

Book review: “The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates”

Written by Kam Williams



“This is the story of two boys living in Baltimore with similar histories and an identical name: Wes Moore. One of us is free and has experienced things that he never knew to dream about as a kid. The other will spend every day until his death behind bars for an armed robbery that left a police officer and father of five dead.

The chilling truth is that his story could have been mine. The tragedy is that my story could have been his. Our stories are obviously specific to our two lives, but I hope they will illuminate the crucial inflection points in every life, the sudden moments of decision where our paths diverge and our fates are sealed...

It is my sincere hope that this book does not come across as self-congratulatory or self-exculpatory... Rather, this book will use our lives as a way of thinking about choices and accountability, not just for each of us as individuals, but for all of us as a society.

This book is meant to show how, for those of us who live in the most precarious places in this country, our destinies can be determined by a single stumble down the wrong path, or a

tentative step down the right one. This is our story.”

-- Excerpted from the Introduction (pgs. xi-xiv)

In December of 2000, Wes Moore saw his name in the newspaper when the Baltimore Sun ran a blurb about how he'd just been awarded a prestigious Rhodes scholarship to do post graduate work at Oxford. But overshadowing that brief mention of him as a “local product done good” was a sensational, front-page story about a brother with the identical name who had been arrested for shooting a police officer to death during the aftermath of a botched armed robbery of a jewelry store.

Wes Moore, the college grad, was struck by the coincidence and wondered exactly what set of circumstances might have led his namesake to commit such a heinous act for the sake of some bling. After all, he knew at the very least that they were both young African American males from the city of Baltimore. He continued to be nagged by that curiosity to the point that when he returned from England a couple of years later, he decided to contact Wes the lesser, now a convicted murderer serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole.

An exchange of correspondence led to a series of face-to-face visits, and the two forged an enduring friendship, since they had a lot in common, their contrasting fates notwithstanding. As it turned out, they had both been raised by a single mothers in a rough neighborhood where they had frequent run-ins with the police. Both had also dropped out of school to hang out on the street corners with a fast crowd. But where one Wes would benefit from an intervention that would send him to military school for a serious attitude readjustment, the other, in the absence of a mentor, was simply allowed to slip between the cracks.

Their parallel and ultimately sharply diverging paths in life are recounted in fascinating fashion in *The Other Wes Moore*, as engaging, illuminating and touching a memoir as one could hope to encounter. Studiously avoiding the temptation to put on any “holier than thou” airs, the author instead altruistically embraces a “There but for fortune” tone, suggesting that he and his jailed alter ego's lots could just as easily have been reversed.

Wes even goes out of his way to pay tribute to the slain police officer who left behind a widow and kids. “Let me be clear,” he writes, emphasizing the point that any empathy for the other Wes Moore “is not meant in any way to provide excuses... The only victims that day were Sergeant Bruce Prothero and his family.”

This imperceptibly-interwoven double-biography is a brilliant primer on the discouraging odds of making it out of the average, inner city ghetto nowadays. For those unforgiving environs remain likely to prune the potential of any misguided, unprotected or impressionable youngster unfortunate enough to take even one false step en route to adulthood.

THE OTHER WES MOORE

ONE NAME, TWO FATES

The chilling truth is that his story
could have been mine.

The tragedy is that my story
could have been his.

