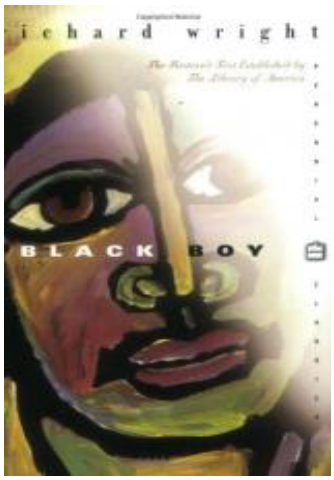
Black Boy

by Richard Wright



About the Book

Black Boy is Richard Wright's memoir of his life from early childhood to the launching of his career as a writer. His father abandoned the family soon after they moved to Memphis, leaving Wright, his mother and brother in dire straits. Schooling throughout his childhood was erratic and often interrupted; he eventually completed the ninth grade. Domestic violence, neglect and hunger plagued him throughout his youth.

Wright's first prolonged contact with white people came when he began working odd jobs to earn enough money for food. The discrimination and violence he experienced in the Jim Crow South came as a terrible shock to him. Time and again, Richard was the target of white hatred because he failed to hide his true thoughts and feelings behind a mask of servility and humility. Finally, resolved to leave the South forever, Richard scraped together enough money to move north to Chicago.

Wright vividly describes the intellectual awakening he experienced in Chicago as he immersed himself in the works of Dreiser, Mencken, Faulkner and Sherwood Anderson and began his first serious efforts at writing. **Black Boy** ends with an image of Wright sitting poised with pencil in hand, determined to "hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo." He had arrived at the threshold of his professional literary career.

Discussion Guide

1. In one of his first contacts with whites, Wright feels himself tensing up with confusion and suspicion over how to act. Discuss the various forms that tension takes in the course of **Black Boy**. Does Wright glimpse any relief from this tension?

2. Personal narratives like Zora Neale Hurston's "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," and James Baldwin's Notes of a Native Son have been among the most enduring and powerful modes of expression among African-American writers.

What is it about the African-American experience that makes so many gifted writers tell their own stories? What influence has **Black Boy** had on this genre?

3. Wright writes: "I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair." Taken out of context, this reads like a terrible damnation of the African-American soul. How does the meaning of these words change when read in the context of the book - and the context of Wright's own youth? Do you feel the book justifies this criticism of African-Americans - or is this passage a sign of Wright's self-hatred, his lack of sympathy with the essence of black culture?

4. When it was published in 1945, **Black Boy** was read primarily as an attack on the violence and oppression of the Jim Crow South; during the 1960s, critics began to focus on the sensibility of the narrator - how his experiences shaped him, how he found his voice and satisfied his yearning for expression. Which view of the novel feels most on target to you?

5. Several years before he died, Wright wrote, "I declare unabashedly that I like and even cherish the state of abandonment and aloneness...it seems the natural, inevitable condition of man, and I welcome it..." Discuss this statement in the light of Black Boy.

6. Compare the male and female characters as they are presented in Black Boy. To what extent is Richard rebelling against the powerful role of women in African-American families? Do you think Wright is a misogynist, as some critics have written? Are there any men in the book to whom Richard feels close or to whom he turns for guidance or mentoring?

Author Bio

Richard Wright won international renown for his powerful and visceral depiction of the black experience. He stands today alongside such African-American luminaries as Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison, and two of his novels, **Native Son** and **Black Boy**, are required reading in high schools and colleges across the nation. He died in 1960.

Critical Praise

"The publication of this new edition is not just an editorial innovation, it is a major event in American literary history."

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Publication Date: September 1, 1998
Paperback: 448 pages
Publisher: Harper Perennial Modern Classics
ISBN-10: 0060929782
ISBN-13: 9780060929787