Literary Cubs, Canceling Out Each Other’s Reticence

*Letters between Federal Writers’ Project cohorts Richard Wright and Nelson Algren depict a mutual admiration rare among young novelists*

David A. Taylor

In Yale’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, a cart rolls out from the stacks with archival boxes from the Richard Wright collection, neatly arranged, belying their insurgent contents. I open one and find, in a letter from March 1940, an arresting passage:

Dear Dick,

I really hadn’t planned on writing you about *Native Son*, because I’d assumed it was just one more good book in America. . . . But I’m honestly hit so hard I have to get it off my chest. . . . I don’t feel any need to tell you how well-thought out or how well-sustained it is and all that, you’ll hear all that all over. . . . What does get me is it’s such a threat. I mean a personal threat. At first I felt it was just a challenge, but it’s more. You’ve done a very, very smart thing: I don’t think any white person could read it without being either frightened or angry at the end. My own reaction happened to be anger more than anything else. I mean when someone’s threatened out of a clear sky, he starts getting sore.

The letter reached Wright a month after *Native Son*, his first novel, appeared. Wright was in the first flush of fame, and the letter writer, Nelson Algren, a fellow novelist who was exactly his age, 31, was still not widely known. What you hear in that letter and Wright’s reply is an unguarded exchange—rare for any two writers, especially these two, one white, one black—and the unambiguous tones of a friendship. It is as if these two introverts have canceled out each other’s reticence. They discuss race, but like any two writers who have swapped manuscripts, they discuss it as an element of the work. With the focus on writing, they navigate very personal feelings on that treacherous terrain.

After offering his gut response, Algren continues: “I don’t mean I’m angry now. I don’t see how anyone could stay angry, assuming he’s got a notion of what it’s all about, because, of course, you’re right. . . . You can’t stay angry at patent truth.” Algren shares the self-doubt and anguish of any reader when first confronted with his innate racism. “I have the feeling that I’ve been going around with that surface-look you ascribed, first, to Buddy. And of course anyone resents suddenly seeing himself as a dope, especially when it’s so true.”

Then he returns to the novel’s merits—the appreciation of a reader and a friend, complete with a doodle in the margin: “I’ve never read anything more psychologically convincing than *Native Son*. I wouldn’t want to. . . . You’ve hit me with something you’ve been holding behind your back all the while. . . . [but I’ll be] grateful for being slugged out of a coma. Sincerely, Nelson”

Wright replied, “I think you reacted more honestly than anybody I know. But really, I
wasn’t trying to frighten anybody or make anybody angry. I just wrote as I felt... I just threw shame and fear and pride out of the window.”

The exchange invites the question: How well did these two know each other? What did they share—Algren the son of a Jewish auto mechanic in Chicago, Wright a refugee from the Jim Crow South? Were these lone wolves of urban realist fiction writing for each other? Did they agree on what writing should do?

Algren and Wright got acquainted in Depression-era Chicago, in 1933 or ’34, at the John Reed Club, a youth group for the Communist Party that met in a second-floor apartment on South Michigan Avenue. They became close, though, when they worked for the Federal Writers’ Project, a New Deal program for people plucked from the unemployment rolls. The FW P began under the Works Progress Administration in 1935 and for almost five years would document a wide range of American life. Like other WPA arts projects, the FW P employed thousands who had lost jobs in the publishing industry. Its most visible effort was a series of travel guides for each of the 48 states, the U.S. territories, and selected cities. Henry Alsberg, the national director, envisioned these guides as hybrids, combining a state encyclopedia and a conventional travel guide with tour routes. The five-pound books were of dubious use for travelers, perhaps, but they were comprehensive, even including an annual calendar of festivals and events. “Folklore, travel, history, everything,” Studs Terkel said of the guides in 2004 when I interviewed him at his home. “You can’t match them anywhere.” Terkel, who died last October at the age of 96, credited the FW P with his own start as a writer.

The Chicago FW P office was an exceptional version of what Alsberg could barely hope for: a community of talents that would absorb the American scene with fresh eyes and imaginations. Although the project was make-work, Alsberg, a one-time director of the Provincetown Playhouse in Massachusetts and a friend of Eugene O’Neill, imagined that it might foster a creative dialogue. In Chicago, Algren and Wright provided alphabetical bookends to a startling roster that included Saul Bellow (his first writing job), Arna Bontemps, Jack Conroy, choreographer Katherine Dunham, Terkel, and African-American poet and novelist Margaret Walker. Most were in their 20s. Wright was 28 or 29 when he joined. Algren was 27. Bellow was 22. Walker was 20 and had to lie about her age to become a member.

“These writers will get an education in the American scene,” Alsberg said at the time. “A great deal of real American writing comes out of seeing what is really happening to the American people.”

Besides the state guides, the Writers’ Project gathered thousands of life histories, natural histories, ethnographies, and interviews. Between 1935 and 1939 it released more than 200 publications. Many manuscripts piled up, never to be published. The FW P ended as World War II loomed and for years received little public attention. Having been on a relief program wasn’t anything to brag about, but former employees’ silence was ensured when in 1939 the first House Committee on Un-American Activities tarred the WPA effort as Communist infiltrated. It was decades before one FW P editor, Jerre Mangione, led a rehabilitation effort that continues now with a new television documentary, funded largely by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Chicago’s FW P office was in a warehouse on McClurg Court near Lake Michigan. The room where the staff met between assignments held nearly a hundred people, “a huge floor,” as Terkel recalled.
Margaret Walker encountered Richard Wright on her first day on the job. She later wrote, in Richard Wright, Daemonic Genius, that the office fostered “what nobody believed was possible at that time—a renaissance of the arts and American culture . . . and some of the most valued friendships in the literary history of the period.” For her, the project ended the isolation of African-American artists. The political climate in the warehouse shifted her writing markedly, from “very romantic and sentimental” poetry to a more “realistic” style, she told interviewer Judith McCravy for the short film For My People: The Life and Writing of Margaret Walker. “I was very conscious of making that change.”

In after-hours gatherings over cold cuts and cheap wine, staff members flirted with each other and debated politics. Walker recalled a party where a conservative colleague cautioned her about Communists in the office, and the next moment Wright pulled her aside to warn against a lesbian coworker: “Don’t let that woman put an arm around you,” he said. “And don’t take candy from her.”

Wright had come to Chicago in late 1927 and by the end of the decade had obtained a part-time position with the postal service. Soon after the stock-market crash, he was out of a job. He sold burial insurance for a time. He and his mother moved to a cheaper apartment, and he took relief work with the city, digging ditches and cleaning hospital operating rooms and animal lab cages.

When he joined the Federal Writers’ Project, he tried, as he wrote, “to earn my bread by writing guidebooks.” He received and kept a letter dated January 1936, addressed “To whom it may concern”; it declared Wright “an authorized representative of the AMERICAN GUIDE” and urged the reader to “give any information or suggestions that will help to make our Guide more authoritative and accurate,” for the benefit of all Illinois. “Many of the writers on the project were members of the Communist party,” he wrote in his autobiographical Black Boy. “After working on the project for a few months, I was made acting supervisor of essays.”

In the essays he drafted for the guide, Wright captured Depression life on Southside Chicago, from a tearoom that harbored people “seeking seclusion and privacy” to movie theaters (“Admission is 25 cents for adults and 15 cents for children. In summer there is a cooling system.”) to dicier quarters down the way:

Along Garfield Boulevard . . . are dozens of beer gardens, . . . “chicken shacks,” horse racing, bookies, pool rooms, and small hotels. Here is the center of gambling, prostitution and “high-life.” . . . Walking still further west on Garfield Blvd. till we reach State Street, we find a night club of the old 1920 variety—the Club Delisa at 5516 S. State St. There is an average bar and a huge dance floor. The place is Italian owned and catered, it is rumored, to “gangster trade.”

Other staff members researched tour routes or interviewed neighborhood residents about their lives. A young Saul Bellow catalogued biographies of midwestern writers.

Algren started as a field interviewer, wrote much of the Illinois guide text on the city of Galena, and eventually became a supervisor. “Had it not been for [the Writers’ Project] the suicide rate would have been much higher,” he said later. “It gave new life to people who had thought their lives were over. . . . To such people the WPA provided a place where they began to communicate with people again.” He added, “I know it put me in touch with people again.”

Before that, Algren had supported himself as a door-to-door salesman and truck driver. He had ridden freight through west Texas, plumbing the stories of his fellow hoboes. On the WPA, Algren at first earned $87 a month, then $96. Eventually he was up to $125, “the most money I had ever made.” His rent ate up only a fifth of it, he said, “so I had a hundred bucks and I was going to the race track. It was a kind of affluence.”

Terkel, after leaving law school and pursuing an ill-fated interview with the FBI, applied to the Writers’ Project. “That’s where I met Nelson Algren, who was an outsider too,” Terkel recalled. Some afternoons he, Algren, and others would slip out to the Arena bowling alley half a block away to knock down pins at 20 cents a line. His friendship with Algren would profoundly shape his own work. “My own writ-
ing—for better or worse—was influenced by Nelson more than anybody I know,” Terkel once told an interviewer.

Algren and Wright worked on their fiction after office hours. “Everybody used [the project] to the extent that it was a place where you could report at 10 in the morning and then leave at 2 and then you had the rest of the day to yourself,” Algren said in one interview. He was ambling toward a novel while Wright put together the short stories that would become *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938). Jack Conroy, a mutual friend, had a head start in writing proletarian novels, having already published *The Disinherited* (1933) and *A World to Win* (1935).

For the folklore division, Conroy and Algren interviewed bar patrons, prostitutes, and boxers and found the experience beneficial to their fiction. They visited bars “in the sleaziest skid row district of Chicago,” Conroy said, which “had royal or very grandiose royal names” like the King’s Palace, Queen’s Paradise, and Duke’s Castle. “Algren and I would repair over there . . . and at a certain festive hour in the afternoon, it was called the ‘cuckoo hour’ in King’s Palace and the bartenders would go about shouting, ‘Cuckoo’ and the object of the ‘Cuckoo hour’ was . . . you could get another shot of whiskey for a penny additional.” Many of these interviews were later collected by Ann Banks in *First-Person America* and are now online at the Library of Congress Web site.

Historian Michael Denning suggests in *Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* that the FWP mandate to record people’s lives echoed the John Reed clubs’ earlier call for writers to study industries and trades; thus the novels of Algren, Conroy, and Wright—as well as of Walker, Ralph Ellison, and others—“embodied a dialectic between fictional invention, autobiographical reflection, and urban fieldwork.”

By mid-1937, Wright was anxious to try his luck in New York City. It was a leap of faith. In her biography of Wright, Margaret Walker recalled his nervousness on his last day in Chicago. “We got on the El . . . and got seats,” she wrote. “He said, ‘When I go tonight, I will have forty dollars in my pocket . . . I hope I can get on the Writers’ Project there . . . I hope I’m not making a mistake.’ . . . His stop came first, and suddenly he grabbed both my hands and said goodbye.”

By 1939, Wright was on the project in New York and making a name with his stories. He had published an essay in an anthology of FWP writers’ work called *American Stuff* (Wright’s essay was “the first piece of writing to hit me squarely between the eyes,” wrote The New York Times’ reviewer) and won a short-story contest for WPA workers organized by *Story* magazine. That brought a $500 prize and a publishing contract for *Uncle Tom’s Children*. He had recruited a young Ralph Ellison to the project and was at work on a novel based on a murder trial in Chicago. With a recommendation from Alsberg, Wright soon received a Guggenheim Foundation grant that took him to Mexico.

Algren was still in Chicago, working off and on for the project. A note of friction enters his typed postcards to Wright, as in one dated February 18, 1939:

Dear Dick,

Heartiest congratulations on your winning of the *Story* contest—and more power to you. Or, as the Irishman says, may yer shadda niver grow less. . . . I hate to knock down that $500, needing it as I know you do—but you will recall that you intended to send along a couple bucks I loaned you, when you could spare it. So you see I have a long memory, and besides we live here pretty much on the grim verge ourselves. Let’s hear from you. Best, Nelson

---

*Essay | Books*
At the same time, Wright’s success buoyed Algren and his other friends in Chicago with the hope that they too could make it. Informal mentors came and went. When Margaret Walker was working on a new poem and wanted feedback from another writer, she took it to Algren’s house, and they talked it over. Then she went home and completed the powerful last stanza of “For My People,” which ends, “Let a race of men now rise and take control.”

Walker was also clipping newspaper articles about a murder trial that Wright kept asking her about. She sent them to him in New York, where he arranged them on the floor of his apartment and began writing *Native Son*.

By early 1940, Algren was balanced uneasily between the world of Chicago’s downtrodden and Wright’s publishing world in New York, where *Native Son* was a Book-of-the-Month Club success. Algren received a copy, inscribed, “To my old friend Nelson. Who I believe is still the best writer of good prose in the U.S.A. Dick.”

Dear Dick,

*Native Son* arrived this morning. I haven’t begun it yet because I can’t get past the autograph. I hope you meant it all the way, because it did something to me. . . . I’m now hoping I can do something—just a little—toward earning that inscription. . . . I’m looking forward to moving so I can get settled and get some work done before I’m totally bald (three years away) and I hope you won’t wait till I’m bald to write.

*Native Son* gave Algren a focus and persistence for his own work. By May, he had moved into Chicago’s Polish neighborhood centered at Milwaukee and Division Streets, which the *WPA* guide to Illinois described as “an old-time proving ground for Chicago hoodlums.” He set to work on a novel about a boxer, which would become *Never Come Morning* (1942). His marriage was coming apart, and his sister, the only family member who had encouraged his writing, was dying. He told almost nobody how hard her illness struck him, but he did confide in Wright: “Dear Dick, . . . Trouble and tribulation. Economics and death. My sister, age 37, died last week leaving two little kids, 10 and 6. Trouble, trouble.”

Finally, the Writers’ Project became a casualty of a country bracing for war. By 1939 U.S. Rep. Martin Dies of Texas, the chair of the House Un-American Activities Committee, had attacked the project as a tool of Communists and freeloaders, and its budget was slashed. State funding kept activities limping along until 1943, and Algren stayed with it, fitfully. It still gave him perspective on his muse, Chicago. In October 1940 he sent Wright comments on Wright’s new essay “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born”:

What I liked best in it was a paragraph that was just a by-product, describing “that fabulous, roaring city,” etc. I’ve always thought of Chicago as such a place—like the Petersburg of Dostoevsky—a place of extremes of heat, a sort of sprawling chaos of men and women, taverns, el’s, trolleys, markets, brothels, poolrooms, with no two persons going in the same direction and no meaning to the whole insane business of milling and elbowing and clutching until you stop to look at just one person, any one . . . . In other words it’s a town with a wholly inhuman aspect taken in bulk and from a rooftop, but understandable when approached in human terms. . . . The above lines indicate an effort to thank you for the plugging which laid a contract and five Cs on my doorstep. . . . All the best, Nelson

Wright was helping Algren gain entrée with New York editors and providing critical suggestions for his new novel’s structure. Wright also wrote a glowing introduction for *Never Come Morning*. Algren was grateful: “The introduction gives me the feeling that you know better than I do what I’m up to, and will afford me an explanation which I’ve never tried to articulate myself.”

Even then, with increasing acceptance among publishers, Algren kept his spot on the project, joking to Wright that it would take a few more hefty magazine commissions before he’d “quit the W.P.&A.,” making it sound like a steady railroad job. He urged Wright to come back to Chicago for his own creativity: “When you feel yourself looking at the world through the veil
of sophistication common to N.Y. writers, you’d better slip back here for six months or a year to recapture the actuality of Native Son. . . . Give me Chicago any day.” Algren groused about battling his old typewriter and how lack of a better one stalled his novel’s progress. Not until July 1941 did he write, “I got the boot off the Project, among some twenty other supervisors and over a hundred field workers. Conroy got it also.”

The last note in Wright’s files relating to Algren is a letter from Algren’s mother. On November 14, 1945, she wrote that she was looking forward to hearing Wright speak at the Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago. “Nelson is still in France waiting to be sent home,” she informed her son’s friend.

Algren and Wright met up for the last time in the summer of 1949, in Paris. Algren had delivered The Man With the Golden Arm to his publisher. By then, both men had achieved renown, although Wright’s was still far greater. The New York Times had found Algren’s Never Come Morning “sickeningly powerful and unsparing,” and admitted that he “might achieve much.” Neon Wilderness had attracted good reviews, and Algren received a national grant. Wright had followed up Native Son with Black Boy and 12 Million Black Voices, a photo essay in the FWP mold. Seeing each other in Paris, biographer Bettina Drew writes, “sadly underscored the differences that Wright’s self-exile had brought between the two defenders of the inarticulate.”

Algren carelessly insulted Wright’s decision to live in Paris, suggesting it cut ties with his roots. Incensed, Wright responded, “Don’t you realize that some of the greatest novels have been written in exile?” He cited Dostoyevsky. Algren said the difference lay in whether a man was exiled from his country or had exiled himself. After that, there wasn’t much to say.

As years passed Algren abused the kindnesses of many others, but he still remembered Wright in the early 1960s when an interviewer asked him who else in the 1930s was doing what Algren was trying. “Well, just Dick Wright, that’s all,” he answered. “That’s the only one I know of in the ’30s who was writing from the bottom of American society. . . . Wright had made these multitudes articulate to himself.” Algren also finally managed to articulate why he himself wrote. His books started, he said, as scenes in which human beings were involved in conflict, I was in the middle of them and simply recorded my own reactions and tried to catch the emotional ebb and flow and something of the fear and the terror and the dangers and the kind of life that multitudes of people have been forced into with no recognition that such a world existed. They lived in a world which is very plain, which anybody could see, which is lived in the streets of the city, but which the people who didn’t live in this world said, “It doesn’t exist, they aren’t there, we know that they aren’t there, and if they are there, it doesn’t matter, because we’re here and we don’t live in that sort of world.”

Algren and Wright brought that world to American literature. Their exchanges show how they plumbed those dynamics, navigated the minefield of human relations, and honed their instruments, one against the other.

NEW FROM STANFORD
Deception
From Ancient Empires to Internet Dating
Edited by BROOKE HARRINGTON With a Foreword by MURRAY GELL-MANN

From Internet-dating profiles to Native American folktales to the photo trickery of Hollywood gossip magazines, this volume explores deception and offers insights from leading figures in disparate fields, drawing out surprising commonalities. For the first time, one broadly accessible volume pulls together classic philosophical debates on deception with examinations of contemporary issues, including stock market fraud and terrorism.

“One of the most important forms of communication—deception—is one of the least studied. A useful approach to the problem, then, is with a collection of investigators, each with a different angle, each aware of the others’ contributions, each looking for signs of hidden structure. The result in this book, deliciously, is an introduction to the Science of Untruth.”

—Stewart Brand

$39.95 cloth

© 2010 Stanford University Press 800.621.2736 www.sup.org