



Classroom Guide for
RICHARD WRIGHT
AND THE LIBRARY CARD
by **William Miller**
illustrated by **Gregory Christie**

Reading Level

Interest Level: Grades 2-5

Reading Level: Grades 2-3

(Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula)

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 4.5/.5

Lexile Measure®: 700

Scholastic Reading Counts!™: 4.8

Themes

Discrimination, History, African Americans, Interracial Friendship, Civil Rights

Synopsis

As a child, Richard Wright loves to hear the stories his family tells, and he can't wait to learn to read stories on his own. Because his family moves often in search of work, Richard has little opportunity to go to school. With the help of his mother, Richard does finally learn to read. However, they don't have money to buy books, and few libraries in the South in the early 1900s are open to African Americans. At age 17, Richard seeks work in Memphis and lands a job as a helper and errand boy in an optician's office. There he enlists the aid of a co-worker, Jim Falk, himself an outsider because he is Catholic. Falk helps Richard find a way to borrow the books he craves from the library. Richard reads everything he can get his hands on and knows he will never be the same again. For him, every page is "a ticket to freedom." Soon after, Richard sets off for Chicago to make a new life for himself in the North.

Background

Richard Wright And The Library Card is a fictionalized account based on a scene from Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy*, published in 1945.

Richard Nathaniel Wright was born in 1908 near Natchez, Mississippi. Racial segregation was then legal in many parts of the South, and Jim Crow laws assured the separation of races in many public places. The schools Wright attended were all segregated, and his formal education ended at ninth grade. Wright moved to

Memphis in 1926 and then to Chicago in 1927, where he worked in the post office and also began his career as a writer. In 1940, the publication of *Native Son* brought Wright a Guggenheim Fellowship, great acclaim, and best-seller status. He went on to write many other successful books, including *The Outsider*, *Lawd Today*, and *The Color Curtain*, and became an important spokesperson for African Americans. Wright moved with his wife and daughter to Paris in 1946 and died there in 1960. He is recognized as a significant literary voice of the twentieth century.

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

Before reading the book, you may wish to have students discuss one or more of the following questions as a motivation for reading.

1. Why do you think a library card could help make someone's future better?
2. When you want something really badly, how do you go about getting it? What kinds of qualities might a person need to achieve an important goal?
3. The main character in the story you are going to read was born in 1908. What are some things you have today that had not yet been invented? What do you think people's lives were like without these things?

Setting a Purpose for Reading

Ask students to think about the cover of the book. What does the title suggest to them? Who was Richard Wright? What does the illustration show? Suggest that students write down some questions they hope to have answered as they read the book. Tell students to keep these questions in mind as they read.

Vocabulary

Have students scan the story for unfamiliar words such as rebel, optician, polished, boardinghouse, ignored, suspicious, nervously, roamed, spines. List these words on the chalkboard and briefly discuss students' thoughts about what the words mean.



AFTER READING

Discussion Questions

After reading the book, use these questions to generate discussion and expand students' understanding and comprehension. Encourage students to refer back to the text as needed.

1. Why was a library card so important to Richard Wright?
2. What kinds of obstacles did Wright have to overcome? What sacrifices did he make to achieve his goal of reading books from the library?
3. Why do you think Jim Falk lent Richard Wright his library card? Why did Falk want to keep it a secret?
4. What words would you use to describe the librarian? How would you describe the way Richard Wright acted towards her?
5. Why do you think some people in the South in the early 1900s wanted to control who was allowed to borrow and read books from the library? Do you think this was right? Why?
6. Prejudice is an opinion formed without knowing the facts or by ignoring the facts. What kind of prejudice was shown toward Richard Wright? How do you think Wright felt about the way people like him were treated?
7. How did reading books change Richard Wright?

Other Writing Activities

You may wish to have students participate in one or more of the following writing activities. Set aside time for students to share and discuss their work.

1. The first books Richard Wright read changed his life. Write about an event that caused changes in your life.
2. Work with a partner to write a list of behaviors you think students should follow to show respect for everyone in the class.
3. Suppose you could have loaned Richard Wright a book when he was a boy. What book would it be? Write a recommendation of the book. Why do you think Wright would have liked it?
4. Think about an incident of prejudice you feel is taking place today. Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper telling what you think is wrong and offering suggestions for improving the situation.

ESL Teaching Strategies

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners or who are learning to speak English as a second language.

1. Encourage students to pay close attention to the illustrations as the story is read aloud. Talk about each illustration and help students identify the characters and action.

2. Help students make charts comparing their learning-to-read experiences with Richard Wright's. In what ways are their experiences similar? In what ways are they different?
3. Use real objects or photographs to help students identify concrete nouns from the book such as flag, book, tree, farm, rain, mud, bus, and so on. Ask students to use these words in sentences relating to the story.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

To integrate students' reading experiences with other subject areas, you may wish to have students complete some of the following activities.

Social Studies

1. Have students work with partners to learn more about the lives of African Americans in the South during the time Richard Wright was a boy (1908-1929). Encourage students to find out what the Jim Crow laws were. When did the Jim Crow laws first appear? Why? How did they affect the lives of African Americans? In what other ways were the lives of African Americans and whites different during this time?
2. Students might work in groups to create timelines showing important events and legislation beginning in the 1950s that eventually led to the abolishment of segregation and to new laws protecting the rights of all citizens.
3. Have students locate on a map or globe the various places Richard Wright lived. These include Natchez, Mississippi, where he was born; Memphis, Tennessee, where the story takes place; Chicago, Illinois, where Wright began his writing career; New York City, where he lived for a time; and Paris, France, where he moved in 1946.

Library Skills

Take the class to the school or public library to review the kinds of books and other materials available. Model how to use various reference books and how to locate specific titles. In particular, you might locate books by Richard Wright as well as books by the authors Wright first read: Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy, and Stephen Crane.

Discuss the responsibility readers have to follow library rules and to care for the books they borrow. Talk about the kinds of resources a library has today which were not available in Richard Wright's time (books on tape, computers, microfiche, and so on). If students do not have library cards, encourage them to sign up for cards and borrow some books.

Music

Suggest that students choose music they feel reflects the feelings and events of the book. You might assign different parts of the book to different groups. Ask students to play their musical selections for the class and explain their choices to the listeners.

Writing

Have students write brief captions for the illustrations in *Richard Wright And The Library Card*. Assign different pages to pairs of students. Let students share their finished captions with the class. One partner can hold up the book to display the illustration while the other partner reads the caption.

Language Arts

Write two or more of the following quotations on the chalkboard, placing each in a speech balloon pointing to the name of the speaker.

- "The more I read, the more reasons I found to be proud of my African ancestors." —John Steptoe
- "Reading is a creative activity. You have to visualize the characters, you have to hear what their voices sound like." —Madeleine L'Engle
- "Books can be part of what helps you find the answers to questions in your life." —Gary Paulsen
- "Books, books, books. It was not that I read so much. I read and reread the same ones. But all of them were necessary to me." —Colette
- "The stories that have been written by great writers possess lives of their own. They live through the years and through the centuries." —Scott O'Dell

Read the quotations aloud and initiate a discussion about each quote and its relationship to the book. Then ask students to find other quotations about books, reading, or literacy. Have students cut out or draw speech balloon shapes and write their quotations in them. Post the speech balloons on a bulletin board or a classroom wall. Invite students to talk about the quotations they found.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR

William Miller is the author of numerous books for young people including *Zora Hurston And The Chinaberry Tree*, a 1996 Reading Rainbow Selection; *Frederick Douglass: The Last Day Of Slavery*, a Smithsonian Notable Children's Book; *The Bus Ride*, *Night Golf*, *The Piano*, and *Rent Party Jazz*.

Miller was raised in Anniston, Alabama, and now lives in York, Pennsylvania, where he teaches creative writing and African American literature at York College. He received his doctorate in English and American Literature from the State University of New York in Binghamton.

Richard Wright And The Library Card is the third book in Miller's trilogy of picture book biographies about well-known African Americans. "These books explore the early lives of major African American authors," says Miller. "My purpose is to inspire young readers and encourage them to know more about Hurston, Douglass, and Wright."

Gregory Christie is an award-winning children's book illustrator. His first picture book, *The Palm Of My Heart: Poetry By African American Children*, won the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor Award. He is also a contributing artist to the book *America: My Land, Your Land, Our Land*.

Christie was born and raised in New Jersey. He received his fine arts degree from the School of Visual Arts in New York City. Christie's artwork has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Village Voice*, *The New Yorker*, *Parenting*, and on many CD covers.

For the illustrations in *Richard Wright And The Library Card*, Christie researched photographs of the time period to add authenticity to his bold, yet sensitive pictures of young Wright. Christie also used this project as an opportunity to re-introduce himself to the work of a writer whom he admires for "his subject matter as well as his style of storytelling."

Resources on the Web

Learn more about ***Richard Wright and the Library Card***:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/99/hc/richard_wright_and_the_library_card

Richard Wright and the Library Card in Spanish:

Other Books by William Miller

Zora Hurston And The Chinaberry Tree

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/136/hc/zora_hurston_and_the_chinaberry_tree

Zora Hurston And The Chinaberry Tree in Spanish:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/163/hc/zora_hurston_y_el_arbol_sonador

Frederick Douglass: The Last Day Of Slavery

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/51/hc/frederick_douglass_the_last_day_of_slavery

The Bus Ride

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/27/hc/the_bus_ride

Night Golf

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/87/hc/night_golf

The Piano

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/90/hc/the_piano

Rent Party Jazz

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/98/hc/rent_party_jazz

Joe Louis, My Champion

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/70/hc/joe_louis_my_championpal

Other Books by Gregory Christie

the Palm of My Heart:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/88/hc/the_palm_of_my_heart_poetry_by_african_american_children

Deshawn Days:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/41/hc/deshawn_days

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http://www.leeandlow.com/books/81/hc/love_to_langston

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