Hailed as the father of black literature in the twentieth century, Richard Wright was an iconoclast, an intellectual of towering stature whose multidisciplinary erudition rivals only that of W. E. B. Du Bois. This collection captures Wright’s immense power, which has made him a beacon for writers across decades, from the civil rights era to today. Individual essays examine Wright’s art as central to his intellectual life and shed new light on his classic texts *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. Other essays turn to his short fiction and nonfiction, as well as his lesser-known work in journalism and poetry, paying particular attention to manuscripts in Wright’s archive – unpublished letters and novels, plans for multivolume works – that allow us to see the depth and expansiveness of his aesthetic and political vision. Exploring how Wright’s expatriation to France facilitated a broadening of this vision, contributors challenge the idea that expatriation led to Wright’s artistic decline.


*A complete list of books in the series is at the back of this book*
THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO

RICHARD WRIGHT

EDITED BY

GLENDA R. CARPIO

Harvard University
For Werner Sollors, with love
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chronology

1908  Richard Nathaniel Wright is born on September 4 on a plantation in Roxie, Mississippi, located twenty miles east of Natchez, Mississippi. It was one of the most impoverished and segregated areas in the Deep South. His father, Nathan, was a sharecropper, and his mother, Ella, was a schoolteacher who started to work on a farm shortly after Richard was born.

1910  Richard Wright’s brother, Leon Alan Wright, is born on September 24. He was the second and last child of Nathan and Ella Wright.

1911–1912  Ella Wright leaves the farm with her children to live with her parents in Natchez, and Nathan joins them later. Wright’s maternal grandmother was a strict Seventh-Day Adventist and strong disciplinarian.

1913–1915  Wright sets his maternal grandparents’ house on fire by accident, and the Wrights move up the river to Memphis to find better employment. Nathan works as a night porter in a hotel and Ella cooks for a white family. Nathan then leaves his family for another woman, and Ella acquires an illness that eventually disables her for the remainder of her life. Richard Wright enrolls at Howe Institute in Memphis.

1916  As their mother becomes more ill, Wright and his brother Leon are placed in an orphanage for a month. This experience surely influenced his posthumously published novel *Rite of Passage*. Ella eventually moves with her children to Jackson, Mississippi, for the summer to stay with Wright’s grandmother. After that, they move to Elaine, Arkansas, to live with Ella’s sister and brother-in-law, Maggie and Silas Hopkins.
### CHRONOLOGY

**1917–1918** Wright’s Uncle Silas is murdered by whites due to his thriving business as a saloonkeeper. The Wrights escape to West Helena, Arkansas, and ultimately move back to Jackson to live with Ella’s mother again. For the next two years, they oscillate between West Helena and Jackson, and Wright’s schooling is irregular. During this time, Wright becomes conscious of the depth of American racism and violence in the Deep South.

**1919** Wright begins school in West Helena as his mother’s health continues to deteriorate. As her health worsens, he must leave school to make money for his family. After Ella has a paralyzing stroke, the Wrights move back to Jackson to live with Ella’s mother. Wright attends a Seventh-Day Adventist school yet rebels against the strict guidelines laid out there.

**1921–1923** Wright attends Jim Hill School and Smith Robertson Junior High, and does well academically and socially. He works an array of jobs after school during the summer and reads pulp fiction in his spare time.

**1924** He publishes his first short story, “The Voodoo of Hell’s Half-Acre,” in Jackson’s *Southern Register*.

**1925** Wright graduates from Smith Robertson as valedictorian but refuses to give the speech prepared for him by the principal. Upon graduation, he moves to Memphis and begins to take reading and writing more seriously.

**1926** Richard is drawn to H. L. Mencken’s writing due to his courage to criticize American society and modern life. He is also attracted to American naturalists (e.g. Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis) and European realists (Henrik Ibsen, Emile Zola, and Fyodor Dostoevsky). This period intensely awakens him and confirms his desire to write.

**1927–1928** Wright moves to Chicago and begins to work in a post office.

**1928–1930** During these early years in Chicago, he develops a strong interest in modernist literature, such as the works of T. S. Eliot and Gustave Flaubert. After the 1928 stock market crash, he loses his job as a postal clerk and is forced to support himself and his family with low-paying jobs while living in the Chicago slums. Such an experience influenced both *Lawd Today!* and *Native*
Son. In 1930, he becomes an aide to the South Side Boys Club and works with young men in Chicago’s street gangs.

1931 He publishes another short story, “Superstition,” in a black magazine. He also starts working with the Federal Negro Theatre and becomes a writer for the Illinois Writers’ Project.

1932–1934 Wright joins the John Reed Club, a Communist Party-sponsored literary organization. There he writes poems about revolution and is published in Left Front, the magazine for Midwestern John Reed Clubs. In 1933, he officially joins the Communist Party. He is eventually elected secretary of the Chicago John Reed Club and becomes coeditor of Left Front. He continues to read nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction, and is greatly influenced by Fyodor Dostoevsky, with whom he is often compared.

1935–1936 He continues publishing poetry, ventures into journalism, and expands his connections in Marxist and leftist circles. He also joins the Federal Writers’ Project, where he does research on the history of blacks in Chicago, which influences Twelve Million Black Voices. He also tries to sell his first novel, Lawd Today!, but without success. Nevertheless, he publishes “Big Boy Leaves Home” in Negro Caravan in 1936 and begins working on Native Son and other short stories that will be included in Uncle Tom’s Children.

1936 Wright organizes the South Side Writers’ Group, which consisted of black writers and intellectuals such as Frank Marshall Davis, Horace Cayton, and Margaret Walker.

1937 Due to ideological differences over artistic freedom, Wright leaves Chicago’s John Reed Club and moves to New York City in June. In New York, he assists in founding New Challenge. He also becomes a writer and editor for the Harlem Bureau of the Daily Worker. Moreover, he is on a rigorous schedule as he works on Native Son.

1937 He publishes his literary manifesto, “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” in the Daily Worker and publishes “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” in American Stuff: WPA Writers’ Anthology. He also wins a $500 first prize in Story Magazine’s contest for his short story “Fire and Cloud.”
## Chronology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>This is also the year Langston Hughes connects Wright with Ralph Ellison. They become friends as they discuss modernist literature and even attend the Second American Writers’ Congress together in Carnegie Hall, where Ernest Hemingway gave the plenary address. Wright gives Ellison his first opportunity to write, requesting that he write a review for <em>New Challenge</em>'s first issue.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td><em>Uncle Tom’s Children</em> is published and receives positive reviews. Wright continues to work on <em>Native Son</em>. He does research on the Robert Nixon case, in which an 18-year-old black man was accused of murdering a white woman, to help flesh out the novel more.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>Wright wins the Guggenheim Fellowship in June, and this helps him complete <em>Native Son</em>. He marries his first wife, Dhimah Meadman, in August. Ralph Ellison is the best man.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td><em>Native Son</em> is published on March 1 by <em>Harpers</em> as a Book of the Month Club selection. It sells 215,000 copies by early April and becomes a bestseller. Wright and Dhimah Meadman get divorced. Later in the year, he collaborates with Paul Green on a stage version of the novel. He also starts working on <em>Twelve Million Black Voices</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>Wright marries Ellen Poplar, a Communist Party organizer, on March 12. On March 25 <em>Native Son</em> opens on Broadway. <em>Twelve Million Black Voices</em> is published by Viking Press. For his many literary accomplishments, the NAACP awards him with the Spingarn Medal. Wright begins to doubt his relationship with the Communist Party due to their de-emphasis on American racial issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>He officially leaves the Communist Party. His daughter Julia is born, and he publishes the short story “The Man Who Lived Underground” in <em>Accent</em>. The existentialist story details the life of a man who dwells in the city sewers after being falsely accused of a murder. This short story deeply influenced <em>Invisible Man</em>, and obvious connections can be made between the two.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943–1944</td>
<td>Wright visits the Deep South and gives a lecture at Fisk University. Traveling back to the South inspires him to write his own autobiography. In August of 1944, he publishes</td>
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Chronology

“I Tried to Be a Communist” in *The Atlantic Monthly*. A young James Baldwin meets Richard Wright. Baldwin visits Wright’s apartment in Brooklyn, and they discuss his novel over a bottle of bourbon. Wright agrees to read his draft, eventually supports the novel, and recommends him for the Eugene Saxton Fellowship (which Baldwin wins in 1946).

1945

*Black Boy* is published in March as a Book of the Month Club selection. It is an autobiography that covers his childhood and teenage years in the South. Like *Native Son*, it becomes an instant bestseller. He does not keep the success all to himself. On top of supporting Baldwin, he helps Gwendolyn Brooks publish her first book of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville*, by giving a glowing review of her work when asked by Harper & Brothers. Wright and Brooks knew each other from their shared literary circle in Chicago.

1946–1947

The Wrights sail to France on invitation from the French government. While there, they make friends with Gertrude Stein. Upon returning to the United States, he experiences racism again and they decided to move to France permanently. He quickly adapts to the French scene and makes friends with the likes of André Gide, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir. He also connects with members of the African diaspora living in Paris, such as Aimé Césaire, George Padmore, and Léopold Senghor. Wright helps Senghor, Césaire, and Alioune Diop launch *Présence Africaine*.

1948

Baldwin writes to him, curious to learn more as he decides whether he should follow Wright’s footsteps. Wright responds and encourages him to do so, and Baldwin moves to France in 1948. Wright continues to explore his intellectual curiosities by reading the works of Heidegger and Husserl, and forms friendships with European writers Carlo Levi, Arthur Koestler, and Ignazio Silone.

1949

His second daughter, Rachel, is born in January. Baldwin begins to criticize Wright’s literary aesthetic with the first of two scathing critiques of Wright’s fiction (see “Everybody’s Protest Novel” [1949] and “Many Thousands Gone” [1951]), and their relationship never recovers. Nevertheless, Wright continues to produce and begins to write the script for the film version of *Native Son*.
While in Chicago filming for *Native Son*, Wright was encouraged by Ben Burns to write three articles for *Ebony*, which became “Richard Wright Explains Ideas about Movie Making” (published in January 1951); “The Shame of Chicago” (published in December 1951); and “I Choose Exile,” which was never published by *Ebony*. Burns and *Ebony* had problems with Wright’s bleak outlook on the Negro problem after World War II. They preferred he give a more optimistic story about African American success. Therefore “I Choose Exile” was never published. *Ebony* had problems with “The Shame of Chicago,” but “I Choose Exile,” an essay about why he decided to leave racist American society and flee to Paris, crossed a line. The essay still has not been published. It is held by Kent State University, with use restricted by Wright’s inheritors.

Wright begins to work on *The Outsider* as he continues to work on the film version of *Native Son*. He also forms the Franco-American Fellowship with a group of African-American expatriates. The goal of the fellowship was to encourage better relations with France and America during the Cold War. They fought against racism back in America, and internationally.

On June 14, 1951, up-and-coming Negro writer William Gardner Smith writes Richard Wright with questions about moving to Paris. After Wright responds graciously, encouraging him to move and offering to help him make the transition, Smith gets on the *Liberté* to join Wright and Baldwin in Paris in October of 1951. *Native Son* the film is released on June 16, 1951, with Wright starring as Bigger Thomas.

Wright helps Chester Himes find a place to stay when he moves to Paris. He also introduces him to his friends and other important contacts in the publishing world. Maybe most importantly, to help Himes’s reputation in France, Wright writes a laudatory preface to the French translation of *Lonely Crusade*. Wright’s *The Outsider* is published in March, but the reviews are not as praiseworthy as his earlier works. In July of 1953, William Gardner Smith publishes a major profile on Richard Wright in *Ebony* entitled “Black Boy in France,” which gives the people back home a picture of
A day in the life of the famed writer. Wright spends the summer in the Gold Coast, now Ghana, and records his experiences in a travel diary.

1954 Wright travels in Spain and publishes two books: *Black Power: A Report of Reaction in a Land of Pathos*, about his experiences in the Gold Coast; and the novel *Savage Holiday*.

1955 He travels to Indonesia to report on the Bandung Conference, the first large-scale meeting of newly independent African and Asian states.

1956 *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* is published in March. He helps to organize the first Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in Paris, an important meeting of writers from across the African diaspora in which they discuss the role of literature and culture in the freedom of black people worldwide. The meeting is held in September.

1957 *Pagan Spain* and *White Man, Listen!* are published.

1958 *The Long Dream* is published. Wright works on a few other novels as well, which are not published in his lifetime.

1959 Wright adapts a play from Louis Sapin’s *Papa Bon Dieu* and produces *Daddy Goodness* in Paris. After visiting Africa, Wright is diagnosed with amoebic dysentery and is hospitalized. In the hospital, he experiments with haiku.

1960 *The Long Dream* appears on Broadway, but only for one week. Wright continues to battle illnesses. On November 28, he dies of a heart attack at the Clinique Eugene Gibeiz. He is cremated at Père Lachaise Cemetery on December 3, along with a copy of *Black Boy*.

1960–1961 Richard Wright’s career is universally praised in France, especially by French-speaking Africans. Many elegiac articles are written about his contribution to freedom for the world at large. And the three black novelists Wright helped move to Paris all praise him in their work following his death: Baldwin in “Alas Poor Richard” (1961); Himes in an *Ebony* article, “The Last Days of Richard Wright” (February 1961) and later in *My Life of Absurdity* (1972); and William Gardner Smith in a *Two Cities* article, “The Compensation for the Wound”
chronology


1963  *Lawd Today!*, which was originally declined by several publishers in the 1930s, is published.

1968  *Negro Digest* polls the most prominent African American writers of the time, asking who the most important writer in African American literary history is. In their January issue, “A Survey: Black Writers’ Views on Literary Lions and Values,” they publish their results. Richard Wright is voted number one. The cover of that issue is subtitled “Richard Wright: ‘The Leading Lion,’” with a big picture of Wright on the cover.


1986  *Callaloo* publishes a special issue on Richard Wright, “Richard Wright and the Chicago Renaissance School,” dedicated to his work and aesthetics.

1991  The Library of America publishes a two-volume edition of Richard Wright’s work in which they restore cuts and changes made by publishers and others.


1998  A selection of Richard Wright’s haiku is published by Arcade Publishers under the title *Haiku: This Other World*.


2005  Julia Wright, his daughter, publishes *Daughter of a Native Son* with Random House. It is a memoir about her father.

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Two major conferences are held to celebrate Richard Wright’s centennial. On March 29, acclaimed writers Sonia Sanchez and John Wideman, along with Richard Wright biographer Hazel Rowley and his daughter Julia Wright form a panel in which they discuss the importance of his body of work. This is moderated by Professor Maryemma Graham at the Schomburg Center (“Richard Wright at 100”). On June 21, the American University of Paris hosts the International Richard Wright Centennial Conference in Paris. In the same year, Harper Perennial publishes a draft of a novel by Wright, A Father’s Law.

University of Missouri Press publishes some of Wright’s early leftist journalism under the title Byline, Richard Wright: Articles from the Daily Worker and New Masses.