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2008 marks centennial of Richard Wright's birth

By EMILY WAGSTER PETTUS, Associated Press Writer
Thursday, November 13, 2008

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(11-13) 12:49 PST Jackson, Miss. (AP) --

Julia Wright bounces and paces across the front of the library at Lanier High School, a public place of learning in a neighborhood of neat, modest homes and the occasional building tagged with graffiti.

Her brown eyes twinkling, the slender 66-year-old has the energy of a cheerleader and the intellectual intensity of a woman who spends her life examining and re-examining her place in the world. She faces nearly three dozen teenagers who have come to the library to hear her talk about her father, Richard Wright, whose powerful, controversial novels helped put a face on racism, and who is still one of the most widely read American writers nearly a half century after his death.

She encourages the kids to follow his example. "Always ask questions. Always turn things around and look at all facets. Always look at the flip side," Julia Wright tells the students, some of whom lean forward, elbows on tables, to absorb her words about a man who attended Lanier decades ago.

This year marks the centennial of Richard Wright's birth, and his daughter, who lives in Paris, is traveling the globe to honor her father's literary legacy. Richard Wright conferences, lectures and public readings are being held in many cities, including his native Mississippi. The state was once one of the most grotesquely oppressive in the nation, and Wright — a bright young black man with a gift for words — had to leave so he could thrive.

His works, including the 1940 novel "Native Son" and the 1945 autobiography "Black Boy," exposed and challenged the deeply entrenched system of racial injustice in 20th-century America. "Black Boy" was a best seller shortly after its release, and "Native Son" was the Book of the Month Club's first selection by a black author.

Jerry W. Ward Jr., a Wright scholar at Dillard University, said Wright was "one of the first African-American writers to really challenge a larger American readership."

Ward said "Native Son" shocked World War II-era America and still jolts readers today. The protagonist, a black man named Bigger Thomas, lives in Chicago and is pummeled by a society structured to oppress black people. Thomas loses control of his own life after he accidentally kills a wealthy white woman.

Ward said that in Wright's works, "We discover the entire nation, through institutions and social habits, might be responsible for major problems."

Wright was born Sept. 4, 1908, on a farm near Natchez, a Mississippi River town with a tourist trade that still centers on elaborate antebellum planters' homes. He was the grandson of former slaves and son of a schoolteacher mother and illiterate sharecropper father. In a sign of how times have changed, the Mississippi Legislature voted this year to

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name a road near Natchez for Richard Wright, just in time for a literary festival that honored his work. In 1945, Theodore Bilbo, a U.S. senator and Mississippi demagogue, denounced "Black Boy" in the Senate.

In "Black Boy," Wright recounts the upbringing he endured from the various relatives with whom he lived, including his mother and a grandmother who was a strict Seventh Day Adventist. After his father abandoned the family, Wright skipped from home to home in Memphis, Tenn., rural Arkansas and Mississippi.

Because of the frequent moves, his formal education was sporadic, but he developed an early love of the written word. As a youngster living in a segregated society, he borrowed a library card from a sympathetic white man and forged notes from the man so the librarian would allow Wright to check out books.

In 1925, Wright attended the then-new Lanier High School, but never graduated. (The school has since moved to a different location, but even decades after court-ordered desegregation, the school is all black, reflecting the surrounding neighborhood.)

He became a published author after moving to Chicago, where, in 1939, he met Ellen Poplar, a white Communist Party member who was the daughter of Polish Jewish immigrants. She became Wright's first wife and mother of his two daughters — Julia, who was born in the United States, and Rachel, who was born after Wright moved his family to Paris in 1947.

On her father's 100th birthday, Julia Wright sat down for an interview at the Fairview Inn near downtown Jackson. The stately white-columned home, now a popular site for wedding receptions, was once owned by the former head of the Citizens Council — an uptown version of the Ku Klux Klan that worked to preserve segregation in Mississippi decades ago.

"Oh, my goodness. Maybe that's why my telephone's not working," Wright said with a laugh when told of the inn's history.

The family left the United States, she said, after her father attacked the Jim Crow society.

"He realized when he wrote 'Black Boy,' that he would have to fear for his family's safety down South because of what he wrote," she said. Her father had also left the Communist Party and was being pressured from two sides: Party members were trying to pull him back in, and federal investigators were trying to force him to provide inside information about the party, she said.

But a humiliating incident involving a 3-year-old Julia Wright also caused the family to turn its back on America.

In 1945, a friend of the Wrights, a white woman named Connie, took Julia shopping at an upscale New York department store. The little girl needed to use the ladies' room and Connie asked a sales clerk for directions.

"The saleslady behind the counter said to Connie, 'The restroom is over there.' But when Connie removed herself from the counter, I appeared," Julia Wright recalled. "Because I was so small, I was hidden by the counter. And she saw me, and I was brown And the saleslady said, 'Oh, no, not her. You, but not her.'"

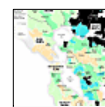
"So, Connie told me to be a 'good little girl' and go relieve myself on the sidewalk."

Julia did as she was told.

"And for being a 'good little girl,'" Julia Wright said, "I got an ice cream cone."

Later, at home, Connie told Richard Wright what had happened; Julia was in another room playing. "All of a sudden, I heard this howl of anger," Julia Wright recalled. "I think my father must've become like Bigger (the enraged central character of 'Black Boy') at

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Walter Dean Myers, a prolific writer for young readers and two-time National Book Award finalist, said Wright's works and his characters such as Bigger Thomas illuminated a horrific part of American life that few wished to correct during the decades between slavery and the civil-rights movement.

"What he did was to open a door to black life in America, treating it very seriously, where previous to that it was not being treated seriously," Myers said in an interview from London, where he lives several weeks each year.

"You had the whole Harlem Renaissance period. But by the '40s, that was over and gone," he said. "The black person as a person who protested and as a person who was a keen observer of American life — you did not have that until you had Richard Wright."

Myers, who now lives in New Jersey, was a National Book Award finalist in 1999 for "Monster" and in 2005 for "Autobiography of My Dead Brother." He recalled that as a black teenager in New York in the 1950s, he was taught only the standard canon of works by white authors. He was a teenager when a relative exposed him to Wright novel.

"And I had not read anything by black authors prior to that. And I was really sort of surprised because it was about something that I had never encountered in school," Myers said.

"I didn't know that I needed permission to write about black life. And then I read Richard Wright and then later James Baldwin and I said, 'Gee, I can do this, too. I can write about my own community and my own life.' And that was just like a liberating thing for me."

Julia Wright was an adolescent before she read one of her father's books.

"He allowed me to discover that he was famous not by telling me he was famous but by actually allowing me to discover it. Because what does famous mean, after all? I mean, he didn't want to turn me into a snob," she said.

Richard Wright died in Paris in November 1960 and his ashes are interred at the Pere Lachaise cemetery, the burial place of other literary greats, including Wright's friend, Gertrude Stein.

Earlier this year, a previously unpublished novel of Richard Wright's, "A Father's Law," was released with an introduction by Julia Wright. In June, several literary expatriates gathered at Pere Lachaise to pay tribute to the author of "Black Boy" and "Native Son."

Paper flowers with poems that celebrated the author written on them were available at the grave site.

"People would read it and then go and lay the paper flower down," Julia Wright recalled. "Anonymous people who don't know him could read the flowers. It was beautiful."

(This version CORRECTS typo in 'department store')

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