

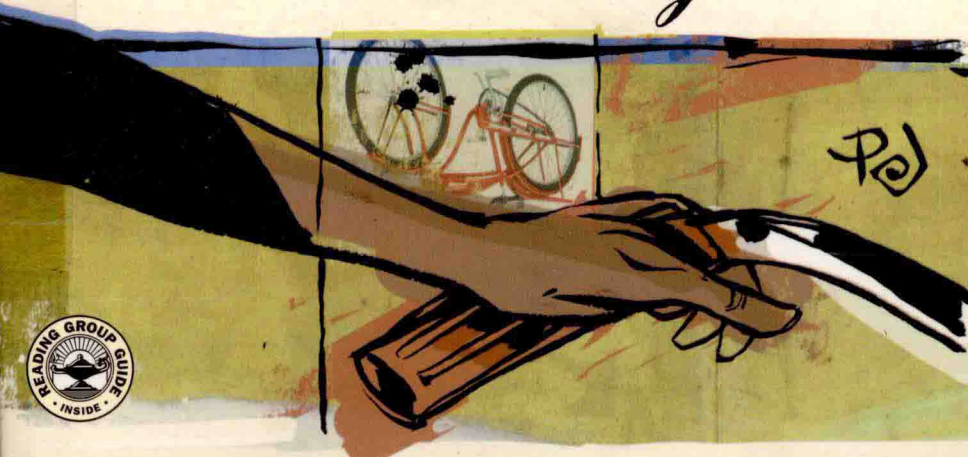
"Heartbreaking and heartwarming. I was touched in so many ways by this absolutely dazzling and elegant debut. You won't be able to put it down."

—E. LYNN HARRIS, *The New York Times* best-selling author of *Abide with Me*



Sunday You Learn How to Box

a novel by *Bil Wright*



SUNDAY
YOU LEARN
HOW TO
BOX

A N O V E L

Bil Wright

SCRIBNER PAPERBACK FICTION
PUBLISHED BY SIMON & SCHUSTER
NEW YORK LONDON SYDNEY SINGAPORE



SCRIBNER PAPERBACK FICTION
Simon & Schuster, Inc.
Rockefeller Center
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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DESIGNED BY ERICH HOBGING

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Wright, Bil.

Sunday you learn how to box : a novel / Bil Wright.

1. Afro-Americans—Connecticut Fiction. I. Title.

PS3573.R4938S8 2000

813'.54—dc21 99-41479

CIP

ISBN 0-684-85795-2

Praise for *Sunday You Learn How to Box*

“*Sunday You Learn How to Box* has all the rhythm, drama, and dance of a good fight but in this case the battle matters more because the soul of a boy is at stake. In elegant and agile prose, Wright matches brutality with passion and heartbreak with hope. And a man in purple polyester pants walks off with the prize. This book is a knockout.”

—KARIN COOK, author of *What Girls Learn*

“A mother’s uphill battle to forge a better life for her family, her young son’s struggle to survive in a world where the lines of ‘manhood’ and ‘masculinity’ are harshly drawn—Bil Wright’s wrenching novel about growing up gay is sometimes crushing, sometimes exhilarating, but always full of grace. In this elegant and honest book, Wright engages difficult themes of love exhausted and renewed, dreams derailed and put back on track again, and the stubborn will to create one’s destiny instead of falling prey to it. I was powerfully moved by *Sunday You Learn How to Box*. Its images singe. Its characters gleam.”

—GERRY GOMEZ PEARLBERG,
author of *Marianne Fauthfull’s Cigarette*
and editor of *Queer Dog: Homo/Pup/Poetry*

“*Sunday You Learn How to Box* is smart and sexy. Bil Wright’s gorgeous first novel overflows with wit and lyricism, the wonders of desire, and the brutality of racism. Louis shows us the power of salvation when the savior and saved are one—I couldn’t put it down!”

—STEPHANIE GRANT, author of *The Passion of Alice*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you God for the journey. Thank you to the following for their encouragement: Becket Logan, Paula West, Traci West, Robynne West, Jerry Watts, Rick Northcutt, Antonio Suarez, Karen Amore, Edna Davis, Kathleen Connolly, John Edward McGrath, Sharon van Ivan, Michael Campbell, Bob Najjar, Linda Herring, Margret McBride, The Millay Colony, the Edward F. Albee Foundation. Thanks to Winifred Golden for her belief from the beginning and to Cherise Grant for being a wise and caring eye.

SUNDAY
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1

1968

Mom and I were both sure Ben was dead. If I'm never sure of anything else in my life, I knew the exact moment Ben and I had stopped speaking to each other for good. And I knew Mom could tell he wasn't listening to her anymore, either.

Ben was on the driver's side, Mom was in the middle, next to him. I was squeezed up against the door. There should have been more room, since none of us was what you'd call big. When I was eight and first saw Ben, he looked like a craggy mountain with long arms. He was tall alright, about six three or four maybe, but he had no stomach, no hilly butt like a lot of black men have. By the time he died, he didn't look like a mountain at all. He was more like a high pile of rocks. Mom was short and small like me. But that Sunday, she had on a handmedown fur coat she called "the grizzly" that took up most of the front seat.

When we heard the siren, Mom put her head on Ben's shoulder and her arm around him like you see teenage girls doing with their boyfriends when they cruise past you on the highway. The difference was, Ben was Mom's second husband and I'd never seen her sit next to him that way before, anywhere.

It couldn't have been more than twenty-five degrees outside, but inside Ben's car it felt like there was a bonfire

BIL WRIGHT

in the backseat. Mom and I were sweating. I'd even seen water running from Ben's mustache along the top of his lip when she was pounding on him. He'd sneered at us like he always did when Mom and I were going crazy, but his forehead was shiny and wet looking, which was different for him. The three of us had been in plenty of fights and Mom and I would be dripping afterwards like we'd been pushed underwater with all our clothes on. But Ben never looked any different at the end than he had at the beginning. The first time I remember seeing him sweat was the Sunday he died.

The cops came screeching into the projects parking lot and blocked Ben's car. One of them ran over, threw open the door on my side and jumped back with his hand on his gun. A freezing wind blew in on all of us. The world was larger, again, than the inside of Ben's Pontiac.

I hadn't even heard the radio. One of us must've kicked or knocked into it accidentally during the fight. Martha and the Vandellas were singing "Jimmy Mack," which meant it was on a station Ben wouldn't have approved of. He didn't usually allow the radio to be played at all, because he said it wore down the battery. When he did turn it on, the only station we could listen to was the one that played music from the thirties and forties. I'd asked Ben once why that was. He'd frowned into the rear-view mirror. "You think I'm going to argue about what to play on the radio in a car I bought with *my* money? When you buy your *own* car, buddy, you can play all the stations at the same time if you want to."

"C'mon now, c'mon!" the cop ordered us with his hand still on his gun. I pushed out staring at the ground, shivering. Mom came behind me, gasping like she was drown-

SUNDAY YOU LEARN HOW TO BOX

ing. She opened the grizzly, trying to pull me inside, but I jerked away. No matter how cold I was, I wouldn't let her wrap me up under her coat like some baby faggot kangaroo. If they were going to accuse anybody of killing Ben, I wanted them to think it could've been me as much as her.

By the time the cops got there, just about everybody who lived in the projects was in the parking lot. A lot of them had circled the car and watched us, so there were plenty of witnesses eager to tell what they'd seen. When we'd stopped fighting and Ben was sitting there without the sneer on his face anymore, Isabelle Jackson, the girl from next door, put her nose up against the window and whined to Mom, "Mrs. Ben, you can't get out?" She ran to tell her mother, who called the police to report a man had just murdered his wife in the Stratfield Projects parking lot. Once they got there, the police didn't seem to care that the details they'd been given were wrong.

"Jimmy Mack" was over. The announcer was saying if he got enough calls he'd play "Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay" by Otis Redding. "If you remember one song from this year, I betcha it'll be this one," he said. "Dial my number, kids, and tell me you wanna hear it. Call Uncle Davie and tell him how bad you want ol' Otis to sing that song."

When the ambulance arrived, one of the men examined Ben, listened to Mom's version of what she called an argument and told the police Ben probably had a heart attack. They had trouble pulling him out of the car because he was so long. Every time his head thumped against the steering wheel or the door, Mom winced and whispered, "God. Oh, God." When they got him onto the stretcher, she grabbed for me again, making an appeal to the cops. "We have to go back. My baby girl's alone."

It was true we'd left my sister Lorelle behind, but she