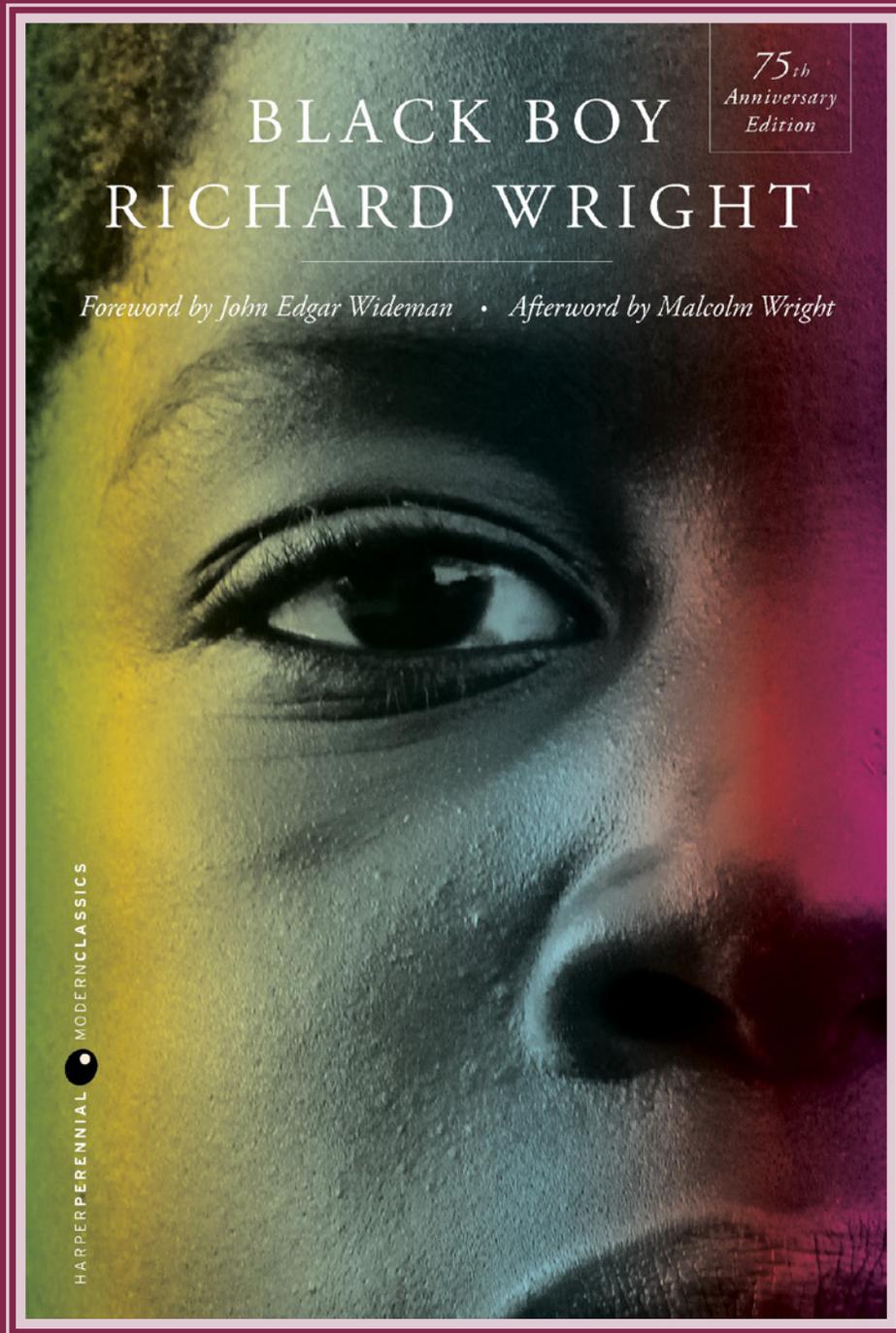


TEACHER'S GUIDE



HARPERPERENNIAL MODERNCLASSICS

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## About the Book

Wright's once controversial, now celebrated autobiography measures the raw brutality of the Jim Crow South against the sheer desperate will it took to survive as a black boy. Enduring poverty, hunger, fear, abuse, and hatred while growing up in the woods of Mississippi, Wright lied, stole, and raged at those around him—whites indifferent, pitying, or cruel and blacks resentful of anyone trying to rise above their circumstances. Desperate for a different way of life, he may his way north, eventually arriving in Chicago, where he forged a new path and began his career as a writer. At the end of *Black Boy*, Wright sits poised with pencil in hand, determined to “hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo.”

Seventy-five year later, his words continue to reverberate. “To read *Black Boy* is to stare into the heart of darkness,” John Edgar Wideman writes in his foreword. “Not the dark heart Conrad searched for in Congo jungles but the beating heart I bear.”

## About the Author

Richard Wright won international renown for his powerful and visceral depiction of the black experience. He stands today alongside such African-American luminaries as Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison. He died in 1960.

## About this Guide

This guide consists of questions that can be used either as discussion questions or as short writing prompts. Most questions encourage students to think across characters and themes in the novel to formulate their answers.

Page numbers included parenthetically in this guide are for the following editions of *Black Boy*: ISBN: 9780062964137 (the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition); ISBN: 9780061443084 (the Harper Perennial Modern Classics edition).

E-book and digital audio formats of *Black Boy* are also available.

New to this guide is a series of three questions—two plot-based, one format based—relating to the digital audio version of *Black Boy*. For practice using digital audio with your class, we are happy to provide [Chapter 1](#) and [Chapter 2](#) as free audio samples. If you use our digital audio format in your teaching plans, please let us know it went! [Email us](#), or tag us in a social media post! We'd love to see how you're using it!

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## Questions

- What is the significance of the title, *Black Boy*?
- *Black Boy* is an autobiography. In what ways does *Black Boy* fit into genre conventions of autobiography? In what ways does it defy it? What other genres do you think *Black Boy* could fit into, either wholly or in part?
- Describe Wright's family. Who in Wright's family do you think has the most influence over Wright? How?
- What is life like in the Jim Crow South for Wright?
- Would you describe Wright as an outsider? Why or why not?
- Certain spaces, or ideas Wright has about certain spaces, become incredibly important to him. What does Chicago represent to Wright? Or the North? How do the reality of these places meet (or not meet) his expectations?
- What obstacles does Wright have to overcome in the white spaces he occupies? Which are more challenging for him to overcome? Do you think some are insurmountable?
- Describe Wright's relationship with reading. What books does he read? What kinds of perspectives and ideas does he gain from reading them?
- In his conversation with his former classmate Griggs (1.9), why does Griggs tell Wright he doesn't know how to live in the South? Is Griggs trying to be helpful?
- Wright's job at Crane's Optical starts out well for Wright but then becomes a situation he most feared. What prompted the shift? How did this change fit into Wright's expectations about society?
- How does Wright experience Communism? What does he ultimately come to decide about the politics of Communism and the potential for black people in Communism?
- On page 383 (2.20) Wright writes, "If this country can't find its way to a human path, if it can't inform conduct with a deep sense of life, then all of us, black as well as white, are going down the same drain..." What do you think the "human path" is that he talks about? Do you think it's achievable? Are we still trying to find it in twenty-first century America?

## Questions on the digital audio format:

- For you as a reader and listener: what is the difference between reading *Black Boy* and listening to it? What sorts of things do you notice in one format, as opposed to the other?
- How does Wright talk about food in the opening chapter of *Black Boy*?
- What does Wright's environment teach him about race relations? How does his family talk about relationships between blacks and whites?