



The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace: A Brilliant Young Man Who Left Newark for the Ivy League

By Jeff Hobbs

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A heartfelt, and riveting biography of the short life of a talented young African-American man who escapes the slums of Newark for Yale University only to succumb to the dangers of the streets—and of one's own nature—when he returns home.

When author Jeff Hobbs arrived at Yale University, he became fast friends with the man who would be his college roommate for four years, Robert Peace. Robert's life was rough from the beginning in the crime-ridden streets of Newark in the 1980s, with his father in jail and his mother earning less than \$15,000 a year. But Robert was a brilliant student, and it was supposed to get easier when he was accepted to Yale, where he studied molecular biochemistry and biophysics. But it didn't get easier. Robert carried with him the difficult dual nature of his existence, "fronting" in Yale, and at home.

Through an honest rendering of Robert's relationships—with his struggling mother, with his incarcerated father, with his teachers and friends and fellow drug dealers—*The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace* encompasses the most enduring conflicts in America: race, class, drugs, community, imprisonment, education, family, friendship, and love. It's about the collision of two fiercely insular worlds—the ivy-covered campus of Yale University and Newark, New Jersey, and the difficulty of going from one to the other and then back again. It's about poverty, the challenges of single motherhood, and the struggle to find male role models in a community where a man is more likely to go to prison than to college. It's about reaching one's greatest potential and taking responsibility for your family no matter the cost. It's about trying to live a decent life in America. But most all the story is about the tragic life of one singular brilliant young man. His end, a violent one, is heartbreaking and powerful and unforgettable.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

An Amazon Best Book of the Month, September 2014: To read *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace*, a meticulous and heartfelt account of a brilliant black student from the poverty-stricken streets of Newark, is to see the best of the American dream lived and ultimately, tragically, lost. Peace's mother endured great sacrifices to ensure that her gifted son would meet his full potential. His father, until his arrest for murder when Rob was seven, dedicated himself to helping his son learn and mature. Rob was a popular, straight-A student who played on the water polo team (his mother scraped up enough money to send him to parochial school), and upon graduating he was rewarded with a scholarship to Yale. Although he continued to thrive academically in college, growing up in the second largest concentration of African-Americans living under the poverty line created barriers that even one as gifted as Robert Peace could not fully surmount. This is a riveting and heartbreaking read, as Rob Peace seems always to have been on the outside—the resented geek in the hood, and the inner city black man in the Ivy League. —*Chris Schluep*

Guest Review of *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace* by Michelle Alexander



This is a book you will not forget. It will stay with you, haunt you. Strangely, it may even inspire you. You

may not realize how good it is until days or weeks after you've finished it. The truth may dawn on you when you notice that you keep talking about the book with friends or family or the person sitting next to you on the bus. Perhaps you'll begin to think that the book was more than good – truly great – when you find yourself thinking about Robert Peace as you're drifting off to sleep and then find that he's still on your mind in the morning.

This book was born from grief, but it pulses with the life of an unforgettable young man. The story is deftly told by Robert Peace's white college roommate and good friend, Jeff Hobbs, someone who knew Robert well, but didn't. Written with great compassion yet unflinching honesty, the book invites you to contemplate the meaning of one man's life—a life that could've turned out so differently.

The question that will tease and torment you, but can never, ever be answered, will linger: Why? Why would an astonishingly brilliant young black man who worked so tirelessly as a teen, overcoming incredible odds to get out of the 'hood, out of crushing poverty, and off to Yale, and who excelled once he was there – academically as well as socially – *why* would he forfeit all of the opportunity that was now waiting for him, the shining path that lay ahead beckoning him? Why would Robert Peace toss it all away so that he could return to his 'hood, deal drugs, and try to make it on a path that was so obviously doomed? Why?

My husband read the book because I could not stop talking about it. We disagree completely on why Robert Peace chose to be drug dealer rather than a genius scientist who cures cancer or wins a Nobel Prize—possibilities that do not seem entirely fanciful given his academic prowess and his passion for science. My husband views Robert as a tragic Greek figure, someone who was on the brink of greatness but whose personal flaws and weaknesses ultimately got the best of him. Some of the people who knew Robert best apparently have a similar view; they think that he couldn't shake his dream of being “the Man,” making it big without the hard work and discipline that is required of a more traditional path.

None of those views sit right with me. Robert Peace was about as hard-working and disciplined as they come. And he showed no great interest in wealth or “bling.” He sold marijuana for pragmatic reasons—to make money to pay for school, support his mother, buy stuff he thought he needed, save for the future, and fund legitimate business ventures. I cannot pretend to know why Robert Peace chose the path he did, and it is entirely possible that he, himself, would not have been able to answer the “why” question even if he had been asked moments before he was killed. But I suspect the why had more to do with his virtues than his vices.

Yet Robert did not want to leave anyone behind. Above all things, he was loyal. He was loyal to his father who was serving time in prison for murder. He was loyal to his family, to his friends, to his neighborhood. He did not want to go on ahead. He wanted to make it with them, and be one of them. If he was going to make it big, he wanted it to make it with the people he loved.

But we, as a society, will not allow for that. Only a chosen few are allowed to escape from the 'hood, and when they have their chance to make a break for it, they're supposed to do it alone. They're supposed to run away from their old neighborhood, away from their old friends, and become someone new—someone who likes socializing with other Ivy Leaguers and chatting about vacation destinations, private schools, and career paths. But that wasn't Robert. Robert preferred to eat with the cafeteria workers rather than with his classmates at Yale. He felt he belonged to them. He didn't respect or admire the over-privileged, spoiled kids at Yale; he resented them. He did not want to become them. He was open-hearted and able to make friends with anyone – and he did make many friends at Yale – but who he really loved, who he really cared about, could be found in his old neighborhood. He knew who he was when he came home; everything else was foreign, everywhere else he was fronting.

If there was some path to great “success” that could’ve included his old friends and his old world – one that did not require him to abandon his core identity and all that mattered most – I believe Robert would be alive today. I cannot prove this. And I will confess that my views are influenced by the young people that I have mentored over the years, young folks that I’ve tried to persuade to leave the ‘hood but wouldn’t or couldn’t. I remember once talking with other mentors about how frustrated we were that so many kids “kept returning to the block” or “kept running with the same crowd” when opportunity existed elsewhere. But now I see that the impulse to return and to leave no one behind – not childhood friends, not aunts or cousins or un-cles – may reflect more virtue than vice. It might be love. That is not to say that Robert did not have major flaws. We all do. But something more than character flaws killed him.

This is a beautifully simple book. It does not preach; it offers no answers. But it raises many questions I believe we should be asking ourselves, including why we afford only a tiny number of young people in certain communities defined by race and class an opportunity to live their dreams, and require, as the price for their ticket, leaving behind the very people and places and identities that have given their lives meaning.

Robert’s friend Oswaldo lost his mind—literally—as he struggled to make the transition from his segregated, ghettoized community to the halls of Yale. This story ends with Oswaldo surviving his institutionalization in a mental ward and going on to be a “success,” while Robert is shot and killed in a house with his best friends, all of whom were scheming and dreaming of making it together somehow. Read this extraordinary book and decide for yourself who or what killed Robert Peace. I am fairly certain that more of us are to blame than Robert and the man who pulled the trigger.

Review

“Mesmeric... [Hobbs] asks the consummate American question: Is it possible to reinvent yourself, to sculpture your own destiny?... That one man can contain such contradictions makes for an astonishing, tragic story. In Hobbs’s hands, though, it becomes something more: an interrogation of our national creed of self-invention.... [The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace] deserves a turn in the nation’s pulpit from which it can beg us to see the third world America in our midst.” (*The New York Times Book Review*)

"Many institutions that provide bridges to realization of The American Dream conflate the aspirant's yearning to participate fully with a desire to leave everything behind. *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace* reveals the devastating consequences of this assumption. There are few road maps for students who carry our much-valued diversity, and few tools for those who remain ignorant of the diverse riches in their midst. Jeff Hobbs has made an important contribution to the literature for all of us. He shows what high quality journalism can aspire to in its own yearning for justice—the urgency of taking a full and accurate account of irreplaceable loss, so we don't keep making the same mistakes over and over again." (Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, author of *Random Family*)

"A haunting work of nonfiction.... Mr. Hobbs writes in a forthright but not florid way about a heartbreaking story." (*The New York Times*)

"I can hardly think of a book that feels more necessary, relevant, and urgent." (*Grantland*)

"The Short Tragic Life of Robert Peace is a book that is as much about class as it is race. Peace traveled across America's widening social divide, and Hobbs' book is an honest, insightful and empathetic account of his sometimes painful, always strange journey." (*The Los Angeles Times*)

"Devastating. It is a testament to Hobbs's talents that Peace's murder still shocks and stings even though we are clued into his fate from the outset....a first-rate book. [Hobbs] has a tremendous ability to empathize with

all of his characters without romanticizing any of them." (*Boston Globe*)

"It is hard to imagine a writer with no personal connection to Peace being able to generate as much emotional traction in this narrative as Hobbs does, to care as much about portraying fully the depth and intricacy of Peace's life, his friends and the context of it all... it is an enormous writing feat.. fresh, compelling." (*The Washington Post*)

"[An] intimate biography... Hobbs uses [Peace's] journey as an opportunity to discuss race and class, but he doesn't let such issues crowd out a sense of his friend's individuality...By the end, the reader, like the author, desperately wishes that Peace could have had more time." (*The New Yorker*)

"Heartbreaking." (*O Magazine*)

"Captivating... a smart meditation on the false promise of social mobility." (*Bloomberg BusinessWeek*)

"Nuanced and shattering." (*People magazine*, "Best Books of Fall")

"The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace is a powerful book meant to haunt us with the question that plagued everyone who knew Peace. Hobbs has the courage not to counterfeit an answer leaving us with the haunting question: Why?" (*The New York Daily News*)

"The Short and Tragic Life [of Robert Peace] tackles some important topics: the swamp of poverty; the tantalizing hope of education; the question of whether anyone can truly invent a life or whether fate is, in fact, dictated by birth...[Its] account of worlds colliding will leave nagging questions for many readers which might be all to the good." (*The Seattle Times*)

"A haunting American tragedy for our times." (*Entertainment Weekly*)

"Can a man transcend the circumstances into which he's born? Can he embody two wildly divergent souls? To what degree are all of us, more or less, slaves to our environments? Few lives put such questions into starker relief than that of one Robert DeShaun Peace... As Hobbs reveals in tremendously moving and painstaking detail, [Peace] may have never had a chance." (*San Francisco Chronicle*)

"Mr. Hobbs chronicles Peace's brief 30 years on earth with descriptive detail and penetrating prose... He paints a picture of a young man who was complex, like most of us, and depicted both his faults and admirable qualities equally. It is up to the reader to decide if Peace was an Ivy League grad caught up in a life of crime or just a victim of circumstances... Mr. Hobbs' empathetic narrative gives readers an opportunity to view his life beyond a stereotype." (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*)

"With novelistic detail and deep insight, Hobbs... registers the disadvantages his friend faced while avoiding hackneyed fatalism and sociology... reveals a man whose singular experience and charisma made him simultaneously an outsider and a leader in both New Hampshire and Newark... This is a classic tragedy of a man who, with the best intentions, chooses an ineluctable path to disaster." (*Publishers Weekly*, *STARRED review*)

"Ambitious, moving...Hobbs combines memoir, sociological analysis and urban narrative elements, producing a perceptive page-turner... An urgent report on the state of American aspirations and a haunting dispatch from forsaken streets." (*Kirkus*, *STARRED review*)

"Peace navigated the clashing cultures of urban poverty and Ivy League privilege, never quite finding a place where his particular brand of nerdiness and cool could coexist... [Hobbs] set out to offer a full picture of a very complicated individual. Writing with the intimacy of a close friend, Hobbs slowly reveals Peace as far more than a cliché of amazing potential squandered." (*Booklist*, *STARRED* review)

"One part biography and one part study of poverty in the United States, Hobbs's account of his friend's life and death highlights how our pasts shape us, and how our eternal search for a place of safety and belonging can prove to be dangerous. Peace's life was indeed short and tragic, but Hobbs aims to guarantee that it will not go unmarked." (*Shelf Awareness*, *STARRED* review)

"The resulting portrait of Peace is nuance, contradictory, elusive, and probing... At its core, the story compels readers to question how much one can really know about another person... VERDICT: An intelligent, provocative book, recommended for any biography lover." (*Library Journal*)

"If *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace* were a novel, it would be a moral fable for our times; as nonfiction, it is one of the saddest and most devastating books I've ever read, a tour-de-force of compassion and insight, an exquisite elegy for a person, for a time of life, for a valid hope that nonetheless failed. It is also a profound reflection on a society that professes to value social mobility, but that often does not or cannot imbue privilege with justice. It is written with clarity, precision, and tenderness, without judgment, with immense kindness, and with a quiet poetry. Few books transform us, but this one has changed me forever." (Andrew Solomon, author of *Far From the Tree* and *Noonday Demon*)

"Jeff Hobbs has written a mesmerizingly beautiful book, a mournful, yet joyous celebration of his friend Robert Peace, this full-throated, loving, complicated man whose journey feels simultaneously heroic and tragic. This book is an absolute triumph—of empathy and of storytelling. Hobbs has accomplished something extraordinary: he's made me feel like Peace was a part of my life, as well. Trust me on this, Peace is someone you need to get to know. He'll leave you smiling. His story will leave you shaken." (Alex Kotlowitz, author of *There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America*)

"A poignant and powerful can't-put-it-down book about friendship and loss. *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace* takes you on a nail-biting, heartbreaking journey that will leave you moved, shaken, and ultimately changed. In this spectacularly written first work of non-fiction, Jeff Hobbs creates a singular and searing portrait of an unforgettable life." (Jennifer Gonnerman, author of *Life on the Outside: The Prison Odyssey of Elaine Bartlett*)

About the Author

Jeff Hobbs graduated with a BA in English language and literature from Yale in 2002, where he was awarded the Willets and Meeker prizes for his writing. Hobbs spent three years in New York and Tanzania while working with the African Rainforest Conservancy. He now lives in Los Angeles with his wife.

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