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Contact: Mark Saunders
(O) 202-268-6524
(C) 202-320-0782
mark.r.saunders@usps.gov
usps.com/news
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Richard Wright Immortalized on Postage

Author, former Postal employee, wrote on racism in America

A high-resolution image of the stamp is available for media use only by emailing mark.r.saunders@usps.gov

CHICAGO — Author and former postal employee Richard Wright will be immortalized on a First-Class stamp tomorrow in the lobby of the Chicago Main Post Office on West Harrison Street when the stamp goes on sale nationwide Thursday, April 9, as the 25th inductee into the Postal Service's Literary Arts series. Best remembered for his controversial 1940 novel, *Native Son*, and his 1945 autobiography, *Black Boy*, Wright drew on a wide range of literary traditions, including protest writing and detective fiction, to craft unflinching portrayals of racism in American society. Wright worked for the Chicago Post Office from 1927 to 1930 as a letter sorter.

Artwork for the 61-cent First-Class two-ounce stamp created by Kadir Nelson of San Diego, CA, features a portrait of Wright in front of snow-swept tenements on the South Side of Chicago, a scene that recalls the setting of *Native Son*. Nelson's portrait of Wright was based on a circa 1945 photograph. Carl T. Herrman of Carlsbad, CA, was the stamp designer. One hundred million stamps were printed in sheets of 20.

"This nation experienced a historical event in our most recent presidential election," explained U.S. Postal Service Chicago District/Postmaster Gloria Tyson. "It was an event Richard Wright helped to bring about with his often controversial writings; writings of a world view on humanity and politics that were far too forward-thinking for his own generation; writings full of anger, frustration, and indignation stemming from

his early life experiences being poor and black in America; writings that appealed to — and appalled — both whites and blacks; writings that eventually helped to direct a change in how America addressed and discussed race relations.”

Scheduled to join Tyson in dedicating the stamp are WVON Radio talk show host Cliff Kelley; independent scholar (Boston) Carlos Brossard; University of Chicago Professor Jacqueline Goldsby; Poet and University Distinguished Professor at Chicago State University Dr. Haki R. Madhubuti and stamp artist Kadir Nelson.

Richard Wright’s daughter, Julia, will not be able to attend, but asked Postal Service representative Evelyn Fleming to deliver her remarks:

“When a young Barack Obama came to Chicago in his 20s to work as a community organizer, he made imaginary chains between his life and the faces he saw, borrowing other people’s memories. ‘In this way’ he wrote in *Dreams From My Father*, ‘I tried to take possession of the city, make it my own. (...) The mailman I saw was Richard Wright, delivering mail before his first book sold.’”

Continued Fleming, in delivering Julia Wright’s remarks, “In my father’s case, letters and their delivery played an important role in his childhood when he watched his grandfather spend his last years writing letters to the War Department insisting that his war pension be granted at last. This was never to be because the white officer who had discharged him from the Union Army distorted his name from Wilson to Vinson and the slave who broke free to fight the Rebels became invisible. My father wrote in “Black Boy”: ‘I used to get the mail early in the morning and I would read him the letter. Like K of Kafka’s novel, he tried desperately to persuade the authorities of his true identity right up to the day of his death and failed.’

“Richard’s early contact with the dreams we express in our letters is part of the genesis of his own life - long drive to WRITE to prove he was indeed WRIGHT. Becoming a postal worker in Chicago during the Depression was my father’s way of redeeming his grandfather’s failure. And so he did.”

How to Order the First-Day-of-Issue Postmark

Customers have 60 days to obtain the first-day-of-issue postmark by mail. They may purchase new stamps at their local Post Office, at The Postal Store website at www.usps.com/shop, or by calling 1-800-STAMP-24. They should affix the stamps to envelopes of their choice, address the envelopes, to themselves or others, and place them in a larger envelope addressed to:

Richard Wright Stamp
Retail Operations
U.S. Postal Service
433 W. Harrison Street, 4th Floor
Chicago, IL 60699-9998

After applying the first-day-of-issue postmark, the Postal Service will return the envelopes through the mail. There is no charge for the postmark. All orders must be postmarked by June 10, 2009.

How to Order First-Day Covers

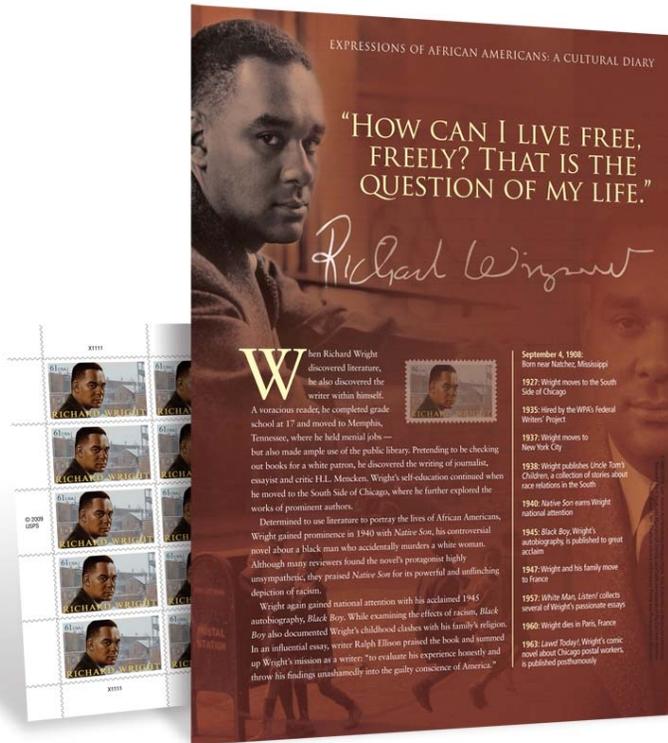
Stamp Fulfillment Services also offers first-day covers for new stamp issues and Postal Service stationery items postmarked with the official first-day-of-issue cancellation. Each item has an individual catalog number and is offered in the quarterly *USA Philatelic* catalog. Customers may request a free catalog by calling 1-800-STAMP-24 or writing to:

Information Fulfillment
Dept. 6270
U.S. Postal Service
P.O. Box 219014
Kansas City, MO 64121-9014

Philatelic Products

Richard Wright, author of *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, drew on a wide range of literary traditions to offer an unflinching look at racism in American society. The U.S. Postal Service remembers the power of expression with this addition to the cultural diary series.

The Diary Page (Item 113076, \$17.95) comes with a pane of 20 stamps. There are two other philatelic products available for this stamp issue: item 113061, First Day Cover, 99¢; and item 113091, Ceremony Program, \$6.95



All of the items can be purchased online at the Postal Store at this link:
<http://shop.usps.com/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/CatalogSearchResultView?storeId=10001&catalogId=10152&langId=-1&pageSize=8&beginIndex=0&sType=AdvancedSearch&resultType=2&searchTerm=Richard+Wright&searchTermScope=4>

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Please Note: For broadcast quality video and audio, photo stills and other media resources, visit the USPS Newsroom at www.usps.com/news.

An independent federal agency, the U.S. Postal Service is the only delivery service that reaches every address in the nation, 149 million residences, businesses and Post Office Boxes, six days a week. It has 34,000 retail locations and relies on the sale of postage, products and services, not tax dollars, to pay for operating expenses. Named the Most Trusted Government Agency five consecutive years by the Ponemon Institute, the Postal Service has annual revenue of \$75 billion and delivers nearly half the world's mail. To learn about the history of the Postal Service visit the Smithsonian's National Postal Museum: www.postalmuseum.si.edu.

Richard Wright Background

With this 25th stamp in the Literary Arts series, the U.S. Postal Service honors author Richard Wright (1908-1960). Best remembered for his controversial 1940 novel, *Native Son*, and his 1945 autobiography, *Black Boy*, Wright drew on a wide range of literary traditions, including protest writing and detective fiction, to craft unflinching portrayals of racism in American society.

Richard Nathaniel Wright was born on Sept. 4, 1908, near Natchez, MS. During his childhood, he lived with various family members in Tennessee, Mississippi and Arkansas. At 17, after earning a grade-school education, Wright moved to Memphis, TN, where he held several menial jobs and made ample use of the public library.

Pretending to be checking out books for a white patron, he discovered the writing of journalist, essayist, and critic H.L. Mencken, whose works served as Wright's introduction to literature.

In 1927, Wright moved to the South Side of Chicago, where he held a wide range of jobs to support his relatives, who also had migrated from the South. In Chicago, he wrote short stories. He socialized with artists, intellectuals, and activists and continued his self-education by reading the works of prominent American and European authors.

Determined to use literature to portray the lives of African Americans, Wright wrote *Lawd Today!*, a satiric novel about 24 hours in the lives of four Chicago postal workers. Inspired by the experimental language and literary techniques of James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and T.S. Eliot, the novel was published posthumously in 1963 and was praised by some critics, including James Baldwin, for further revealing Wright's range as a writer.

In 1935, when the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers' Project began hiring writers to document regional and ethnic life in America, the Illinois Writers' Project hired Wright to write essays and articles about African-American culture. During the late 1930s, Wright also organized the South Side Writers' Group, whose meetings helped to inspire a flourishing of Chicago-based African-American writing between 1935 and 1950.

Wright moved to New York City in 1937. The following year, he published his first book, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), a collection of short stories. As the title suggests, Wright saw the book as a response to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, with his stories about such subjects as lynching and mob violence offering a more stark view of race relations in the American South.

Wright gained national prominence in 1940 with the publication of *Native Son*, his controversial novel about a black man who accidentally murders a white woman. *Native Son* challenged readers to implicate society in the crimes of Bigger Thomas, a protagonist who believes that the murders he commits are acts of human freedom. Although many reviewers found Bigger Thomas highly unsympathetic, they nonetheless praised *Native Son* for its powerful and unflinching depiction of racism. *Native Son* became a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, and Wright received the prestigious Spingarn Medal from the NAACP. Still debated in high school and college classrooms, *Native Son* is often considered the strongest race-relations protest novel of its day.

Wright again gained national attention with his acclaimed autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945). While examining the omnipresent effects of racism, *Black Boy* also documents Wright's childhood clashes with his family's religion and his discovery of writing and literature as outlets for his own creativity and freedom. In an influential 1945 essay, writer Ralph Ellison compared *Black Boy* to the music of the blues and praised Wright for his ability "to evaluate his experience honestly and throw his findings unashamedly into the guilty conscience of America."

In 1946, Wright was invited by the French government to visit Paris. He returned to France in 1947 and lived there for the rest of his life, enjoying celebrity status across Europe and publishing three novels. *The Outsider* (1953) was influenced by Wright's interest in existentialism; *Savage Holiday* (1954) was a murder story that explored psychoanalytic theory; and *The Long Dream* (1958) focused on the difficulties of African-American life in Mississippi.

During his career, Wright also wrote numerous works of nonfiction. He provided a poignant narrative for *Twelve Million Black Voices*, a 1941 folk history of African Americans. During the 1950s, he published books about his travels in Ghana and Spain; he wrote a book-length report about an international conference of Asian and African countries; and he collected several passionate essays in the 1957 volume *White Man, Listen!*

Richard Wright died in Paris on Nov. 28, 1960, at the age of 52.

For further detailed biographical information on Richard Wright's life, consult the following standard encyclopedia sources: *Africana: the Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, second edition, Oxford African American Study Center; *American National Biography* online; *African American National Biography*, Oxford African American Study Center; *The Concise Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, Oxford African American Study Center; and the new edition of the *Encyclopedia of African American History*.

