



# Black Boy

**Richard Wright-Black Boy:** Produced by Madison Davis Lacy, Jr., a PBS presentation from Mississippi Educational Television and ITVS. The first full-length documentary on the life, work, and legacy of Richard Wright, acclaimed author of *Native Son* and *Black Boy* and other influential works. (Left) Richard Wright in Paris, circa 1947; Photo: unknown. (Center) Richard Wright in Chicago, circa 1928; Photo: courtesy of the Wright family. (Right) Richard Wright on the cover of German magazine *Der Spiegel*, circa 1955, Photo: Unknown.

## A Moving Look at the Influential and Infamous Writer Who Changed the Face of American Literature

To mark the 50th anniversary of the publication of Richard Wright's iconoclastic autobiography, *Black Boy*, Mississippi Educational Television and the Independent Television Service (ITVS) present the first in-depth look at the African-American writer who changed the face of American literature. When asked in 1945 why he wrote *Black Boy*, a harrowing account of his Southern childhood, Wright replied that he wanted to "give [his] tongue to voiceless Negro boys." Quoting Walt Whitman, he added, "Not until the sun ceases to shine on you will I disown you." Fifty years later, Richard Wright's passion for words is depicted in the first full-length documentary on his life.

the documentary chronicles Wright's struggle, overcoming poverty and fear to earn recognition as one of America's most important writers. Producer Madison Davis Lacy, whose credits include *Eyes on the Prize II*, drew from hundreds of sources to reveal the persona of a man critics viewed as a literary genius. Three years in the making, *Richard Wright - Black Boy* skillfully intertwines dramatic excerpts from Wright's own work with historical footage and recollections from his daughter Julia as well as friends, associates, and fellow writers such as Ralph Ellison and Margaret Walker Alexander.

"I was initially interested in pursuing Wright's expatriation, and the phenomenon of expatriation as a dynamic in African-American culture," says Lacy. "What I discovered was a self-taught literary genius of tremendous political conviction. At 19 years old, Wright told a friend, 'I want my life to count for something.' Somehow he was able to crystallize that determination and his understanding of racial oppression into a reason to write on behalf of himself and his people."

Born outside Natchez, Mississippi, on September 4, 1908, Wright was the son of an illiterate sharecropper. He developed his fascination with the power of words at an early age. His classmates at Jackson's

literature. As Wright's popularity grew, so did the displeasure of party officials intent upon influencing his writing, eventually causing him to break with the Party. He left Chicago in 1937 for New York where "he

U.S. writing, black or white," claimed *Time* magazine. The public seemed to agree, sending the book to fourth place among fiction sales for the year.

Wright married for the second time in 1941 and weathered the war years in New York lecturing and writing his autobiography, *Black Boy*, published in 1945. *Black Boy* also became a runaway best seller, aided by a major photo spread in *Life* magazine. After the war, Wright, as a former Communist party member, became the subject of FBI monitoring and experienced overt acts of racial hostility.

In 1946 Wright traveled to Paris and London, where he was welcomed by his American expatriate and European literary contemporaries. After his return to New York in early 1947, Wright decided to move his family to France where he felt he could write unimpeded by social and government interference. He never returned to the States, though he always considered himself an American.

Living in Europe, Wright's interests took on an expanding global view. He lectured and wrote a series

of non-fiction essays and books reflecting on the position of race in a quickly changing post-war world; he took a particular interest in Pan-African issues.

By the time of his sudden death in 1960 at the age of 52, Wright had irrevocably changed the principles governing African-American writing and left an indelible mark on the American imagination.

His books still sell briskly and continue to be mainstays of high school and college literature and composition classes. "Wright was one of the people who made me conscious of the need to struggle," offers writer Amiri Baraka. In a 1963 essay on Wright, critic Irving Howe wrote, "the day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever."

Wright biographer Constance Webb reflects, "He was a storyteller - because he wrote these stories; but he also lived these stories." Prominent author Ralph Ellison, in his last filmed interview before his death in 1994, assessed, "I don't know whether he always knew where he was going, and I think that is a good sign because you don't just create a novel, you are created by it."

"He came like a sledgehammer, like a giant out of the mountain with a sledgehammer, writing with a sledgehammer ... After *Native Son*, the condescending attitude toward Black writers was over."

Historian John Henrik Clarke, in *Richard Wright - Black Boy*

Smith-Robertson School recall that he always had his head in a book. Reading reinforced his dissatisfaction with life in the segregated South and, like thousands of other African-Americans, he resolved to go north, to Chicago. He survived the Depression as a street-sweeper and a postal worker until he found encouragement to write from the Communist Party. Soon he was at the forefront of the "school for social protest" in Chicago, a literary movement which gave rise to a wealth of progressive

could get published," according to Margaret Walker Alexander. He published his first book, *Uncle Tom's Children*, to good reviews in 1938, but it was his second, *Native Son*, that brought Wright critical and public acclaim.

In 1940, *Native Son* soared to the top of the best-seller lists and became the first book by an African-American author to be a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. "His new book makes it clearer than ever that he has one of the most notable gifts in

## Ballot Box Can Ensure Affirmative Action



**Helping Black Kids "Enter A New Realm":** Students from the Mae C. Jemison Academy (MJA) in Detroit enjoy some of the books on blacks in math and science given to them by Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) during AKA's Leadership Seminar. Sharing the moment are MJA principal Schlybea Jean Hopkins (far R) and AKA national leaders Dr. Eva L. Evans (C), president; and Mrs. Norma S. White (L), vice president; who believe AKA's donation of 250 books to the school will motivate more black students to enter the realm of math and science.

"Why affirmative action?"

Because the wrongs have not been undone. 200 years of systematic barriers established to hold the Black community back cannot be overcome by 15 years of affirmative action."

Addressing the question was Robert L. Green, former president at the University of the District of Columbia, at the biennial Leadership Seminar of Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA), a 140,000-member black women's organization, July 13-16.

His position was paralleled by AKA international president Dr. Eva L. Evans of Lansing, Mi., and other speakers, including U.S. Rep. John Conyers (D., MI.), U.S. Rep. Louis Stokes (D., Oh.) and Detroit Mayor

Dennis Archer.

Evans also took her case to the Michigan House Judiciary Committee as it debated a civil rights resolution to the Michigan Constitution.

Testifying, she queried, "What has gone so egregiously wrong in Michigan that there is a need to alter our most fundamental equal opportunity documents in a way which will lock out a large share of Michigan citizens from an opportunity to be employed and promoted in the workplace, and other facets of Michigan life?"

While Evans called on the committee to retain measures which provide access for minorities, she and the speakers at the conference said the solution is at the ballot box.

Resultingly, AKA has taken steps to defend affirmative action and back candidates who support it. "We are increasing the number of blacks registered and we will insure that they vote," Evans said.

AKA is also supporting organizations at the forefront of the affirmative action battle.

AKA supplemented its annual chapter donations to the NAACP with a \$10,000 check.

The conference agenda also featured training for AKA's math-science initiative, its partnership with the American Red Cross, and its chapter operations, and AKA presented 250 books on Blacks in math and science to students enrolled in the Mae Jemison Academy, Detroit.



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