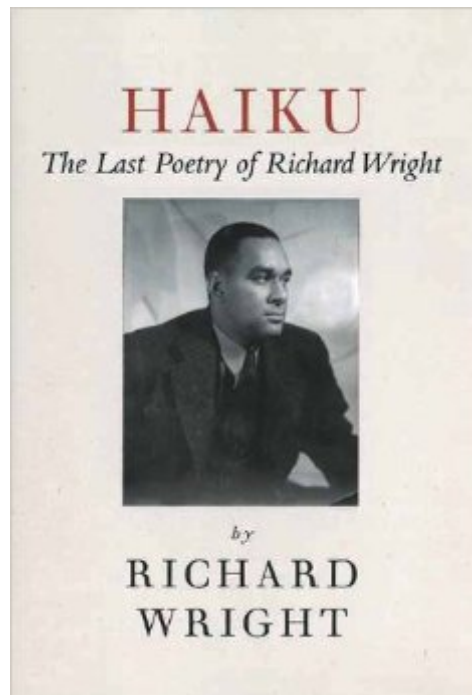


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Haiku: The Last Poems Of An American Icon



Synopsis

Richard Wright, one of the early forceful and eloquent spokesmen for black Americans, author of the acclaimed *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, discovered the haiku in the last eighteen months of life. He attempted to capture, through his sensibility as an African-American, the elusive Zen discipline and beauty in depicting man's relationship, not only to his fellow man as he had in the raw and forceful prose of his fiction, but to the natural world. In all, he wrote over 4,000 haiku. Here are the 817 he personally chose; Wright's haiku, disciplined and steeped in beauty, display a universality that transcends both race and color without ever denying them. Wright wrote his haiku obsessively "in bed, in cafes, in restaurants, in both Paris and the French countryside. They offered him a new form of expression and a new vision: with the threat of death constantly before him, he found in them inspiration, beauty, and insights. Fighting illness and frequently bedridden, deeply upset by the recent loss of his mother, Ella, Wright continued, as his daughter notes in her introduction, "to spin these poems of light out of the gathering darkness."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I came to this book as a fan of Richard Wright, and as a poetry buff, but not as an avid reader of haiku. I was intrigued to discover that a literary figure who had distinguished himself primarily through his fiction, particularly his novels, had explored this Eastern poetic form in the final year-and-a-half of his life. My expectations were admittedly high, and, accordingly, my reaction was mixed. I found the 817 haiku (selected by the author from roughly 4000 that he had composed) alternately engaging and self-conscious. Wright often riffs at length on a particular theme, linguistic

turn, or device somewhat incessantly, suggesting that he did not make his editorial choices based solely on variety. However, while the repetition can become heavy-handed and tiresome, it is at times incantatory, and, as such, quite compelling. In general, there is a homogenous quality to the collection, mitigated by occasional forays into less idiomatic haiku, which ultimately prove to be the most interesting in the series. The foreword by Wright's daughter Julia is eloquent and concise, the afterword and notes by the editors somewhat less so. I am not familiar enough with this art form to take issue with their discussion, only with their laborious and academic style, which I found to be less-than-ideally suited to the subject matter. In the final analysis, while the book was not quite the revelation I had hoped it would be, it is unquestionably a valuable addition to Wright's catalogue and legacy, offering some valuable insight into his earlier works. It is also, simply put, a fine collection of poetry, one that bears reading if only to see a great writer stretch his literary muscles in a new medium.

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