

## Book Review: *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates*

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### Recommended Citation

Johnston, G. D., & Onofre, A. L. (2017). Book Review: *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates*. *National Youth-At-Risk Journal*, 2(2). <https://doi.org/10.20429/nyarj.2017.020209>

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## Book Review: *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates*

### **Abstract**

This review of *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates* explores the role choices and accountability play in youth development. This book illustrates how two young men with the same name from the same city and raised with similar life experiences would make different life choices that resulted in drastically different outcomes. One Wes Moore is a graduate of Johns Hopkins, Rhodes scholar, White House Fellow and successful business person. The other Wes Moore is serving a life sentence in prison for his involvement in a robbery and murder of an off-duty police officer. Recommendations for youth practitioners are discussed.

### **Keywords**

youth at risk, youth development, resilience, education equality, poverty, youth intervention

### **Cover Page Footnote**

Special thanks to Linn Walker and Dr. Sara Dodd for their contributions.

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In late 2000, the Baltimore Sun published two articles about Wes Moore (Moore, 2011). The first was about a successful Wes Moore entitled: “Local Graduate Named Rhodes Scholar.” The second was one of a series of articles about the other Wes Moore and his involvement in a jewelry store robbery that left Sergeant Bruce Prothero, an off-duty police officer and father of five, fatally shot.

*The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates*, written by the “successful” Moore, used two boys’ lives as an instrument for “thinking about choices and accountability, not just for each individual but for all of society” (Moore, 2011, p. xiv). As evident by the title, this book consists of two main characters, the “author Wes” and the “other Wes.” It traces key points in both lives and reveals how two people with the same name met similar challenges in different ways that resulted in drastically different outcomes.

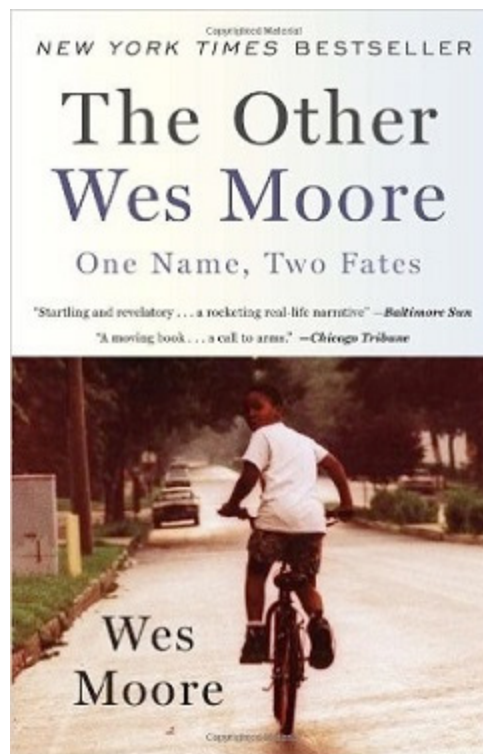
The author Wes was an accomplished student, White House Fellow, decorated military veteran, and successful business leader. The other Wes will spend the remainder of his life in the Jessup Correctional Institution of the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional services. This book examines two boys with the same name but easily could be the story of millions of struggling youth. This

review explores the daily struggles of youth placed at risk and what lessons can be learned for prevention and intervention.

The author Wes began and ended the book with the same epitaph, “The chilling truth is that the other Wes’ story could have been mine. The tragedy is that my story could have been his” (Moore, 2011, p. xi). In an article examining Wes Moore’s memoirs, Thein, Sulzer, and Schmidt (2013) discussed how the author artfully navigated the balance of explaining the challenges experienced by children growing up at risk with the complexity of how best to support youth to achieve. Thein et al. noted that the book’s structure places the author Wes in the role of a student to the other Wes’ life lessons; even though the outcome was often unfavorable, the story and lived experience of the

other Wes becomes a powerful opportunity for growth.

Three major themes emerge from *The Other Wes Moore* that directly relate to work with youth at risk: poverty, education, and resiliency. It is important for youth interventionists to explore the overlap between each theme. Put simply, issues that influence poverty also impact education and resilience of youth at risk. Every student has a story, and it is the job of the adult to help the story to be heard.



## **THEME 1: POVERTY**

Both Wes Moores grew up in single family households in West Baltimore. Poverty, drugs and violent crime engulfed these neighborhoods in the early 1980s. The economic status of their families and communities influenced both teens. The other Wes lived with his mother, Mary, and brother, Tony. They lived in public housing in living conditions unfit to raise a family. The author Wes described the conditions of the public housing in West Baltimore:

The walls and floors were coated with filth and graffiti...The constantly broken-down elevators forced residents to climb claustrophobic, urine-scented stairways. (Moore, 2011, p. 27)

Youth in poverty are at greater risk for many negative outcomes including poor academic achievement, physical health problems, and poor behavioral outcomes (American Psychological Association, 2014). Ruby Payne (2005) defined poverty as “the extent to which an individual does without internal and external resources” (p. 7). Payne wrote that meeting these resources, as well as understanding hidden rules of social classes, are the greatest predictors of ending generational or situational poverty.

While the challenges of poverty impacted both Wes Moores, their families addressed these obstacles in different ways. The takeaway for practitioners is that often youth at risk may not feel they have a voice in systems that impact their lives—whether it be school, community, or macro policies. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the interventionist to be their advocate and provide that voice.

## **THEME 2: EDUCATION**

Poverty and the lack of educational opportunities often are linked. The other Wes remained in Baltimore public schools while the author Wes was enrolled at a prestigious private school (Riverdale). He stated, “My mother saw Riverdale as a haven, a place where I could escape my

neighborhood and open my horizons” (p. 47). He continued that while it was a reprieve from the unforgiving streets of West Baltimore, for him, it was where he felt lost and never had a sense of belonging.

Often, youth at risk may struggle to see the value of education. Many may feel that school is like a prison, a place where they are forced to be and would do anything to escape. The author Wes’ mother made the decision to send her children to private school, requiring her to work multiple jobs and rely on a support network for childcare. He struggled with the transition from the streets of Baltimore to a prestigious private school, where he straddled two different worlds: the neighborhood where he lived and the school where he was a student.

The author Wes experienced both academic success and failure. He was suspended from Riverdale and forced to enroll in Valley Forge military academy. His attitude toward education changed upon reading an autobiography by Colin Powell, which resonated with the author Wes’ sense of justice and desire for a fair shot in life. This change in perspective led him to an altered life course including a career in the military and business.

The other Wes had a different experience with education. The book began with Wes’ mother losing her Pell Grant and having to drop out of Johns Hopkins University due to cuts in education funding. This seemingly closed the door on her higher education pursuits. The irony is that the same door that closed for the other Wes’ mother opened for the author Wes to graduate. The economic realities of a single mother raising two children in Baltimore County were harsh, and, therefore, the other Wes learned life skills from the streets and eventually dropped out of school.

An important educational reality to consider is that youth often rise to the expectation set for them. High academic expectations often lead to high outcomes whereas low academic expectations may accompany low achievement

(Barbour, 2009). When asked if he was a product of his environment, the other Wes concluded that youth are the product of other people's expectations and that they often take on those expectations as their own (Moore, 2011).

Regarding success of youth at risk, "what" questions of youth development often are accompanied by "who" questions, meaning the individuals who help youth achieve their goals are integral to them reaching their potential (Live Oak Community Church, 2017). The author Wes achieved academically not only because he felt he could succeed, but because he surrounded himself with others who believed in his success. Supportive relationships are critical for the positive development of youth at risk. Educational thriving occurs when individual assets (e.g., talents, strengths, and interests) align with external/social supports, such as school, administration and family support (Lerner et al., 2011).

### **THEME 3: RESILIENCY**

Why is one person able to bounce back from adverse situations and another not? The answer to this question is described as resilience. In general, resilience is the ability to bounce back, rebound, or successfully adapt to adverse conditions (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014). Building resilience involves developing skills and assets that when used in the face of risky situations often predict successful outcomes.

The author Wes spoke to the importance of youth connectedness in building resilience. Youth placed at risk must feel a connection to their family, neighborhood, and school. Building resilience is dependent upon the strength of those bonds. He stated, "Young boys are more likely to believe in themselves if they know that there's someone, somewhere, who shares that belief. To carry the burden of belief alone is too much for most young shoulders" (Moore, 2011, p. 28).

The other Wes lacked a healthy connection to school, family, and community. His older brother, Tony, tried to give support and offered advice on healthy decision-making but fell short in his application, relying on a "do as I say, not as I do" mentoring technique (Moore, 2011, p. 27). Currently, Tony is serving a life sentence at Jessup Correctional Institute for his involvement in the same crime as Wes. In contrast, compare the significance of connectedness on resilience from the author Wes:

I found myself surrounded by people—starting with my mom, grandparents, uncles, and aunts, and leading to a string of wonderful role models and mentors—who kept pushing me to see more than what was directly in front of me, to see the boundless possibilities of the wider world and the unexplored possibilities within myself. (Moore, 2011, p. 189)

For youth practitioners, the focus should be on helping youth develop a healthy sense of connectedness in order to navigate life challenges successfully. In his plea to those who work with youth, the author Wes urged that the best we can do for youth at risk today is "give them the chance to make the best decisions possible by providing them with the information, tools and support they need" (Moore, 2011, p. 179).

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates* is a story of two boys from the same neighborhood with similar struggles, yet one became a Rhodes Scholar and the other is serving a life sentence for his involvement in a deadly crime. They both shared similar paths in life but made different choices at critical points that offered drastically different results. Both characters in the book have the same names but are referred to throughout this review as "the author Wes" and "the other Wes"—as though

one name has value and the other can be easily discarded. Youth practitioners are charged to fight as hard for the potential “lifers” in prison as they are for the future Rhodes Scholars. One never knows who will make the right choice at the critical moment that will change everything. As the author Wes explained, “Our destinies can be determined by a single stumble down the wrong path, or a tentative step down the right one” (Moore, 2011, p. xiv). Wes left the readers with a William Ernest Henley poem about the value of every soul (Moore, 2011, p. 183):

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate:  
I am the captain of my soul.

This is a story often repeated in America. Regretfully, many youths fail to meet their full potential. As youth practitioners, we have a crucial role in their success. While the book highlights the choices made by a few, it is also a call for change by all as a society.

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