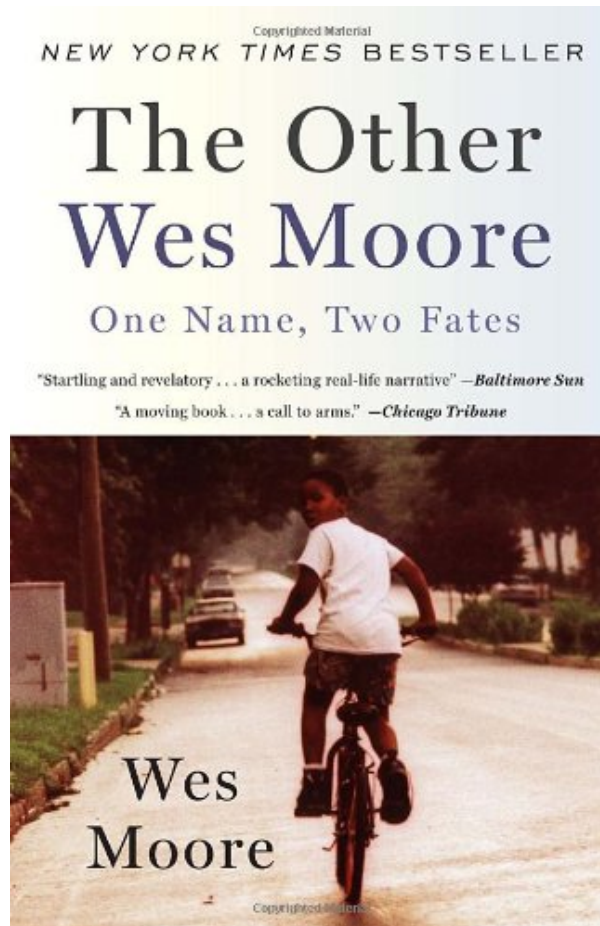


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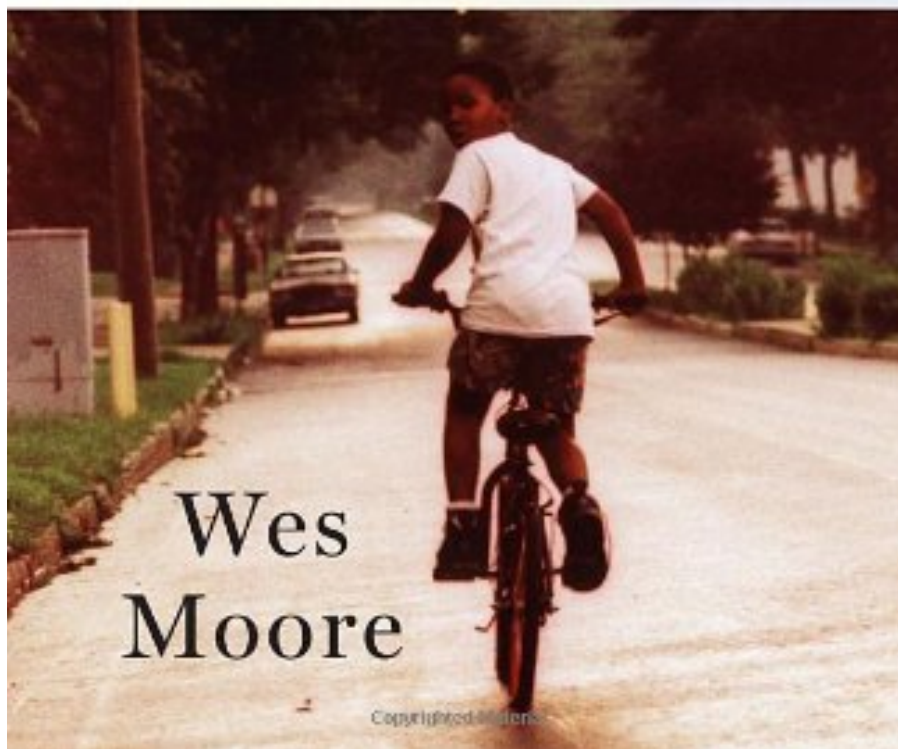
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The Other Wes Moore

One Name, Two Fates

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Two kids named Wes Moore were born blocks apart within a year of each other. Both grew up fatherless in similar Baltimore neighborhoods and had difficult childhoods; both hung out on street corners with their crews; both ran into trouble with the police. How, then, did one grow up to be a Rhodes Scholar, decorated veteran, White House Fellow, and business leader, while the other ended up a convicted murderer serving a life sentence? Wes Moore, the author of this fascinating book, sets out to answer this profound question. In alternating narratives that take readers from heart-wrenching losses to moments of surprising redemption, *The Other Wes Moore* tells the story of a generation of boys trying to find their way in a hostile world.

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

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Two young men at a fork in the road

By N. B. Kennedy

In 2000, a Baltimore newspaper ran a story with the headline, "Local Graduate Named Rhodes Scholar." It was a story about the author, Wes Moore, a young black man who rose from the drug, crime and poverty-stricken streets of the city to attain this prestigious academic honor.

Several months earlier, in the same paper, Mr. Moore had noticed a series of articles about two young black men who killed a Baltimore policeman while robbing a jewelry store. The name of one of the killers struck him: his name was Wes Moore.

This coincidence prompts the author to seek out "the other Wes Moore." He contacts Wes in prison. "How did this happen?" he asks. The question jumpstarts the story of these two young men whose life paths diverged, one into triumph, the other into tragedy.

The author comes to realize that this seemingly complicated story, a too-familiar story that is freighted with societal, economic and racial impact, comes down to a few simple moments in time. "These forks in the road can happen so fast for young boys," he says. "Within months or even weeks, their journeys can take a decisive and possibly irrevocable turn."

I would more specifically pin the divergence on the boys' mothers. The author is born into a two-parent home, both parents college educated, but his father dies when Wes is just three. His mother moves to the Bronx, so that her parents can help provide a stable home life. She works multiple jobs so that she can put her boys in private school. When the author starts to feel the pull of the streets, she packs him off to military

school.

The other Wes Moore grows up in a single-parent household of starkly different character. His father is absent and his mother frequently dumps him on friends and family so she can go out clubbing. Although she'd been attending community college, she loses her Pell Grant and simply gives up. Disagreements in the home are handled with beatings. The older brother gets into the drug trade, and all three of them, mother and two sons, bring babies into the world without the stability of marriage. It's no surprise when the other Wes Moore's run-ins with the law begin.

This is a compelling story told with passion and understanding. While the author is compassionate, he also makes clear that he is in no way excusing the other Wes Moore for his heinous deed. Even so, I imagine this is a tough book for the family of the slain policeman to read. If you want another great story of a young black man from Baltimore who succeeds thanks to his determined mother, read Byron Pitts's *Step Out on Nothing: How Faith and Family Helped Me Conquer Life's Challenges*.

116 of 123 people found the following review helpful.

The difference between reasons and excuses

By L. F. Smith

At first glance, this book looks like an interesting read based on an unusual coincidence. A young Baltimore man named Wes Moore, an Army officer who had just graduated from Johns Hopkins and was named a Rhodes Scholar, learned that another young Baltimore man also named Wes Moore had just been sentenced to life in prison without parole for his role in a robbery that resulted in the murder of an off-duty policeman. The first Wes Moore naturally began to wonder about why he had avoided the fate of the second Wes Moore, even though their surroundings and upbringings had been quite similar. So, in a way, this is a "Wow! It could have been me in prison!" story.

That probably would have made for an interesting book, but Moore chose to examine his life and the second Wes Moore's life in parallel with one another in an effort to determine where-- and, more importantly, why-- their fates diverged. That makes this an important book, because it raises a critical question: What makes so many young men-- and particularly black, poor young men raised mostly by their mothers-- choose the drug trade and all of the violence that attends it as a career?

As it turns out, Moore can't answer that question. As he explains, both he and the other Wes Moore 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.

Moore never specifically says it, but nonetheless, as one reads his account of their parallel lives, the difference is in the ways that their mothers lived their own lives and reacted to what their sons were doing. 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. At the same time, unlike the first Wes Moore's mother, she allowed her kids to see violence as an acceptable way to resolve problems in their lives.

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 isn't at all smug or self-righteous about how his life compares to that of the other Wes Moore. Nor does he pity the other Wes Moore. That's because 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.

This is a unique and compelling book. I recommend it most highly.

180 of 199 people found the following review helpful.

A disappointing read

By RJD

As a forensic psychologist, I was quite intrigued by the premise of the book but ultimately disappointed. It is presented as a study in how two boys with such similar backgrounds could have ended up in such different places - one a Rhode Scholar with a promising career in finance, the other convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison. The author, Rhode Scholar Wes Moore, makes the argument that his childhood was very similar to that of the other Wes Moore, convicted felon. But from the very first chapter, the vast differences in their upbringing (even genetics) is apparent. It is never hard to understand how their lives ended up so differently - the Rhode Scholar was born into a loving, intact family with 2 college educated parents. Even after the tragic death of his father, his family remains a strong support in his life, with all sorts of relatives offering both financial and emotional support. Contrast that with the other Wes Moore, who is born to a single mother, the second of her children born out of brief, unstable relationships with alcoholic uninvolved fathers. They are worlds apart from the moment of conception but this is not acknowledged or perhaps understood by the author - at one point he acknowledges that having an adult who is invested in your well-being is key to children's healthy development but then doesn't relate this to how different his life was (with the support of an uncle, grandfather and a very strong and involved mother) from the other Wes Moore (whose mother left him unattended from age 8 and whose primary influence was a criminally involved older brother).

In the end, I was left with the impression that this was a vanity project for the author. The sections about his life get longer and longer while the sections about the other Wes Moore get shorter and shorter. In the epilogue, the author devotes several pages to listing his achievements in life - these are never connected to other events or analyzed in any way - it's simply a list of things he has done. An impressive list certainly, but it offers nothing to the book. The book also seems to be the author's attempt to establish "street cred" - he seems almost desperate to make clear that he grew up poor and disadvantaged (even though he and his siblings went to an expensive private school). It comes off as false and self-serving. For example, his claims that they both had brushes with the law as children overlooks the type and severity of those - the author gets a lecture from a cop at age 11 for spray painting a building while the other Wes Moore was arrested at age 8 for threatening another child with a knife.

If you want to understand why these two men ended up in such different places, it's not difficult at all. There is a fundamental difference between being raised by a single mother because your father died of illness versus because your father has no interest in you and would not recognize you. There is a fundamental

difference between mothers who have children at age 16 in the context of a casual relationship and those who wait until after marriage. There is a fundamental difference between a family who rallies around its children, pushes them to succeed and takes action when one of the children is having problems and a single mother who leaves her child alone or in the care of a drug dealing brother who teaches him to fight.

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