

The Other Wes Moore

One Name, Two Fates

by Wes Moore

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Photos courtesy of Wes Moore.

“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.” (Introduction)



www.OneBookOneWaco.org

Summary

Two kids, both with the same name, were raised at the same time in the same high-poverty, drug and crime-plagued area. They both began to struggle in school at about the same time. They both had early brushes with the law due to petty crimes at about the same time. However, their lives took dramatically different paths.

One went on to be a Rhodes Scholar, decorated combat veteran, White House Fellow, and business leader. The other is serving a life sentence in prison.

In December 2000, *The Baltimore Sun* ran a small piece about Wes Moore, a local student who had just received a Rhodes Scholarship. The same paper also ran a series of articles about four young men who had allegedly killed a police officer in a spectacularly botched armed robbery. The police were still hunting for two of the suspects who had gone on the lam, a pair of brothers. One was named Wes Moore.

Wes just couldn't shake off the unsettling coincidence, or the inkling that the two shared much more than space in the same newspaper. After following the story of the robbery, the manhunt, and the trial to its conclusion, he wrote a letter to the other Wes, now a convicted murderer serving a life sentence without the possibility of parole. His letter tentatively asked the questions that had been haunting him: Who are you? How did this happen?

That letter led to a correspondence and relationship that has lasted for several years. Over dozens of letters and prison visits, Wes discovered that the other Wes had a life not unlike his own: both had grown up in similar neighborhoods and had difficult childhoods; both were fatherless. They'd hung out on similar corners with similar crews, and both had run into trouble with the police. At each stage of their young lives they had run into trouble with the police. At each stage of their young lives they had come across similar moments of decision, yet their choices and the people in their lives would lead them to astonishingly different destinies.

Told in alternating dramatic narratives, *The Other Wes Moore* is an unforgettable story about youth in America, one that provokes readers to think about why some kids succeed while others do not.

Why the Book Was Written

Wes Moore, the Rhodes Scholar, became obsessed with the story of this man he'd never met but who shared much more than space in the same newspaper.

The Other Wes Moore began upon the author's return to the states after studying in Oxford for the Rhodes. Compelled by curiosity, he wrote the other Wes Moore a note and a month later received a letter from Jessup Correctional Institution. "I was surprised that he wrote, I was surprised at how honest and transparent he was, I was surprised at how intelligent he was after reading the letter and getting a better understanding of who he was," said Moore. "And one letter turned to dozens of letters. And those dozens of letters turned into dozens of visits."

Through over 200 hours of interviews over five years with the other Wes Moore as well as friends and family of both Wes Moores, the author produced his gripping account of their similar yet jarringly different lives.

The Role of Fathers

A sad similarity is their growing up fatherless, and the pain it caused. Moore's father, a radio and television journalist, died at the age of 34 when the author was just three and living in Southern Maryland. The other Wes Moore never had his father in his life.

"Wes said to me in one of our conversations: 'Your father wasn't there because he couldn't be. My father wasn't there because he chose not to be,'" said Wes. "It is a really interesting point. And the hole we know boys feel growing up without their fathers, you find kids will spend so much time and energy trying to fill that hole, and unfortunately kids look to very dangerous ways of filling it. That void cannot be overstated and [neither can] the importance of kids having loving parents and guardians because they will help shape decisions made later on."

And now, due to the other Wes Moore, the five children of the slain police officer don't have a father, and neither do the other Wes Moore's four children and Tony Moore's three. "It goes to show," said Moore, "how one decision can impact dozens and dozens of lives."

The Role of Mothers

Both had hard working mothers who wanted the best for their sons but their responses to their sons' struggles were totally different. One Wes Moore's mother was raised by college-educated parents, and she spent her life working and struggling to achieve things for herself and her family. She moved several times in an effort to find stable, safe places for her kids to grow up, and she worked several jobs so she could afford to put her kids into private schools. When it appeared that Moore was going to fall into the thug lifestyle, she sacrificed economically and emotionally to put him into a military school. In short, she simply refused to allow herself or her kids to succumb to the conditions and temptations that surrounded them.

In contrast, the other Wes Moore's mother tried to resist those conditions and temptations, but she eventually did succumb to them. She simply gave up. She allowed her kids to see violence as an acceptable way to resolve problems in their lives.

Forks in the Road

In the end, it comes down to forks in the road of time. At several critical points in his youth, the first Wes Moore went down one path, mostly due to the influence of his mother. Unfortunately for the other Wes Moore, there was no one to influence him to take the "right" path, and he chose the easier, more glamorous path of thug culture and the drug trade.

Moore explains that there is a difference between reasons and excuses. That is, there are abundant reasons for the choices that the second Wes Moore made and their tragic consequences for himself, his family, and his victims. However, the first Wes Moore clearly doesn't regard any

of those reasons as acceptable excuses. Both Wes Moores came to forks in their lives; one of them made-- or was forced to make-- the right choices, and the other one didn't. But they were choices, and they are ultimately responsible for making them

About The Author

Wes graduated Phi Theta Kappa as a commissioned officer from Valley Forge Military College in 1998 and Phi Beta Kappa from Johns Hopkins University in 2001 with a bachelor's degree in International Relations. At Johns Hopkins he was honored by the Maryland College Football Hall of Fame. He completed an MLitt in International Relations from Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar in 2004. Wes was a paratrooper and Captain in the United States Army, serving a combat tour of duty in Afghanistan with the elite 1st Brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division in 2005–2006. Wes spearheaded the American strategic support plan for the Afghan Reconciliation Program that unites former insurgents with the new Afghan Government. He is recognized as an authority on the rise and ramifications of radical Islamism in the Western Hemisphere. A White House Fellow from 2006–2007, Wes served as a Special Assistant to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Following his time at the White House, Wes became an investment professional in New York at Citigroup, focusing on global technology and alternative investments. In 2009 he was selected as an Asia Society Fellow. Moore was named one of Ebony magazine's "Top 30 Leaders Under 30" for 2007 and Crain's New York Business' "40 Under 40 Rising Stars" in 2009.

Wes is passionate about supporting U.S. veterans and examining the roles education, mentoring and public service play in the lives of American youth. He serves on the board of the Iraq Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and founded an organization called STAND! through Johns Hopkins that works with Baltimore youth involved in the criminal justice system. Wes was a featured speaker at the 2008 Democratic National Convention in Denver and addressed the crowd from Invesco Field. He has also spoken at the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) Business Plan Competition, Southern Regional Conference of the National Society of Educators, the education reform session of the third annual Race & Reconciliation in America conference, and the first 9/11 National Day of Service and Remembrance.

He has been featured by such media outlets as People Magazine, The New York Times, The Washington Post, , in late April 2010.

Moore lives with his wife Dawn in New Jersey.

Contents

Introduction

Part I - Fathers and Angels

There are three chapters in Part I. This part provides the background as to how the two Wes's arrived at their "fork in the road" teen years. Their stories really are not all that different, at this point.

In Part II - Choices and Second Chances

Part II has three chapters. Here is where we see the mentoring and bad role models at work. At several points, it's apparent that the author Wes had before him the same path as the prisoner Wes. In fact, the author *would have taken* the path to failure, if not for the extraordinary mentoring, love, and persistence of other people who went way out of their way to influence his choices.

The author Wes, when he arrived at military school, was a classic "lost cause" with just about zero hope of becoming anything other than a zero and loser in life. Yet, his mother and her parents had hope for the boy and sacrificed immensely to get him into that school. His transformation was unlikely, at best. And yet, it happened.

Part III - Paths Taken and Expectations Fulfilled

Part III has the final two chapters. One thing we see In Chapter 7 is that the (future) prisoner Wes turns his life around through the Job Corps. We also see how once again mentoring has amazing power and how it leads the author Wes to a Rhodes Scholarship.

Epilogue

Afterword

"A Call to Action" (by Tavis Smiley)

Resource Guide - This guide provides summary information on helpful organizations, in the form of a four column table. The columns are organization name, services provided targeting youth, geography/scope, and contact information.

Acknowledgments

A Reader's Guide

Discussion Questions

1. What are the main themes in this story?
2. Do you think having “positive” role models as a child serves as a deterrent to a life of crime? Is what constitutes a “positive” role model the same for everyone or does it vary?
3. Both Weses had absent fathers. Do you think the way in which they lost their fathers influenced their choices in life?
4. In what ways does the story demonstrate the idea of “nurture vs. nature” or “being a product of your environment?”
5. Tony had a tremendous impact on Wes #2. What were some examples of how Tony’s influence affected Wes and contributed to his choices in life?
6. From the following statement made by Wes # 1, “I was becoming too “rich” for the kids from the neighborhood and too “poor” for the kids at school ... Thinking way too much in each situation and getting tangled in the contradiction between my two worlds.” one can assume the psychological effect “living in two worlds” had on Wes. How do you think Wes was able to deal with living two lives?
7. Wes 1 and Wes 2 started off in the same place. Both grew up in single-parent households with working-class mothers, in neighborhoods filled with crime and drugs. At what point do you think their paths diverged, leading one to success and another to a life of crime? What was that life changing moment?
8. Should we blame ourselves for our mistakes or should we blame our parents?
9. How well does Moore describe the culture of the streets, where young boys grow up believing that violence transforms them into men? Talk about the street culture—its violence, drug dealing, disdain for education. What creates that ethos and why do so many young men find it attractive?
10. Oprah Winfrey has said that "when you hear this story, it's going to turn the way you think about free will and fate upside down." So, which is it...freedom or determinism? If determinism, what kind of determinism—God, cosmic fate, environment, biology, psychology? Or if freedom, to what degree are we free to choose and create our own destiny?
11. The overriding question of this book is what critical factors in the lives of these two men, who were similar in many ways, created such a vast difference in their destinies?
12. Talk about the role of family—and especially the present or absence of fathers—in the lives of children. Consider the role of the two mothers, Joy and Mary, as well as the care of the author's grandparents in this book.
13. Why did young Wes, who ran away from military school five times, finally decide to stay put?
14. Why was the author haunted by the story of his namesake? What was the reason he insisted on meeting him in prison? Talk about the awkwardness of the two Weses' first meeting and their gradual openness and sharing with one another.
15. From prison, the other Wes responded to the author's initial letter with his own letter, in which he said, "When you're in here, you think people don't even know you're alive anymore." Talk about the power of hope versus hopelessness for those imprisoned. What difference can it make to a prisoner to know that he or she is remembered?

16. The author Wes asked the prisoner Wes, "When did you first know you were a man?" Talk about the significance of that question...and how each man responded.
17. Has this book left you with any ideas for ameliorating the conditions that led to the imprisonment of the other Wes Moore? What can be done to ensure a more productive life for the many young men who grow up on the streets?
18. The author also points out that while we're in the middle of things and learning how to deal with life, the obviously correct choices aren't obviously correct to us. Discuss the role of an adult mentor/role model in a child's life.
19. Consider the following statement from a recent book review of *The Other Wes Moore*. Any reader of the book could tell -- the difference is class. Both his parents were college educated, his mother was more involved in his life and had vastly greater financial resources to devote to him, and he had high-achieving siblings. That's pretty much it. When the eventually-successful Wes made some poor decisions as a kid, his mom was able to ask her parents for the money to put him first in private school, and eventually in an elite military academy. Once he prospered in that environment, doors started opening for him, as the network of connections started helping him up the ladder. The other Wes's mother had no financial or familial support to draw upon, and eventually lost control of her son, whose main male role model was his drug-dealing half-brother.

So, ultimately, there's not much of a lesson here, nor any kind of revelatory strategy for helping young black men. But it is a very instructive case study on how class mechanisms work in America, and what they mean in a tangible, concrete sense.

(<http://www.bookadda.com/>)

Do you agree with this review? Why or why not?

20. How much do expectations from family, friends, teachers, and community members play in shaping your life/ both Wes Moores' lives?
21. The tale of two men named Wes is also a tale of two mothers. What are some similarities between Mary Moore and Joy Moore? What are some of the differences – particularly their reactions to their sons' misbehavior?
22. Do you agree with Wes's opinion that the expectations that others place on us help us form our expectations of ourselves?
23. What was the turning point in Wes's life at military school that changed his attitude from a rebel to a leader? (Chapter 6)
24. Why did Wes feel that the Army made it easier for him to love his country, with all its flaws, and to serve her with all of his heart? (p. 131)
25. Do you think the success of Wes Moore was due to the decisions he made in his life or the decisions that were made for him (to send him away to military school)?
26. Do you think the financial resources that Joy Moore was able to obtain to send her son to military school was the difference between his success and failure?
27. Do you think the other Wes Moore would have had a better chance in life if his mother had more money? Why or why not?
28. Discuss this quote from Colonel Murphy:

“When it is time for you to leave this school, leave your job, or even leave this earth, you make sure you have worked hard to make sure it mattered you were ever here.”

29. Wes Moore said, “...life and death, freedom and bondage, hang in the balance of every action we take.” (p. xiv) Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?
30. Discuss Wes’s retaliatory responses to perceived injustices. When another youngster hit him in the nose, he returned with a knife to stab him. When Ray beat him, he returned with a gun and shot Ray.

More Discussion Questions

1. The author says to the other Wes, “I guess it’s hard sometimes to distinguish between second chances and last chances.” What do you think he means? What is each Wes’s “last chance”? Discuss the differences in how each one uses that chance and why they make the decisions they do.
2. During their youth, Wes and Wes spend most of their time in crime-ridden Baltimore and the Bronx. How important was that environment in shaping their stories and personalities?
3. Why do you think the incarcerated Wes continues to proclaim his innocence regarding his role in the crime for which he was convicted?
4. The book begins with Wes and Wes’s discussion of their fathers. What role do you think fatherhood plays in the lives of these men? How do the absence of their fathers and the differences in the reasons for their absences affect them?
5. Wes dedicates the book to “the women who helped shape [his] journey to manhood.” Discuss the way women are seen in Wes’s community. What impact do they have on their sons?
6. The author says “the chilling truth is that [Wes’s] story could have been mine. The tragedy is that my story could have been his.” To what extent do you think that’s true? What, ultimately, prevented their stories from being interchangeable?
7. Throughout the book, the author sometimes expresses confusion at his own motivations. Why do you think he is so driven to understand the other Wes’s life?
8. The author attributes Wes’s eventual incarceration to shortsightedness, an inability to critically think about the future. Do you agree? Why or why not?
9. Wes states that people often live up to the expectations projected on them. Is that true? If someone you care for expects you to succeed—or fail—will you? Where does personal accountability come into play?
10. Discuss the relationship between education and poverty. In your discussion, consider the education levels of both Weses’ mothers, how far each man got in his education, the opportunities they gained or lost as a result of their education, and their reasons for continuing or

discontinuing their studies.

11. The book begins with a scene in which the author is reprimanded for hitting his sister. Why is it important for conflicts to be solved through means other than violence? In what way do the Weses differ in their approaches to physical confrontations, and why?

12. Why is the idea of “going straight” so unappealing to the incarcerated Wes and his peers? What does it mean for our culture to have such a large population living and working outside the boundaries of the law?

Websites:

Reader’s guide

<http://www.randomhouse.com/book/116877/the-other-wes-moore-by-wes-moore#reader'sguide>

NPR Interview with Wes Moore

<http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=126370229&m=126370190>

Readers’ Comments

<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/7099273-the-other-wes-moore>

Wes Moore website

<http://theotherwesmoore.com/>

Themes:

Poverty

Drugs

Crimes

Prison

Absent Fathers

Single Mother

Parallel biographies

Overcoming obstacles

Mentoring

Role models

Life choices

Fate vs free will

Importance of education

Vocabulary:

Introduction

illuminate, crucial, diverge, fate, prestigious, daunting, phalanx, superficial, obsess, conspiratorial, conjuring, melodramatic, narcissistic, naïve, self-indulgent, presumptuous, rendered

Chapter 1

mollified, diaphanous, unabashed, reconciliation, diligently, cadences, idiosyncracies, volatile, roiling, assimilationist, charismatic, contemptuous, insatiable, resonant, askance, improbable, recalibrate, entrepreneur, dialysis, gaunt, gregarious

Chapter 2

monoliths, claustrophobic, logistics, retaliate, incapacitated, pondering, ventilated, alcove, vigilance, rationality, sprightly, fluctuated, transformation, engulfed, shrine, apathy, demeanor, postapocalyptic, frame of reference, signifier, cohort, phenoms,

Chapter 3

dilapidated, haven, potent, affiliation, predominantly, surreal, pristine, homogeneous, nonchalantly, pathetic, innovative, metastasizing, bucolically, tableau, disenchantment, vulnerable, exhilarating

Part Two

flagrantly, squandered

Chapter 4

clenched, inquisition, infuriated, hypocrite, plummeted, incredulous, epiphany, validator, inchoate, audacity, retrospect, prowess, contingent, reminisce, hyperventilating, simultaneously, chasm, precipice

Chapter 5

sonorous, fusillade, tirade, stellar, austere, cuisine, dubious, bewildered, cachet, guidon, denoted, deferential, demeanor, crucial, juncture, irrevocable, trappings, adrift,

Chapter 6

relevancy, gruff, prestigious, illusion, litany, bewilderment

Chapter 7

cadence, clumsily, riveted, engulfed, retrospect, pathology, pragmatic, dilemma, entranced, vulnerable, impermanence, prospective, sporadic, tenuous, trepidation

Chapter 8

perpetrators, audacious, brusquely, manifest, melancholy, imposing, unassuming, daunting, glib, stodgy, apportioned, myriad, anecdotes, rapacious, vertigo

Related Books:

Losing My Cool: How a Father's Love and 15,000 Books Beat Hip-hop Culture

by Thomas Chatterton Williams (240p. Penguin Press, 2010)

A pitch-perfect account of how hip-hop culture drew in the author and how his father drew him out again-with love, perseverance, and fifteen thousand books.

A Question of Freedom: A Memoir of Learning, Survival, and Coming of Age in Prison

by R. Dwayne Betts

A unique prison narrative that testifies to the power of books to transform a young man's life.

Ideas for assignments

- Writing
 - Take notes on each chapter, summarize or outline each chapter
 - Answer discussion questions
 - Write a daily blog with classmates
- Vocabulary
 - Define vocabulary words as used in context
 - Make a list of new vocabulary words in each chapter
- Project
 - Create a project based on the book to present to the class and outline your presentation