

Reader's Guide – *Clara Callan*

About the Author

Richard B. Wright is the author of nine novels. His work has been published in Canada, the U.S., and the U.K., to outstanding reviews. A graduate of Trent and Ryerson universities, Wright taught English at Ridley College in St. Catharines, Ontario, for over twenty years. Born in Midland, Ontario, Mr. Wright currently lives in St. Catharines with his wife, Phyllis.

Inside *Clara Callan*

Saturday, November 3 (8:10 p.m.)

Nora left for New York City today. I think she is taking a terrible chance going all the way down there but, of course, she wouldn't listen. You can't tell Nora anything. You never could.

Monday, March 25

Showers and the smell of earth as I walked to school this morning. The children were restless today, anxious to be outside even in the rain. There is an eagerness for spring in their blood: farewell to woollen underwear, to overshoes and scratchy leggings. I understand and remember feeling the same way at this time of year. For me, it is now goodbye, at least for a few months, to shovelling coal into that damn furnace.

It's the late 1930s and two sisters, Clara and Nora Callan, face the future with both hope and uncertainty. Clara is a spinster school teacher whose quiet life in a small Ontario town masks a passion for love and adventure. Nora, her flighty and attractive sister, escapes to the excitement of New York, where she lands a starring role in a radio soap opera and becomes a minor celebrity. In a world of Depression and at a time when war clouds are gathering, the sisters struggle within the web of social expectations for young women.

Underneath the seemingly ordinary lives of Wright's characters are entire worlds of emotion that, once entered, become wildly unpredictable. *Clara Callan* has that capacity to surprise, to draw the reader behind the facade of convention to where secrets percolate and sudden, unexpected violence erupts.

Clara and Nora, very different yet inextricably linked, face the future in their own ways, discovering the joys of love, the price of infidelity, and the capacity for sorrow lurking beneath the surface of everyday experience. A brilliantly realized, deeply moving novel, *Clara Callan* is a masterpiece of fiction.

In His Own Words ...

Richard Wright speaks to HarperCollins on *Clara Callan*, inspiration, and the writing process.

HC: When did you first realize that you wanted to be a writer?

RW: I always enjoyed making up stories as a child, but the notion of one day being a writer would have been as foreign to my childhood and surroundings in 1940s Ontario as suggesting that I be a movie actor or opera singer. I think I began to entertain the possibility of actually being a writer when I was in my mid-twenties and had spent some time in book publishing.

HC: What writers do you read yourself? Are there any that have influenced you strongly?

RW: I could list dozens of writers whose work has inspired and strengthened me over the years. I could mention the great writers from Homer to Shakespeare to Flaubert and Chekov, but I'll just name a few contemporary novelists who have provided me with a particular kind of literary enjoyment: Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, John Cheever, Thomas Berger, Walker Percy, Alice Munro, Ian McEwan, Mordecai Richler, Beryl Bainbridge, and W.G. Sebald.

HC: In your last two novels, *The Age of Longing* and *Clara Callan*, the reader senses that you are perhaps drawing on your own family for inspiration. Are your characters based on real people?

RW: The characters in my last two novels are not based on any members of my family, or for that matter other real people. They are composites of people I have known, people I have read about, and figures from my own imagination.

HC: The novels also draw heavily on the history of the 1930s. Why does this period appeal to you so much?

RW: I have always been interested in the 1930s. As a child growing up in the 1940s, I heard a great deal about the family hardships of the previous decade when I was just a baby. The 30s therefore assumed a kind of mythic lore; it was a reference point to compare past and present prosperity or the lack thereof. Because the production of domestic goods was curtailed or even disrupted by the war, I grew up surrounded by the artifacts of the 1930s: the cars, the stoves, the ice boxes, the radios, etc. In a way, we were still living in the 1930s until after the war. When I explored this time period in *The Age of Longing*, I enjoyed the experience of reading about it, and I suppose at the end of that book, I wasn't quite finished with the period; hence *Clara Callan*.

HC: Many critics have praised *Clara Callan* for its ability to portray the inner emotions of two women in the 1930s. As a male writer, did you have any trepidation about dealing with such a theme?

RW: No, as a male I have no trepidation about inventing female characters and using their voices. I think it might be more difficult (in a certain kind of novel) to imagine the life of someone from another race or country. I might, for example, have difficulty bringing to life an Inuit hunter or a mother of six in Ethiopia.

HC: *Clara Callan* raises some issues about women's morality in the 1930s that seem surprisingly contemporary: abortion, affairs with married men, and so on. Do you yourself have a moral position on these issues (some male writers certainly do) or is this just part of a fictional world you are

creating?

RW: I have no position on people's sexual behaviour; I was primarily interested in looking at how women in those days had to deal with the enormous complications of a sex life outside marriage. Young women today may think that the birth control pill, rape crisis clinics, medically safe abortions, support groups for abused women, etc. have always been around, but all these things are very recent. And women like Clara Callan had to live in a society that was far less tolerant of sexual "misconduct" than we are today. It's perhaps not a bad thing to be reminded of this.

HC: The trip to Europe in *Clara Callan* is a fascinating glimpse into travel and politics in the 1930s. Why did you decide to include it? Is the character of Lewis Mills based on someone real?

RW: The world was changing in the 1930s and I wanted Clara to be a part of that; I wanted to take her out of her village and show her how something like fascism, an ideology she only read about in *The Globe and Mail*, was a living reality in Mussolini's Italy. She is interested in politics and how people arrange their lives under political systems, so putting her in Italy gives her a chance to comment on things she wouldn't normally see in Ontario. Lewis Mills is a composite of several American journalists and writers whose work I have read.

HC: Critics have noted that your memorable central character, Clara, stays with readers long after the book has been put down. Many readers, in fact, have said that she goes on talking to them. Why do you think this is so?

RW: I don't know the answer unless it could be that I have created a character whose authenticity strikes readers as genuine. Clara is also a very sympathetic character; she doesn't think too highly of herself, but neither is she unduly modest; she doesn't whine and see herself as a victim when misfortune strikes; she takes chances and risks disaster at a time when women were much more vulnerable to social pressures. She is not perfect, but she is fundamentally a good person whom we are prepared to admire and respect for her courage and her principles.

Awards and Distinctions

- * 2001 Governor General's Award for Fiction
- * 2001 Giller Prize
- * Trillium Book Award
- * CBA Libris Award (Author of the Year)
- * CBA Libris Award (Fiction Book of the Year)
- * Pearson Canada Readers' Choice Award
- * #1 National Bestseller

Praise for *Clara Callan* and Richard B. Wright

"*Clara Callan* illumines, by way of a diary and letters, the inner life of an Ontario village school teacher of the 1930's when 'spinster' and 'respectable' meant constricted emotions and a glum existence. In this atmosphere Clara enacts her private drama of doomed adulterous love and single motherhood with stoic heroism. Running parallel with and counterpointing Clara's life is Nora's—she

is the sister who got away. An understated, graceful writer who never makes a false step, Richard B. Wright is a master at revealing the small dramas that unfold in what might appear to others as an unremarkable life. In *Clara Callan* he has achieved an accomplished and utterly convincing novel.”
~ Giller Prize Jury 2001

“[Wright] has certainly successfully entered the mind of Clara Callan. By the end of the book, she seems beyond mere authorial creation—she seems a living, breathing human being.”
~ *The Globe and Mail*

“Wright has accomplished an amazing feat by allowing his characters to emerge, fully formed and true, without authorial intrusion into their intimate psychological world, revitalizing the epistolary form in the process.”
~ *Publishers Weekly*

“... the content is ... profound and the characters so fully formed they haunt and chatter even when—if—the book can be put down.”
~ *Quill & Quire*

If you liked *Clara Callan* ...

... you might also enjoy these other titles from HarperCollins:

Richard B. Wright

The Age of Longing

Farthing's Fortunes

In the Middle of a Life

Sunset Manor

Tourists

The Weekend Man

The Stubborn Season by Lauren B. Davis

Questions for Discussion

1. *Clara Callan* takes the form of letters and journal entries. Why did the author choose to write an epistolary novel instead of a straight narrative? What advantages and disadvantages does this writing tool provide? How would the book change if he hadn't taken this route? Does it help to illuminate any underlying themes?
2. Richard B. Wright has been widely praised for his convincing portrayal of his female protagonist. Do you agree or not? Why?
3. Discuss Clara's sudden lack of belief in God. Is this loss of faith really significant in her life? Explain.
4. Discuss the significance of "The House on Chestnut Street." What are the parallels between the radio show and Clara's and Nora's own lives?

5. On more than one occasion, Clara's letters contradict what she writes in her journal. Does she lie to herself, or to her correspondents? Why would she do this? Do you consider her a trustworthy narrator?
6. How does Clara deal with change throughout the book?
7. The three main female characters in *Clara Callan*—Clara, Nora, and Evelyn—lead personal lives that stand out from the norms of the time. How does defying social conventions affect each character?
8. What would you say is Clara's greatest fear? How do her actions throughout the book point to this?
9. Discuss Clara's difficulties with communication.
10. Like those of a Jane Austen heroine, Clara's observations about the time and place in which she lived are vivid, atmospheric, and often humorous. What is your favourite anecdote from the book?