

Haiku: This Other World

By Richard Wright



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Author of 20th-century classics Native Son and Black Boy, Wright, while exiled in France, wrote over 4000 haiku in the 18 months before his death in 1960. Based on a manuscript at Yale's Beineke library, this volume reproduces Wright's own selection of 817 of these short, imagistic poems, most previously unpublished. In snapshots and brushstrokes, they largely adhere to the seasonal and descriptive conventions of the form, ranging from tranquil to winsome to bitter and plaintive. Wright can play rewardingly with consonance: "A soft wing at dawn/ Lifts one dry leaf and lays it/ Upon another." He can also, simply, observe: "Only where sunlight/ Spots the tablecloth with gold/ Do the flies cluster." Wright's tableaux encompass fields and forests, country villages and "wet tenements." A few seem specifically African American: "The green cockleburs/ Caught in the thick wooly hair/ Of the black boy's head." Some of the most effective follow an inverted? or parody? haiku form called senryu, cultivating incongruities, and ending up grotesque or funny: "While mounting a cow,/ A bull ejaculates sperm/ On apple blossoms." Clear themes and recurring images?exile, futility, illness, recovery, scarecrows, farm animals, rain and snow?compensate for the lack of overarching sequence. Copious notes elucidate single poems; a 61-page afterword explains the haiku tradition in Japanese and English, and ties Wright's earlier prose and verse to the Japanese form. The preface, by Wright's only daughter, gives ample biographical context to the many poems of mourning and grief. If not quite a major literary event, these poems nonetheless testify to the fruitful East-West confluences of the period, and to the respite they offered one of our all-time great writers.

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From Library Journal

Historian John Henrik Clarke once described Wright as "writing with a sledgehammer," and the powerful early works Native Son (1940) and Black Boy (1945) bear that out. But in the last creations of his life, he wrote as if with a gentle quill pen. During his final illness in France in 1960, Wright happened upon an English translation of Japanese haiku. Fascinated by the form, he began writing in it himself, producing over 4000 poems. Before his death, he selected 810 for publication, and now nearly 40 years later they are newly in print. Wright adheres strictly to the formal structure (three lines, five-seven-five syllables per line) and to the notion that the season of the year must be stated or implied. The poems are simple, Zenlike treasures: "As my delegate,/ The spring wind has its fingers/ In a young girl's hair." "For seven seconds/ The steam from the train whistle/ Blew out the spring moon." The collection has a melancholy air, perhaps a reflection of Wright's failing health and expatriate status. Highly recommended. Yudy Clarence, California State Univ. Lib., Hayward

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From **Booklist**

During the last 18 months of his life, the great African American novelist Richard Wright (1908^-60) wrote some 4,000 poems in the 3-line, 17-syllable Japanese form called haiku. He selected 817 of them to be published as a collection, which until now they have not been. They highlight a facet of Wright that had been secondary in his previous writings--namely, a capacity for deep communion with nature that may seem at odds with his commitment to social struggle. In their sometimes clumsy afterword, editors Hakutani and Tener draw attention to evidence in Wright's prose of his feeling for nature and point out autobiographical references in the haiku not only to the pleasure Wright took in gardening at his final home in France but also to his rural Mississippi childhood. The apprehension of the unity of creation that informs these little poems seems to have been something Wright had long felt and that his last, grave illness compelled him to express, thereby greatly enriching American literature. Ray Olson

Users Review

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