

Native Son

by Richard Wright

StoryLines Midwest Discussion Guide No. 6

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About the author

Grandson of slaves, son of an illiterate sharecropper, Richard Wright was born in Mississippi in 1908, and moved to Chicago with his aunt at the age of 19. A voracious reader of American literature, he worked at an array of blue-collar jobs, was active in left-wing political groups, and began to write both fiction and nonfiction. In 1937, he joined the New York Federal Writers' Project, and in 1939 was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. Wright followed *Native Son* (1940) with an autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945), also a best-seller. After 1946, he spent the bulk of his time abroad, where he associated with the leading artists and intellectuals of the time. Wright's later books fared less well in the marketplace, though in translation, his writing was widely acclaimed throughout Europe. As he grew older, he distanced himself from the political organizations he'd previously supported. He died in 1960, in Paris, of a heart attack.

Discussion questions

How important in one's life are each of the "protections" Bigger did not have, the "protections of religion, ideology, profession"? Can a life be satisfactory without any of them? Why did Bigger not have them?

Is what ways is the situation of migrants and immigrants to large cities today similar to or different from that of the blacks who migrated to Midwestern cities such as Chicago and Detroit in the 1930s?

What did Wright want us to think about Bigger? Where in *Native Son* do you feel empathy or sympathy for Bigger, if at all? Why? What role might your own race play in your reaction?

The Daltons are described as charitable whites—for instance, they've given over five million dollars to support black education. But when asked if the terrible conditions of his rental properties has any connection to his daughter's death, Mr. Dalton answers: "I don't know what you mean." What is your opinion of the Daltons, and what do you think of Wright's choice to characterize them as he did?

Additional readings

James A. Baldwin. *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, 1953.
Claude Brown. *Manchild in the Promised Land*, 1965.
Eldridge Cleaver. *Soul on Ice*, 1968.
Theodore Dreiser. *An American Tragedy*, 1925.
Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man*, 1952.
Chester Himes. *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, 1945.
Richard Wright. *Black Boy*, 1945.
Malcolm X. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 1965.

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From the moment Richard Wright's grave cautionary tale begins, with the jarring ring of an alarm, Bigger Thomas is on a crash course with his fate. By day's end, he will have suffocated a young white woman in her bed—by accident, but without remorse—and set into motion his undoing. *Native Son* (1940) proved a landmark in American fiction. For the first time, readers of a mainstream novel were confronted with a blunt, unapologetic portrait of black urban life.

Wright's first book had been *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), a collection of stories. He later chided himself for its naivete: "I found that I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book... it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears."

Native Son was an immediate commercial success and was selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club (Wright had deleted certain sexual passages at their request). The novel was reviewed by most major newspapers and was praised for its unswerving look at the psychological impacts of racism. But some critics, including Wright's young friend James Baldwin, complained that the novel was weighed down by its message. R. P. Blackmur wrote that it was "one of those books where everything is undertaken with seriousness except the writing," a frequent charge against novels of social protest during the 1930s.

Wright's novel fell within the "naturalist" school of fiction, which argued that human nature was controlled by powerful exterior forces—environment, social class—and by such inner drives as hunger, sex, and fear. For its design, *Native Son* owes a particular debt to Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925). Wright also borrowed from the heavily publicized murder-rape trial of a young Chicagoan named Robert Nixon.

Wright's own story is very much the product of its place—the urban Midwest—and its time. He was born in Natchez, Mississippi, in 1908. Like Bigger Thomas's family, Wright's had taken part in the "Great Migration," the exodus of blacks from the Deep South. By 1930, Chicago's black population was well over a quarter million, largely confined to the city's South Side, a narrow zone called the Black Belt.

Whatever economic and racial realities these migrants had fled, conditions in Depression-era Chicago were difficult. Housing on the South Side was scarce, substandard, and exorbitant; Jim Crow laws were still in place; unemployment—bad everywhere—was double in the black community. The gap between rich and poor had grown so severe that Wright, like many artists of his time, had turned to the trade-union movement and the Communist Party for possible antidotes.

Sixty years after his appearance, Bigger Thomas remains an indelible and controversial figure: a sullen, angry young man, fueled mainly by instinct, a "cornered animal." He's not a likeable character—we watch him with fascination, but not, exactly, with sympathy. He is a man gripped by a "primitive fear," Wright has said, a man without the traditional protections of religion, ideology, or profession.

The story unfolds in three acts—Wright names them Fear, Flight, and Fate. Bigger begrudgingly accepts work as a live-in chauffeur for the ultra-wealthy Dalton family, who pride themselves on their charity toward blacks. His first duty is to drive the daughter, Mary, to the university, but instead she attends a Communist meeting in the Loop. Afterward, she and organizer Jan Erlone draw Bigger into a discussion of the Party's stand on racial equality, and compel him to eat with them in a black restaurant.

Nothing in Bigger's background has prepared him for this show of brotherhood—it flusters him, makes him feel trapped. Later, all three drunk, Bigger drops Jan off and drives Mary home, where she proves incapable of getting to bed without help. Bigger is stimulated by Mary's drunken flirtation, but he and Mary are interrupted by Mrs. Dalton, who is blind (white society's "blindness" is one of the novel's motifs). Bigger tries to quiet Mary by pressing a pillow over her face, but in his panic, he fails to realize that she's stopped breathing. The remainder of the novel carries us through Bigger's efforts to place blame for the killing elsewhere, then his capture, trial, and death sentence.

Shortly after the novel's publication, Wright spoke about its origins to an audience at Columbia University. Bigger, he said, was an amalgam of boys and men he'd known, from schoolyard bullies to various hard-edged, taboo-breaking types who whipsawed between elation and deep depression. They were alienated, disinherited, "hovering unwanted between two worlds." None came to a good end. "Eventually the whites who restricted their lives made them pay a terrible price," Wright said.

His perception expanded by exposure to the radical politics of the period, Wright realized that the Bigger Thomases could be whites as well. "I became conscious, at first dimly, and then later on with increasing clarity and conviction of a vast muddled pool of human life in America." There was "a complex struggle for life going on in my country, a struggle in which I was involved. I sensed, too, that the Southern scheme of oppression was but an appendage of a far vaster and in many respects more ruthless and impersonal commodity-profit machine."

To write *Native Son*, Wright had needed to quiet his internal censor. He feared white readers would see in Bigger a confirmation of their worst prejudices, and black audiences would rebuke him for not showing the best aspects of his race. But, Wright said, he couldn't make Bigger convincing if he didn't "depict him as he was."

In 1947, Wright rejected an offer to film *Native Son* with the Bigger Thomas role changed to a white man. Wright later wrote his own script, and played the part of Bigger Thomas himself when the movie was filmed in Argentina under the title *Sangre Negra*.

Upon the publication of *Native Son*, Wright became, virtually overnight, the most popular black writer in America, and an influential spokesman on matters of race. As social commentator Irving Howe wrote in a now-famous essay: "The day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever. It made impossible a repetition of the old lies [and] brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture."