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Black Boy
Richard Wright

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Black Boy
Richard Wright



Prestwick House

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To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

Foreword

1. *Black Boy* influenced the writer of the foreword greatly. It was the first non-picture book that he ever read, and he still has the same copy his teacher gave him. All of us have parts of our lives that, even though they occurred when we were children, still affect us as adults.

Make a list of some of the elements of your early childhood that greatly influenced you. Choose a few of these and write a sentence or two explaining why you were affected by them.

2. *Black Boy* is an autobiography of Richard Wright, a man who was born in 1908. His book was not published until 1945. At this time, World War II was ending, and the Civil Rights movement wasn't far off. Imagine you were growing up during this time of turmoil in the United States. Write a journal entry about what struggles you are facing at this time. What specific challenges would an African-American face that other citizens wouldn't?

Black Boy

8. When Uncle Hoskins is killed, the reader is not filled in on all the details. After his death, Richard learns that the murder was at the hands of white men who were jealous of Uncle Hoskins's flourishing saloon. Instead of fighting back, though, Richard's family immediately moves away and puts the death behind him. Wright reports they didn't even have a funeral or time to grieve; instead, Uncle Hoskins was gone like he had never been there before.

At this time, the newspapers in the area were mostly run by and staffed with white men. Because of the racial tension, their reporting might not have been as objective as we have come to expect now. Knowing this, come up with a headline for the article that might have appeared in the newspaper regarding Uncle Hoskins' death.

9. Despite the fact that black people were frequently persecuted during this time in American history, in Chapter 3 we see Richard and his friends harassing another person just because he is different. Because the owner of the local corner store is Jewish, Richard and his friends feel like they are superior to him based on religion. Imagine you are the storeowner and are bothered by what Richard is saying. Write an e-mail telling him how you feel and explaining a little bit about Judaism and how its fundamental values are similar to those of Christianity. You may need to consult the Internet or other source.

Chapter 5

16. Even though he has never been to school consistently before, it takes Richard Wright only weeks to advance from the fifth grade to the sixth. While he is immensely proud and runs home to tell his family, Richard is also skeptical at first as to whether he can handle the workload.

Make a list of three things that you are good at and write a sentence of two explaining what you had to do to be successful at each one.

17. Richard accurately describes one of his classmates by writing, “In my class was a tall, black, rebellious boy who was bright in his studies and yet utterly fearless in his assertion of himself: he could break the morale of the class at any moment with his clowning and the teacher never found an adequate way of handling him.”

Pair up with one of your classmates and write one or two sentences about the other person. Use descriptive language for both actions and appearance. Before reading what your partner has written, write one or two sentences about how you see yourself in class. Compare the two statements. Are they similar?

18. In order to help pay for food and clothes, Richard takes a job delivering newspapers from Chicago. One night, we see a man confront Richard over the subject of the material. It is at this time that Richard realizes that he has been aiding the Ku Klux Klan by delivering their messages within the paper. Both Wright and his friend are humiliated that they could have done something like this without being aware.

Have you been duped into doing something you later regretted? If so, write a journal entry for that day. If not, imagine a situation where it could happen and write a journal entry for that situation.

Chapter 15

46. To begin Part II of *Black Boy*, Richard Wright inserts a “Negro folk song.” The song is like a poem with its meaning to be inferred. Read the lines given to us in *Black Boy*, and write a few sentences about what you think the song refers to in regards to Wright’s life.

Research the purpose of this type of song and incorporate your findings in your response.

47. Riding the streetcar, on the way to Aunt Cleo’s house, Richard sits next to a white man, a phenomenon Richard had never known. He is uncomfortable, yet overjoyed to come to a place where the racial relations are completely different than anything he had ever experienced. Wright wonders, “How could that possibly be? Was he aware of my blackness?”

Richard’s mom had never experienced the racial indifference that her son is in the midst of. Write her a telegram of the event as if you are Richard. Prepare her for her journey north with the information you noticed as you came to Chicago.

48. Soon after arriving in Chicago, Wright accepts a job working for a Jewish couple as a porter. He is caught in a lie by the Jewish couple and refuses to admit his guilt. It is clear in their conversation that Mr. Hoffman knows his employee is lying and even knows why he lied, but Richard will not admit to his obvious guilt.

Beginning with Mr. Hoffman’s statement, “I didn’t sink you would ever come back,” re-write the conversation between Richard and Mr. Hoffman as if Richard had told the truth. How do you think Mr. Hoffman would have responded to hearing about Richard’s exam?

49. You are an advice columnist responding to letters from people seeking answers. One day you open a letter from a young black adult asking what he should do about the head white chef spitting in the food. Write an advice column responding to the question. Take into consideration racial discrimination and the fact that Richard must hold onto his job. Are there any options that would allow him to resolve the situation without negative repercussions?