

w.34 Wright, Richard *Native Son*. New York: Harper, 1940.

■ Fusing literary technique of the American naturalists (such as his beloved Theodore Dreiser) with his own insight into the urban slum experience of African Americans, Wright creates the disturbing portrait of Bigger Thomas, who experiences his first sense of freedom when he kills (albeit perhaps unintentionally) Mary Dalton, the daughter of white liberal philanthropists and slum landlords. A twenty-year-old prone to violence born of fear, Bigger despises the acceptance of poverty and racism by his religious mother and his younger siblings, whom he regards as afflicted by “blindness”; yet, he feels keenly his exclusion from the mainstream of American life while he is simultaneously attracted by its materialistic lures embodied in films and magazines.

When Wright had half-completed his first draft of *Native Son*, a Chicago murder was committed that resembled the case the novelist had been imagining. Robert Nixon, an eighteen-year-old black man, was charged with entering the apartment of Mrs. Florence Johnson for the purpose of a burglary and murdering her by blows to the head with a brick when she was wakened by his intrusion (see *People v. Nixon*, 371 Ill. 318, 20 N.E.2d 789 [1939]). At Wright’s request, aspiring poet (and his future biographer) Margaret Walker mailed him every article published on the Nixon trial over a period of a year, as shocked as her friend Wright by the crudely racist epithets applied to the defendant (*Richard Wright: Daemoniac Genius* [New York: Amistad, 1988], 121–50). Nixon’s defense that his accomplice in the burglary, Earl Hicks, had wielded the brick failed; the Illinois Supreme Court ruled that, under principles of felony murder, both burglars were equally responsible for the ensuing murder. Nixon was executed in 1939. The racist atmospherics of the Nixon trial are reflected in *Native Son*, and, like Nixon, Bigger Thomas uses a brick as his murder weapon in silencing his girlfriend, Bessie Mears.

w.35 Wyatt-Brown, Bertram *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982.

■ In this greatly praised study of ethics and behavior in the antebellum American South, Professor Wyatt-Brown stresses the key role played by honor, which he defines as “the cluster of ethical rules, most readily found in societies of small communities, by which judgments of behavior are ratified by community consensus.” The ethic of honor is composed of elements that are ages old: “inner feelings of self-worth, gentility, and high-mindedness or public repute, valor for family and country, and conformity to community wishes.”

Part 3 of *Southern Honor* examines structures of social control based on honor, including the Old South’s unlovely practices that replaced or, in Wyatt-Brown’s analysis, complemented the civil and criminal justice system. These measures of community retribution included kangaroo-court procedures for the alleviation of periodic fears about slave insurrections, usually figments of imagination or the pretexts for reasserting white dominion and unity; lynch law and its less-violent alternate, the *charivari* (pronounced *shivaree*), in which the victim, freed by court processes or punished too lightly by judicial authorities to satisfy the mob, was subjected to dehumanizing rituals, such as tar-and-feathering.