



Richard Wright: From Black Boy to World Citizen (Library of African American Biography)

Jennifer Jensen Wallach

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Upon meeting thirty-three-year-old Richard Wright in 1941, the renowned sociologist Robert Park famously demanded, "How in hell did you happen?" Having been born into poverty in a sharecropper's cabin in 1908, Wright managed to complete only an eighth-grade education. Yet by the time he met Park he was the best-selling author of *Native Son* (1940), a searing indictment of racism that is a classic of American literature. Although Wright died prematurely at the age of fifty-two, he published nearly a dozen books and left behind hundreds of unpublished manuscript pages.

Jennifer Jensen Wallach's biography—which we will publish on the fiftieth anniversary of his mysterious death—traces Wright from his obscure origins to international fame, from the cotton fields of Mississippi to his expatriate home of Paris. She highlights Wright's various attempts to answer the driving question of his life: "How can I live freely?"

Seeking answers, Wright traveled widely and became involved with many of the most important intellectual and political movements of his day, including Marxism, existentialism, and Pan-Africanism. Along the way he struggled to balance his own fierce sense of individualism with a desire to be a spokesperson for oppressed people throughout the globe. His ardent prose infuriated, bewildered, and inspired a generation of African-American writers and activists. It also attracted the attention of American intelligence agencies, which placed Wright under surveillance for most of his adult life.

To both his critics and admirers, Wright proved the truth of his claim that words are among the most powerful of weapons.

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