



RICHARD WRIGHT

BLACK

BOY

• Celebrating •

THE
CENTENNIAL
OF HIS BIRTH

Richard Wright

WITH A NEW FOREWORD BY EDWARD P. JONES

SIXTIETH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

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I



One winter morning in the long-ago, four-year-old days of my life I found myself standing before a fireplace, warming my hands over a mound of glowing coals, listening to the wind whistle past the house outside. All morning my mother had been scolding me, telling me to keep still, warning me that I must make no noise. And I was angry, fretful, and impatient. In the next room Granny lay ill and under the day and night care of a doctor and I knew that I would be punished if I did not obey. I crossed restlessly to the window and pushed back the long fluffy white curtains—which I had been forbidden to touch—and looked yearningly out into the empty street. I was dreaming of running and playing and shouting, but the vivid image of Granny’s old, white, wrinkled, grim face, framed by a halo of tumbling black hair, lying upon a huge feather pillow, made me afraid.

The house was quiet. Behind me my brother—a year younger than I—was playing placidly upon the floor with a toy. A bird wheeled past the window and I greeted it with a glad shout.

“You better hush,” my brother said.

“You shut up,” I said.

My mother stepped briskly into the room and closed the door behind her. She came to me and shook her finger in my face.

“You stop that yelling, you hear?” she whispered. “You know Granny’s sick and you better keep quiet!”

I hung my head and sulked. She left and I ached with boredom.

“I told you so,” my brother gloated.

“You shut up,” I told him again.

I wandered listlessly about the room, trying to think of something to do, dreading the return of my mother, resentful of being neglected. The room held nothing of interest except the fire and finally I stood before the shimmering embers, fascinated by the quivering coals. An idea of a new kind of game grew and took root in my mind. Why not throw something into the fire and watch it burn? I looked about. There was only my picture book and my mother would beat me if I burned that. Then what? I hunted around until I saw the broom leaning in a closet. That’s it . . . Who would bother about a few straws if I burned them? I pulled out the broom and tore out a batch of straws and tossed them into the fire and watched them smoke, turn black, blaze, and finally become white wisps of ghosts that vanished. Burning straws was a teasing kind of fun and I took more of them from the broom and cast them into the fire. My brother came to my side, his eyes drawn by the blazing straws.

“Don’t do that,” he said.

“How come?” I asked.

“You’ll burn the whole broom,” he said.

“You hush,” I said.

“I’ll tell,” he said.

“And I’ll hit you,” I said.

My idea was growing, blooming. Now I was wondering just how the long fluffy white curtains would look if I lit a bunch of straws and held it under them. Would I try it? Sure. I pulled several straws from the broom and held them to the fire until they blazed; I rushed to the window and brought the flame in touch with the hems of the curtains. My brother shook his head.

“Naw,” he said.

He spoke too late. Red circles were eating into the white cloth; then a flare of flames shot out. Startled, I backed away. The fire soared to the ceiling and I trembled with fright. Soon a sheet of

yellow lit the room. I was terrified; I wanted to scream but was afraid. I looked around for my brother; he was gone. One half of the room was now ablaze. Smoke was choking me and the fire was licking at my face, making me gasp.

I made for the kitchen; smoke was surging there too. Soon my mother would smell that smoke and see the fire and come and beat me. I had done something wrong, something which I could not hide or deny. Yes, I would run away and never come back. I ran out of the kitchen and into the back yard. Where could I go? Yes, under the house! Nobody would find me there. I crawled under the house and crept into a dark hollow of a brick chimney and balled myself into a tight knot. My mother must not find me and whip me for what I had done. Anyway, it was all an accident; I had not really intended to set the house afire. I had just wanted to see how the curtains would look when they burned. And neither did it occur to me that I was hiding under a burning house.

Presently footsteps pounded on the floor above me. Then I heard screams. Later the gongs of fire wagons and the clopping hoofs of horses came from the direction of the street. Yes, there was really a fire, a fire like the one I had seen one day burn a house down to the ground, leaving only a chimney standing black. I was stiff with terror. The thunder of sound above me shook the chimney to which I clung. The screams came louder. I saw the image of my grandmother lying helplessly upon her bed and there were yellow flames in her black hair. Was my mother afire? Would my brother burn? Perhaps everybody in the house would burn! Why had I not thought of those things before I fired the curtains? I yearned to become invisible, to stop living. The commotion above me increased and I began to cry. It seemed that I had been hiding for ages, and when the stomping and the screaming died down I felt lonely, cast forever out of life. Voices sounded near-by and I shivered.

“Richard!” my mother was calling frantically.

I saw her legs and the hem of her dress moving swiftly about the back yard. Her wails were full of an agony whose intensity told me that my punishment would be measured by its depth. Then I

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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.

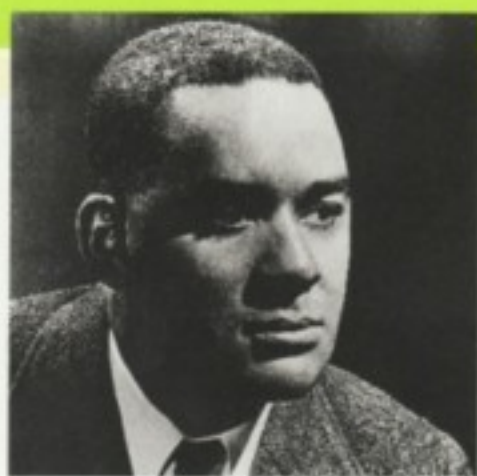
Black Boy is Richard Wright’s powerful account of his journey from innocence to experience in the Jim Crow South. It is at once an unashamed confession and a profound indictment—a poignant and disturbing record of social injustice and human suffering.

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RICHARD WRIGHT (1908–1960) is the author of *Native Son*, the first novel by an African American to be featured as a Main Selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club, *The Outsider*, *The Long Dream*, and many other works.

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