

Verbundkatalog Kalliope

Black Boy. By Richard Wright.

Mann, Klaus

1945-09-16

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What They're Reading

BLACK BOY — By Richard Wright; Harper and Brothers, New York; 2.50.



Richard Wright established his reputation as one of America's most talented contemporary writers with his first novel, *Native Son* (1940)—a sensational success, not only in its original form but also in a dramatic version produced by Orson Welles and John Houseman. His recent book, *Black Boy*, is still a national best-seller, more than six months after its publication. The popularity of Wright's work is all the more remarkable as the problems with which this author deals are far from being pleasant. What he has to say about the Negro question in the United States may sound shockingly violent to certain sensitive ears. Yet his message has such dynamic power—the power of real inspiration and uncompromising sincerity—that it cannot be ignored.

Black Boy is the simple and terrible story of a Negro boy's childhood and youth in the American South—a candid, precise account of the author's own experiences during the first nineteen years of his life. Nothing spectacular happens; there are no lynchings, no Ku Klux Klan atrocities. There is just the usual misery, the monotonous drama of social insecurity and racial defamation, the ordinary afflictions—father's weakness for liquor, mother's failing health—"the essential bleakness of black life in America."

Richard's early years were dominated by two elementary impulses — hunger and fear. "Hunger was with us always," he writes. "I knew hunger, biting hunger, hunger that made my body aimlessly restless, hunger that kept me on edge, that made my temper flare, hunger that made hate leap out of my heart like the dart of a serpent's tongue, hunger that created in me odd cravings. No food I could dream of seemed half so utterly delicious as vanilla wafers. Every time I had a nickel I would run to the grocery store and buy a box of vanilla wafers and walk back home, slowly, so that I could eat them all without having to share them with anyone. Then I would sit on the front steps and dream of eating another box; the craving would finally become so acute that I would force myself to be active in order to forget. I learned a method of drinking water that made me feel full temporarily whether I had a desire for water or not; I would put my mouth under a faucet and turn the water on full force and let the stream cascade into my stomach until it was tight. Sometimes my stomach ached, but I felt full for the moment."

If hunger was a continuous problem and almost incessant pain—fear was worse; a constant nightmare and permanent agony. Young Richard was always scared — "rapidly learning to distrust everything and everybody." At the age of six, "dread and distrust had already become a daily part of my being and my memory grew sharp, my senses more impressionable; I began to be aware of myself as a distinct personality striving against others." And a few years later, "I was already so conditioned toward my relatives that when I passed them I actually had a nervous tic in my muscles."

The family — bigoted, ignorant people — try to break the boy's indomitable pride and defiance by beating him — often and cruelly. His story opens with a beating: "I was lashed so hard and long that I lost consciousness. I was beaten out of my senses and later I found myself in bed, screaming, determined to run away, tussling with my mother and father who were trying to keep me still. I was lost in a fog of fear. . . . Finally I got well. But for a long time I was chastened whenever I remembered that my mother had come close to killing me."

Later, when the family moves from Natchez, Mississippi, to Memphis, the



RICHARD WRIGHT
... fear and hunger

black boy is afraid of other black boys in the streets. At school, he is afraid of his teachers and class-mates. He begins to ask questions about the relations between whites and blacks — "and what I learned frightened me." As his father abandons the family to live with another woman, and his mother suffers a stroke of paralysis, the youngster has to do chores in the neighborhood. He experiences a new fear — the fear of the white boss, the all-mighty, merciless, unpredictable master.

His youth is a series of moves from one Southern town to the next, of sporadic schooling and part-time jobs. For several years he lives with his grandmother, an ardent member of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and "as nearly white as a Negro can get without being white, which means that she was white." She, too, believes in the necessity and righteousness of hard and frequent physical punishment. A rather frightening person, once she loses her temper. "The sagging flesh of her face quivered; her eyes, large, dark, deep-set, wide apart, stared at me. Her lips narrowed to a line. Her high forehead wrinkled. When she was angry her eyelids drooped halfway down over her pupils, giving her a baleful aspect."

In this particular instance, Granny's wrath is caused by a young colored

schoolteacher, Ella, who tells young Richard the story of Bluebeard and his Seven Wives. The old woman is strictly against stories: "That's the Devil's work!" But her little grandson is all in raptures. "The tale made the world around me be, throb, live. As she spoke, reality changed, the look of things altered, and the world became peopled with magical presences. My sense of life deepened and the feel of things was different, somehow. Enchanted and enthralled, I stopped her constantly to ask for details. My imagination blazed. The sensations the story aroused in me were never to leave me."

This early experience — the first contact with the sphere of imagination and poetry — becomes a turning point in the young Negro's development. Not that his life changes: it remains bleak and miserable. But however humiliating the conditions of his outward existence; however painful the brutalities to which he is subjected — there is, deep in him, a mysterious energy which makes him somehow incorruptible, invulnerable, invincible. His fervent interest in books — far from being a form of cowardice or escapism — will help him in clarifying his own identity and his position in a cruel, hostile world. This colored youth — endowed with creative imagination and an unbreakable will of resistance — will not accept the humble place for which he seems to be destined.

In the concluding chapter, we see him in Memphis again — a penniless runaway; ready to set out for a new adventure, a new goal — Chicago. He bids a grim farewell to the South: "Well, the white South had never known me — never known what I thought, what I felt. The white South said that I had a 'place' in life. Well, I had never felt my 'place'; or, rather, my deepest instincts had always made me reject the 'place' to which the white South had assigned me. It had never occurred to me that I was in any way an inferior being. And no word that I had ever heard from the lips of southern white men had ever made me really doubt the worth of my own humanity. True, I had lied. I had stolen. And it was perhaps a mere accident that I had never killed. . . . But in what other way had the South allowed me to be natural, to be real, to be myself, except in rejection, rebellion, and aggression?"

This autobiography is the most eloquent protest, the most stirring challenge yet to come from a colored American writer. It combines the power of truth with the persuasion of beauty. The story of a black boy's ugly youth is beautifully written; especially the first chapters are full of nostalgic images and poetic suggestions — evoking with inspired accuracy the subtle sensations of those childhood years when "each

event spoke with a cryptic tongue, and the moments of living slowly revealed their coded meanings."

If Wright's book is an indictment, it is also a message of hope. The author — for all the bitterness of his experiences and for all the vehemence of his indignation — never gives up his belief "that life could be lived with dignity, that the personalities of others should not be violated, that men should be able to confront other men without fear or shame, and that if men were lucky in their living on earth they might win some redeeming meaning for their having struggled and suffered here beneath the stars."

— K. M.

CAN REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT DO THE JOB?—By Thomas K. Finletter; Reynal and Hitchcock, New York, 2.00.



Far-reaching changes in certain fundamental factors in the form of government of the United States are proposed by Mr. Finletter, once of the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania and more recently a special assistant to the Secretary of State.

Our Congress, he tells us, "is in a state of decentralization and confusion—a fact which is becoming increasingly apparent to the American people. There is accordingly a great deal of criticism not only of individual members but also of Congress as an institution. Much of this criticism is destructive and some of it dangerous. Attacks which have the effect of creating public contempt for Congress play into the hands of the wrong forces. And unfortunately the battles between Congress and the President—the Supreme Court Bill was an exception—have the effect of making Congress look like a negative and querulous body which irresponsibly blocks the efforts of a President to carry out policies for the national good."

He would remedy what he conceives to be such defects by two main steps. First, both the Senate and the House by joint resolution and the President by an executive order would establish a joint Executive-Legislative Cabinet which would report to and be responsible to the two houses in a more intimate way than is the case at present. Such a cabinet might consist, he says, of nine leaders in Congress and nine members of the cabinet, with the President as chairman, all chosen, of course, from the majority party.

Thereafter, he would amend the Constitution (1) to give the President the right, whenever he might feel that a deadlock between the executive and legislative branches had arisen, to dissolve Congress and call for general elections in which all Senators, Representatives and the President himself would go before the people; (2) to make all terms of office coincide, perhaps lengthening them all to six years.

These steps, Mr. Finletter believes, would bring to an end the difficulties now arising, in his opinion, from the old doctrine of separation of powers which was a part of the whole theory from which the Constitution was formulated in the first place.

Mr. Finletter is careful to argue his case entirely on fundamentals, although the orientation of his arguments would indicate that he is not as pleased with the policies commonly called "New Deal" as in the electorate of the nation itself. It is to be noted that he sees nothing surprising or worth closer attention in the fact that in one house of Congress, possessing vast legislative powers, a State of 200,000 voters gets exactly the same voice as a State of 12,000,000. Nor does he give much space to such fundamental realities of politics as economic influence, money, the cost of elections, the practices of political organizations, and above all the press.

Like Senator Robert F. Wagner (D., N. Y.) who contributes a foreword to this book, most people will have to reserve judgment as to the specific proposals. Can it be demonstrated that ability to dissolve a parliament increases the responsiveness of a legislature to its electors? I think not. At least I know of no decisive examples. This power is a common feature of many European constitutions and during the series of crises leading up to and during the war it played no positive role in enabling the peoples of Europe to decide their own destinies.

—L. D.



"You mean you've never heard of electronics?"

One of the drawings from "Stop Or I'll Scream," a collection of new cartoons from Collier's. Robert McBride, New York; 2.00.