright Studies and the study of American literature generally?

MF: Wright seems to be in a stable position, and he is taught as he used to be taught when my second son was in high school. High school literature courses mostly teach Black Boy. Recently there has been a dissertation on Wright and essentialism by an African scholar and another scholar working on Wright in France. Fitzgerald is still big and I recently went to a Faulkner commemoration and a similar one on Hemingway. Edouard Glissant, a black man and a great poet and writer from Martinique has written a wonderful book on Faulkner, which I think will be translated very soon.

MG: What other African American writers are popular among the French readers?

MF: After James Baldwin died, there was renewed interest in Baldwin. Now the African American writer who is being studied most is Toni Morrison, and it's overwhelming. I have already sat on twenty panels and directed a couple of dissertations on her.

MG: How would you judge the quality of this work?

MF: Some of them are good, but not very original. They bring something new in terms of style and linguistics, but they often do not have a deep understanding of the context which Americans have.

MG: Morrison is certainly just as popular or moreso as an American dissertation and thesis topic. What about other writers who are being read, if not necessarily being written about? One of the things we are trying to do in the newsletter is expose readers to a wider range of writers, and especially the lesser known writers, those at home in the U.S. as well as abroad.

MF: Ernest Gaines is becoming big here. His last book, A Lesson Before Dying, is fantastic. And there are a number of others writers being translated, like John Wideman.

MG: You are suggesting that one of the reasons these writers are becoming more widely known is their accessibility?

MF: Yes, accessibility is key. All of Gaines' books have been published in French, so he is more known by people. A French publisher, Liana Levi, took a chance on Gaines and they have done very well.

MG: What do you think of Wideman?

MF: He reminds me of Wole Soyinka who uses images as concepts. His metaphors are very conceptual. He picks metaphors more because of their meaning. I think Wideman is one of the few people who can use postmodernist techniques while at the same time keep you very strongly related to what is really going on in his books.

MG: Are there African American writers we need to be aware of?

I'm currently working more on African American writers in Europe, where Wright is again central.

The notion of African Americans in Paris has become very big.
MF: I'm currently working more on African American writers in Europe, where Wright is again central. The notion of African Americans in Paris has become very big. There is James Emmanuel, a fine poet living in Paris, who's sort of been forgotten, I think. I was sorry to see that he wasn't included in the Norton Anthology of African American Literature. But a film is being done on him. And he's going on a tour to read poetry in Syria. A film is also being made on African American Writers in Paris, and they mostly focus on Wright. The film is called "Un Sang d'encre" and is made by a Frenchman, Jacques Goldstein, and a Malian, Blaise Ndjehoya. Another important poet is Dudley Randall, who was also left out of the Anthology. A film about him was shown at the conference in Tenerife. I think it was done by Melba Boyd.

MG: Is Barbara Chase-Riboud still actively writing?

MF: Yes, she wrote a sequel to Sally Hemings, but she is busier now with her art and sculpture. She wrote Echo of Lions, on the Amistad mutiny.

MG: Amistad was produced by Steven Spielberg and Debbie Allen, who worked closely with the whole project.

MF: She's black? I knew that John Hope Franklin went to the site to give advice.

MG: There has been a major controversy over this film, which will be out in December. We shall have to see what unfolds.

* * *

MG: We know that Wright is being read all over the world. In fact, we have begun to publish responses from readers of Wright wherever they encounter him. We now have readers in Indonesia, Turkey, Germany, Japan and France, along with our U.S. subscribers. One of our strategies has been to send bulk copies of the newsletter with people who teach in the less conventional places (like prisons) and we distribute newsletters to conferences where there is a constituency interested in African American literature. Julia Wright is sent bulk copies for distribution as well. The result is that the Newsletter has a mixed audience: people who are just plain readers, Richard Wright scholars, students who get turned on through a classroom assignment. We have invited all these to share their responses to reading/teaching Wright. Is there anything else you can think of that we need to tell our readers?

MF: The prison writer is an interesting topic, and there is a new book coming out by Jerry Bryant on prison writing, which includes Himes' and Wright's work. Bruce Dick is also working on Wright and theatre. And there is a documentary film on Wright being done in France; it is part of a TV series on 200 writers, "Un siecle d'ecrivains".

MG: Final words. What will we see coming from Michel Fabre next?

MF: Jack Moore is editing an issue of Mississippi Quarterly on the international reception of Wright and I am helping him with it. The new Street Guide to African Americans in Paris that I prepared with John A. Williams is being distributed by The Du Bois Book Center (PO Box 776, Englewood, NJ, 07631-0776). Many people approach me from the States about African Americans in Europe but now I am mostly working on the culture of the French-speaking Afro-Creoles in Louisiana in the nineteenth century.

∞

Editor's note: In 1995, Michel Fabre published African American Literature: Critical Reception in France, a must for anyone contemplating work on any African American author.
Hazel Rowley was born in London and brought up in England and Australia. Her biography of Christina Stead (New York, Henry Holt, 1994) won several prizes in Australia and was a New York Times Notable Book for 1994. Until recently, she was a Senior Lecturer at Deakin University, Melbourne. She is currently an Independent Scholar. This interview was conducted in April, 1998.

MG: You are writing a new biography of Richard Wright. How did you become interested in him?

HR: I read Black Boy years ago, in my twenties, when I was reading a number of autobiographies for a PhD on autobiographical writing and Simone de Beauvoir. Black Boy more than moved me; it marked me. Then there was the intriguing picture of Wright and his family in Beauvoir's America Day By Day. Through Wright, Beauvoir saw a quite different picture of the United States when she visited in 1947 than the standard tourist version, and that interested me. My first biography was of Christina Stead, the Australian expatriate writer. She lived in New York in the late 30s and 40s, married to William Blake, an American of German-Jewish descent who was active in communist circles. Richard Wright occasionally called in at their apartment to talk politics with Bill Blake. Richard Holmes, the British biographer, once commented that the subject of his next biography always seems to be someone who played a minor role in his previous book. That seems to be true for me this time!

MG: What is it about his life that compels you to write about him?

HR: I admire Wright -- as a powerful writer and as a public intellectual on the left, who had the courage to say what most people do not dare even to think. His writing provoked passionate responses, from deep admiration to vehement hostility. He has been a model and an anti-model to several generations of black writers. Why such passion around this man? This has me interested.

As someone who has spent years of my life outside Australia--mostly in Europe--I have always felt like an expatriate. I often muse about the psychological and emotional state of exile. Christina Stead never felt at home anywhere, but she was extraordinarily adaptable and more or less felt at home everywhere. Richard Wright is probably the most extreme 'exile' you'll ever find. He was made to feel an outsider in his own country. Like many 'exiles,' he came to embrace this outsider status.

MG: Why do you think we need another biography?

HR: There are dozens of biographies of writers like Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence. Biography is a form of interpretation: your view of a particular person is never going to be the same as mine. In fact, it is very rewarding to read the existing biographies of Wright (or sections of them) alongside each other. Each biographer has quite different personal baggage and they each approach Wright from a quite different perspective. Mine will be different again.

MG: What obstacles are you confronting with this biography?

HR: The biggest obstacle is that so many people are dead. I do not have the privilege that earlier biographers had of meeting many of the people who knew Wright, who could have given me their personal impressions. On the other hand, I have the benefit of awesome hard work done by previous Wright scholars, and luckily for me, they have been very generous.

MG: How does your background--white, female, Australian--provide a perspective different from others?

HR: Distance can be a good thing. Especially with such a red-hot subject as Richard Wright. I think it is useful to be outside the American racial divide. Australia has a shamefully racist history, which partly accounts for the fact that the country I was (partly) brought up in was basically white. But it means that people in my milieu (the educated, urban middle-class) have simply not had the opportunity to develop the prejudices we might have developed if we had been brought up in the United States. My friends there are often more interested in black America than in white America. We have never thought of black Americans as...
anything other than people. People who are both American and something else too-- so doubly interesting.

Black critics, in particular, have found it hard to accept Wright's sometimes negative portrayal of black characters in his fiction, his interracial marriages, and his leaving the country for France. I can note these things without feeling personally angry or disappointed. I can absolutely understand why African Americans are often rather prescriptive about each other's behavior; so much is at stake; so much depends on black solidarity.

**MG:** What does it mean not to have a background in the African American experience? Every other Wright biographer has had this background or a strong relationship to the experience: Kin- nanon, Fabre are African American specialists by training; Webb was actively involved in the black political movement and was married to a black man; Walker is black and a poet and scholar of the black experience.

**HR:** I have had to grapple with my defensiveness on this score. We live in times when we are supposed only to be able to understand our own group--white or black, homosexual, heterosexual or whatever. But this theory takes no account of the serious divisions within groups. . . And it takes no account of the power of imagination. . . Or mutual goodwill.

**MG:** Are you hoping for an authorized biography? Will that title still be held by Fabre?

**HR:** Ellen Wright trusted Michel Fabre with the sorting of Wright's papers; no one will ever write another 'authorized biography' of Richard Wright in the sense that Fabre did. But I have

(continued next page)
had several fruitful meetings with Ellen Wright, and I very much hope to talk to Julia Wright.

MG: How do you think today's obsession with indiscreet personal detail will affect the writing and ultimate reception of this biography? Does it tempt you?

HR: I'm interested in the total person, not in salacious detail for its own sake. I personally like biographies to be 'dignified,' and I think this depends as much on the biographer as on the subject.

MG: There is considerable discussion about the role of the biographer in reconstructing the life of an individual. What are some of the pitfalls you've learned to watch out for?

HR: The main one, I think, is putting in everything. When you come across another detail in some obscure journal in some faraway archive, it is tempting to put it in. But ultimately, I am more interested in conveying the sweep of Wright's life and the spirit of the man than in tracking his every movement like an FBI agent.

MG: When is your projected completion date? When will we see the book?

HR: I am due to pass the book to my publishers, Henry Holt, in June 2000. I think - I hope! - that I'm just about on schedule.

 Native Son and the Book-of-the-Month Club

by MARK MADIGAN
University of Vermont, Burlington

Native Son was the first book by a Black author to be selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club or, as a matter of fact, to be selected by any American book club. Whether or not the Book-of-the-Month Club ever considered the works of Black authors before 1940 is uncertain, but the evidence suggests that if it did, it certainly never came close to making one a Book of the Month. The reasons for this are not hard to imagine. First of all, when one considers how conservatively the club behaved right from the beginning with White authors themselves, it is not surprising that it was even more conservative with Black authors. Who among the readers of the club would care to read them and did the judges themselves care? There is some indication that at least one did, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, who served as a judge in the literary contests of the Opportunity and Crisis magazines of the twenties.

What then were the circumstances that created the conditions necessary for the selection of Native Son? How was it that the Book-of-the-Month Club, a pretty conservative literary institution from the start, went out of its way to pick what was not only its first book by a Black author but also what can safely be described as one of the most daring novels ever written by a Black author up until that time?

First, let us take a look at some of the initial reactions of the judges who sat on the board at that time -- namely: Dorothy Canfield Fisher, a 61-year-old White woman from an upper-middle-class background, and a best-selling popular novelist; Henry Seidel Canby, a former Yale professor in English, also in his sixties, and the founder of the Saturday Review of Literature; the 72-year-old William Allen White, a long-time editor of the Kansas Emporia Gazette, a political analyst, and also a writer of popular books for which he received two Pulitzer prizes; and finally Christopher Morley, a 50-year-old journalist and long-time colleague of Canby at the SRL. Fisher and Canby were by far the two most influential members of the board and were responsible for many of its final decisions.

As soon as Native Son arrived at the offices of the Book-of-the-Month Club, Dorothy Canfield Fisher read the novel in manuscript and reported to Meredith Wood that she was "enormously interested by it," though "not at all sure what I'd think of it as a choice." "Can you tell me something about the author?" she asked [1]. As she later explained in a 1956 interview, "... that year (1940), there was a very controversial book, again something written from the inside, almost for the first time: Richard Wright's book, Native Son . . . . It was a disturbing and dreadful topic: the life of a poor Negro in a highly industrialized city, Chicago, by a Negro who had lived in that life and had been brought up in it but who also was a very gifted writer. It was the
first book of that kind which had come out, telling with savage frankness not only what it meant to be poor and downtrodden in the industrial world, but a Negro. And it did not spare the reader any of the tragedy, horror, fear which the true depiction of a human being, forced into a situation of hopelessness, always creates in the reader [2].

Adjectives and phrases like "disturbing," "dreadful," and "savage frankness" show just how troubled Fisher was by what she read. In her comments, she did not really specify what it was that troubled her, aside from the overall feeling of "tragedy, horror, [and] fear" that the novel created in her (and here it is important to emphasize that she is talking about her own fears, the fears that the novel aroused in her—not Bigger's fears), but her emphasis on the hopelessness of Bigger's situation suggests that this feeling of "tragedy, horror, [and] fear" came especially from realizing that Bigger's social condition, his condition of racial and class oppression combined, could create the kind of fear and violence that explode in the unintentional killing of Mary Dalton, in the way Bigger subsequently disposes of her body, and in the deliberate and very brutal rape and murder of Bessie, Bigger's girlfriend. Undoubtedly, Fisher already knew that oppression could generate fear and violence but that racial oppression could, under certain circumstances, lead to such violent actions and crimes as those that are depicted in the novel was rather shocking news.

The connection between race, violence, and sex was emphasized in another comment that Fisher made in the interview. The novel, she pointed out, came "pretty early in the discussion of the race situation, when there had been very little crack in the solid crust of prejudice against the Negro, and we were not sure that the book would be at all acceptable, because it wasn't--and by its nature, couldn't be--the kind of book which could be given to my seventeen year old daughter." [3]. What could have made the novel so unsuitable for Fisher's daughter to read in the context of the racial climate of the late thirties?

First of all, when the novel came out, White Americans generally knew very little about the living conditions of Black Americans in the cities, even though they were the ones who created these conditions. The so-called "Great Migration" was still underway and Northern segregation limited social contact between Whites and Blacks outside the South. Furthermore, White Northerners often continued to believe that racism was primarily a Southern problem and that the North was in comparison far more liberal than the South. In this context, Bigger was a startling revelation, a clear statement that the North was in many ways not much better than the South, if less overtly racist, in some respects. Like Fisher, most White American readers of that time were not prepared for the violence that Wright argued was generated by Bigger's environment, which was undoubtedly one of the reasons why Fisher did not think that the book was appropriate for a seventeen-year-old to read.

Then, on top of that, for Wright to have chosen the young, rich, good looking, White Mary Dalton as the catalyst of Bigger's assault on White America—unpremeditated as that assault was nothing short (on Wright's part) of a crime against White America's most precious icon. In this respect, I think it is particularly interesting that Fisher thought mainly in terms of her daughter when she said that the book was inappropriate for a seventeen year old to read, even though she also had a son. Without wanting to stretch things too far, it seems that Fisher felt that Mary could have been her daughter—which certainly would have caused some of the fears that she talked about in the interview.

Disturbing as Native Son was, Fisher found the novel to be generally convincing. It was, as she said, "a true depiction of a human being, forced into a situation of hopelessness" [my emphasis]. Her evaluation was based on the fact that Wright, as she indicated, had written "from the inside" and that contemporary sociological studies backed up what he said. Wright therefore had treated a contemporary issue that had immediate relevance to the times and he had done so in a truthful manner.

Following Fisher's lead in his review of Native Son for the Book-of-the-Month Club News, Henry Seidel Canby argued that the theme of the novel was "the mind of the Negro we see every day; whose emotion is the emotion of that native born under the stress of a social situation difficult in the extreme . . ." [my emphasis] [4]. Bigger, he wrote, is "the essential Negro-in-America" for both the North and the South in modern times.
To understand what Canby meant by "the essential Negro-in-America" in the context of the 1940s, one first needs to take a look at the autobiography he wrote in 1947, American Memoir, in which he recalled the happy days of his upper-middle class childhood in his native town of Wilmington, Delaware, at the turn of the century, and where he described what might be called "the essential Negro" of his childhood, such as he perceived him.

All the good families in town, he explains, had "Negro waiters," and this is how he remembered them in the autobiography: "they would steal little things and lie, but in important matters they could be trusted. They sang spirituals while they polished the knives in the pantry, and only ha-ha-ed when a watermelon rind found a mark in the wool. Their wives, who did the washing, helped when we had company, filling the kitchens with chuckles when they came. They were part of Us, molded to our needs, a powerful element in that easy good-humor which ran all round the town. When they were sick or destitute, we took care of them if they were our darkies, but of course what they thought, if they thought, and what they wanted, if they wanted more than we gave them, was not significant. They lived, naturally, in slums of their own, where it always smelled 'darky,' and they were supposed to like it that way. Perhaps they did." [5]

One can say without any hesitation that the "essential Negro" of Canby's childhood memories was the stereotypical "sambo," "mammy," "coon," "pickaninny," that originated with the institution of slavery and permeated American culture for decades, as Marlon Rigg's documentary film, Ethnic Notions, has so well demonstrated. To say the least, Canby's description is jam-packed with these stereotypical images, along with stereotypes of black ignorance, incompetence, uncleanness, deceitfulness, and so on and so forth.

In this context, Canby's description of Bigger as the "essential Negro-in-America" for the 1940s was the antithesis of what he remembered from the days of his childhood. Bigger, he revealingly wrote in his review, "is mean; he is a coward; he is on occasion liar, thief, and bully." From the first, "he is a bad actor," or, as he said, in another part of the review, a "bad nigger," and even though Canby used quotation marks around the phrase to suggest its inappropriateness, his very description of Bigger indicates that he was unable to make a clear distinction between the stereotype and the social reality that lay behind it. In describing Bigger, Canby once again fell back on stereotypes, particularly post-slavery stereotypes of Black men as violent creatures who needed to be held in check.

So what did Canby like about the novel that might have persuaded him to endorse it? Well despite his stereotyping of Bigger Thomas, he was not totally unimpressed by Wright's argument that Bigger was to a large extent a product of his environment. In another review he wrote of the novel for the Saturday Review of Literature, he admitted that Wright had asked an important and relevant question-namely, what could America do about Bigger Thomas?--and that he had done so in such a way that one could not dismiss Bigger as a mere victim of his own flaws [6]. What "first concerns vice and violence and crime," he wrote in that review, "slowly becomes ethical, political, and psychological, without once separating itself from an intensely human context." Wright asked questions, he stated, that called for "the responsibility for some answer." Had Canby completely rejected Bigger as a victim of his own self, he would not have felt any sense of responsibility towards him.

There was at least one person on the board who strongly objected to the novel and was totally opposed to the idea of selecting it. William Allen White, as one biographer has shown, believed that "the function of the judges who selected books" was primarily "to pick books that most exactly suited their customers." These customers, White argued, were "average intelligent Americans, who had had college training or the equivalent," who "knew something of the artistic currents of the day, were occasionally interested in politics, and were familiar with the classics," but who did not "appreciate subtlety, are made impatient by stylistics, and are not much interested by fashions, by newness."
referred to anything that he considered inappropriate in literature—an overemphasis on the seamy side of life, for example, too much violence, too much sex, etc.

Not surprisingly, then, White was totally against Wright and his novel. "I am hardboiled and mean in my tremendous dislike of Native Son as Book of the Month choice," he wrote in a telegram to the club. "It would queer us with a large crowd. Why take a questionable book when you have a dozen sure shots? Now is not the time to cross the Rubicon on the dirt question." [8] What is certain is that, if it had only been for him, Native Son would not have become a Book of the Month in 1940.

Why then did the board as a whole decide to select the novel? First and foremost, I think that Native Son conveyed a sense of urgency. Here was a novel, as both Fisher and Canby emphasized, that had immediate relevance to what was going on in American society at the time with respect to race relations and that raised issues that would need to be addressed by the nation if the problems represented by Bigger's experience were to go away.

I also think that in the process of discussing the appropriateness of making Native Son a selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club, the judges on the board had to consider the fact that the novel offered them a chance to do the right thing, namely to recognize, for the first time in their history, the work of a Black writer who was not only an apt commentator on the racial situation of his time but also a talented artist, a fact that both Canby and Fisher agreed on.

In making its decision, the board may have been encouraged by the fact that Wright had already had one book published by 1940, a collection of short stories entitled Uncle Tom's Children, which came out in 1938 and was generally well received by the critics when Harper published it that year.

And, even before the publication of the book, Wright had received a literary award for his short stories; among the judges who gave Wright the award was no other than Harry Scherman, the founder and president of the Book-of-the-Month Club.

The decision to select Native Son was historically significant, even though it may not have been motivated by purely selfless reasons, and even though we do know that Wright had to pay a price for it. As documented by Arnold Rampersad, the selection was contingent upon Wright's agreement to making changes in his manuscript, the main cuts involving the sexual explicitness of the novel which was not entirely censored but considerably toned down. These imposed conditions do take away from the historical meaningfulness of the selection. It is also true, however, that the club did select the novel when it could have chosen to play safe. As William Allen White asked, "Why take a questionable book when you have a dozen sure shots?" The club did run the risk of creating an unwelcome controversy among its readers and of losing subscribers as a result. To quote one last time from Dorothy Canfield Fisher's 1956 interview, this was "a red-hot-poker" and "we weren't sure we were going to manage it." In fact, even the publishers, just before the book came out, "began to get alarmed too, fearing that it would be taken as just horror for its own sake." That is when they asked her if she would write an introduction to the book. So, there was definitely a feeling there that the club was going out on a limb with this book, not knowing how it would come out. As it turns out, the club did not lose subscribers—perhaps a few but there is no evidence of a major drop out—and nobody wrote that the novel "wasn't fit for his seventeen year old daughter to read, although it certainly was not," Fisher quips at the end of the interview, but the club had taken chances, and in doing so, it made a significant contribution to the contemporary debate on race relations in America.

NOTES:

"The Southern Tradition: Representation of Race in the Work of William Faulkner and Richard Wright"

by CANDICE M. LOVE
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

The uniqueness of Southern literature as a subcategory of "American" literature often lies in its racial representation. African American writers and Anglo-American writers, depending upon their collective and individual experiences, portray the South as they lived it; it is possible that the South never truly materializes in the literature. Differences between African American and white Southern literature can be investigated by examining works by William Faulkner and Richard Wright, two of the South's most prominent authors who dared to tackle the issue of race in America. My work-in-progress addresses the racial involvement in Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury, Light in August, and Go Down Moses and focuses on Wright's Native Son, The Outsider, and The Long Dream, novels which embody the negative emotions Wright associated with the South and his representations of the races in America. For the CLA presentation, I discuss only Go Down Moses and The Long Dream.

"The Third Life of Grange Copeland: Alice Walker's debate with Richard Wright's Native Son in the creation of an imaginative path to masculinity."

by ANN SUTCLIFFE
Keele University

In The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970), Alice Walker demonstrates the impossibility of African American men achieving fully socially recognised masculinity in the South. Escaping sharecropping and constant white surveillance in the South, Grange, alienated and marginalised, is shocked by his invisibility to whites in the North. In her attempt to create a masculine identity for Grange, Walker reworks Bigger Thomas' initiation in Richard Wright's Native Son (1940). Both characters "accidentally" kill white women and are responsible for the deaths of "their" black women. Both reject the accidental nature of the white deaths because they feel more powerful as murderers. Both Grange and Bigger believe their subsequent enlightenment has bestowed clear-sightedness not shared by those around them. However, whilst Wright can only lead Bigger (dreaming of masculine solidarity) to the electric chair, Walker (writing after sixties civil rights) returns her hero to the South to create a sanctuary in which to raise his grand daughter, Ruth. Although he eventually dies attempting to secure her freedom, the reader believes that, in his last life, Grange has benefited from his enlightenment.

Whilst critics have noted a connection with Native Son in Walker's first novel, there has been little consideration of how Walker creatively reconstructs Wright's narrative. My paper reconsidered the connection which, I believe, places Walker with other African American Women writers who rework earlier narratives (both black and white) to represent an other viewpoint. Far from suffering from an anxiety of influence, such writers often celebrate and honour what has gone before.
Renewal Notice

As you receive this issue of the Richard Wright Newsletter, we want to remind you to renew your membership in the Richard Wright Circle. The yearly $10 membership fee runs for one calendar year and entitles you to two issues of the Newsletter: Fall/Winter and Spring/Summer. In order to receive the Fall/Winter 1998-9 issue and continue your membership, you need to fill out and send us the form below (to insure that we have your latest address) along with a $10 check or money order made out to the Richard Wright Circle. Please remember that your membership dues still constitute the primary funding for the Circle and Newsletter. Your cooperation in helping us to maintain the Circle and Newsletter is greatly appreciated.

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