

Originally adapted for and published in Storyworks Magazine under the title "Richard Wright & The Library Card"



Cast of Characters:

- Richard Wright – an African-American boy
- Roxie and Maggie – Richard's childhood friends and the story's narrators
 - Grandpa – Richard's grandfather
- Mr. Falk, Mr. Gerald, and Mr. Olin – Richard's bosses at the clinic
 - Librarian ▫ Woman



Scene 1 – The Deep South

Roxie: Our friend Richard used to always say he was glad he was born in 1908 'stead of 1808.

Maggie: But even though slavery was gone, life in the Deep South was still tough for colored folk.

Roxie: That's right. If you were black like Richard, you couldn't vote, you couldn't go to a good school ...

Maggie: You couldn't even get a library card.



Roxie: It's no wonder Richard was still dreamin' of being free.

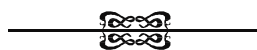
Richard: What's that you're thinkin' about, Grandpa?

Grandpa: I was just thinkin' how when I was your age I was a slave runnin' away from my master.

Richard: Didn't he come after you?

Grandpa: Sure he did, but by then I was fightin' in the war so that all slaves could be free. I may have been just a boy, but I fought as hard as any man. I fought in the rain and the mud.

Richard: Weren't your scared?



Grandpa: Yes, I was, but I was fightin' for freedom.

Richard: What's it like to be free, Grandpa?

Grandpa: What are you talkin' about, son? You are free.

Richard: Somehow I don't feel like it, Grandpa. We're so poor, and we have to move all the time lookin' for work. Where's the freedom in that?

Grandpa: Well, I'll tell you a little secret, Richard. Books are the road to the promised land.



Maggie: Well, Roxie and me, we were impressed to hear Richard read every word of that ol' rag. We looked around for other things to read.

Roxie: Look here, Richard! I found this old torn up book in an ash can. Tell us what it says!

Maggie: Look, there's part of the funny papers in the gutter. Read it, Richard!

Roxie (to the audience): We liked listening to him say all those words, but we just didn't understand how readin' would get him to the promised land.



Scene 2 – A Few Years Later

Roxie: What's wrong, Richard? Why are you so glum?

Richard: I've been to the library, but they won't let me in.

Roxie: Of course not. The library is shut up against black folk. Why do you want to go there anyway?

Richard: I want to read, Roxie. Books are the road to the promised land.

Roxie: You know how to read? How'd you learn how to read?

Richard: My mama taught me some. I taught myself some, too. Look there.

Maggie (to the audience): Richard spotted an old newspaper in a trash can.

Richard: A newspaper! Let me read some of it to you.



Scene 3 - Movin' to Memphis

Maggie: When Richard was seventeen, he got on a bus bound for the big city.

Roxie: Where you headed, Richard?

Richard: Memphis. I'm going to get me a job.

Roxie: Well you just be careful now.

Maggie: Good bye, Richard.

Roxie: And good luck!

Maggie: Unfortunately, Richard wasn't the only one lookin' for work.

Roxie: There were many young black men searching the streets of Memphis.

Richard: Excuse me, ma'am. Might you have a job for someone like me?

Woman: Sorry. Just hired a boy yesterday. Times are hard 'round here.

Maggie: But Richard didn't give up.



Roxie: When he asked for a place in an optometry clinic, his luck improved.

Mr. Gerald: You'll report every morning promptly at 8 a.m.. You'll sweep the floors, run errands, and do other simple chores.

Mr. Olin: You must be careful when you polish the eyeglasses.

Mr. Gerald: You mustn't speak unless spoken to.

Mr. Olin: And you must always begin every sentence with "sir."

Richard: Sir, yes, sir.

Mr. Falk: Welcome to the firm, Richard.



Maggie: Richard checked out the books for Mr. Falk and went back to the office.

Richard: Sir, here are your books and your card.

Mr. Falk: Thank you, Richard.

Roxie: Seeing all those library shelves stirred up something fierce in Richard.

Maggie: He just couldn't let it be. A week later he stood at Mr. Falk's desk feeling uneasy.

Richard: Sir, I want to ask you a favor.

Roxie: Mr. Falk looked at Richard suspiciously. He glanced around to make sure they other men weren't listening.

Mr. Falk: Are you in some kind of trouble?

Maggie: What Richard was about to say was very risky.

Richard: Sir, I want to read, but I can't get books from the library. I wonder if you'd let me use your card?

Maggie: He hoped Mr. Falk wouldn't laugh in his face. He hoped he wouldn't be fired.

Mr. Falk: What do you want to read, Richard? Poetry, novels, history?

Roxie: Richard's mind raced.

Richard: Sir, everything, sir.

Maggie: Mr. Falk hesitated at first, but then he held out his worn library card.

Mr. Falk: How will you use it?

Richard: Sir, I'll write a note,... like the one you wrote when I got books for you.

Mr. Falk: All right. But don't tell anyone. I don't want to get in trouble.



Scene 4 - Workin' Man

Maggie: A few days later, one of the white men handed Richard a note.

Mr. Falk: Richard, take my library card to the public library and check out these books for me.

Richard: Sir, I don't believe black boys are permitted in the library, sir.

Mr. Falk: The note explains everything, Richard. Just take it to the front desk and they'll take care of it.

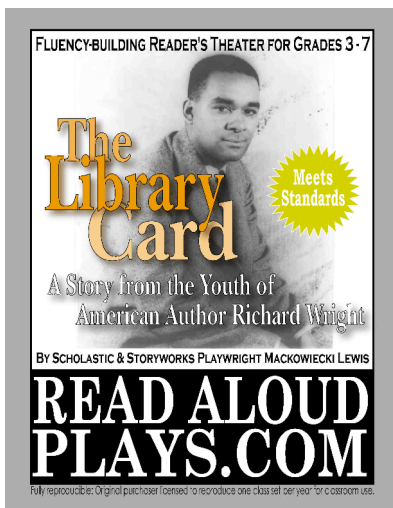
Richard: Sir, yes, sir. I will, sir.

Roxie: Richard went to the library remembering what his grandfather had told him about reading.

Maggie: The shelves were lined with thousands upon thousands of books.

Roxie: Richard longed to read them, but black boys weren't allowed to have library cards.





American author Richard Wright wrote numerous books of significance during the middle of the 20th-century including *Native Son* and the autobiographical *Black Boy*. This play is based on an incident from Wright's youth in which he was denied access to the public library due to his race. The story was popularized in William Miller's inspiring picture book, "Richard Wright and the Library Card" (Lee & Low, 1997). Young Richard teaches himself how to read, moves to the city, and gets a job. When he's turned away at the library, he seeks help from his employer. His boss takes the risk, allowing Richard to check out books in his name. The suitability of its themes for children including racism, love of reading, trustworthiness, and grace is obvious, but be aware that the author Richard Wright led a controversial life that may be objectionable to some. This play is fairly straightforward to enact with simple scene changes and

minimal props. There are parts for 9 actors, the two narrators being of greatest importance. In scenes 2 and 3, they narrate while also interacting as characters. Their Southern dialect is optional, and though they are girls, they can easily be cast as boys simply by changing their names.



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Vocab: The following words may prove confusing to young readers: **colored** (racial term of that era; worthy of discussion), **rag** (newspaper), **congested** (crowded), **stamped** (marked), **longed** (desired), **fierce** (empowering), **discretely** (secretly), **Mencken** and **Tolstoy** (authors); *optometry* and *potent* are also challenging, but they are they subject of questions in the comprehension activity.

Comprehension Activity (*CCS Lit items 1, 5, and 10; Info Text item 2*) The activity is designed to prompt discussion more than it is to evaluate correctness. **Key:** 1. c; 2. b; 3. d; 4. c; 5. b; 6. a; 7. d; 8. any answer could be deemed correct provided student backs it up with evidence; 9. answers will vary

Extension Activities:

- **Pair with "Richard Wright & the Library Card"** by William Miller (Lee & Low, 1997). Older students can pair it with Wright's original text, "The Library Card," which can usually be found online. Create a simple T-chart to satisfy Common Core standard, "Information Text, Craft and Structure" (*analyze multiple accounts of the same event...*)
- **Enact along side other plays.** *ReadAloudPlays.com* has numerous plays with related content. Meet CCS standard for Literature (*analyze how two or more text address similar themes...*) by teaming *Library Card* with *How Jackie Saved the World* (with focus on pre-MLK racial tension) or with *Stolen Childhoods* or *The Newsies* (with focus on issues related to the Great Depression).

