



# NATIVE SON

BY  
RICHARD WRIGHT

*Even today is my complaint rebellious,  
My stroke is heavier than my groaning.*

JOB

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TO

*My Mother*

*who, when I was a child at her knee, taught  
me to revere the fanciful and the imaginative.*

## RICHARD WRIGHT

(1908- )

### A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR OF *NATIVE SON*

Born on a plantation in Mississippi, Richard Wright is the son of a mill worker and a country school teacher. He received his early education wherever he could find it while his family moved from place to place in search of a living. At fifteen he left home and began a pilgrimage on the road that took him to every part of the country. He earned a meager subsistence by whatever job offered itself, from ditch-digging to clerking in a post-office. Wherever he happened to be, he managed to find books, and he read them avidly. In New York he became head of the Harlem Branch of a metropolitan newspaper and began his first book, *Uncle Tom's Children*. It was awarded first prize in a national contest sponsored by *Story Magazine*. Even before *Native Son* had achieved critical acclaim and best-sellerdom, a Guggenheim Fellowship was given to Wright on the submission of his manuscript. *Twelve Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States*, with text by Richard Wright and pictures by Edwin Rosskam, appeared in November, 1941.

## INTRODUCTION

**H**ow to produce neuroses in sheep and psychopathic upsets in rats and other animals has been known to research psychologists for so long that accounts of these experiments have filtered out to us, the general public, through books and periodicals. The process seems to be a simple one: the animal is trained to react in certain ways to certain stimuli, and then is placed in a situation in which these reactions are impossible. After making a number of attempts to go on reacting as he has been trained to, each attempt blocked, the frustration produces a nervous breakdown. His actions become abnormal, quite different from what is natural to him in health. The sheep, by definition gregarious, becomes solitary and morose, he will neither mingle with his fellows nor eat nor drink as he usually does, nor react in a normal manner to any stimuli, even the simplest and most familiar. The rat continues madly to dash his head against the locked door until, bruised and bleeding, he has battered himself to exhaustion, almost to death.

The National Youth Commission, of which Mr. Owen D. Young is Chairman, includes, among its projects for research into the condition of American youth, an investigation as to what is offered Negro youth by the U. S. A. The first statement made in a report recently sent in to the Commission by the specialists assigned to this field, reads:

"The four area research studies just completed by the staff of the American Youth Commission concerned with an analysis of the minority status of Negro youth present conclusive evidence that large percentages of Negro youth by virtue of their combined handicap of racial barriers and low social position subtly reflect in their own personality-traits minor or major distortions or deficiencies which compound their problem of personality adjustment in American society. More specifically, the research studies have revealed: That being a Negro in most

cases, not only means living in the presence of severe physical limitations, but, more important for personality development, also means living in an intimate culture *whose incentives, rewards, and punishments prevent the development of that type of personal standards, attitudes, and habits which the general community deems desirable.*"

In other words, our American society creates around all youth (as every society does) a continual pressure of suggestion to try to live up to the accepted ideals of the country—such ordinary, traditional, taken-for-granted American ideals as to fight injustice fearlessly; to cringe to no man; to choose one's own life work; to resist with stout-hearted self-respect affronts to decent human dignity, whether one's own or others'; to drive ahead toward honestly earned success, all sails spread to the old American wind blowing from the Declaration of Independence. But our society puts Negro youth in the situation of the animal in the psychological laboratory in which a neurosis is to be caused, by making it impossible for him to try to live up to those never-to-be-questioned national ideals, as other young Americans do.

*Native Son* is the first report in fiction we have had from those who succumb to these distracting cross-currents of contradictory nerve-impulses, from those whose behavior-patterns give evidence of the same bewildered, senseless tangle of abnormal nerve-reactions studied in animals by psychologists in laboratory experiments.

It is not surprising that this novel plumbs blacker depths of human experience than American literature has yet had, comparable only to Dostoevski's revelation of human misery in wrong-doing.

I do not at all mean to imply that *Native Son* as literature is comparable to the masterpieces of Dostoevski (although I think there is no one single effect in Dostoevski finer than the last page of *Native Son* in which—just before he dies, not having yet lived—the stultified Negro boy is born at last into humanity and makes his first simple, normal human response to a fellow-man.) What I mean to say is only that the author of this book, as has no other American writer, wrestles with utter sincerity with the Dostoevski subject—a human soul in hell because it is sick with a deadly spiritual sickness.

This is really all I have to say about this absorbing story of

a "bad Negro," except to warn away from it, urgently, those who do not like to read books which harrow them up. It can be guaranteed to harrow up any human heart capable of compassion or honest self-questioning.

Yet, perhaps, it would be well to add two more short comments. One is to remind the reader that Bigger's mother and sister, although subjected to exactly the same psychological cross-currents as he, are not bad but good—the hymn-singing, submissive, all-enduring, religious, affront-swallowing yes-massa-ing Negroes, so heartily approved by white people looking for cheap help "to do their work for them." They are, as much as Bigger, in accordance with the experiments in psychological laboratories. For not all sheep fall into bewildered nervous breakdowns, not all rats become psychotic. Some—are they the ones which are placid? or insensitive?—simply take what comes to them, without losing their normal appetite for living. There is no sounder stroke of realism in *Native Son* than the portrait of Bigger's sweetnatured, infinitely patient, unrebelling doormat of a mother.

The other point I would like to make is that the author shows genuine literary skill in the construction of his novel in giving so few pages to show us in concrete detail the exact ways in which American society constantly stimulates the powerful full-blooded human organism to action, which is as constantly forbidden to him by our mores.

Mr. Wright does not prove to us, in one realistic incident after another, taken from the childhood and youth of his hero, that the outlets to native power which would have been open to any white boy were closed to Bigger. He knows he does not need to prove this. With a bold stroke of literary divination, he assumes that every one of his American readers will know all that without being told. And he is right. We do.

DOROTHY CANFIELD FISHER

Arlington, Vermont  
January 1940

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*BOOK ONE*

**FEAR**





room. They forgot their conspiracy against shame and their eyes strayed apprehensively over the floor.

"There he is again, Bigger!" the woman screamed, and the tiny, one-room apartment galvanized into violent action. A chair toppled as the woman, half-dressed and in her stocking feet, scrambled breathlessly upon the bed. Her two sons, bare-foot, stood tense and motionless, their eyes searching anxiously under the bed and chairs. The girl ran into a corner, half-stooped and gathered the hem of her slip into both of her hands and held it tightly over her knees.

"Oh! Oh!" she wailed.

"There he goes!"

The woman pointed a shaking finger. Her eyes were round with fascinated horror.

"Where?"

"I don't see 'im!"

"Bigger, he's behind the trunk!" the girl whimpered.

"Vera!" the woman screamed. "Get up here on the bed! Don't let that thing *bite* you!"

Frantically, Vera climbed upon the bed and the woman caught hold of her. With their arms entwined about each other, the black mother and the brown daughter gazed open-mouthed at the trunk in the corner.

Bigger looked round the room wildly, then darted to a curtain and swept it aside and grabbed two heavy iron skillets from a wall above a gas stove. He whirled and called softly to his brother, his eyes glued to the trunk.

"Buddy!"

"Yeah?"

"Here; take this skillet."

"O.K."

"Now, get over by the door!"

"O.K."

Buddy crouched by the door and held the iron skillet by its handle, his arm flexed and poised. Save for the quick, deep breathing of the four people, the room was quiet. Bigger crept on tiptoe toward the trunk with the skillet clutched stiffly in his hand, his eyes dancing and watching every inch of the wooden floor in front of him. He paused and, without moving an eye or muscle, called:

"Buddy!"

"Hunh?"

"Put that box in front of the hole so he can't get out!"

"O.K."

Buddy ran to a wooden box and shoved it quickly in front of a gaping hole in the molding and then backed again to the door, holding the skillet ready. Bigger eased to the trunk and peered behind it cautiously. He saw nothing. Carefully, he stuck out his bare foot and pushed the trunk a few inches.

"There he is!" the mother screamed again.

A huge black rat squealed and leaped at Bigger's trouser-leg and snagged it in his teeth, hanging on.

"Goddamn!" Bigger whispered fiercely, whirling and kicking out his leg with all the strength of his body. The force of his movement shook the rat loose and it sailed through the air and struck a wall. Instantly, it rolled over and leaped again. Bigger dodged and the rat landed against a table leg. With clenched teeth, Bigger held the skillet; he was afraid to hurl it, fearing that he might miss. The rat squeaked and turned and ran in a narrow circle, looking for a place to hide; it leaped again past Bigger and scurried on dry rasping feet to one side of the box and then to the other, searching for the hole. Then it turned and reared upon its hind legs.

"Hit 'im, Bigger!" Buddy shouted.

"Kill 'im!" the woman screamed.

The rat's belly pulsed with fear. Bigger advanced a step and the rat emitted a long thin song of defiance, its black beady eyes glittering, its tiny forefeet pawing the air restlessly. Bigger swung the skillet; it skidded over the floor, missing the rat, and clattered to a stop against a wall.

"Goddamn!"

The rat leaped. Bigger sprang to one side. The rat stopped under a chair and let out a furious scream. Bigger moved slowly backward toward the door.

"Gimme that skillet, Buddy," he asked quietly, not taking his eyes from the rat.

Buddy extended his hand. Bigger caught the skillet and lifted it high in the air. The rat scuttled across the floor and stopped again at the box and searched quickly for the hole; then it reared once more and bared long yellow fangs, piping shrilly, belly quivering.

Bigger aimed and let the skillet fly with a heavy grunt. There

was a shattering of wood as the box caved in. The woman screamed and hid her face in her hands. Bigger tiptoed forward and peered.

"I got 'im," he muttered, his clenched teeth bared in a smile. "By God, I got 'im."

He kicked the splintered box out of the way and the flat black body of the rat lay exposed, its two long yellow tusks showing distinctly. Bigger took a shoe and pounded the rat's head, crushing it, cursing hysterically:

"You sonofabitch!"

The woman on the bed sank to her knees and buried her face in the quilts and sobbed:

"Lord, Lord, have mercy. . . ."

"Aw, Mama," Vera whimpered, bending to her. "Don't cry. It's dead now."

The two brothers stood over the dead rat and spoke in tones of awed admiration.

"Gee, but he's a big bastard."

"That sonofabitch could cut your throat."

"He's over a foot long."

"How in hell do they get so big?"

"Eating garbage and anything else they can get."

"Look, Bigger, there's a three-inch rip in your pant-leg."

"Yeah; he was after me, all right."

"Please, Bigger, take 'im out," Vera begged.

"Aw, don't be so scary," Buddy said.

The woman on the bed continued to sob. Bigger took a piece of newspaper and gingerly lifted the rat by its tail and held it out at arm's length.

"Bigger, take 'im out," Vera begged again.

Bigger laughed and approached the bed with the dangling rat, swinging it to and fro like a pendulum, enjoying his sister's fear.

"Bigger!" Vera gasped convulsively; she screamed and swayed and closed her eyes and fell headlong across her mother and rolled limply from the bed to the floor.

"Bigger, for God's sake!" the mother sobbed, rising and bending over Vera. "Don't do that! Throw that rat out!"

He laid the rat down and started to dress.

"Bigger, help me lift Vera to the bed," the mother said.

He paused and turned round.

"What's the matter?" he asked, feigning ignorance.

"Do what I asked you, will you, boy?"

He went to the bed and helped his mother lift Vera. Vera's eyes were closed. He turned away and finished dressing. He wrapped the rat in a newspaper and went out of the door and down the stairs and put it into a garbage can at the corner of an alley. When he returned to the room his mother was still bent over Vera, placing a wet towel upon her head. She straightened and faced him, her cheeks and eyes wet with tears and her lips tight with anger.

"Boy, sometimes I wonder what makes you act like you do."

"What I do now?" he demanded belligerently.

"Sometimes you act the biggest fool I ever saw."

"What you talking about?"

"You scared your sister with that rat and she *fainted!* Ain't you got no sense at *all?*"

"Aw, I didn't know she was that scary."

"Buddy!" the mother called.

"Yessum."

"Take a newspaper and spread it over that spot."

"Yessum."

Buddy opened out a newspaper and covered the smear of blood on the floor where the rat had been crushed. Bigger went to the window and stood looking out abstractedly into the street. His mother glared at his back.

"Bigger, sometimes I wonder why I birthed you," she said bitterly.

Bigger looked at her and turned away.

"Maybe you oughtn't've. Maybe you ought to left me where I was."

"You shut your sassy mouth!"

"Aw, for Chrissakes!" Bigger said, lighting a cigarette.

"Buddy, pick up them skilletts and put 'em in the sink," the mother said.

"Yessum."

Bigger walked across the floor and sat on the bed. His mother's eyes followed him.

"We wouldn't have to live in this garbage dump if you had any manhood in you," she said.

"Aw, don't start that again."

"How you feel, Vera?" the mother asked.

Vera raised her head and looked about the room as though expecting to see another rat.

"Oh, Mama!"

"You poor thing!"

"I couldn't help it. Bigger scared me."

"Did you hurt yourself?"

"I bumped my head."

"Here; take it easy. You'll be all right."

"How come Bigger acts that way?" Vera asked, crying again.

"He's just crazy," the mother said. "Just plain dumb black crazy."

"I'll be late for my sewing class at the Y.W.C.A.," Vera said.

"Here; stretch out on the bed. You'll feel better in a little while," the mother said.

She left Vera on the bed and turned a pair of cold eyes upon Bigger.

"Suppose you wake up some morning and find your sister dead? What would you think then?" she asked. "Suppose those rats cut our veins at night when we sleep? Naw! Nothing like that ever bothers you! All you care about is your own pleasure! Even when the relief offers you a job you won't take it till they threaten to cut off your food and starve you! Bigger, honest, you the most no-countest man I ever seen in all my life!"

"You done told me that a thousand times," he said, not looking round.

"Well, I'm telling you agin! And mark my word, some of these days you going to set down and cry. Some of these days you going to wish you had made something out of yourself, instead of just a tramp. But it'll be too late then."

"Stop prophesying about me," he said.

"I prophesy much as I please! And if you don't like it, you can get out. We can get along without you. We can live in one room just like we living now, even with you gone," she said.

"Aw, for Chrissakes!" he said, his voice filled with nervous irritation.

"You'll regret how you living some day," she went on. "If you don't stop running with that gang of yours and do right

you'll end up where you never thought you would. You think I don't know what you boys is doing, but I do. And the gallows is at the end of the road you traveling, boy. Just remember that." She turned and looked at Buddy. "Throw that box outside, Buddy."

"Yessum."

There was silence. Buddy took the box out. The mother went behind the curtain to the gas stove. Vera sat up in bed and swung her feet to the floor.

"Lay back down, Vera," the mother said.

"I feel all right now, Ma. I got to go to my sewing class."

"Well, if you feel like it, set the table," the mother said, going behind the curtain again. "Lord, I get so tired of this I don't know what to do," her voice floated plaintively from behind the curtain. "All I ever do is try to make a home for you children and you don't care."

"Aw, Ma," Vera protested. "Don't say that."

"Vera, sometimes I just want to lay down and quit."

"Ma, please don't say that."

"I can't last many more years, living like this."

"I'll be old enough to work soon, Ma."

"I reckon I'll be dead then. I reckon God'll call me home."

Vera went behind the curtain and Bigger heard her trying to comfort his mother. He shut their voices out of his mind. He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fulness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair. So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain. And toward himself he was even more exacting. He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So he denied himself and acted tough.

He got up and crushed his cigarette upon the window sill. Vera came into the room and placed knives and forks upon the table.

"Get ready to eat, you-all," the mother called.

He sat at the table. The odor of frying bacon and boiling coffee drifted to him from behind the curtain. His mother's voice floated to him in song.

*Life is like a mountain railroad  
With an engineer that's brave  
We must make the run successful  
From the cradle to the grave. . . .*

The song irked him and he was glad when she stopped and came into the room with a pot of coffee and a plate of crinkled bacon. Vera brought the bread in and they sat down. His mother closed her eyes and lowered her head and mumbled,

"Lord, we thank Thee for the food You done placed before us for the nourishment of our bodies. Amen." She lifted her eyes and without changing her tone of voice, said, "You going to have to learn to get up earlier than this, Bigger, to hold a job."

He did not answer or look up.

"You want me to pour you some coffee?" Vera asked.

"Yeah."

"You going to take the job, ain't you, Bigger?" his mother asked.

He laid down his fork and stared at her.

"I told you last night I was going to take it. How many times you want to ask me?"

"Well, don't bite her head off," Vera said. "She only asked you a question."

"Pass the bread and stop being smart."

"You know you have to see Mr. Dalton at five-thirty," his mother said.

"You done said that ten times."

"I don't want you to forget, son."

"And you know how you can forget," Vera said.

"Aw, lay off Bigger," Buddy said. "He told you he was going to take the job."

"Don't tell 'em nothing," Bigger said.

"You shut your mouth, Buddy, or get up from this table," the mother said. "I'm not going to take any stinking sass from you. One fool in the family's enough."

"Lay off, Ma," Buddy said.

"Bigger's setting here like he ain't glad to get a job," she said.

"What you want me to do? Shout?" Bigger asked.

"Oh, Bigger!" his sister said.