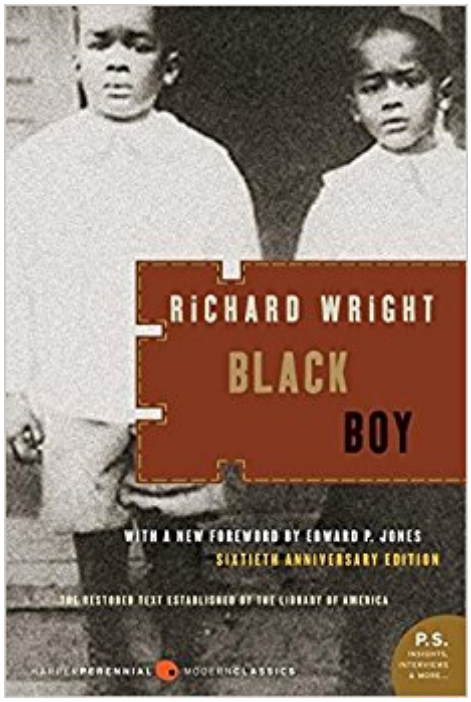
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Black Boy: A Record Of Childhood And Youth



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Synopsis

Richard Wright grew up in the woods of Mississippi amid poverty, hunger, fear, and hatred. He lied, stole, and raged at those around him; at six he was a "drunkard," hanging about in taverns. Surly, brutal, cold, suspicious, and self-pitying, he was surrounded on one side by whites who were either indifferent to him, pitying, or cruel, and on the other by blacks who resented anyone trying to rise above the common lot. Black Boy is Richard Wright’s powerful account of his journey from innocence to experience in the Jim Crow South. It is at once an unashamed confession and a profound indictmentÃ¢â ¬â •a poignant and disturbing record of social injustice and human suffering.

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Customer Reviews

"Before he was 40, Wright dominated literary America, publishing four books in seven years, each a triumph in its genre. His first novel, Native Son (1940), sold at the rate of 2,000 copies a day, making Wright the first best-selling black writer in the country’s history. Black Boy (1945), his memoir of his Southern childhood, was a bigger success, selling more than a half-million copies" * New York Times * "A compelling indictment of life in the Deep South between the wars" * Daily Telegraph * "An angry chronicle of a bright black rebel growing up in the Jim Crow southlands: a landmark in the literature of Black America" * The Times * --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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.

I've known of Richard Wright for a long time. I partially read "Native Son" sometime in my teens but I never read any of his other works. I was brought to this book via another book: "Kafir Boy in America" by Mark Mathabane. In that book he describes how Richard Wright's "Black Boy" had a profound affect upon him; hence I decided to read "Black Boy"."Black Boy" is an autobiography and I think that that is why I found it so powerful. Just to read, first person, how it was to grow up as a Black male in the South during the 10's and 20's is riveting. I know, academically and cognitively that slavery existed as did the Jim Crow era--but to read first hand accounts of the physical, mental, economical, social and psychological torment that many Blacks faced--that's another thing entirely.Richard Wright writes openly about his family life and his extra-family life in Mississippi. He faced daily abuses from both, his near-fanatically religious family as well as the Whites he had to work for. But more than the physical and verbal abuses that Richard detailed, I found myself as much bothered by the transformation he had to make whenever confronting White people. He was not allowed to be a man and therefore act like one, he was always expected to be a boy. Even the job titles were "cleaning boy", "elevator boy", or just simply "boy for..." when they were hiring adults with families. Like a method actor, he would have to transmogrify into a slumped shouldered, downcast, foot-shuffling, speech deficient "boy". He could not stand up straight like a man, or look another in the eyes, or speak like a man, or even display any emotions beyond stupid gaiety, fear, or humility.I found out quickly that Richard was not constructed for that place or that era--that's why he journeyed North. Whereas other Black folks were able to seamlessly and automatically turn on the "Black Boy" act and compartmentalize that part of their life; Richard found himself hard pressed to do so--which was a problem because his life depended upon it.I was enthralled by the book. This particular copy has the addition of his life in Chicago which used to be printed as a separate book. Part two of this published edition deals with Richard as an adult in Chicago and being a part of the Communist Party. Although not as compelling, it was an interesting read into how the Communist Party could be so appealing to Blacks at that time. This book is a real page turner and a must read for a real historical reference to a dark era in American history.

In reading Richard WrightÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s Black Boy, the autobiographical novel of the childhood

and youth of the prominent Afro-American author of the first half of the last century, I was struck by the America that was depicted. It is not the American I am so fond of, the America that prides itself in being the land of freedom, hope and opportunity for all; on the contrary, it is an America where racism, discrimination and gross injustice abound, even a century after the end of slavery. IÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ve always had some notion of how difficult it wouldÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ve been for blacks to live in a world of segregation and constant humiliation, but WrightÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s book made it all come to life in a much more disturbing way. It made me reflect on the psychological damage American society effected on ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“NegrosÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• from the day they were born: not only poverty, lack of opportunity, indecent living conditionsÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â¦ but sheer helplessness and lack of dignity. Wright makes it clear that blacks were regarded as second class citizens, who had to constantly pay homage to the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“superiorityÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• of whites. In this process of perpetual self-degrading, they ended up loosing respect for themselves, as individuals and as a race.Indeed, the most poignant passages are not so much those in which Richard is abused by whites as the ones where he is abused by ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“his ownÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•, starting with his family. The book opens with the infamous scene of four year-old Richard being beaten unconscious by his mother (for accidentally burning down the house). This is the first of a long series of beatings, in the course of the book, by his mom, his dad, his aunt, his uncles, his grandmother, his grandfather (did I miss anyone?). In WrightÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s analysis, whites had created a society that trapped blacks in their own underworld of misery, with very little possibility of escaping this stunted existence.The novel is about RichardÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s attempt to break free from this condition of servitude and humiliation. He first struggles to make his family, his black peers and his white counterparts respect him. Wright portrays himself as willful, always bent on rejecting the behaviors his family and society try to impose on him. He will not let himself be molded into the archetypical ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“black boyÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• that everyone wants him to be: he shuns religion, gratuitous deference to older people and, more importantly, subjection to whitesÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â¦ until he realizes that, in order to survive, a certain dose of hypocrisy is needed. When he starts ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“respectingÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• whites as his black friends teach him to do, he feels like he is betraying himself, his rebellious, freedom-seeking nature. The only thing that allows him to keep on pretending is his overwhelming desire to leave the South.I say ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“leaveÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• the South and not ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“go NorthÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• because his goal is a negative one ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ escape hell ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ and not the positive one you would expect from the American dream narrative, a.k.a. the pursuit of happiness.

Wright is running away from a dreadful existence, not running towards a compelling one. And sure enough, the second half of the book, about his life in Chicago, is not the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“happy endingÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• we would expect. The North is no paradise, and what Richard gains in dignity (the Yankees do treat him with more respect and less discrimination than the Rednecks) he seems to loose in serenity: life in Chicago is enticing and glamorousÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â¦ for those who can afford living it. The protagonist finds himself living a second class life, similar to that of the South, even though, formally, he is not discriminated against: it seems as though ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“class awarenessÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• has somehow merged and even trumped ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“race awarenessÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•. Wright becomes a member of the Communist party and gives his contribution to the fight against injustice, although he quickly understands that such a profound and structural problem can in no way be solved by a dogmatic and stifling ideology.As I mentioned, Black Boy is a disturbing account not only of Richard WrightÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s life, but, more importantly, of AmericaÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s recent past which, as events in Ferguson remind us, in some way continues to bleed into the present. I have enormous respect for America, and I believe in the principles on which it was founded. However, even AmericaÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s most enthusiastic proponents should never forget or downplay the tragedies it has allowed on its soil, which negate the very principles it professes to uphold. Two centuries of discrimination, mistreatment and even de-humanization have left scars on a Nation that prides itself on being the worldÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s beacon of freedom, democracy and human rights. What strikes me even more is that the events that Wright describes took place during the period Hitler was in power in Germany. In other words, World War II America ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ the America that saved Europe from nazism and fought in the name of human dignity ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ is also the America that oppressed an entire category of its own citizens with laws, norms and behaviors that were anything but civilized.Having said all this, I think Wright ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ who died in Paris in 1960 ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ would be pleased with how America has since corrected its course. The Civil Rights act and all the atonement that came with it marked a milestone in American history. I believe that for all its misdeeds, America has a redeeming feature that trumps everything else: the capacity to reflect on its actions and reverse them when they are found to be contrary to its core values. This does not in any way erase the damage done to countless generations of African-Americans, but it does show that the professed goal of building ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“a more perfect UnionÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• based on the inalienable rights of every human being actually means something, at least in the long term.

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