



Native Son

Richard Wright

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Right from the start, Bigger Thomas had been headed for jail. It could have been for assault or petty larceny; by chance, it was for murder and rape. *Native Son* tells the story of this young black man caught in a downward spiral after he kills a young white woman in a brief moment of panic.

Set in Chicago in the 1930s, Wright's powerful novel is an unsparing reflection on the poverty and feelings of hopelessness experienced by people in inner cities across the country and of what it means to be black in America.

Native Son Details

Date : Published August 2nd 2005 by Harper Perennial Modern Classics (first published 1940)

ISBN : 9780060837563

Author : Richard Wright

Format : Paperback 504 pages

Genre : Fiction, Classics, Cultural, African American, Historical, Historical Fiction, Literature

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Brina says

Updating my shelves. I read this in high school for a book report. Being that I'm from the Chicago suburbs originally this was one of my first exposures to life in another part of the city and I found the book to be fascinating. It would be interesting to reread it through adult eyes.

Peter says

What a powerful book. In narrative, theme, character and motifs, Wright uses his whole arsenal to show us the horrors of racism. He seems to be able to reflect back the experience of racism—how it's created and it's cycle of destruction. I've read other Black writers before, but this book is probably the one that has taken on and embodied racism more so than any other book for me.

For a novel written in 1940, the book holds up quite well. Unfortunately, while our nation has made progress, especially some legal and institutional progress, this book and the picture it paints is still quite relevant today.

The book is very accessible. Wright's prose, while rhythmic and artful, is quite straightforward and easy to read. I can't recommend this book enough, and not just as a means to understand racism from more angles, shine a light on our own behaviors, but also as a gripping literary thriller that has stood the test of time. Put it on your to-read list.

Richard says

A challenging read. The easy route for the author Richard Wright would've been to write a novel asking us to sympathize with a black man wrongfully accused of murder in a racist community. But he does not take the easy route. Instead he implores the reader to follow Bigger Thomas, a young black man who is absolutely guilty of committing a deplorable act (for reasons which he himself cannot fully explain), and forces us to look at the circumstances which might have possibly created this complex man.

Although the book isn't perfect and every now and then (especially in the last 30 pages) delves into bloated preachiness, it still is very engaging and surprisingly suspenseful. It forces you to consider how society in the 1930's created a man, for whom fear and hate were the only emotions he's ever felt, and how those emotions can lead him to murder. It challenges you to understand that although the murder is essentially accidental, Bigger knows he has done something wrong but is initially unrepentant. Because after lashing out in a situation he doesn't understand, it is the first time he feels alive, with a purpose and with the control of his own life in his hands.

A challenging and important book that pulls aside the curtain and looks dead on at the circumstances that create Bigger Thomas and at the social, class, and racial relations in our society.

“Violence is a personal necessity for the oppressed...It is not a strategy consciously devised.

It is the deep, instinctive expression of a human being denied individuality."

Fabian says

(SPOILERS!!) Reading the first two parts of "Native Son," Richard Wright's landmark novel is an absolute thrill. One part Tom Ripley, one part Graham Greene's "Brighton Rock," the antihero reigns triumphant. But this antihero lacks panache, intelligence, even, perhaps, a conscience... all the character traits of a true villain. So he's somewhere in between. The crimes committed by the much-studied, much-written-about Bigger Thomas are heinous. The character study is super taut and intense. "Fear" and "Flight" (parts 1 & 2) are absolutely perfect.

Then the bloody politics come in. The tide and tone turns radically and inexplicably. The Third and longest part of "Native Son," aptly called "Fate" seems like a purgatory teeming with bo-oh-ring soliloquies and lawyer sways. The courtroom drama I do not particularly like (think: the 600+ pages of "Bonfire of the Vanities" !), and that is why "Native Son" loses some points on its journey to reach almost-perfection. But the failure seems too great, after all's said and done. The social commentary becomes real and the magic of parts I and II disappears as everything becomes too obvious. Everything that came before, which is interesting to dissect and discuss, is pretty much eradicated by the sentimentalism that pops up at the end in this otherwise raw and unsentimental novel.

Brian says

Maybe it's the inevitable melancholy of getting older, but reading this novel for the second time, roughly 13 years after the first go, has made me tremendously sad and despairing.

I would like to think the country is so much different 70 years after its publication, but is it?

Missy J says

"Confidence could only come again now through action so violent that it would make him forget. These were the rhythms of his life: indifference and violence; periods of abstract brooding and periods of intense desire; moments of silence and moments of anger - like water ebbing and flowing from the tug of a far-away, invisible force. Being this way was a need of his as deep as eating."

4.5*

Bigger Thomas might be the most difficult character I've come across in fiction. Never have I felt so uncomfortable while reading a work of fiction. Bigger makes one bad decision after another, commits two heinous crimes, literally digs his own grave and yet, he feels like he could not act any other way. Furthermore, Bigger Thomas is inarticulate and so unaware of his own potential. It's painful to read about such a character. Without a doubt, Richard Wright achieved his goal of making the reader come face to face

with America's biggest sin. Bigger Thomas can't escape from the horrible crimes he committed, similarly the reader can't turn away from what Wright presents. In general, Wright's writing is accessible, clean and straight to the point. The author created a dozen characters who are all memorable and representative of different values (racism, capitalism, communism...). The book is divided into 3 stages - fear, flight and fate. For me, the opening scene with the rat is one of the most memorable scenes I've read (possibly because I have a super big fear of rats). Highly recommend this book.

peiman-mir5 rezakhani says

Ted says

What with a second Like of a the previous blank review (to say nothing of the pathetically non-puissant comments I've made below regarding the desire to read it again), I have become aware that I must reread this in the coming year. Must. Must. **Must!**

The only thing to prevent it is my memory of the declaration I've just made. I still have the book after all these years. Shame on me.

Actually I've now done something at home that I think will make it a high-probability read in 2018.

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Previous review: The Works of Archimedes

Random review: The Misanthrope

Next review: 2017 on Goodreads

Previous library review: Look Homeward Angel

Next library review: Without Feathers *Woody Allen*

Esteban del Mal says

I've been putting off writing a review of this for two reasons:

- 1.) I'm busy.
- 2.) I wanted to cool off a bit, not let any of that nebulous white guilt creep into my thinking.

This book has heft, both physical and otherwise. The paper stock, the binding, the subject matter --- they combine for one weighty tome. I came to terms with the material dimensions quickly. The other dimensions? Not so much. I mean, I'm an ethnic Jew, but I identify (and pass, thankfully) as your run-of-the-mill white American guy. And white guys have it pretty good (thanks, jo). Typically at the expense of others, and most notably blacks. The understanding of my natural advantages in society necessitates that there is, and ever will be, a divide between my experience in society and that of a similarly constituted African-American. I try to bridge that divide as best I can. Richard Wright has helped me.

Wright walks a fine line expertly. His protagonist, Bigger Thomas, is more sociopath than oppressed racial minority for a good one hundred sixty pages. But then the hammer drops. We overhear the words of an investigating detective:

"Well, you see 'em one way and I see 'em another. To me, a nigger's a nigger."

Welcome to circa 1940s America, where the best you can hope for if you happen to have *x*-amount of melanin in your skin is to be a barely literate chauffeur to wealth and condescension. Systematically degraded, you lash out and you kill. Is it any wonder?

Just as there is a gulf in my understanding of what it is to be black in America, there is a gulf in Bigger Thomas's understanding of what it is to be a human -- because he has never been fully recognized as one. There is a convergence in nature and nurture that sets him on the path to murder. Already predisposed to be

the neighborhood bully, the conditions in which he is raised hone those native instincts into something hard. Hard enough to suffocate a woman, chop her head off and stuff her remains into an oven. Hard enough to bludgeon another woman -- his girlfriend -- to a pulp with a brick and dump her body four floors down a ventilation shaft. Hard enough to spurn his grizzled communist defense attorney, who recognizes Bigger's murderous intransigence in the end, his courtroom elegance giving away to stammering disbelief in the face of what America has created, what it will continue to create after Bigger is executed.

Things have changed since the 40s, to be certain. In fact, I even found myself working under a black man for a day as I read this book. His job was to follow me around and gauge my efficiency. It sounds worse than it was -- I've grown accustomed to being demeaned myself, I guess. And, happy corporate cog that I am, I am exceptionally efficient, so I have nothing in the (short-term) to worry about and dutifully jump through my assigned hoop because I have a wife and a child and a mortgage and a college loan andandand.

As my shift progressed, this stranger and I inevitably started to connect on a human level and social and work barriers grew less opaque. When the time arrived for us to drive to an area infamous for its racism, I told him about it because he was from out of town. I told him how I had managed a liquor store there years ago and transferred one of my clerks, an African-American woman, because she had been threatened on the job by a skinhead. I told him about how I had had to call building maintenance to paint over assorted white power graffiti, most notably a swastika, on the company building there. I told him how I had once pulled up in front of the office at midnight and looked across the narrow, two-lane street to see a family of white trash -- father, mother, pre-pubescent boy -- huddled together on a lawn as a garden hose dangled from the father's hands, the lot of them staring at me in a scene reminiscent of American Gothic, and feeling for days afterwards how fragile the flame of civilization is. I told him how when we had an African-American co-worker, it was understood that she wasn't allowed to travel to the office alone.

When we arrived there, I did my thing and it was time for lunch. I had a momentary pang of dread as I took the book from my backpack, what with all this race bullshit ambient around the two of us. When he asked me what I was reading and I told him, he responded simply, "Good book." Things seemed a bit more somber between us after that. Not because either of us intended it, but just because it was.

Aubrey says

Have you heard the name Trayvon Martin? If you have, good. If you haven't, look him up. Open a tab, search up the name, T-R-A-Y-V-O-N etc, and read. Familiarize yourself with the exact definitions of the atrocity, the scope of the repercussions throughout the US, the up and currently running process of rectification that in a fair and just world would not be as excruciatingly slow and painful as it's turning out to be. In a fair and just world, he would not be one of countless mown down for everything but a valid reason.

This is not a fair and just world.

No, this is a world where we have those who profess to be not only good writers deserving of literary rewards, but good *teachers* of writing to boot, despite bigoting their scope of literature down to the basic principle of whom they identify with based on parameters such as gender, sexuality, and color of skin.

Do you know what that sort of mentality would leave me, reading this book? Do you know which character I was expected to perfectly align with, the one most feasible for the goal of sewing myself up in the skin and riding around in perfect harmony? The young *white* girl, so filled with highfown aspirations of social

justice, so loaded with easy income, so filthy with white privilege, who is suffocated and mutilated and burned up into a few fragments of bone and a single earring.

Tell me, then, oh wise teacher, keeper of books and innate sense of good literature, white, middle-aged, heterosexual, the banality of character, the default of personalization, the one archetype for whom nearly the whole of literature has been customized for and has never known what it means to eke out an empathetic terrain on the basis of understanding, not physicality. Even here, in this book written by a black man, you have an overwhelming majority in terms of representation, what with your Buckley, your Max, your multitudes of Klu Klux Klan and crowds and judges all in a big fat white male world. While I have a single soul, a Mary Dalton.

What the fuck am I supposed to do with her, this small, pretty, idiot girl who knows nothing of the agony she is sustained by, and thinks herself kind and generous by reaching out to those her very skin tone persecutes and compromising their existence with a single moment of stupidly inane trust? What am I supposed to do with this pompously fulfilled imbecile, this suicidally naïve prat who innocently frames her words out of what she perceives as an intention of kindness, treating the other as an animal when she notices their plight and accessory ensuring her comfortable existence when she returns to her natural state of self-righteous ignorance?

For you know, teacher, in spite of all that deficiencies on her part, there is a case to be made when it comes to the casual abuse and even more casual conformation of mind and soul of countless women in the history of both reality and literature. Saintly virgin, blighted whore, girlfriend in a refrigerator, all objects used with unconscious persistence of augmenting the male reality, the male realization, the male point of view. You may not know, teacher, with your blatant refusal to even consider reading literature on the other side of the curtain of your all too male sensibilities, but that is not how woman are. That is not how *I* am, and as such it would be all too easy to resonate with Bessie and Mary above all others, young women there and gone in a swift spending of their use in the pursuit of a story of a young and violent man.

Tell me, in light of that, should I hate Bigger Thomas? Should I spit on him and his indomitable pride of living, one that will not be blinded to the misery of him and his people no matter how much they beg and plead? Should I ignore his anger, his shame, his fearful panic in the face of living cut and dried at every second, every year, every century that his ancestors were first wrenched away from their homeland and have suffered in inhuman bondage ever since? Should I withhold my empathy for someone who looks the reality of his existence in the face, dredging out his life in a country that rapes him into a corner and sees that as the way it ought to be? Should I refuse to recognize the effects of a neverending amputation of the self's expression onto the wider plane of life and living, the horrible consequences that can and will result so long as oppression stamps its broken and bloody way across ethics and humanity?

Should I close my ears to the integrity of Max, the manipulation of Buckley, not chase the slightest bit of critical analysis of the two and their diatribes, all because I cannot relate in terms of simple physicality? Above all, should I have not even embarked on this book written by Richard Wright, because somehow I 'knew' that I wouldn't relate because of the differences the author and I have in terms of skin and gender?

Tell me, teacher, although it's unlikely you would ever deserve the title no matter how much writing you did. Would you have me stuff myself into a box that will cradle me with familiar blindness forevermore? Would you have me tie myself down to the identity of someone like poor Mary Dalton, the little fool, and rightfully suffer for it? For I will never know what it means on a visceral level to be black, male, and in the United States, pushed past the farthest boundaries of humanity by centuries of systematic oppression of an entire people into a barren void where right and wrong squeak along with the voices of ghosts. But I do know how

to read, as well as listen. I do know how to write, as well as think. I do know, in the fundamental ache of myself, what it means to be a human being.

Do you know that last one, teacher? I doubt it.

Keertana says

Even after thinking about this book for days, I still don't know what to write. I think we've all learned about 1930s/1940s black America, but none of us have truly experienced it. We sympathize with the black people, we cheer on stories of people such as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr., and we are grateful that our world is not the same way today. Yet, how many of us have truly had to put ourselves in the shoes of those people? How many of us have really known what it's like to be treated as if you're not even human, to be denied your basic rights at freedom, and to be stripped of all your free will? In Native Son, Richard Wright takes you into the mind of one black man, Bigger Thomas. Yet, Bigger stands for something bigger; he represents all of black America. So truly, Wright isn't just taking you into Bigger's mind, he's taking you into the heart of racial crisis.

Bigger has been recognized in life as a troubled boy, one who lashes out. He has been raised in a small apartment that isn't fit to hold two people, let alone four. His education is scarce and limited, his fear overwhelms him, and he constantly feels as if white people control his every move, his every action, his every thought. Thus, these feelings and instincts have bubbled over to such an extent where he lashes out. He accidentally smothers a white woman, chops off her head and throws her body in a furnace to burn. He takes a brick and hits his girlfriend with it, throwing her down an air shaft to freeze to death – all after he has raped her. He blames his actions on a Communist, one of the few people helping him – the same Communist who ultimately finds him a lawyer. Max, the lawyer who sees Bigger as an equal and exposes in a biased courtroom not what Bigger has done, but what America and society has created and will unfortunately continue to create, long after Bigger's untimely demise.

In the writing of Native Son, Wright walks a fine line. Bigger, despite being the main character of the novel is so hard to feel any sympathy for. Wright has created a character who is black, who is oppressed, who is quite literally a victim of the society in which he lives, yet Bigger acts like a sociopath with animalistic instincts and no regret for the inhumane acts he commits. However, Wright takes this view of Bigger, this interpretation of him, and turns it into something different: understanding. In a world where you can only hope and pray to have skin that is lighter than what you already have, in which you can only stand and dream about flying planes because of your skin color, who wouldn't lash out and kill? Who wouldn't seize that first glimpse of power and authority when they find it? Wright describes the ongoing power struggles within this novel, mixed with the rising fear so perfectly, that you cannot help but be in awe of his skill. Although most readers will find Bigger to be a sociopath or cruel and unyielding at first, reading on we can see that he is truly a man being treated just like a caged animal.

In so many ways Native Son is such a difficult book to read. It took me nearly a month to finish it because of the time I took reading each chapter and more importantly, the reflection it caused me to have. I've tried and found it impossible to find any situation in our present-day life that is similar to that of Bigger. I've never felt the way he does, I've never been treated the way he has since I've always been seen as a human. I'm not white, so in that aspect I never felt guilt of my skin color while reading this story, because truly, being white means you have it all. However, I did feel an immense amount of sympathy towards Bigger and I still can't quite wrap my mind around what it must feel like to never have been treated as a human, as an equal to all

other people in the world. It breaks my heart.

Wright once said that, "I must write this novel, not only for others to read, but to free myself of this scene of shame and fear.' In fact, the novel, as time passed, grew upon me to the extent that I became a necessity to write it; the writing of it turned into a way of living for me." In many ways, the reading of this novel too became a necessity. It became something I had to do, I felt obliged to do. I felt as if I owed it to Bigger, to history, and to the suffering black people of the past and present to read and understand Bigger's story. I cannot recommend this book enough, but just know that once you pick it up, you won't be able to look at the world the same way again.

Ryan Lawson says

Richard Wright's Native Son is without a shadow of a doubt one of the most powerful books that I have read, ever. This nightmarish story packs such an overwhelming amount of emotion and controversy that it is hard to pull away from much like the sight of a gruesome car crash on an interstate, you don't want to look but you must look. If you're looking for a competent, confident example of verisimilitude in literature then you need not look further.

Upon reading this piece, I wondered the entire time, "How had I not been exposed to this book or Richard Wright?" And, it still escapes me how this masterpiece is not at the forefront (if not, the very front) of not only American Literature but more specifically African-American Literature. I've yet to read a piece that surpasses the violent honesty of this book; and, perhaps, that is why it is not as much a part of the American-Literature Subconscious Canon. Wright's work isn't as tame as the weary Hughes and he manages to surpass the shocking tact of James Baldwin.

Bigger Thomas is a murderous and rapacious young man who through his horrendous acts of rape, theft, and violence somehow manages to elicit an amount of sympathy. Wright is able to portray him in such a light that makes the reader understand fully that Bigger is committing unconscionable crimes yet no matter how atrocious the crimes are not unforgivable.

There were times I felt guilty for rooting for Bigger Thomas, but that is the mastery in Wright's writing! Bigger is such an uncanny character that it is next to impossible to not feel sympathy for him.

"Why?" I kept asking myself. "Why do I not want this man's head on a plate?"

It's as if Bigger is in a nightmare but is unable to wake up. If you've ever been in a situation so bad, so unbearable that you actually wished it to be a terrible dream then you will understand Bigger. You'll beg for him to stop committing these crimes instead of demanding him to be caught and killed.

The mob mentality in this book is frightening and dark, darker than Bigger Thomas himself. To think that some of Bigger's case was based on an actual trial of a man named Robert Nixon is almost unbelievable. The hate is so gigantic within the mob.

As a reader, you really get to see how minorities (blacks), laborers (unions), and people with differing social opinions (socialist & communists) have been and, sometimes, still are persecuted by mass mentality... The tragedy is that the mass mentality is controlled by an elite few. This book offers a dramatic understanding of

how those in power maintain a steady hand on their subordinates and pit each subordinate against one another so they do not focus on the real monsters, the employers! It bears witness to the class-struggle of the times and the class-struggles that are still occurring today.

Bless this book. It's a good one.

Rowena says

“These were the rhythms of his life: indifference and violence; periods of abstract brooding and periods of intense desire; moments of silence and moments of anger—like water ebbing and flowing from the tug of a far-away invisible force. Being this way was a need of his as deep as eating. He was like a strange plant blooming in the day and wilting at night; but the sun that made it bloom and the cold darkness that made it wilt were never seen. It was his own sun and darkness, a private and personal sun and darkness.” Richard Wright, Native Son

This story is still heavily on my mind. I think if I'd read it earlier, I would have reacted to it differently. There is so much going on it has been hard for me to write a coherent review but I feel compelled to write down some of my thoughts, regardless of how disjointed they may be.

The story starts off with a poor black family trying to kill a rat in their apartment, it reeks of poverty from the start and quickly materializes into showing us the dark side of racist American society. It introduces us to our protagonist, Bigger Thomas, who I'd heard of even before I read this book; I knew that he had accidentally killed a white girl, and then killed a black girl to cover his crime. I'd even read James Baldwin's literary criticism of this book, but there was more to this story than that. Had I known, I wouldn't have stayed away from this novel for this long.

The mind-numbing lives black people had to live was clearly illustrated from the start. The drugs, alcohol, women, pool playing, cheap movies, religion....all were seen as ways to not think about what was going on around them. As Bigger said, **“He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair.”**

My feelings about the book were in part influenced by the current civil rights movement in the States. If that hadn't been going on, the book would still have been horrific, but with it, it was even more visceral. It would have been more satisfying to have finished reading the book and said, "Thank God all that crazy racism stuff is over," but watch the news on any given day and you know it's alive and well.

I was fascinated by how the whites and blacks interacted. In the book, we have a rich white family, the Dalton's, who are actually the good guys but even they had a problematic way of looking at, and dealing with, the blacks they purported to be helping. They made them appear so simplistic, almost like children. On the other hand, Mary, the daughter, did not really understand that her being overly friendly to Bigger, or inviting him to eat with her, was actually making him uncomfortable and could cause serious repercussions for him. In her privileged position she failed to have much empathy or understanding for Bigger. I saw Mary and her boyfriend Jan as behaving like old-school anthropologists, going to observe blacks "in their natural habitat", as it were. Their actions were very voyeuristic and I could understand Bigger's rage at their

behaviour. The psychological aspects of race and poverty is not something they understood, coming from privileged backgrounds. There was the lack of privacy the poor had, the fact that their lives were so clearly on display and that they had little to no control over their lives that made Jan and Mary's actions particularly degrading.

To be honest, this book scared me. It scared me because it showed that you can have groups of people living in close proximity, yet not knowing anything about each other, instead holding on to an alien image of the other:

“To Bigger and his kind white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead, or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one’s feet in the dark. As long as he and his black folks did not go beyond certain limits, there was no need to fear that white force. But whether they feared it or not, each and every day of their lives they lived with it; even when words did not sound its name, they acknowledged its reality. As long as they lived here in this prescribed corner of the city, they paid mute tribute to it.”

It scared me because people are treated according to their race, and like it or not, recent events have shown this. It scared me that the coloured body can be exploited, even in death.

Poor Bessie, she said: **“I just work! I ain’t had no happiness, no nothing. I just work. I’m black and I work and don’t bother nobody...”** Probably the cry of so many at the time. And to make matters even worse, in death her body is exploited. What made her death even sadder and more tragic was this:

“Though he had killed a black girl and a white girl, he knew that it would be for the death of the white girl that he would be punished. The black girl was merely “evidence.”

The media whipping people into a frenzy, not just with race but with Islamophobia, is happening now, just as it happened back then:

“Several hundred Negroes resembling Bigger Thomas were rounded up...” Like the panelist at a Black History Month event I attended this week said, regarding his having been stopped by the Vancouver police who said he fitted a description of a black man wanted for robbery, “You mean a black man between 5’ 2” and 7’ 3?”

This book showed me the impact of racism in an even more profound way than in other books I've read. I don't think I will ever forget it.

Clif Hostetler says

As a reader going through the book, I was aghast at the brutal descriptions of murder and coverup contained within the first two-thirds of the book. I don't normally read this sort of stuff. Nevertheless, I recognize the book as a realistic depiction of the ravaged world of urban African Americans of the 1930s (published 1940) with repercussions remaining today.

The story is told with the highly charged consciousness of an uneducated and embittered black man who has been radically cut off from the mainstream of American life. It's a view of the ghetto from the standpoint of

one of its victims. Feelings of anger and hate are described with visceral realism. It attacks the old taboo of mentioning the relationships between sex, race, and violence.

Then in the final third of the book the intermingling of the powers and promises of religion, capitalism, racism, and communism is explored with explicit thoroughness. The summary arguments of the defense counsel at the trial near the book's end is long and passionate in which the argument is made that the violent criminal acts of this defendant are products of our unfairly segregated society which predictably has led to anger and resentment. The countering summary arguments by the prosecution are equally passionate maintaining the position of the blind justice in a nation of laws. (view spoiler)

There are two conversations between Bigger Thomas, the book's protagonist, and his defense attorney in which Bigger discovers for the first time a glimpse of what perhaps may be purpose and meaning in life. Ironically, this life changing experience occurs shortly before his life is to be ended by execution.

The first conversation occurs before the trial when the attorney asks Bigger, "Tell me about yourself." The subsequent recounting of his life's dreams and disappointments creates feelings that are new and have not previously been experienced by Bigger.

After the trial is over there is a second conversation between the two in which Bigger strives to revisit these new feelings and insights. There's something about these conversations I find particularly poignant, but it's difficult to explain why.

Could the tragedy of this story have been avoided if these sorts of conversations have occurred earlier? Or is it the message of this book that these conversations cannot take place when needed because of society's structural flaws?

Considering the year that this book was published in 1940, the ideas explored in this book were particularly prophetic in light of the civil rights movement that appeared in the second half of the twentieth century.

Nathan Paul says

While I realize some of the things that Wright is trying to say in this book, I could not bring myself to enjoy it at all. One of the main reasons was because I simply detested the main character, Bigger Thomas. The reason I disliked him so much was not because he is amoral; no, there are characters in books I like who are quite evil. The reason I disliked him is because he did things that were completely pointless and he was also not a very deep or interesting character. This book also dragged on far too long (in my opinion), and never gave the reader much reason to sympathize with the main character. Main characters do not have to be "good guys", of course, but they should at least be interesting! There was nothing about Bigger that made me curious to know why he became the type of person he was. Of course, this book does have a good message (in some ways) about how racism can damage people both directly and indirectly. However, I think Wright should have created a more complex protagonist that the readers could have at least understood in some way.

LATOYA JOVENA says

The suspense made my heart race even though I knew what was going to happen. I found myself holding my

breath and clenching my fist; the description about how Bigger was feeling was so vivid. The subject matter was a lot to swallow but I see why this novel is a classic; the description of racism was enough to change the world.

Thomas says

A powerful book about a young black man named Bigger Thomas who kills a white woman out of fear for his own life. Richard Wright takes us to Chicago in the 1930s, where Bigger just obtained a new job working as a chauffeur under the wealthy Dalton family. Mary Dalton, the family's luxurious daughter, and Jan, her communist boyfriend, treat Bigger well - a suspicious feat because Bigger has suffered tragedy all his life. That night ends in tragedy when Bigger kills Mary in a claustrophobic space, leading to a violent cycle he cannot escape.

Wright does a fantastic job of showing many things: the political, economic, and interpersonal disadvantages faced by blacks, the way society will capitalize on dis-empowering the underprivileged, and the possible reclamation of self-governance that blacks can assert with effort and time. However, I most appreciated his commitment to revealing the inner workings of Bigger's brain. He captures the psychological repercussions of racism and how prejudice contributes to Bigger's actions. Wright does not render Bigger likeable; rather, he uses Bigger's character as an exploration of externalized and internalized racism. The depth in which Wright writes Bigger's inner world reveals the fraught complexities inherent within an oppressed person's psyche.

Overall, another great read in my Social Protest Lit course, and recommended to those interested in the psychology and sociology of race relations. I wrote a seven-page-paper on *Native Son*, so it has a ton of quality material, even though some of that material may make you squirm - or shake - in fury and/or disgust.

Ben Siems says

My older brother Larry, who is extremely well-read, recently came to town for a visit. He had with him a copy of *Native Son*. I asked what prompted him to re-read it. He explained that he had actually never read it before, which he confessed was really odd, given that the book is an undisputed classic.

Well, here is Larry's two-word review of the book:
Holy shit.

I concur.

Those who have studied the Harlem Renaissance know that Richard Wright was a passionate, angry man, the writer about whom other African American writers of his era would say, "Well, I'd never write THAT, but I'm glad someone did." *Native Son* is a brutally frank look at the racial divide of the America of the 1940s, and the relevance to today is positively painful.

There have been many profound and moving stories, both true and fictionalized, of young black men wrongfully accused of crimes. This book dares to tell the story of a young black man who, in a moment of

panic, commits a horrible act. That makes the way the man is treated thereafter so incredibly present and real. You can't read this story from a distance. You're in it, you feel it so palpably.

I think *Native Son* is one of the most powerful and important American books ever written.

David says

Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of *Native Son*, is a shiftless, bullying, vulgar young man who begins the book tormenting his poor mother, goes to a billiards club to plan a robbery with his equally ne'er-do-well friends, then he and one of his friends goes to a movie theater to masturbate in the seats.

He ends the book accused of the capital rape and murder of a white girl, whom he did murder (but did not in fact rape), but by his own words to his lawyer, makes clear that raping her was something he *might* have done, if the circumstances had been only slightly different.

In other words, Bigger Thomas is the Big Scary Negro personified, a nightmare manifestation of white America's racial fears. And that was Richard Wright's point. He wasn't trying to make Bigger Thomas sympathetic as an individual. He was, as he explains in my edition's afterword ("How 'Bigger' was Born") trying to show how American society creates Biggers.

Written in 1940, *Native Son* describes a pre-Civil Rights Act America in which segregation was still the law of the land and political correctness had not yet banished "boy" and "nigger" from polite discourse. So on the surface one might think that *Native Son* is nearly as dated as, say, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

But Wright (the grandson of slaves) was not addressing anything as simple as segregation or racial epithets. In the interior monologues of his protagonist, he spells out the alienation and hostility of men like Bigger, and comparisons with today's society, with a prison-industrial complex that exists largely to incarcerate black men, are hard to avoid.

Richard Wright was apparently a novelist of the naturalist school, and his writing has been criticized for its lack of imagery or style and a tendency towards polemicist. There are a lot of monologues and speeches in *Native Son*, particularly in the closing arguments of Bigger's trial, which take up most of the second half of the book. Bigger's defense attorney, Max, a Jewish communist (as the prosecutor points out repeatedly), eloquently and at length, essentially presents a "society made him do it" argument.

"Let me, Your Honor, explain further the meaning of Bigger Thomas' life. In him and men like him is what was in our forefathers when they first came to these strange shores hundreds of years ago. We were lucky. They are not. We found a land whose tasks called forth the deepest and best we had; and we built a nation, mighty and feared. We poured and are still pouring our soul into it. But we have told them: 'This is a white man's country!' They are yet looking for a land whose tasks can call forth their deepest and best."

To which the prosecutor responds with a brief, vitriolic "protect your daughters from scary niggers" speech.

"Every white man in America ought to swoon with joy for the opportunity to crush with his heel the woolly head of this black lizard, to keep him from scuttling on his belly farther over the earth and spitting forth his venom of death!"

There can be little doubt who's going to win over the jury.

Despite its thickness and its soapboxing, I did not find *Native Son* at all boring, and it was powerful because when Wright describes Bigger's alternating feelings of shame, alienation, reflexive hostility, crushed capacity to dream, and inability to express any of this even to the most helpful of white men, it all rang plausibly to me. Bigger Thomas' murder of Mary Dalton is a horrible tragedy. She was innocent, he is guilty, and yet even the situation that led to her death is a multilayered disaster of racial fear and guilt and misunderstanding.

I had not previously read any of the works of Richard Wright, one of the most prominent African-American writers of the 20th century. His biography is interesting to say the least, as he mingled with a Who's Who of the early 20th century cultural scene - W.E.B. Dubois, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Gertrude Stein, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, Langston Hughes, John Houseman, Orson Welles, Frederic Werthham, etc. He was a member of the Communist Party, but became disenchanted and broke with them not long after *Native Son* was published.

I don't know if this is the definitive book about the Black Experience. Apparently many of Wright's critics think he did a rough cut of ground covered better by Ralph Ellison and others, and the communist influences are, while not completely intrusive, noticeable. *Native Son* reminded me most strongly of the social novels of Upton Sinclair, who likewise could tell a good story even while being completely unsubtle about his cause. But whereas Sinclair was a muckraker and a rabble-rouser, Wright, I think, saw himself as trying to sound an alarm bell. An alarm bell that still may not have been heard.

Samadrita says

One has got to appreciate the diplomatic mincing of words that graces the GR blurb.

"Set in Chicago in the 1930s, Wright's powerful novel is an unsparing reflection on the poverty and feelings of hopelessness experienced by people in inner cities across the country and of what it means to be black in America."

A distinctly innocuous 'what it means to be black in America' is a nice little euphemism for 'institutionalized racism' or terminology like 'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy' which are too confrontational, too accusatory, too ominous sounding. That America continues to practice a similar form of conscious prevarication to avoid facing the true sordidness of its race problem is in some small way responsible for this book's enduring relevance. America is still bowed under the weight of its real Bigger Thomas-es and their collective existential agony, otherwise Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and Eric Garner would, perhaps, still be alive.

What the book blurb avoids spelling out is that to be black in America is to follow a trajectory of limited self improvement or slow and gradual decline carved out for one by malevolent, mysterious forces way beyond one's control. To be deprived of an agency, to have one's freedom of movement, thought, and speech so

severely restricted that the only way for a working class black man to make his presence felt in the world is by (accidentally) killing a rich white girl, one whose coveted sexuality and beauty are treated as valuable objects in the ownership of the white supremacist capitalist patriarch.

Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knothole in the fence... .

Bigger Thomas embraces an absurd world and finds meaning in an otherwise futile existence only by committing accidental murder and finding a sense of accomplishment in that act but unlike Camus's Meursault the source of his private angst and indifference in the face of persecution is situated within a realm in which Jim Crow laws reign supreme.

It was the first full act of his life; it was the most meaningful, exciting and stirring thing that had ever happened to him. He accepted it because it made him free, gave him the possibility of choice, of action, the opportunity to act and to feel that his actions carried weight.

No other work has brought back memories of 'The Wire' (which has got to be the best thing ever made for television viewing) as acutely as 'Native Son' and Ta-Nehisi Coates' powerful diatribe against the systematic destruction of 'black bodies' in contemporary America (Between the World and Me) because both books and tv show explicate the heart-breaking consequences of social injustice in its many macabre avatars and the trickle-down effect of public policy aimed at preserving the noxious but brittle status quo. And yet the discerning will not fail to notice that I have rated this work 4 stars despite my limitless love for The Wire. This is majorly owing to the fact that Wright, much like Camus in The Stranger, seeks to rationalize a crime(s) simply to propound a philosophy. The murdered women, especially Bessie Mears, are relegated to the status of lifeless plot devices whose purpose is merely to flesh out Bigger's fear of and anger at a world in which he is perpetually treated as a pariah. Silly white entitled ignorant Mary Dalton is as much objectified by Bigger and his friends as by the self-righteously outraged white community which treats her murder as an event of communal humiliation. Her personhood, life, socialist inclinations, and opinions are eventually subsumed by the color of her skin and its implied political symbolism. That Bessie, as a black woman, is a doubly marginalized victim who suffers a two-pronged form of oppression perpetrated both by an essentially racist social order and black men who find an amoral form of self expression through inflicting some kind of violence on the vulnerable is also never acknowledged by the narrative.

Not that I question Richard Wright's right to place black masculinity in the foreground of his novel, but he achieves his narrative aim at the expense of overlooking the gravity of the hardships and everyday violence that black women endure. Camus displays a similar thoughtlessness while portraying the accidental murder of a nameless 'Arab' simply so that Meursault could have an epiphany and make peace with his *absurd* life and imminent execution. Either scenario does not sit well with me. After all, it is usually the women and people of color who are robbed of even the minimal glory of true victimhood in literature.
