RICHARD WRIGHT
1908–1960

With the 1940 publication of Native Son Richard Wright became the first African American author of a bestseller. Native Son is an uncompromising study of an American white man's sense of superiority, fear, and indifference to the sufferings of the American Negro. The white man's fear and disgust for the Negro were nothing new; in The Invisible Man Rector Thomas had spoken of the "negative inter-ethnic attraction" that caused whites to dislike the Negro. Both Thomas and Wright agreed that whites feared the Negro; but both also realized that whites were unaware of this fear and disgust. Where Thomas portrayed the Negro as a myth, Wright made him a living being. He showed the Negro as a real person, with a mind and a heart, and with a soul. Wright's Negro was a man who was not afraid to face the world with his eyes open.

Wright's life was as dramatic as his work. He was born in Natchez, Mississippi, in 1908, and was brought up by his grandmother, who was a slave. Wright's mother was a domestic servant and his father was a laborer. Wright's family was poor and his childhood was difficult. He was sent to work as a messenger boy in New York City when he was ten years old. He was expelled from the New York City public schools because of his poor performance, but he continued to read and write. Wright's first novel, Native Son, was published in 1940. It is a realistic portrayal of the daily life of a Negro in Chicago. The novel tells the story of a young Negro who is forced to work as a messenger boy and who is subjected to the brutalities of daily life. The novel was a success and it was followed by other novels, including Black Boy, which was published in 1945. Wright's last novel was The Outsider, which was published in 1953.

Wright was a political activist and a member of the Communist Party. He was arrested in 1941 for sedition and in 1942 for conspiracy to commit treason. Wright was also a supporter of the Soviet Union and of the Chinese Communist Party. He was a member of the International PEN Club and of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Wright's life was cut short by his death in an automobile accident in 1960. He was 52 years old. Wright's works have been translated into more than 30 languages and have been published in more than 20 countries. His works have been widely translated and have been widely read. Wright's works have been studied in schools and universities around the world. Wright's legacy is a powerful example of the power of literature to change the world.
"Ah'll tell yuh, Mistah Joe, ef yuh promise yuh won't tell.

"I promise.

"Waal, Ahma buy a gun.

"A gun? What you want with a gun?"

"Ah wanna keep it."

"You ain't nothing but a boy. You don't need a gun."

"Am, lemme have the catlog, Mistah Joe. Ah'll bring it back."

Joe walked through the rear door. Dave was elated. He looked around at barrels of sugar and flour. He heard Joe coming back. He craned his neck to see if he were bringing the book. Yeah, he's got it. Gawdawg, he's got it! "Here, but be sure you bring it back. It's the only one I got."

"Sho, Mistah Joe."

"Say, if you wanna buy a gun, why don't you buy one from me? I gotta gun to sell."

"Will it shoot?"

"Stare it'll shoot."

"What kind is it?"

"Oh, it's kinda old. . . a left-hand Wheeler. A pistol. A big one."

"Is it got bullets in it?"

"It's loaded."

"Kih Ah see it?"

"Where's your money?"

"What yuh wan fer it?"

"I'll let you have it for two dollars."

"Just two dollars? Shocked, Ah could buy tha when Ah git mah pay."

"I'll have it here when you want it."

"Awright, suh. Ah be in fer it."

He went through the door, hearing it slam again behind him. Ahma git some money from Ma n buy me a gun! Only two dollars! He tucked the thick catalogue under his arm and hurried.

"Where yuh been, boy? His mother held a steaming dish of black-eyed peas.

"Aw, Ma, Ah just stopped down the road t talk wid the boys."

"Yuh know bettah t keep supper waitin."

He sat down, resting the catalogue on the edge of the table. "Yuh git up from there and git to the well n wash yoself! Ah ain feedin no hops in mah house!"

She grabbed his shoulder and pushed him. He stumbled out of the room, then came back to get the catalogue.

"What is?"

"Aw, Ma, it's jisah catlog."

"Who yuh git it from?"

"From Joe, down at the sto."

"Waal, that good. We kin use it in the outhouse."

"Naw, Ma."

"He grabbed for it. "Gimmie ma catlog, Ma." She held onto it and glared at him."

"Quit hollerin at me! What's wrong wid yuh? Yuh crazy?"

"But Ma, please, it ain mine! It's Joe's! He tol me t bring it back t im termorrow."

She gave up the book. He stumbled down the back steps, hugging the thick book under his arm. When he had splashed water on his face and hands, he groped back to the kitchen and fumbled in a corner for the towel. He humped into a chair, it cluttered to the floor. The catalogue sprawled at his feet. When he had dried his eyes he snatched up the book and held it again under his arm. His mother stood watching him.

"Now, ef yuh gonna act a fool over that ol book, Ah'll take it in burn it up."

"Naw, Ma, please."

"Waal, set down n be still!"

He sat down and drew the oil lamp close. He thumbed page after page, unaware of the food his mother set on the table. His father came in. Then his small brother.

"Whatcha got there, Dave?" his father asked.

"Jus catlog, he answered, not lookin up."

"Yeah, here they is!" His eyes glowed at blue-and-black revolvers. He glanced up, feeling sudden guilt. His father was watching him. He eased the book under the table and rested it on his knees. After the blessing was asked, he ate. He scooped up peas and swallowed fat meat without chewing. Buttermilk helped to wash it down. He did not want to mention money before his father. He would do much better by cornering his mother when she was alone. He looked at his father uneasily out of the edge of his eye.

"Boy, how come yuh don quit foolin wid tha book n eat yu suppuh?"

"Nussh."

"How you n ol man Hawkins gitten erlong?"

"Suh?"

"Can't yuh hear? Why don yuh listen? Ah ast yu how wuz yuh n ol man Hawkins gitten erlong?"

"Oh, swell, Ps. Ah plows mo lan than anybody over there."

"Waal, yuh oughta keep yo mind on what yuh doin."

"Nussh."

He poured his plate full of molasses and stopped it up slowly with a chunk of cornbread. When his father and brother had left the kitchen, he still sat and looked again at the guns in the catalogue, longing to muster courage enough to present his case to his mother. Lawd, ef Ah only had the money! He could almost feel the slickness of the weapon with his fingers. If he had a gun like that he would polish it and keep it shining so it would never rust.

N (Alb) keep is loaded, by Gawd!"

"Ma?"

"His voice was hesistant.

"Hum?"

"Of man Hawkins give yuh mah money yu?"

"Yeah, but ain no usa yuh thinking bout throwin none it away. Ahm keepin tha money son yuh kin have close t go to school this winter."

He rose and went to her side with the open catalogue in his palm. She was washing dishes, her head bent low over a pan. Shyly he raised the book. When he spoke, his voice was husky, faint.

"Ma, Gawd knows Ah warns one of these."

"One of what?" she asked, not raising her eyes.

"One of these," he said again, not daring even to point. She glanced up at the page, then at him with wide eyes.
"No, Ma." "Git outa here! Don' yuh talk to me bout no gun! Yuh a fool!"

"Ma, Ah kin buy one fer two dollars."

"Not Ahf Ah knows it, yuh ain'?"

"But yuh promised me one."

"Ah don care what Ah promised! Yuh ain nothing but a hoy yi!"

"Ma, ef yuh lemme buy one Ah'n never see yuh feer nothing no mo."

"Ah tol yuh to git outa here! Yuh ain gonna toucha penny of that mah money fer no gun! Thas how come Ah has Mistah Hawkins t pay yo wages t me, cause Ah knows yuh ain got no sense."

"But, Ma, we needs gun. Pa ain got no gun. We needs gun in the house. Yuh kin never tell what might happen."

"Now don yuh try to make fool outa me, boy! Ef we did hava gun, yuh wouldn't it?"

He laid the catalogue down and slipped his arm around her waist.

"Aw, Ma, Ah done worked hard alla summer n ain yuh fer nothin, is Ah, now?"

"Thas what yuh sposed t do!"

"But Ma, Ah wanna a gun. Yuh kin lemme have two dollars outa mah money. Please, Ma. I kin give it to Pa. . . . Please, Ma! Ah loves yuh, Ma."

When she spoke her voice came soft and low.

"What yuh wanna wid, Dave? Yuh don need no gun. Yuh'll git in trouble. N' yo pa jus thought Ah let yuh have money t buy a gun he'da felt."

"Ah'll hide it, Ma. It ain but two dollars."

"Lawd, chll, what's wrong wid yuh?"

"Ain nothing wrong, Ma. Ahm almos a man now. Ah wants a gun."

"Who gonna sell yuh a gun?"

"Oh Joe at the store."

"N it don cor but two dollars?"

"Thas all, Ma. Just two dollars. Please, Ma."

She was stacking the plates away, her hands moved slowly, reflectively. Dave kept an anxious silence. Finally, she turned to him.

"Ah'll let yuh git tha gun of yuh promise me one thing."

"What's thas, Ma?"

"Ahh bring it right back t me, yuh hear? It be fer Pa."

"Seesus! Lemme go now, Ma."

She stopped, turned slightly to one side, raised the hem of her dress, rolled down the top of her stockings, and came up with a slender wad of bills.

"Here," she said. "Lawd knows yuh don need no gun. But yer pa does. Yuh bring it right back t me, yuh hear? Ahma put it up. Now ef yuh don, Ahma have yuh pa pick yuh so hard yuh won forget it."

"Seesus."

He took the money, ran down the steps, and across the yard.

"Dave! Yussahuh Dussauwer!"

He heard, but he was not going to stop now. "Naw, Lawd!"

The first movement he made the following morning was to reach under his pillow for the gun. In the gray light of dawn he held it loosely, feeling a sense of power. Could kill a man with a gun like this. Kill anybody, black or white.

And if he were holding his gun in his hand, nobody could run over him; they would have to respect him. It was a big gun, with a long barrel and a heavy handle. He raised and lowered it in his hand, marveling at its weight.

He had not come straight home with it as his mother had asked, instead he had stayed out in the fields, holding the weapon in his hand, aiming it now and then at some imaginary foe. But he had not fired it; he had been afraid that his father might hear. Also he was not sure he knew how to fire it.

To avoid surrendering the pistol he had not come into the house until he knew that they were all asleep. When his mother had tiptoed to his bedside late that night and demanded the gun, he had first played possum; then he had told her that the gun was hidden outdoors, that he would bring it to her in the morning. Now he lay turning it slowly in his hands. He broke it, took out the cartridges, felt them, and then put them back. He slid out of bed, got a long strip of old flannel from a trunk, wrapped the gun in it, and tied it to his naked thighs while it was still loaded. He did not go in to breakfast. Even though it was not yet daylight, he started for Jim Hawkins' plantation. Just as the sun was rising he reached the barns where the mules and plows were kept.

"Hey? That you, Dave?"

He turned. Jim Hawkins stood eying him suspiciously.

"What's yuh doing here so early?"

"Ah didn't know Ah wuz gittin up so early, Mistah Hawkins. Ah wuz fin'n titch up out of enny t take her t th's fields."

"Good. Since you're so early, how about plowing that stretch down by the woods?"

"Suits me, Mistah Hawkins."

"O.K. Go to it!"

He hitched Jenny to a plow and started across the fields. Hot dog! This was just what he wanted. If he could get out of bed by the woods, he could shoot his gun and nobody would hear. He walked behind the plow, hearing the traces creaking, feeling the gun tied tight to his thigh.

When he reached the woods, he plowed two whole rows before he decided to take out the gun. Finally, he stopped, looked in all directions, then untied the gun and held it in his hand. He turned to the mule and smiled.

"Know what this is, Jenny? Naw, yuh wouldn' know! Yuhs juss of nulce! Anyhow, this is a gun, it is kin shoot, by gad!"

He held the gun at arm's length. What t hell, Ahma shoot this thing! He looked at Jenny again.

"Listen here, Jenny! When Ah pull this oh trigger, Ah don was yuh t run n acka fool now!"

Jenny stood with head down, her short ears pricked straight. Dave walked off about twenty feet, held the gun far out from him at arm's length, and turned his head. Hell, he told himself, Ahm ain afraid. The gun felt loose in his fingers; he waved it wildly for a moment. Then he shut his eyes and tightened his forefinger. Bloom! A report half deafened him and he thought his right hand was torn from his arm. He heard Jenny whimpering and galloping over the field, and he found himself on his knees, squeezing his fingers hard between his legs. His hand was numb; he jammed it into his mouth, trying to warm it, trying to stop the pain. The gun lay at his feet. He did not quite know what had happened. He stood up and stared at the gun as though it were a
"I don't see how in the world it happened," said Jim Hawkins for the tenth time.
The crowd parted and Dave's mother, father, and small brother pushed into the center.

"Where Dave?" his mother called.

"There he is," said Jim Hawkins.

His mother grabbed hair.

"What happened, Dave? What yuh done?"

"Nothing."

"C'mon, boy, talk," his father said.

Dave took a deep breath and told the story he knew nobody believed.

"Wum," he drawled. "Ah heeng of Jenny down here so Ah could do mah plowin. Ah plowed bout two rows, just like yuh see. He stopped and pointed at the long rows of upturned earth. Then somethin musta been wrong wid Jenny. She wouldn' ack eight f' a tall. She started smokin n' kickin her heels. Ah tried t' hol her, but she pulled out, rearin breathin hard, suprise full half arched. She caught her nose and led her back to where the plow and gun lay. Then he stooped and grabbed handfuls of damp black earth and tried to plug the bullet hole. Jenny shuddered, whimined, and broke from him.

"Hol' on! Hol' on!"

He tried to plug it again, but blood came anyhow. His fingers were hot and sticky. He rubbed dirt into his palms, trying to dry them. Then again he attempted to plug the bullet hole, but Jenny shied away, kicking her heels high. He stood helpless. He had to do something. He ran at Jenny; she dodged him. He watched a red stream of blood flow down Jenny's leg and form a bright pool at her feet.


His lips trembled. She's bleeding t' death! He looked in the direction of home, wanting to go back, wanting to get help. But he saw the pistol lying in the damp black clay. He had a queer feeling that if he only did something, this would not be; Jenny would not be there bleeding to death.

When he went to her this time, she did not move. She stood with sleepy, dreamy eyes; and when he touched her she gave a low-pitched whimper and knelt to the ground, her front knees slapping in blood.


For a long time she held her neck erect; then her head sank, slowly. Her ribs swelled with a mighty heave and she went over.

Dave's stomach felt empty, very empty. He picked up the gun and held it gingerly between his thumb and forefinger. He buried it at the foot of a tree. He took a stick and tried to cover the pool of blood with dirt—but what was the use? There was Jenny lying with her mouth open and her eyes walled and glassy. He could not tell Jim Hawkins he had shot his mule. But he had to tell something. Yuh, Ah'll tell um Jenny started gittin wil n fell on the joint of the plow. . . . But that would hasty happen to a mule. He walked across the field slowly, head down.

It was sunset. Two of Jim Hawkins'men were over near the edge of the woods digging a hole in which to bury Jenny. Dave was surrounded by a knot of people, all of whom were looking down at the dead mule.
The Man Who Was Almost a Man / 2075

"Ah wuz shootin at the mule, Mistah Hawkins. The gun jumped when Ah pulled the trigger... N fo Ah knewed amnythin Jenny was dere a-bleedin."

Somebody in the crowd laughed. Jim Hawkins walked close to Dave and looked into his face.

"Well, looks like you have bought you a mule, Dave."

"Ah swear to Gawd, Ah didn't go kill the mule, Mistah Hawkins!"

"But you killed him, lookin' for the spot where he had hurty the gun. Yeah, here it is. Like a hunny dog scratchin' for a bone, he pawed it up. He puffed his black cheeks and blew dirt from the trigger and barrel. He broke it and found four cartridges unshot. He looked around; the fields were filled with silence and moonlight. He clutched the gun stiff and hard in his fingers. But, as soon as he wanted to pull the trigger, he shut his eyes and turned his head. Now, Ah can't shoot wid ma' eye closed, it mad head turned. With effick he held his eye open; then he squeaked. "Blasses!" He was still, not breathing. The gun was still in his hands. "Dare Ize, he done it! He fired again. "Blasses!" He smiled. "Blasses! Blasses! C'mon, click. There! It was empty. If anybody could shoot a gun, he could. He put the gun into his hip pocket and started across the fields.

When he reached the top of a ridge he stood straight and proud in the moonlight, looking at Jim Hawkins' big white horse, feeling the gun sagging in his pocket. Llawd, el Ah had just one mo' bullet Ah'd ake shot at his house. Ah'd like to scare ol' man Hawkins jimmie little... Juss enough t'let 'im know Dave Saunders is a man.

To his left the road curved, running to the tracks of the Illinois Central. He jerked his head, listening. From far off came a faint howf-howf-howf... howf-howf; howf-howf... howf-howf. Ah stood rigid. Two dollars a mon. Les see now... This means' it'll take bout two years. Shucks! Ah'll be dam!

He started down the road, toward the tracks. Yeah, here she comes! He stood beside the track and held himself stuffy. Here she comes, errow the ben... C mon, yuh slow poke? C mon! He had his hand on his gun; some thing quivered in his stomach. Then the train thundered past, the gray and brown box cars rumbling and clanking. He gripped the gun tightly, then he jerked his hand out of his pocket. Ah betcha Bill wouldn't do it! Ah betcha... The cars slid past, steel grinding upon steel. Ah rid'n yuh till, en he grabbed, pulled atop of a car, and lay flot. He felt his pocket: the gun was still there. Ahez long the rails were glinting in the moonlight, stretching away, away to somewhere, somewhere where he could be a man..."