

## Review for WRIGHT CONNECTION

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Richard Wright. *A Father's Law*. New York: HarperPerennial, 2008.

Written in the final months of his life, Wright's last novel, *A Father's Law*, challenges readers to reconsider how the practice of law and order might at once regulate and complicate the lives of American citizens. Resonating themes from *The Outsider* (1953) and *The Long Dream* (1958), and more faintly those in *Native Son* (1940), this book provides fresh evidence of Wright's talent for spinning tales that catch our conscience. In depicting the uncertainties that may obtain in a father's relationship with his son, Wright maps actuality into such reality as novels seek to represent. He demonstrates why the confluence of psychology, philosophy, and criminology is compelling. The novel provokes readers to deal with some of the knotty issues engaged by proponents of critical race theory and with the endlessly tantalizing matter of how morality is constructed in the United States. *A Father's Law* dwells less on the specifics of racialized being-in-the-world that we find in *Native Son* and more on those prejudices, biological anxieties, and legalized mores that frustrate people's efforts to act morally. Ultimately, readers have to resort to some theory of justice to bring the unfinished aspects of this novel to aesthetic closure. Unfortunately, Wright died before he had a chance to decide whether the current ending of the novel is a precise representation of his intentions. Thus, by default, readers may be obligated to interpret *A Father's Law* as pure tragedy, as a confirmation that justice can be conceptualized and discussed but never achieved. It is not too much to claim that Wright succeeded in crafting a narrative which judiciously confirms how we exhaust our energies in denial of our limitations.

Wright uses some elements of the detective story to plot crucial and limiting moments in the relationship of Chief of Police Rudolph Turner with his son Tommy, but he subverts our conventional

expectations. The novel is not an average thriller. *A Father's Law* denies us the pleasure we might derive from mere time-killing fictions. It summons us to ponder what conditions necessitate law, how strict construction of law may debase our humanity, and how a father's guilt and probing may quicken a son's embrace of real or imagined criminality. It invites readers to interrogate the minds of two characters seemingly caught in the net of law.

As a police chief in Brentwood Park, an upscale Chicago suburb, Rudolph (Ruddy) Turner relishes his achievement, and he loves "the laws and rules of the community with an abiding and intense passion." Nevertheless, as a father who is Republican, Catholic, and black, he is vulnerable. His badge of authority is a weak shield. He has failed to cultivate bonds of friendship with his nineteen-year-old son Tommy, although he has been responsible in providing him with material goods and educational advantages. He feels guilty about that failure. His efforts to make amends and to know his son better only beget more doubts. Is his son against him and the bourgeois values for which he stands? Is his son a genius and a criminal? Wright's masterful depiction of both Turner's states of mind and Tommy's antagonism leads us into a vortex where simple explanations of good, evil, guilt, innocence, obedience and ingrained resentment evade us. His prose at once charms and frightens us with the power of the indeterminate.

For some readers, *A Father's Law* may appear to be a rewriting of *The Long Dream* insofar as it is about a middle-class father and son. Others, focusing on Tommy's character, will be reminded of the long song of yearning in *The Outsider*. The resemblances among the books exist only on the surfaces of the narratives or in our eagerness to reinvent Wright's discourses on law and masculinity fifty years after publication of *The Long Dream*. The dice are loaded differently in Wright's last novel. He gives new angles to the tension between Reverend Tucker and his son sketched in his short story "Fire and Cloud" and voiced in his autobiography *Black Boy*, as Wright coldly described the abyss between his biological father and himself. In *A Father's Law*, the abyss is concealed beneath a layer of thin ice. As we plunge by

choice into the depths of the novel, we discover that Wright's exploration is superbly radical or pre-future rather than modern.

In *The Long Dream*, the son Rex "Fishbelly" Tucker, comes to despise his middleclass father's corruption and sycophancy; he scorns Tyree Tucker's wearing of a mask in the face of racism and the "white" law's turning a blind eye, if sufficiently bribed, on matters of black criminality; like Tommy in *A Father's Law*, he discerns that law in theory is negated by law in praxis. Under his father's tutelage, Rex becomes savvy about the hypocrisies of a segregated world; out of spite, he eschews formal education, embraces "manhood," and becomes his father's partner in shady dealings. The narrative is a faithful rendering of law and desire in the postwar South. On the other hand, *A Father's Law* is set in the "integrated" North. Tommy has stronger intellectual yearnings than Rex, and his life is more sheltered. His father has never instructed him about the ways of the real world. It is through his readings in psychology and sociology that he develops distrust of his father's unquestioning belief in the rightness of law. He positions himself, much as does Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, to challenge the foundations of a belief grounded in the dimness of the state of nature and some fundamental American social contract. Nevertheless, he is ill-equipped to deal with some brutal facts of everyday life.

While father and son are at odds about the nature of the criminal mind and obedience to man's law, they are of one accord in regarding congenital syphilis as an unmistakable sign of moral pollution. Tommy reluctantly confesses to his father that he broke off his engagement to his girlfriend Marie when blood tests showed she inherited the disease. Transferring his dread of the unclean to the urban environment, Tommy consequently abandoned his sociological studies of Chicago's Black Belt. Turner is naturally concerned about his son's emotional state, but he is relieved that a sense of what is "just" prevented his son from marrying "a tainted girl" who has inherited the sins of her forefathers. Such sharply gendered irony! This male reading of disease is quite telling and effective in a plot strongly

marked by readings and misreadings. The deeper irony exists in Turner's assuming Tommy's unbalanced view of life can be cured by exposing him to the state of affairs in Brentwood Park, so he might see "that all areas had their tragedies, that all areas had their poisons, their sources of contamination." There are hints in the text that Tommy knows more about contamination in Brentwood than does his father.

Under the influence of patriarchal law and prejudices, father and son reify the blindness implicit in how some American males socially construct reality. Wright's characterization of males tests the capability of psychological realism to explain. If we accept that in his last days Wright was more openly sharing the obligation of reaching ethical conclusions with his potential readers, we should certainly appreciate the new turn in his experiments in fiction. As was the case with Wright's previous novels, *A Father's Law* is a question-making instrument. Our transactions with the text invite us to consider that law *qua* law does not secure order; on the contrary, law grounded in the antiquity of folk psychology may induce chaos.

Given that *A Father's Law* is replete with echoes from such earlier novels as *Lawd Today!*, *Native Son*, *The Outsider*, and *Savage Holiday*, it is a summation of Wright's aesthetic, his hardboiled vision of a future for which the Cold War was preparing us and the worlds we inhabit. We may find ourselves agreeing with an insight Julia Wright gives us in her introduction. "There is eeriness in my father's premonition," she writes, "that criminality was doomed to bloom among the elite, that the energies of the Tommies of America might better be used by a cause or a movement for justice, that syphilis would overtake us under another name, and that youth serial killing on American university campuses would eventually inspire a prize-winning film in Cannes" (xi-xii). Yes, Wright was already prophetic in *Native Son*. If external events lend credibility to prophecy, we must not neglect the Old Testament sources of Wright's premonition and vision and Wright's struggle to find the language and forms which speak of the

terror and impediments embedded in the law of the father. What is law? Who is its father? What are we to make of Nietzsche's notion that morality is a disease? Does the enlightenment promised by ratiocination in the modern world only intensify the power of what Francis Bacon identified as the "Four Idols"? Even in its unfinished state, *A Father's Law* succeeds in reading mankind's dirty laundry and in leaving us with the option of reading against the patriarchal grain.

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