

The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace Study Guide

The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace by Jeff Hobbs

(c)2016 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.

Contents

The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Summary.....	3
Section 1: Chapters 1-2.....	4
Section 2: Chapters 3-5.....	9
Section 3: Chapters 6-9.....	15
Section 4: Chapters 10-13.....	21
Section 5: Chapters 14-17.....	26
Important People.....	30
Objects/Places.....	34
Themes.....	37
Styles.....	41
Quotes.....	43
Topics for Discussion.....	46

Summary

- *This study guide is based on the large print edition of *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace*.

The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace, a work of nonfiction by Jeff Hobbs, chronicles the upbringing and early adulthood of a young black man who grew up poor in a city, and eventually attends Yale University.

Brought up by a single mother, and with a father in prison, Rob did not have it easy growing up. Still, he had his charisma, his wit, and the motivation to take care of the people around him. This made him omnipresent in the neighborhood, friends with good people and on good terms with bad people so he didn't become a target.

His mother, Jackie, sacrificed quite a bit, investing most of her time in order to buy Rob a private school education. Her one goal was to protect her only child from the fate that she saw so many promising young black men succumb to: hanging out at home, doing drugs, and fathering children.

Rob excelled at school, and became a leader among his classmates. This led to a private benefactor paying his tuition to Yale University. He majored in molecular biophysics and biochemistry.

All of these steps forward made his death even that much more tragic. Unable to escape the world where he grew up, Rob continually returned to dealing marijuana. The drug was a solace to him when he used it, calming his nerves and letting him focus on what's important. It was also a means to an end, when he used his earnings to provide for himself and others.

Using his knowledge of molecular biology, Rob engineered a strain of marijuana that became in high demand. Along the way, he crossed the wrong people and was shot dead in retribution. His murder is not solved by the end of the book. The author does his own investigating, wanting to learn something else. Hobbs interviews the people closest to Rob to try to learn how his intelligent, caring friend wound up having such a violent end.

Section 1: Chapters 1-2

Summary

The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace begins with a brief note from the author, Jeff Hobbs. In it, Hobbs details how he logged more than 300 hours of interviews with people who knew Rob, and some people who were just interviewed to give advice about certain topics of which he was not aware. Although his book is nonfiction, some of the dialogue is imagined, he writes. The book is as accurate as he can make it, given the subjective nature of people.

The first chapter opens as Rob's mother, Jackie, brought Robert DeShaun Peace home a day and a half after he was born. The house was full of people, her brothers and sisters, but the boy's father was not there. He had left the hospital abruptly, saying only that he had "things to take care of."

They lived in East Orange, New Jersey. Their dead end neighborhood was off the beaten path, and too tight for some of the criminal element to linger long. But, it was within walking distance of some of the seedier areas of town, and close to a road that linked East Orange to Newark, with its towers of projects. These were created by the government to keep ghettos contained. His mother was raised in this house on Chapman Street, and it was here she had to help raise her six younger siblings, as she was the third oldest.

The story flashed back to when Jackie met Skeet, Rob's father, through a mutual friend. She was beautiful, and carried a certain confidence. He was smooth and carried himself like he was ready for anything. Although he had a regular job, his real money was in dealing cocaine. When she tried to blow him off, she told him she had to head home to help her little brother with his biography about Frederick Douglass. Skeet recalled from memory a series of facts about the man. This earned him the right to drive her home.

The story jumped forward again to when Rob was a year old. Skeet was urging Jackie to marry him. The child was not an accident. They were building a life together, but they had different ideas about what that life entailed. Skeet wanted to marry her. Jackie wanted her distance. She saw her friends get married to the fathers of their babies, and it always ended up in them splitting up, and the father abandoning the baby. In her eyes, she could keep him closer by letting him have a certain amount of freedom. Additionally, it allowed her to be the most powerful voice in the raising of her son, with no one with which to compromise. She also didn't want her son raised in a house dependent on the sale of cocaine.

As a result, the parents had very different views on child rearing. Jackie frequented the library, and nurtured her son's academics. Skeet would pick him up from day care any day he was off, and show him around town. He felt a boy's strength was in his ability to talk to people, and learn from them.

The rest of the chapter shows Rob's upbringing in East Orange. The day care workers nicknamed Rob "the Professor," because he seemed to know everything. Jackie would take him to the park, always watchful for broken glass crack pipes near the playground equipment. She'd make small talk with the dealers who knew Skeet.

Jackie wanted to move out, but it was just too difficult financially. Skeet was more than willing to have her move in with him, but she still kept him at a distance. She didn't want to be connected on paper to his drugs.

Jackie wanted to send Rob to private school, which would cost \$200 a month. She tried to get Skeet to pay for half. Skeet called her "uppity," which meant she thought she was above her surroundings, and would leave any chance she got. That made her send her son to public school.

Skeet continued to spend time with his son. He got him a boxing dummy, and lavished him with gifts that Jackie didn't feel were appropriate, such as certain rap albums.

Skeet's daily involvement in the boy's life ended abruptly when Rob was 7. Skeet was arrested and charged with murdering two neighbors.

Chapter 2 begins with Jackie going to see Skeet in prison for the first time. All of his good-natured charm was gone. In its place was anxious energy, trying to figure out how to get out of this predicament. Both of them wanted to go back to their lives the way they were; Jackie was the only one who could tell that this was impossible.

Rob's life went on as normal, except he kept waiting for his father to come around. Finally, Jackie told Rob that his father was in jail, and that the charge was murder. She didn't share who the victims were, or that there was more than one. All Rob wanted to know was when he'll be back.

Through a co-worker at the hospital, who had some legal issues in the past, Jackie learned that her best bet was to get a public defender and hope Skeet got one who actually cared about his case. A private attorney's bills would be too high, unless they were bad at their job. And even the bad ones would still find ways to bill more than \$10,000.

The details in the case are presented in this chapter: Georgianna Broadway, Estella Moore, and Charlene Moore were together on the night of Aug. 7 for some liquor and cocaine. The Moore sisters were shot dead. Broadway survived and told officers it was Skeet who was the shooter. On Aug. 9, Skeet was arrested at a friend's house, with the suspected murder weapon on his person. There was no motive listed. The author questions the facts in the case. Skeet had no history of violence, and no motive. The witness identified Skeet by the sound of his voice, having never seen the shooter. She had only met Skeet once before, a week prior. She also had cocaine and alcohol in her system. There was also some questions as to the time of death, about a two-hour window, and why the murder was reported some time after the shooting.



Jackie finally brought Rob to the jail, and father and son talked through the glass. Jackie was terrified of how much Rob looked up to – and looked like – his father. She didn't want him to go down the same path. Skeet had talked her into bringing him. "I'm his father, he loves me, he can see me as I am" (72). Rob told his father about how he was spending his summer. Skeet mostly listened, but added at the end. "Hey, you know I didn't do anything wrong, right? You know I'm innocent?" Rob said "Yeah," confident in his father. Jackie still had her doubts.

His father being in prison weighed on the child. Rob got in his first fight at school, for being called a nerd. He threw the first punch. Jackie worried about him becoming like the men in the neighborhood, lazy men who talked tough.

Skeet was not allowed a public defender at first, because he owned property. To the state, this suggested that he had enough wealth to hire his own attorney. The property in question was a house that had burned down. All he owned was the rubble and the lot. Jackie had to take a picture of the ruins to prove it. Then, he finally got a public defender. Through the course of legal issues between the prosecutor's office and Skeet trying to manage his own defense, his trial actually commenced three years after the murder. The author makes a point that these were three years in the life of a boy at a young age that needed his father. Rob was even called up on the witness stand, and tried to paint a picture of his father as a kind man. The prosecutor's office still made a case for the death penalty.

Meanwhile, Jackie worked two jobs and completed and attended night school. She got a promotion to an administrative job at the hospital, and now had enough money to send Rob to a private Catholic school.

Analysis

Chapman Street is a lot like Rob. It's not the worst part of town, but it's certainly not the best. The location of Rob's childhood is a considerable influence on him growing up. Chapman Street sees its share of murders and drugs are ever-present. The night belongs to dealers and gangs. However, it is still a neighborhood. The dealers leave certain locations alone, giving them over to families. And when the sun is out, neighbors are cordial and care about each other.

The projects in Newark tower over it from a short distance away. However, it is the best anyone living there can afford. In a way, they are stuck there. It is close to the main thoroughfares of dealers and gangs. The street is parallel to a major road, but no one would come down Chapman Street unless they have a reason to go. It is insulated in a way. Living there, you can either stay in your houses, or you can go down the road to the dealers. Chapman Street is a slippery slope.

Rob is not the worst kid in town, but he's certainly not the best. He has choices before him. He can stay inside with his family, or he can go out down the road and hang out with the dealers. He starts his slippery slope here.



The people in the book create their own ways of protecting themselves and those they love. Jackie tries to create her own ways of insulating herself and her son from the bad elements in town. It becomes increasingly difficult living in the house. It has so many people living there, with various brothers and sisters. At night, it isn't safe outside, so everyone stays in. With so many people living under one roof, this self-quarantine leads to friction between people.

The fact that Jackie never marries Skeet or even lives with him, despite his protests, is another way she protects herself and her son. She wants a barrier between herself and Skeet in case things go bad with his drug career. When they do go bad, she is glad that she has no legal connection to the man. He is not able to bring her, or Rob, down with him. The distance Jackie creates is intentional. She never wants to know what is going on in Skeet's life. She never knows the extent of his cocaine dealing. Ignorance is bliss. It also gave her plausible deniability. On the up side, it provides peace of mind. On the down side, it surprises her when he is arrested for murder.

The private school that Jackie seeks is also a way of protecting him. Her family disagrees. They think that they pay taxes for the schools, so he should go to the public school. Skeet thinks she is being uppity. In that neighborhood, it means that you think you are better, or deserved better, than the people around you.

Many of the people in the neighborhood work to keep each other from striving for better. The neighborhood is their own. In their minds, they take care of themselves and are capable of taking care of themselves. They can't count on police or public officials. They have to take care of themselves. Jackie sees it differently. She sees a toughness forming in the boy already. She wants it cut off. She doesn't want to take care of him the way all the other mothers in the neighborhood take care of their children. She sees the other mothers as enablers, letting their children engage in drugs and poor choices, while providing a roof over their head. For a while, Jackie is prevented from sending Rob to private school. Part of this is money. Part of it is pressure from her family and from Skeet. She is criticized for wanting something different, for wanting something that isn't available from the network of friends and family. She sees them as not good enough, and they resent that.

Being distanced from her son's father also means that she has to do everything herself. This self-sufficiency is a strong trait. However, it is a demanding one. She no longer has any social life or spending money. All of that is sacrificed for Rob.

One thing Jackie can't protect Rob from, however, is his own father. The blood bond is one thing, but the two truly care for each other. Rob looks up to Skeet as they walk through the neighborhood, talking to everyone, long-time friends and complete strangers. Skeet, with his amazing memory and focus, dogs Rob about his homework more than Jackie. There are certainly good influences he has on his son. Although she doesn't like the fact that Rob picks up some colorful phrases from his father's circle or his rap albums, there is no denying that he would do anything for the boy. Instead of him rarely being around, like some other fathers in the neighborhood, Jackie has to instill a

rule for Skeet to bring Rob home before nightfall because otherwise they'd be out all the time.

Jackie worries that she will have to protect Rob from people accusing his father of being a murderer, but the opposite actually happens. The many people who know Skeet also think he is innocent. They tell Rob that he has to carry on his father's name proudly. They all see Skeet as the victim, and not the perpetrator. They see him as another martyr to oppression: white police officers accusing any black man they could find and putting him behind bars. Rather than having an unsolved murder, they make a quick arrest. This is common enough that no one makes a big deal over it, either. Violent crime happens so frequently that life simply goes on.

Strength can be a good quality or a bad one. Jackie is strong, although her family would probably say she is headstrong. Rob only listens to his mother, which makes it hard to discipline the boy when she is out working one of her two jobs or going to night school.

Vocabulary

milieu, proximate, thoroughfare, cumulatively, countenance, incredulous, rebut, flummoxed, intractable, nexus, obliquely, cistern, pent, elicited, innocuous, situate, sepulchral, glacially, indigency

Section 2: Chapters 3-5

Summary

Rob began school at Mt. Carmel Elementary School, a private school. His grades and work ethic were good, but he wore a scowl because of what was going on at home. Jackie saw this as a proving ground. If he was given the opportunity to succeed, would he achieve great things or would he still end up like the other men in his neighborhood?

Skeet was found guilty of the murders. Instead of receiving the death penalty, he was given a 30-year sentence. The author brings up mistakes the defense made during the trial, such as not pursuing the right questions, and missing obvious conflicting reports in the testimony. Skeet was given a chance to speak at the end, in which he resented that justice had not been served, and that he wouldn't be able to spend time with his son like he would have.

Rob never mentioned his father to his new friends at school. Everyone just assumed his father wasn't around. He had one more trip to visit him before Skeet was transferred to Trenton State Prison.

As some of Rob's family members had moved out, each remaining family member's bills increased. Rob had turned 11, and had taken to performing odd jobs around the neighborhood for friends of his father. He'd split the money with his mother. She never stopped him because she saw the self-empowerment this was creating. He'd also learned to cook his own dinner, and would make her a portion for when she got home from her second job.

Rob was having trouble finding where to fit in. He was smart and industrious. In his neighborhood, boys didn't understand that. In his school, boys were jealous of the praise he got from the nuns. He also became a subject of scorn, walking home past the projects in his school uniform (pink shirt and purple tie). He usually had to drop the name of someone he knew in whatever project was nearby to show a local tough that he had street cred.

He had developed three distinct personas: In school, he was studious and followed directions; at home he took charge as much as he was allowed; in the streets he knew all the hustlers by name and was referred to by his middle name DeShaun, and later Shawn. He called the last part "Newark-proofing" himself.

He did find friends, though. Jackie judged them to be good boys. He had a best friend, Victor Raymond, who had troubles of his own. After his parents died from illnesses, his brother gave up a football scholarship to work and raise him. Then, the state decided that the brother couldn't raise him, since he was just 17. Victor was sent to live with an aunt in East Orange.

Jackie would take Rob to Trenton State Prison to visit with Skeet. Skeet was his old self, gregarious and hopeful, trying for an appeal. Rob was old enough to speak to him without Jackie, and she would sit outside and give them some private father-son time.

Jackie was laid off, and had to send Rob to public school until she found a new job. During his brief return to public school, Rob casually mentioned to his mother how many of the kids were dealing drugs in school. Jackie took a trip to her old high school and watched the teenagers. She didn't see any future in them. She needed better for Rob, so she made sure he went back to private school.

The neighborhood continued to sink into Rob. By 14, he was drinking and using marijuana. He was smart enough to learn the techniques on how to hide its use. Victor worried about him, about how close to this world he was. Rob only had to walk down the street, and adults would call him up to their porch and offer him something. He was still Skeet's son, after all.

Victor was going to St. Benedict's High School, and Rob wanted to go, too. It wasn't Jackie's first choice. It was in the heart of Newark, near the courthouse where Skeet had been sentenced. The tuition would be \$291 a month, and that was if she spaced it out over 12 months instead of 9, like at the school he attended. Rob told her she'd get promoted soon, and he'd be old enough to get a real job.

As Chapter 4 began, so did Rob's time at St. Benedict's. The school was extremely rigid, and a lot of the rules didn't make sense at first. The boys camped in at the school's gym for a few weeks during summer, were separated into groups so they wouldn't form their own cliques, and were made to memorize school songs and every other child's name. Rob took a while to get ingrained into this system. For a while, he was just doing what he had to do in order to get by. He followed the rules, got straight As, and then bused over to Orange High because he and Victor had a deal worked out that let them play football there. St. Benedict's didn't have a football team. Rob developed a reputation for the being the kid who read a lot and knew all the words to their favorite rap songs.

East Orange stopped paying for insurance for he and Victor, and a new friend at St. Benedict's recruited him into swimming and water polo. Jackie preferred this to her boy riding the bus to compete in a violent sport with boys from the streets. Tavarus Hester was from East Orange, and his mother had left a few years ago. Then, his father died. He told Rob when football was over, that he could join swimming because while doing the sport, you don't think of any of your problems. You just swim.

He formed a fast friendship with three other boys on the team. Instinctively, they knew what was missing from each other's lives. They all came from similar homes. Rob, Tavarus, Drew, Flowy, and Curtis Gamble started calling themselves the Burger Boyz, because of how often they went to Burger King. Rob never ate there, unless Tavarus bought him something with some kickback money from his drug dealing. They all knew Rob was the poorest of the group of them, and they were all poor. When Tavarus' grades floundered, Rob started a study group in Curtis' basement.



Some of the children were chosen to take a trip to one of the school's benefactors, who owned a bank. Tavarus, being a weak student in need of encouragement, was chosen. He got in a fistfight with another boy there. In punishment, he was supposed to call home. Instead, he called Rob. Rob ripped him for fighting in a place like that. Tavarus was being served steak and lobster, in a home with a maid, and he was starting fights? All this encouraged Tavarus to be more like his friend.

Playing water polo, there were only two other teams to compete with in New Jersey, so the team spent a lot of time on the road in hotels. One boy smuggled in wine coolers one trip. Rob scoffed. Therefore, he was told, it was his turn next time to bring the party. He brought marijuana and brandy. After that, he became known as a man who could hook people up with whatever they needed. When people tried to buy marijuana off him, he directed them to Tavarus, who had a better supply worked up. Tavarus gave him a kickback for the referral, and Rob gave half to his mother.

The rest of the chapter speeds through a series of incidents during Rob's freshman, sophomore, and junior years. Times of girls, drinking, and parties. He and his friends avoided a huge fight between St. Benedict's kids and the nearest public school, in which even faculty fought. They won key games. They met Hrvoje Dundovic, a student from Croatia, who listened to punk rock. He and Rob formed a mutual respect, as the white boy introduced him to the Misfits and Black Flag, and Rob introduced him to DMX and Tupac.

On a school excursion, a torrential downpour collapsed the boys' tents, and Rob led them down a trail, hand in hand, to the nearest town. He found the closest house he could and knocked on the door at 3 a.m. and called who needed to be called. The homeowner asked if they wanted to stay the rest of the night in the garage, but Rob led them back to the campground. He wanted them to do it themselves.

In Chapter 5, the author explains that Rob wasn't able to keep his drug use a secret as much as he thought. Coach Ridley took Rob aside one morning while Rob was working as a lifeguard at the pool. He asked why he smoked so much marijuana and why he'd do that to his body. Rob opened up in a flash of anger. He yelled "I haven't had a father since I was 7 years old! What makes you think I need one now?" He stormed out of the pool area and didn't show up to practice for the rest of the week. Then, he called the coach to ask him a question that he already knew the answer to and they just talked for an hour. They didn't talk about the confrontation, and they never talked about it again. They just moved on.

Meanwhile, Rob was made into the leader of his grade, during which he worked on discipline and other day-to-day issues. During this time, Curtis Gamble's father died of cancer. The Burger Boyz were all missing a father in their lives, but wanted to change this. He and Tavarus interned at a real estate office. During breaks, Rob went to a legal library and researched murder trials. He helped his father with his appeal, and a pro bono lawyer was able to get Skeet's indictment thrown out. Skeet was released after 10 years in jail.



In just one section of the chapter, Skeet lived with Rob at Chapman Street. He only had a few months with him before the state assembled a legal counter to bring him up on charges again. During those few months, Skeet never left the house, and barraged Rob with questions about his whereabouts. It wore Rob a bit thin, but it didn't last long.

Rob had a heart-to-heart conversation with Victor. His graduation was approaching, and he didn't know what he wanted to do with his life. He was feeling overwhelmed. Rob allowed himself to have someone watch him cry.

He had applied to a selection of colleges. Two longshots, two good matches, and two safety schools. He was accepted to many of them, but was leaning toward Montclair State because they had offered him a full scholarship, and that way his mother wouldn't have to pay for any more of his schooling.

Ultimately, it didn't happen that way. As group leader of his grade, he gave a speech at the senior banquet. It was a fundraiser attended by Colin Powell and other leaders. One of them, Charles Cawley, the CEO of MBNA bank, had inquired about him after he had spoken. He was a major financial contributor to the school, and had visited once or twice a year. As the dinner was concluding, Cawley sought Rob out, gave him his telephone number, and told him "You can go to college wherever you want" (191).

After some conflicts arose about where he wanted to go, such as missing the deadline for Johns Hopkins, he chose Yale. He had been ridiculed by his street friends for his pending ivy league education, but many of them were at his graduation, alongside acquaintances of Skeet's.

The Burger Boyz had some farewell parties, as all of them were going separate ways. They promised to keep in touch and come back to the area to raise their own families.

At the end of the chapter, Rob got a call from Jeff Hobbs, a future roommate at Yale, in order to figure out what items each of them were going to bring. Hobbs is the author of the book.

Analysis

Rob's way of protecting himself involves keeping parts of himself locked away. Indeed, he has several different personas. At school, he is hard-working and quiet. In the streets of East Orange, he is smart-mouthed and knows everybody, like his father. He continues to play rough street football games. In the house, he's taking on the role of a young man and a bread earner. Keeping each part of himself insulated from the other is a protective measure. He does not want one group of people to learn about another part of him. It's fine that the boys in the street, who all know Skeet, know that he's in prison for a crime he didn't commit. That lends him a fair amount of street cred. However, if the boys at the prep school knew about that, they might look down on him. The author later explains how many other boys in the prep school system come from single parent households, or are dealing with some other issues at home. By doing this, the author suggests that perhaps Rob didn't need to keep his secrets so close to his heart.



The reader never knows what Rob thinks about the boys on the street. The author has already explained Jackie's thoughts. She thinks these boys won't amount to much more than sitting around and drinking and doing drugs. She sees them all growing up to be criminals, fathering children they won't have anything to do with. But it is unknown whether Rob shares her opinions. He keeps his school life separate from them. Several times, he mentions how the kids will pick on him for his academic success. He has to name drop dealers in the area in order to keep himself from getting mugged on the way home from school while he's wearing the school uniform of pink shirts and purple ties. He definitely understands that education is a doorway out of this world, but it is unknown if he feels sympathy or pity for the other children who aren't working hard on their education.

Coach Ridley tries to reach out to Rob, to pierce the facade to get to the real him, and it backfires. The coach had seen a lot of troubled boys go through St. Benedict's. Perhaps Rob is not used to anyone caring about him. Or, more precisely, another man being nurturing. Rob's mother cares for him. When she doesn't have the time or energy for him, he knows it is not because she doesn't care. It is because she does care that she works so hard to send him to a good school. He takes care of himself instead. Interestingly, the coach never goes to the police or the school officials about his knowledge of Rob's drug use. Perhaps he figures that a kid maintaining high grades and a key leadership role in the school could be forgiven a little illegal substances. Besides, with all the much harder drugs in the neighborhood, marijuana is much less dangerous. The coach probably thought Rob would be safer in the school than expelled, where his drug use would certainly climb. The author does not go into great detail about Ridley's life, or why he acts the way he does. However, it is clear that he makes a decision that using marijuana is not that bad of a crime. It might be because these boys all have issues in their home lives that don't have clear-cut answers.

There is an epidemic of fatherlessness in Rob's neighborhood. Whether by choice, fate, or a system rigged against them, Rob is not alone among his friends who are missing their fathers. Some of them lost their fathers from illness. Some, the fathers were never in their lives to begin with. Rob feels a kinship with these people, since they understand what he's going through without him having to explain anything.

Skeet's brief homecoming marks the only time that the father ever lived with his son. Jackie has spurned Skeet's insistence on marriage, and always kept him distant. They always lived in separate homes. Now, with the short break before the state is able to create another trial, Skeet lives with them at Chapman Street. It's not a family unit, however. After 10 years in jail, there is no romance between Skeet and Jackie. Skeet lives in a separate room on a separate floor of the house. The man Skeet was when he entered prison is not the same man he is when he comes out. He's broken down, and doesn't leave the house. The author gives plenty of possibilities of why this could be. One chief reason is that he might not want to get caught up in the same crew, like the dealers he used to know. Another is that he is so used to living in a confined space, that he's not comfortable outside. He also might fear revenge from anyone who knew the women he supposedly killed.



Living with Skeet is very trying for Rob. He has had very high hopes of how life would be like when his father was free. It doesn't live up to expectation. He wants to talk to his father about rappers, and movies he missed. Instead, Skeet barrages him with questions about his own life. This is strange to Rob, since usually people leave him alone. Rob's not used to the close quarters, and a parent that is always around. Even Jackie works a lot so she is not around as much. It is a challenge to him to have people care about him when he is always trying to be self-sufficient.

Rob doesn't know how to handle opportunity. At the end of his high school career, Rob breaks down. He cries in front of Victor, while sitting on park swings at night smoking marijuana. Rob doesn't know what he wants to do with his life. He has opportunity, and drive, but no direction. The only direction he has is out of the neighborhood - for college, anyway – and then he plans on coming back. As to a career, he is unsure of what he wants to do. This existential crisis is something new to him. Throughout his life, there were no options. There was no future except what you could make. He was able to get a path out through his own hard work and that of his mother paying for the tuition. Now, he can go to any school he wants and that pressure is breaking him. He is acutely aware that most of the kids in his neighborhood will not get the same opportunity, and he is scared of squandering it.

Rob's strength could be his weakness. He never lets people get close. He never shows his emotions. Despite everything that is going on, he keeps it hidden. Victor is one of the only people to see him cry. When he becomes enraged at the coach for asking him about his drug use, it could be because the coach is trying to help. He had expected he and Skeet to talk as equals when he came out of jail. Instead, Skeet wants to know what's going on in Rob's life, presumably to make sure his boy is staying out of trouble. Rob, being proud, and trying to be strong, is the type of person to push away people trying to help. He probably sees people who need help as being weak.

Vocabulary

bucolic, glower, irrefutably, protracted, iconoclastic, suboptimal, calibrations, parlaying, milieu, prescient, stymied, vestibule, inoculation, exacerbated, tumultuous, matriculation, sated, broach, rarefied, harried, aplomb, precipice, minutiae, consequential, vichyssoise, everpresence, viscous

Section 3: Chapters 6-9

Summary

Chapter 6 begins with freshmen moving into their dorms at Yale University. There was a meeting between two worlds as the Hobbsses met the Peaces. Jeff's father, a surgeon, and his mother, met Jackie and Rob. There was an awkwardness that comes from people meeting for the first time, made worse by the fact that there was little in common. There were two other roommates in their suite. Ty Cantey was a half-black, half-Japanese man. He and Jeff both ran the 400 meter hurdles, so they roomed together. Dan Murray, a white man from Seattle, roomed with Rob.

People had compared their rooms to prison cells in how small they were. The author notes that they were actually slightly larger than Skeet's room at Trenton State. Jeff was a rich student whose older siblings had gone through this before. They all attended Yale. He sensed that Jackie dropping Rob off was more momentous for them.

Jeff tried to become Rob's friend, although Rob seemed indifferent to a lot of the people around him. Indeed, he might have been the only student at Yale wearing baggy pants and a skullcap. Jeff attempted to seem down-to-Earth, dropping hip-hop references into their conversation. Jeff, in the narration, assumes that Rob probably saw through the fakery. They did have a laugh at a white man competing in sprints and a black man playing water polo. At one point, Jeff asked Rob "What does your father do?" Rob answered that he was in prison for manslaughter.

The freshmen fumbled through and found their places on campus. People sought out and clung to their own kind. There was a very clear racial divide. The whites hung out with the whites, and the blacks hung out with the blacks.

A lot of the first year was posturing. Young people were trying on different personas. They left their high school selves behind and were free to experiment. Rob saw through this facade, and said that everyone was just fronting. They acted a role instead of really being that person. He couldn't stand how no one was real at Yale, except for his girlfriend, Zina, who he argued with constantly.

This chapter ended with "Parents' Weekend," when parents came to visit the school just before Thanksgiving. While most of the students showed off for their parents, Rob went home. He reconnected with the Burger Boyz and hung out with his mother. Rob talked to Flowy about how much time he had at Yale, since he didn't have other concerns like he did at home. But, he needed a job. He needed money to pay for school equipment and entertainment. Upon coming back, he hooked up with Sherman Feerick, who ran what was known as the Weed House. Sherman started giving some of his marijuana business to Rob.



Chapter 7 glossed over the first year of school and carried on into the next. Rob took a job at the lunchroom busing tables for \$8 an hour. He was also one of the more prominent marijuana dealers on campus. An incident in the lunchroom made him want to get revenge on some rich, white students. Instead of busing their own trays, they left them for him to do. It wasn't his job, but he had to clear off their trays so that he could do his job – wiping down the tables. He wanted to follow them out, beyond the safety of Yale University, and beat them down.

Rob and Jeff's friendship continued to grow. They were now in their second year living together. The other two roommates weren't around much. But Rob's customers were. There was usually a steady stream of people buying drugs from him. These were people who didn't judge each other, and Jeff found it easier to be with people who didn't judge him than with other rich, white people who required him to conform. As he said to Jeff once, "You know what I like about you, Jeff? Because it's aaaaall good with you. You just read your books and write you stories and don't give a damn" (253). They helped each other get over break-ups. Rob backed Jeff up in a fight. Jeff played off his being overly white among the racially mixed groups, to much shared laughter.

Rob eventually gave up his job at the cafeteria, since he was selling a lot of marijuana. He took an unpaid internship at a campus lab. His friends from home would come to visit. Tavarus had dropped out of college. Flowy injured himself and couldn't work. They had lost a lot of the hope they had when they left St. Benedict's.

At one point, Rob got attacked because he was mistaken for someone else. He, Victor, Victor's brother, and Jeff went out riding around, trying to find the guy to get some revenge. Jeff thought he was the only one terrified. Jeff was glad that they never found the guy.

Chapter 8 began with Rob being called into the school master's office for dealing, in February of his Junior year. The master and the dean told him how serious this infraction was, and made him promise, on Yale's honor code, to stop. He agreed and apologized.

But he didn't stop. He told a friend, Oswaldo, who had grown up in Newark and now went to Yale, that he was going to reduce it for a bit while the attention was on him. Oswaldo was furious with him. "You do dumb shit and you know it's dumb shit but it's the same dumb shit you grew up around so you do it anyway" (289). Shortly afterward, Oswaldo would break under the pressures of school, issues at home, and other problems. He would entertain thoughts of killing classmates or killing himself. Then, he suffered a psychotic break, and was found wandering around town unable to recall his name.

It was around this time that Rob was selected to become a member of a secret society called Elihu, named after Elihu Yale, the school's founder. This was like a fraternity, except they played up the secret part, wearing robes to hide their identities. He wound up going to the governor's mansion for the initiation, since one of the members was the governor's daughter. Oswaldo, out of the psychiatric hospital after a two-week stay,

warned him to behave. When at Yale, he became angry at how urban people like he and Rob were viewed. In isolation, he became acutely aware of why they were viewed that way. They were treated like dealers because they were.

During their senior year, the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001 happened in the real world. This made all their school projects seem small. The author described a couple of times he and Rob hung out, once in an all-night trip to a casino, and another time when he tried a joint for the first time.

As senior year continued, everyone was making plans for their future. Rob wanted to go to Rio. It was beautiful there. What Jeff didn't realize, was that Rob had made about \$100,000 dealing during his years at Yale. He was still bringing money home, but in small enough amounts that Jackie thought it was from the cafeteria job she thought he still had. \$30,000 was set aside for when he got his first real job, so it could go to her and she'd believe it came from his employment.

Jeff wanted to become a novelist, but was overwhelmed by the more prestigious competition out there, and was being shut down by teachers regarding his first submissions to the literary world. He imagined, during a conversation with Rob about his fears, that Rob was essentially saying to him: "If you want to, and you don't, then that's on you" (312).

All the members of Elihu were called upon to tell a story about themselves, in order for them all to really know each other. Rob went last, and told the longest story. He talked about growing up in East Orange, and Skeet's trial, and the monthly letters he wrote to people in the criminal justice system, for four hours. One of the Elihu members, Arthur Turpin, would later tell Jeff that he felt, that night, that one could never truly shed one's roots. Rob's belief, that the white establishment would always try to keep the black man down, was a kind of racism.

There were a few instances when Jeff visited Rob's world. He went to see a water polo game, since he had never gone to support his friend. Also, Rob took him to a barbecue back home and a tour of the neighborhood. Every corner seemed to have some personal story attributed to it.

Chapter 9 started off as Yale's education was ending. Rob had a job as a custodian, cleaning up after the students' messes they left in the dorms. He also worked at the lab, studying molecular biology to determine how certain cells behave in order to provide treatments for cancer and some immunodeficiency diseases like HIV. He was sharing a basement apartment with a friend, Raquel, platonically. Meanwhile, Jackie held on in East Orange, watching as the neighborhood turned progressively more violent, as regular dealers got replaced by gangs.

Even while working at the lab, he continued to deal. He had his pseudo-uncle, Carl, the man who had introduced his parents, work as a connection so he could buy marijuana by the pound. He needed someone who never left the area to help broker deals for him.

Jeff, meanwhile, had a job arranged for him by his brother, writing grants for a school.



Rob laundered his money through the lab where he worked. Then, he flew to Rio. After hearing how beautiful it was, he wasn't disappointed. He synched into the culture of the place, watched people, and learned as much as he could. He talked to strangers, young and old, men and especially women. Some friends came down to visit during his long trip. They later told the author that this was as peaceful as they'd ever seen Rob Peace.

Rob returned a few weeks early because of a phone call to Carl. Rob had checked in with him regularly. Rob heard anxiousness in Carl's voice. Rob had left his trunk with all of his drug paraphernalia and cash in Carl's place, because he didn't want anything to happen to his mother if it was left with her. Carl had robbed him of all the money he was saving to give to Jackie and to live off of. The earnings at Yale was to give himself a cushion upon graduation, and now it was gone.

Analysis

The Yale campus, with its thousands of students, is a microcosm of the real world. People separate along color lines or economic lines, and by interest. Some of it is intentional. Some of it is forced upon them. Some of it is just people trying to create safety for themselves by hanging out with their own kind. This is a kind of strength in numbers. But Rob wants to transcend that. Rob finds his own group of people to be with. By being a dealer, some of these lines get broken down, because all kinds of people want drugs. He also appreciates how Jeff is non-judgmental about other people. He just goes with the flow.

The author explains what "fronting" is, the act of pretending to be what you're not. It's putting up a false front. Rob thinks everyone is fronting. Jeff, narrating the story, thinks that Rob would also be fronting when showing different personalities to everyone. One persona for school; a different persona for Chapman Street. Jeff imagines that Rob's response would be that he isn't fronting in this situation, because they are all shades of him. And it is a survival instinct that engendered this facade, not an attempt to pretend you're better than everyone else.

Rob partitions himself off from the rest of the student body. In a way, he is protecting himself. He is surrounded by kids who have been put there by their rich parents, and his father is in jail for a double murder. Even when Jeff asks about his father, Rob says he's in jail for manslaughter. Manslaughter is a much lighter crime than murder, especially murdering two women and shooting a third.

While Jeff's departure to college is a big step, he mentions that nothing really changed in his life. His older siblings had gone through this already. The author mentions that his goodbye to his mother lasts 45 minutes. This is definitely a bigger step for Rob and his mother.

Rob explains to some friends while getting high the difference between Yale and his neighborhood. If a white person got lost in his neighborhood, he wouldn't be safe until he got out. If a black person got lost at Yale, he would be safe. He wouldn't feel

comfortable, but he'd be safe. Rob is constantly thinking about how to be safe, and how to create safety around himself. Money brings security, if not safety. Dealing drugs brings money. This is the most likely impetus for Rob's dealing.

The incident with the trays in the cafeteria opens Jeff's eyes to the world beyond his sheltered life. It is such a minor conflict, that it probably went on every day. White, privileged people won't think twice about it. Those who have had to work hard and sacrifice, who know how hard it is to take care of things, can't stop thinking about a sleight like that. It shows one of the first times that Rob offers Jeff a glimpse of his world. Jeff is unaware of how painful a relatively short moment like that can be. Additionally, he is surprised at the anger that this elicits in Rob. He admits, in narration, that he might have done a similar careless thing without thinking of the impact on the people who are working around him. The barriers between these worlds break down during Jeff's four years at Yale. Before school, he would have seen Rob as nothing more than a basic thug. Now, he is going to a barbecue and hanging out with his family. He is riding shotgun while Rob drives through the streets of Newark. He feels safe with Rob as his tour guide. He stops seeing the poverty-stricken areas as full of criminals, but full of people.

The cafeteria incident is also evidence of a recurring theme that different places have different rules. On Chapman Street, the author explains, Rob would have curbed those men. This means he would have thrown them to the ground, and stomped on the backs of their heads so that the curb of the street knocks their teeth out. This is a common enough occurrence to have it's own name. On Chapman Street, respect is important. You respect other people. If you don't, you get beat down. On the campus of Yale, it's fine to disrespect those who you perceive to be at a lower station than yourself. At best, you treat them as if they are invisible. At worst, you can treat them with disrespect and no one cares. The other incident in Chapter 7, when Rob is attacked, happens off campus. Rules are different there. On the Yale campus, the author explains, there is rarely any danger. On the streets close by, the rules are the same as the rules on the streets of Newark or Orange. There, if someone doesn't respect someone else, they can get beat down. Violence is somewhat surprising but not unexpected. Also, violence is also answered by more violence.

It is possible that when Rob gets attacked, it is not a case of mistaken identity. Rob keeps his life compartmentalized. No one knows exactly what he's doing, or to what extent he is in trouble. His confidence, his charm, and his relatively low-key intelligence keep people from asking too many probing questions. However, after reaching the end of the book, readers might reconsider events like this. At the end, his fate is sealed when he goes in over his head. It is possible that Rob is attacked in this chapter because of something he really did to.

Yale has an honor code. After getting caught selling marijuana, Rob has to promise to stop. That is the only punishment he receives. If he had been caught by police in the streets of East Orange, he would have been jailed immediately. This is another instance of Yale having different rules than other places.



When Oswaldo is taken out of Yale, and placed in a psychiatric hospital, he is removed from the Yale experience for two weeks and is, therefore, able to see it more clearly. From a distance, he is able to see why others look down on him and Rob. The author explains that they “propagated the ignorance of their peers” (296). In other words, no one bothers to look deeper into them, and see how complex they are, because they project a rather simple persona. They dress like thugs and deal drugs all the time. No one is thinking that they are as intelligent or as talented as they really are. It's a very clarifying experience for Oswaldo, and he becomes the voice of reason for Rob for the rest of the book.

Meanwhile, the real world encroaches upon Yale in ways the cloistered students never dream of during the Sept. 11 attacks. While the students are all focused on tests and connections that will plot their future, there are terrorist attacks going on. It makes their ivy league world feel sheltered, even more so than usual. At Yale, there is a safety. Nothing truly bad happens, usually. On the outside, the rules are different. No one is safe and no one can predict what will happen.

The rules of the street are different, and a Yale connection can actually prove a detriment. The author explains that Rob needs Carl as a cover to improve his street cred. He has a Yale education, and if his connections find out about that, he might face some kind of retribution. At the very least, his connection with the white world of the ivy league makes him an outsider. Rob is trying to straddle two different worlds, and they are mutually exclusive.

Rio has its own rules as well. While the poor and rich are separated, Rob doesn't feel like there's a change walking from one area to another. He is accepted, as well as a tourist can be, by everyone. He doesn't feel the need to conform to a certain role. He feels serene while he's there, and will later refer to this time as one of the happiest times of his life.

Living with Rob gives Jeff an insular view of Rob's drug trade, which might lead it to be unrealistic. The author describes Rob as one of the more prominent drug dealers on campus. Certainly, with the parade of faces coming in and out of the suite, it could definitely be inferred that he is a big man on campus. However, Jeff's experiences with drugs and the lifestyle associated with them is very limited. It could be that Rob is a relatively low-level player in Yale's drug community. However, to someone with limited experience, he appears to be a major player. Jeff probably does not have any idea where the rest of the campus is buying their supply from.

Vocabulary

fracas, tchotchkes, cordon, milieu, de rigueur, ephemeral, latent, fronting, opined, carillonneurs, vitriol, apropos, naivete, benign, affect (as a noun), blithe, illicit, peristalsis, staidness, foisting, propagated, alacrity, dissociative, datum, motif, derivative, caravanned, domicile, arduous, stigmata, entropy, coalesced, favelas, chiascuro

Section 4: Chapters 10-13

Summary

Chapter 10 finds Rob returning to live at Chapman Street, without any money or prospects of earning any. He felt guilty for being a burden on his mother when he had wanted to take care of her. He got in a fight in a house party in Newark. Someone asked if he was the guy who went to Yale, and accused him of slumming. Rob's pride was injured and both men escalated the fight until it spilled into the street.

Jeff, meanwhile, was writing grants for nonprofits, which allowed him to travel to third world areas to help build wells that were paid for by his writing. He couldn't get in touch with Rob via e-mail or cell phone. Most of his Yale friends, who had moved into rich jobs and rich areas, didn't keep in touch. Without school to hold them together, Jeff and Rob drifted back to their own worlds.

During a deal, one of Rob's bulk suppliers pulled a gun on him. This made him rethink everything. All the hard work he'd done to get to where he was could have disappeared in an instant. He quit the dealing business. It would turn out to be temporary.

He eventually started teaching biology at St. Benedict's. He was gratefully welcomed back by the staff, but they sensed his heart wasn't in it. They felt that he just needed a job and this location was familiar enough. As a teacher, he had the respect of some of the kids, who saw him as a street-smart man not too much older than they were. He would sit in on meetings of children who were having problems at home. However, if someone showed disrespect in class, he would bark at them, even using the "F word." He had to apologize for this later, even though he didn't think he had to.

Rob bought a house, against Jackie's opinion to keep his money with his family and their home. He lived there, rented out two of the floors, and he and Oswaldo tried to fix it up so he could flip it. He continued to visit Skeet in prison. Their constant research on trying to free him was focusing more on minor mistakes made during the trial than Skeet's innocence.

Jeff introduced all his old college friends to his fiancée, Rebecca, during a track meet they were watching. She had grown up in a tough neighborhood, had been robbed at gunpoint once, and so could talk to Rob a little better than most people in their circle.

The author takes a few pages to catch up with his fellow graduates. One had already met a tragic end: an actress named Lyric Benson. She was killed by an ex-fiancee.

"Lyric's death reminded us that having a Yale degree on our resumes could open many doors, but it couldn't protect us from life, which didn't care about our resumes" (416).

Her death was one in a string of tragedies that afflicted the young adults after school. Rob's grandfather, Horace, slowly succumbed to dementia and passed away in 2005. Skeet collapsed in the prison yard, and was diagnosed with brain cancer.

Jeff and Rebecca married after not knowing each other very long. Jeff's first novel had been published, and they were heading toward a future together. The author mentions that this wedding, where Rob was a groomsman, would be the last time he'd see Rob.

Rob continued to be busy, and not up to any good. After he'd get done teaching, he might go to dinner with his mother and grandmother, but at night he made his rounds, selling marijuana until the early morning. Then, he'd grab a few hours sleep and go to school the next day to teach. Somewhere in this schedule, he was writing appeals to try to get his father a transfer based on medical reasons.

Friends criticized Rob on his dealing. They thought he could do better. A Yale graduate could make his own path. They didn't understand how he kept falling into that trap. Part of it was friendship. There were connections in East Orange that he didn't want to let go. He always wanted to get to know people. Another was pride. He had turned Curtis Gamble's basement into a lab where he used his biology knowledge to create a designer drug. This marijuana gave the exact kind of high he wanted, and he was able to sell to the right people. He christened it Sour Diesel.

During this time, Skeet died in prison. The state continued to deny appeals to move him out of the prison infirmary to a hospital where he could get proper treatment. Rob told Victor after the funeral: "I lost my father three times. First when he went to jail. Second when he went back to jail. And now he's in the ground" (445).

Rob dealt with this loss hard. It represented not only losing his father, but losing the fight to free him. Rob addressed this by burying himself in future plans. He had decided to flip houses, having the Burger Boyz taking up important roles in Peace Realty. In school, he had started to burn out, his boss tells the author. He had earned Teacher of the Year once, but it was clear his heart was no longer in it.

The real estate market around the Newark/Orange area turned out to be a bad market. Rob started setting his sights on Cleveland, Ohio, where he had family. However, after nine months of plans, and spending money, Peace Realty never got off the ground.

Rob continued dealing, however, and making enemies. In one instance, he came close to a confrontation with a man nicknamed "Boobie" from the Double II Sets gang. Rob appeared to talk his way out of it.

As Chapter 11 begins, Rob left the school and worked for Continental Airlines as a baggage handler at Newark airport. To the people in his life, they thought he was wasting his time and mind. He had an obligation to his own talent, that people thought he was not pursuing. Jackie told him, "You didn't go to college so you could carry people's luggage" (469). Rob saw the airport job as a means to an end. He would be able to fly for free. He used this to spot areas he could buy and fix up as part of his real estate scheme. He also used free airfare to travel for fun, and to transport marijuana.

Chapter 11, 12, and 13 are short chapters showing how Rob was trying a variety of things, but nothing consistent. He had no career, no steady girlfriend, and no peace. What he had a lot of were plans: plans to flip houses, plans to travel the world, plans to deal drugs.

Rob's friends were settling down, having children, moving forward in some way. He never had a steady woman in his life, and some friends suspected he intentionally sabotaged relationships. One girlfriend, Ina, considered that Rob was addicted to dealing. During their relationship, he tried to transition from smuggling drugs to selling guns. He had manipulated her into getting a gun permit so that she could buy the guns and he could sell them. Once she discovered his plan, she split up with him.

Rob asked Oswaldo to set him up with some drug contacts he could sell to. Oswaldo kicked him out of his house. Oswaldo had tried to leave that part of his life behind, and didn't want to have anything to do with it anymore. It wasn't important anymore to be "the man."

Meanwhile, Jeff and Ty and their wives got together. Jeff's first novel did well, but the second one couldn't find a publisher. He was editing self-published books to make ends meet. Ty and his wife had tons of debt from medical school, a toddler, and a baby on the way. They worried about the fact that they had little more than the immediate future mapped out before them.

Rob started getting close to another friend of Raquel's, Rene. Raquel was being protective of her friend, since she just got through some hard times. Rob replied, "So have I" (528). The following passage takes place: "And Raquel saw it then in his face, the briefest reveal of what Rob had strived always to hide from her and so many others: what he'd been through and how it clung to him."

Meanwhile, Rob made a mistake at his airport job that cost the airline at least \$20,000 in damages, and he failed to provide a urine sample afterward. He was fired.

It was now 2010. Rob sent Jeff a message via Facebook, checking in with him. Jeff replied in the general way that all Facebook messages were: noncommittal.

Analysis

People have trouble adjusting to the different rules that exist in different places. When Rob had first come to Yale, it was a bit overwhelming, and he had trouble fitting in and finding the right group of friends. Now that he has graduated, he is having trouble going back to his old world. He has gone a bit soft from being at Yale. At the ivy league school, nothing bad would ever happen to him. Violence was rare. Back in East Orange, he still carries himself like the big man on campus. That rubs people the wrong way. It gets him into a fight. He learns that he has to downplay his education or else people will accuse him of slumming. St. Benedict's rules have changed now that Rob is on the teaching end of it. The kids are disrespectful and lazy. Coach Ridley tells him that the kids haven't changed. He has just grown up.

All of Rob's fellow Yale graduates are stuck in quarter-life crises. A book titled *Quarterlife Crisis* was published in 2001 popularizing this term. It speaks of the open-ended world that unfurls after graduation, where there are tons of possibilities and lots of new responsibilities. Rob is not alone in this. If he had spoken with the other graduates, he would have known that none of their lives were where they expected either. Jeff's literary career is stalled. Ty, who was going to be a great doctor, is now a dermatologist, which he considers settling while he pays off student debts. All of them have this great potential that is on hold. If Rob only knew that they are all in the same situation as he is, maybe he wouldn't feel so desperate.

Newark and East Orange are more than just places to Rob, they are the people. This is something that an outsider might not understand. A few times, the author quotes people saying that Rob is better than the life he is living at this point – the dangerous life of dealing drugs. In these chapters, the author explains what is in it for Rob. Friends come from all sides: from street football games, hanging out on porches, and making the rounds with Skeet. These are people he can be himself around. He doesn't have to put on airs. This is home for him, and it's why he never really leaves. Despite his travels to Rio and other places, despite St. Benedict's and Yale, he always returns to East Orange, because it is home.

Despite Rob's desire for everyone to be honest, he is not honest himself. Rob continually takes people at Yale to task for putting on airs and trying to be someone they are not. He doesn't turn that lens inward and realize he is doing the same. Oswald sees it clearly. He explains to the author that Rob put up a false front more than he'd ever admit. He rarely talks about his problems. He is a different person at school than he is at home. No one ever really knows the extent of the trouble he is in. And when trouble does come, he laughs it off. This is evident in Yale, when Rob is asked to stop dealing drugs. He promises to stop and then continues. This is also evident at home, when everyone tells him to stop wasting his life dealing. He blows off their concern and assures them that everything will be fine, and that he's on top of it all.

The anger in Rob is finally starting to pour through. Usually this comes out in quick glimpses. He snaps at Raquel for not knowing what he had gone through. He curses out students. But sometimes, the anger is just bubbling under the surface. Charles Cawley, the benefactor who had paid for Rob's tuition, saw him at St. Benedict's. He didn't like the man he saw. As he explains to the author, some personal problems can actually cause people to become successful. Artists, for example, can find a way to thrive on their quirks. But nothing good can come of anger, and that is what he sees in Rob upon meeting him. The anger has replaced the hope he saw seen years before. Rob has plenty of reasons to be angry. In the foreground, his father wasting away in prison burdens him for the better part of two decades.

Rob has potential that everyone sees but him. Whenever he's dealing, or coming up with a get rich quick scheme, friends call him out on it. They ask why he's doing this. He has a Yale degree, he doesn't need to be hustling. Even Victor Raymond's brother, Big Steve, who gave up a football scholarship to take care of his brother after their parents died, calls Rob out on it. Big Steve knows what it's like to sacrifice for family and have

nothing to show for it. Jackie is probably the most upset. She sacrificed the most and she fears that Rob is going to fall into the same traps that all young men in the neighborhood fall into: that of drugs, crime, and laziness.

Rob suffers from an incurable wanderlust. Ever since he was walking around the neighborhood as a young boy following Skeet around as he talks to everybody. Rob ingrained Skeet's words that there is nothing more important than talking to people and learning about them and where they came from. It's better, for example, to work at an airline carrying bags than as a teacher. As a teacher, he never leaves the school. At the airline, he travels the world. On a more personal note, his wanderlust extends to how he can't stay with the same people too long. He has lots of groups of friends, and some don't know the others. When he disappears for a bit at a time, no one knows who he's with or where he's sleeping. He doesn't have a steady girlfriend, but it seems like he might have more than one at a time.

Vocabulary

cumulative, pervading, maelstrom, antiquated, blotto, vitriol, ingrained, malaise, ascendance, exurb

Section 5: Chapters 14-17

Summary

As Chapter 14 begins, Rob was living off unemployment, which was a serious blow to his ego. Jeff, narrating, says that Rob measured his worth in his ability to provide for others. For almost two decades, he had been leaving money for his mother, for example. Jeff states that Rob could have been lived well on a teacher's salary. He didn't have extravagant tastes. Sometimes, giving that money made people respect him more. That might have been his motivation.

Rob had a period of bottoming out here; unemployed for a few months, he had fallen into a routine of living around Newark and the Oranges. He stayed up late, hung out with friends, and did not make any forward progress at all. Besides a plan of going to grad school, he didn't really have any plans.

Oswaldo remained in the picture. He felt that Rob gave more of his time and his effort to his friends and family than he ever received in return. When Rob was trying to fix up houses, few of them came to help. Now, every time Rob had some kind of plan, whether it was grad school or real estate, the friends shot him down, stating that there was no future except hanging out together.

Rob paid the bills by working for a drug boss named Amin. Instead of running around and being a dealer, Rob would take large batches of marijuana and create his signature brand, Sour Diesel, for Amin to then sell.

Chapter 15 begins with Rob trying to convince the Burger Boyz to go in on a get rich quick scheme that involved converting a bulk marijuana purchase into Sour Diesel, and making \$400,000. Half of the Burger Boyz were against it, asking why he couldn't just get a job or go back to school like he'd been talking about. Rob made this speech:

"St. Benedict's, Yale – it doesn't mean anything here. That's how it is. So I'm gonna make my own plans happen. C'mon now, aren't you all tired of struggling yet? You and me, the five of us, deserve to be doing more than getting by, doing what we can to keep a roof on our heads, just like everyone else. An opportunity like this doesn't happen every day, and we only have to do it once and, when we have the money, be smart with it" (570).

For the initial investment to buy the bulk drugs, Rob had to borrow the money from Oswaldo. Oswaldo had two conditions: He had to be paid back, and their friendship was over.

Actually converting all that marijuana was a huge ordeal, and it consumed tons of time. Much of this chapter had to do with the problems of converting a score of that size, and selling it in quantities that wouldn't arouse suspicion. Rob and his friends didn't realize just how difficult the logistics of it would be. They had to hire people to do some of the

street level deals for them. One of them, Kamar, started speaking about the arrangement to the wrong people – members of the Double II Set Bloods gang. Rob needed to talk to someone in that gang and show that he intentionally wasn't encroaching on their territory and that Kamar was a liar. Rob had started wearing a Kevlar vest and he owned a gun.

As the author states: "The Burger Boyz had learned – or they believed they had learned – that at the end of the day education didn't matter. Potential didn't matter. Knowledge didn't matter. Only money mattered" (579).

During this chapter, there are short segments where minor characters have brief interactions with Rob. For example: Rob took Lisa, a former coworker, and her son out to dinner. Rob met up with Sherman, the former owner of the Weed Shack, who now worked as a liaison between a local mayor and the gangs. Rob asked for a counselor job at Sherman's summer camp.

Chapter 16 details the events of May 18, 2011. Rob was at Curtis Gamble's house, where the drug lab operated in the basement. Tavarus, his wife, Darlene, and their son, Christopher, lived there, too. Rob and Curtis heard a car pull up. Rob opened a door to see who it was and cursed. Whoever was in the car forced Rob down the nearby basement steps. The rest of this section is told from Curtis' point of view. Curtis tried to run out and get help, but there was a guard stationed out front. He got a gun out of the closet, but mistakenly jammed it when he tried to help Rob in the basement. The men inside fired on Curtis, and he ran and hid. A few minutes later, the men left, and Curtis found Rob shot to death in the basement.

Tavarus told Flowy to take care of "Ma," meaning Jackie. He did, although he didn't know for sure what had happened. He thought Rob might still be alive. After hours of waiting in a hospital, and no one there confirming any information, Jackie slowly understood what had happened to her son. When she came home, Carl had already received the call and he whispered in her ear. She nodded, already knowing what must have happened.

In the beginning of Chapter 17, Jeff received a Facebook message from Victor Raymond informing him of Rob's death. He apologized that this was the only way he knew to get a hold of him. Jeff, after getting over his disbelief, took on the task of notifying the Yale connections Rob had. He filled them in as best he could, because he didn't have many details. He flew out to the wake, held at the church next to St. Benedict's. There were more than 400 people there. The receiving line was more than two blocks long, and people spoke English, Portuguese, Croatian and Spanish, as all of Rob's segmented groups gathered together.

Friends and family, of course, took his death hard. The author reports that he never saw Jackie cry. She just had a solitary look of defeat about her. In the months following, whenever anyone would talk about Rob, she would state that he influenced a lot of people. Raquel raised \$5,000 to help cover the funeral costs, but was disappointed that so many people refused to help, because of the way he died. Curtis tried to raise money

to hire someone to track down and kill Rob's murderers, but Tavarus talked him out of it. He would eventually go to jail for his role in Rob's drug trade, being the owner of the house. The Burger Boyz were not welcome at the funeral, or in Jackie's life at all after that, cut out because of their role in his death. The book comes to a close describing two ceremonies held on what would have been Rob's birthday. Jackie and many others attended a loud party at a bar celebrating his life. The Burger Boyz had a separate remembrance ceremony, still in the backyard of the house where he died.

Analysis

There are a few sections in Chapter 15 where it seems like everyone's saying goodbye. These were small, insignificant events. However, with only two more chapters left in the book, there was a finality to these interactions. Perhaps the author had interviewed these people and they were telling him about the last time they spoke with Rob.

These final chapters might mark the beginning of the end for Rob, but it could be argued that his fate was sealed long before he was born. Many of the people living in East Orange talk about a system that is rigged against them. This system keeps black people living in poverty while white people live in relative safety. It could be argued that just being born into this system sets all odds against a person.

Some people accept the system as it is, otherwise they'd be "uppity." Skeet calls Jackie uppity when she wants to take her son into a private school. Rob is labeled as the Yale kid, or the Ivy League kid. In some areas, this would be an honor. In his neighborhood, it's an insult. It means that he's too good for them. His neighbors resent the system but reject the methods of getting out of the system, such as higher education. The only suitable reaction to the system is not to rise above it, but to be angry at it.

It is unknown whether intervention could have saved Rob. Reading the book, and seeing the bad choices line up, it's easy to draw a correlation, and see his path clearly. If only the coach had been firmer. If only Yale had followed up on his punishment. If only he had reached rock bottom earlier, maybe he would have learned. His charm and his wit and some luck allowed him to squeak by on a number of near misses. Given his pride and his insistence on doing things his own way, it is unknown if anything would have stopped him from trying to find that last score that could theoretically solve all his financial problems.

Rob helps others before he helps himself. Oswaldo says it pretty clearly. Rob's always helping out his friends. However, if he puts the word out that he needs help fixing up a house, Oswaldo is the only one who shows up. He gets this tendency from his parents. His father wandered the streets, and was always helping people along the way. Whatever project they were in the middle of, Skeet would stop to offer a hand. Jackie sacrificed everything for her son to have a better life than she ever would. This ultimately doesn't happen. Rob also hides his true needs from everyone, because he doesn't want to seem weak. It's a feeling of pride that he doesn't want to ask for help.



Marijuana is Rob's way of helping himself. When Tavarus brings Rob onto the water polo team, it's because of how he described swimming: just letting go of all the stress and just powering through the water. This must have been what smoking marijuana felt like for Rob. When high, he finds that he is less stressed and more focused. The little things don't matter as much any more. A quick Google search shows that Sour Diesel, Rob's brand of marijuana, is prized by the medical marijuana community.

The author makes it a point not to make the story a parable. It could be easy to make it a too-simple story of a kid who couldn't escape his surroundings. By giving Rob more depth, and by showing him from many points of view, the author paints a more convincing portrait of a man who feels that the only choices available to him are dangerous ones.

Vocabulary

milieu, distended, sorties, vitriolic, sojourn, innocuous, flummoxed, allusions, schadenfreude, cumulative, pervading, carping, bemoaning, farcical

Important People

Robert DeShaun Peace

Robert DeShaun Peace is born in East Orange, New Jersey in 1980. His mother is Jackie Peace, who grew up on Chapman Street in East Orange and never leaves. His father is Robert “Skeet” Douglas, a construction worker and cocaine dealer. His father goes to jail for a double murder he says he didn't commit.

Rob is smart, and extremely good with people. In his early years, teachers and family members can all tell he is going to go far. Jackie is compelled to make sure of it, though. She works two jobs, goes to night school, and does what she can to provide tuition for Rob to go to private school.

Although Rob excels at school, he feels equally at home on the streets. He plays rough games of football on the street, flipping kids over his back onto the asphalt, and tackling them into cars parked on the side of the road. By the age of 14, he has been accepted into his father's grown-up world of alcohol, drugs, and the community of people in East Orange.

Rob covers his emotions, feeling that it's a man's job to take care of others and not be taken care of. He rarely shows any kind of weakness, so no one ever knows what's really going on. Occasionally, his anger at the unfairness of the world creeps out and shocks whoever is within earshot.

Rob rises to a leadership position at St. Benedict's, the private high school Jackie pays for. At a fundraising dinner, Rob gives a speech that impresses one of the school's financial supporters. This man, a banker, provides all four years of Yale University's tuition. Rob chooses molecular biophysics and biochemistry as a major.

After Yale, Rob bottoms out, and can't get his footing in the post-collegiate world. There are many options, such as teaching at St. Benedict's, but ultimately Rob's wanderlust keeps him from settling down. He travels throughout the world, sometimes visiting old friends, sometimes forging new territory.

Despite his travels and experiences, he always comes back to East Orange, and the drug culture there. He deals marijuana off and on his entire life. It isn't easy money, and there is a lot of risk involved. Still, this is the life he knows and it comes more readily to him than dealing with educators or scientists. He pays the ultimate price for his ambition and his hubris when he tries to elevate himself above the level of a street dealer/manufacturer and an enemy cuts him down.

Jeff Hobbs

Jeff Hobbs is the narrator and author of this book. A college roommate of Rob's, he tries to piece together the events that led to his friend's surprising death.

Jeff grew up on an eighteenth century farmhouse on 15 acres in Chester County, in Pennsylvania. He lived a sheltered upper class upbringing there before going to Yale, where his family members had gone.

While at Yale, he is placed in a dorm suite with Rob Peace. They get along well enough to continue rooming together for the next four years.

Jeff chooses English language and literature as a major. He aspires to be a novelist. Through this lens, he is constantly people watching. He takes in a lot of his surroundings, and is always wondering why people act a certain way.

Due to his upbringing, Rob is unlike anyone Jeff's ever met before. At first, he pigeon-holes the man as a thug, letting himself stereotype him. After months of living in close confines, he sees how well-rounded Rob is. Rob opens up a new world for him.

After college, they lose track of each other. The last time they see each other is at Jeff's wedding. After the surprising news of Rob's death, Jeff tries to make some sense of it. He visits Rob's old haunts and spends more than 300 hours interviewing friends and family.

Jackie Peace

Jackie Peace is Rob's mother. She works in the food services department of various health care facilities. Born and bred in the house on Chapman Street, she had tried to move out on her own a few times, but always wound up back. She has a child with Robert "Skeet" Douglas but kept the father at arm's length, turning down Skeet's regular attempts for marriage. She wants to protect her family from the drugs and crime in the area. To do this, she sacrifices a lot, working extra jobs and taking classes at night to pave the way for her son to get out like she never did. She has been numbed by a hard life.

Robert "Skeet" Douglas

Robert "Skeet" Douglas is Rob's father. He works in construction, but also works in "making movements," his code for hustling cocaine. He is gregarious and friendly. He regularly makes the rounds to his many friends, always helping everyone and talking to everyone. Despite the fact that he deals cocaine, he has other work, and coaches a youth basketball team. The amount of drugs he deals is never known. He just seems to know everybody. Eventually, he is the only suspect in the murder of two women and

the attempted murder of a third. Despite questionable evidence, he is jailed for most of the rest of his life. He dies of cancer in prison.

Coach Ridley

One of the only authority figures from St. Benedict's mentioned in the book, Coach Ridley is one of the first to see some potential in Rob. When Rob wants to join the water polo team, since they don't have football, he has to learn to swim. From there, he develops into a great athlete. Ridley knows more than he lets on, though. He asks Rob why he smokes so much marijuana. Rob explodes at him in anger, but it subsides. It shows that Ridley sees that the lives these kids come from are more complicated than black and white versions of right and wrong.

Carl

A mutual friend of Jackie and Skeet, Carl is responsible for introducing them. He deals cocaine with Skeet. He is the most constant father figure in Rob's life, and Rob takes to calling him "Uncle." He usually hooks Rob up with marijuana and generally looks out for him through his early life. Trusted with protecting Rob's stash of drugs and cash, he steals everything from him.

Victor Raymond

Rob's best friend from the streets of East Orange, Victor Raymond has some of his own problems. After being left without parents at a young age, his older brother takes responsibility for him. The state determines that the brother is too young, at 17, to care for his sibling, and they are forced to move in with an aunt. Victor's choice to go to St. Benedict's is probably why Rob chose to go there, too. Although they are placed into different groups there, he remains his best friend. He is one of the few people who Rob allows to get close.

Oswaldo

Oswaldo attends Yale with Rob and Jeff. His story parallels Rob's. He is a dealer from the streets of Newark. He can't handle the false fronts of the entitled rich people at Yale. Oswaldo can't process the differences between his old world and the new, and when that's combined with the stress of an ivy league education, he snaps. After a psychotic break, he recovers and is able to see things from a different perspective. He becomes a voice of reason for Rob. They come from the same place, they feel the same way about a lot of things, so he can talk to Rob on a level that few people can. Rob doesn't listen, though.

The Burger Boyz

The Burger Boyz are a group of Rob's friends from St. Benedict's water polo team: Tavarus, Curtis, Flowy and Drew. They call themselves that because of their tendency to hit Burger King after practice. Their bond is inseparable. This is good and bad. The good thing about it is that they always provide Rob a place to call home. Sitting around with these close friends, he can be himself and just relax. The bad thing about it is that they keep Rob close to the dangerous world of dealing in East Orange.

Charles Cawley

Charles Cawley, the CEO of MBNA bank, is a major financial contributor to St. Benedict's. He provides more than just money, however. He gives time and opportunities. He hosts outings for the boys at his estate. He appears a few times a year to see the school and meet staff and students. For the first (and perhaps only) time, he invests in a graduate, wanting to give him every opportunity to succeed. That graduate is Rob Peace, and Cawley pays for his entire tuition.

Objects/Places

Chapman Street

Robert is born in a house on Chapman Street in East Orange, New Jersey. It is a shelter from bad elements of town, but not far enough away. The house is tall, and narrow. There are factories in Newark that employ people in towns like East Orange. So, working class neighborhoods have sprung up all over. These houses are stacked shoulder-to-shoulder. In the decades before Robert was born, everyone knew everyone else. This stops at some point though. Many of the eight uncles and aunts are still living there in the beginning, so it is pretty crowded growing up. It is close to Central Avenue, a thoroughfare one block over, which is a well-traveled place for everyone, including dealers. At night, it is full of dangerous people.

Community

The East Orange community is very important to Rob. There is a scene when Rob is 6, and going on the rounds with his father. They stop to chat with two strangers who are listening to a Yankees game on the radio. As they listen, more and more people stop as they walk by. The owner of the radio has to keep raising the volume. Lemonade is passed around. The day falls into dusk and Rob just looks around at this group of strangers, who are all just standing around and talking, and he feels a sense of belonging. This sense of community is something he never feels at Yale, or at any of the places after graduation. He only feels it at home, with people who might not have his best interests at heart.

Newark

Newark is the source of many urban ills that affect the Peace family. The face of Newark changes drastically over the course of Jackie's life. In her youth, it was a center of industry, as factories gave jobs to thousands of working class people. As the years went by, factories were closed as operations were shipped overseas. People lost their jobs. People had to be put up in projects. The projects outgrew their neighborhoods, as unemployed people spilled out into other territories. A Civil Rights riot took place. White flight, in which white middle-class residents fled to the suburbs, left a vacancy. Gangs and drugs took root.

Cocaine

Skeet deals cocaine throughout Rob's childhood. He calls it "making movements." Being a harsher drug that destroys lives, Jackie tries to distance her son from it by never marrying his father or even living with him. It is Skeet's connection to this drug that might have caused him to be involved in the double murder.

Marijuana

Marijuana is Rob's drug of choice. Despite the active chemicals being known to cause sluggishness and memory loss, Rob uses it to focus, study, and take the stress away whenever he needs to do something important. It's such a major part of his life, that he is able to distill the kind of high he likes from various strands, and use his experience in molecular biology to engineer a designer drug that gives him just what he needs. Others like it, too. The demand for this comes with cash in his pocket, but also leads to his demise.

The fact that marijuana is a relatively harmless drug leads people to minimize the impact it has on Rob's life. He never seems to be losing control to the drug. He never appears to be chemically addicted, although he smokes enough that perhaps he is addicted to the habit of taking it. However, Rob's involvement with making and selling marijuana does end up being dangerous, as it ultimately leads to the end of his life.

Trenton State Prison

Trenton State Prison represents the final say in the systematic racism in America. A compound compared to a medieval castle, the prison holds 1,900 inmates at the time that Skeet is there. This becomes his home for the rest of his sentence. Jackie takes Rob to visit Skeet from time to time, but it is far away and difficult to get to, so the trips are not frequent. After Skeet is sentenced, he is placed there indefinitely. He is just one more black man that the state has deemed a violent person likely to reoffend, despite evidence to the contrary. When Skeet is diagnosed with cancer, the prison officials refuse to transfer him to another prison where he could get the treatment to prolong his life.

St. Benedict's Preparatory School

This school in the heart of Newark is where Rob is sent once Jackie raises the money to do so. It catered to mostly white, well-off families before the race riots in the 1960s. After the white families fled Newark, Friar Edwin Leahy reopened it to serve the residents, regardless of color. The alumni network supported it, and the black families took pride in it, and it grew to include a sports complex, a computer room, a science wing, and a library with 6,000 books.

Yale University

At first, Yale University represents success. To be accepted to Yale, or to even have a chance at it, means that a student is exceptionally gifted and has accomplished great things. However, after graduating, the students realize that Yale is not a destination, but a ticket to another destination. It represents potential. A Yale degree generates respect. It opens doors. However, the doors have to be there to begin with. If there are no



opportunities, a Yale education doesn't magically make them appear. The students learn the hard way that they have to struggle after graduation to get what they want. They thought everything would be handed to them.

Whereas in the business world, a Yale diploma commands great respect, on the streets of East Orange or Newark, it engenders disrespect. A Yale loses all street credibility. They are considered uppity, wanting to leave their roots behind. Rob downplays his education as a defensive measure.

The campus itself is a sheltered community, a city within a city that provides everything most people need to survive in a collegiate setting. While some never leave the campus, Rob feels walled in when he's there, and is more at peace navigating the poorer neighborhoods of nearby New Haven. There, he doesn't have to deal with people putting on airs and pretending to be something they are not.

Rio

Rob learns about Rio at some point as a young man, and its allure never lets go. He stays there for months, and feels at peace. There are rich areas and poor areas, and people of all backgrounds. Rob's natural curiosity causes him to learn about the people and cultures there. Upon returning to the states, he talks frequently about wanting to return.

Curtis Gamble's house

Curtis Gamble's house at 134 Smith Street features in the book several times, and its function changes each time. Curtis Gamble is a close friend of Rob's throughout St. Benedict's. He is on the water polo team with the rest of the Burger Boyz. When some of their grades flounder, Rob starts a study team in the basement. This becomes a safe area for the group of friends. The door is always open to them, and the Gamble parents are always welcoming.

As young men, the house becomes the headquarters for their dreams of making lots of money and leaving the city behind. At first, this takes the form of Tavarus and Rob's company, Peace Realty. That doesn't bring them the riches they expected, so Rob sets up his lab in the basement. Here, he turns bulk marijuana into his own brand, Sour Diesel. At this point, several others are living in the house, including Tavarus and Tavarus' son, Christopher. Ultimately, this basement is where Rob meets his end, being shot dead by persons unknown.

Themes

People look for their own protection

Everyone tries to find safety, although safety means different things to different people. Throughout the book, people are changing things in their lives to create some kind of security, whether it's physical, financial, or psychological. Sometimes, it works. Sometimes, it creates more problems.

Jackie tries to protect her son – and herself – from the street. That means protecting them from Skeet. Obviously, if she really wanted to stay away from him, she wouldn't have got involved with him at all. However, as she is starting a family, she realizes that certain things about Skeet's lifestyle are not welcome in a family home. As good as he is about keeping Rob's nose in his schoolwork, and spending time with his son, Jackie never accepts Skeet's attempts to marry or even move in together. She needs to keep separate from him. Her son has her last name, not his father's. There is a plausible deniability that comes with this kind of distance. She doesn't know much about his dealing, and she doesn't ask. This is how she protects herself and her son.

Rob protects himself by separating the parts of his life. At home, he's a take-charge person, trying to be the man of the house. At school, he's quiet and follows instructions. On the streets, he's Skeet's son, loud and gregarious, drinking and smoking marijuana. He feels the need to keep these aspects of his life separate. If his family knew he did drugs, he'd be in huge trouble. If the street kids knew how devoted he is to academia, he'd be the subject of ridicule. Therefore, he has to create safety for himself by creating three personas, or shades of himself.

Showing weakness makes you a victim. By hiding it, people protect themselves from enemies. Rob learns quickly that the best way to prove that he isn't an easy mark, while walking through his neighborhood in his prep school uniform, is to name drop local dealers to show he's got an in with them. He has to show that he's from the street and that he isn't weak. When Rob breaks down and cries in front of Victor, it is an unusual situation because he almost never shows weakness. To show weakness is to ask for someone stronger to attack you. He builds a wall around his emotions so that he never shows how he truly feels. He allows himself to break that with Victor, however, because Victor is Rob's best friend.

Potential doesn't matter if there are no opportunities

Rob's potential sets him off running, but because there are no opportunities, he runs into a wall. There's a finite number of jobs in the world, and everyone competes for them. Someone growing up rich has more doors open to them, but there is no guarantee that they'll find what they're looking for. Someone growing up poor only has

access to a small percentage of those jobs, and there is even less of a chance that those doors will be open.

Throughout his life, Rob is told he has great potential. His teachers, his mothers, some of his closer friends, all of them say he is bound for better things. This fills him with so much forward momentum that when it doesn't come to fruition he feels like a failure. To be sure, everyone makes mistakes, and Rob definitely made his own. It is much more difficult for him to recover from his mistakes than if he had a better safety net.

After graduation, several of the important people in the story fail to have their lives take off. Rob is the most dramatic, falling from the grace of an Ivy League school to being unemployed. Jeff doesn't become the celebrated novelist he had imagined he'd become. Ty becomes a dermatologist instead of following another medical field or going further in his studies, which he considers settling. One of their fellow grads, an actress, is shot dead.

The world had seemed full of promise until graduation. After that, the responsibilities and realities set in. All the hopes and dreams dried up, and left a bitter taste in the mouths of the grads. If Rob had kept in touch with the others (or if they had kept in touch with him) he would have seen that they were all struggling as well.

Every location has different rules

Some places are a world unto themselves, with rules that set it apart from other areas. Throughout the book, several locations play heavily in the action because they have firm rules to follow. Some characters do better than others at navigating the different worlds.

East Orange and Newark are used interchangeably in the book. Locals might take offense to that. From the author's point of view, they were the same. Both encompassed a street mentality. In this area, people had to be hard or else they'd be a victim. They had to show the proper respect, or else they'd get beat down.

In Yale, it is largely a microcosm of the rest of America. An elite, rich, ruling class is entitled to the best of what there is to offer. Everyone else has to work harder. There are police call boxes, and campus security, and other institutions that enforce the hierarchy. These things keep rich people from any kind of retribution for their bad behavior. For example, when a group of white students leave their trays for Rob to remove so he can wipe down the table, he wanted to curb them, throw them face down and stomp on the backs of their head, knocking their teeth out on the curb. But, all the security around keeps Rob in his place and allow the rich students to continue behaving without any fear of retribution.

Rio soothes Rob more than any other place. Taking long visits as a tourist, he learns enough of the language to get by. The classes are separated like in any other city. However, Rob doesn't feel like they keep as much of a distance as in America. In Rio, from his perspective, they only live apart.



Sometimes there is a culture shock when one goes from one area to another. Rob certainly feels it coming to Yale. That place is unlike any he had encountered before. Jeff feels less culture shock, since his family had attended that school. However, Rob's guard is down when he comes back to East Orange. He talks big because he's used to Yale, where nothing bad ever happens. He's not used to the swift retribution of the streets if someone talks bigger than they should.

After graduation, Jeff and other characters lose track of Rob. Part of this is Rob's wanderlust. Part of this is that Yale is a destination school, and few of them came from the same area. But a large part of it is that after graduation, they all went back to their own worlds. Geography and the school itself held them together. Without it, they faded away from each other's daily lives, only showing up occasionally on Facebook.

The system works - in a bad way

A system keeping classes separate in America continues to work when everyone continues to play their part. There's a system in play throughout the book, that of rich people keeping their money and keeping poor people poor. Since rich people tend to be white, and poor people tend to be minorities, this becomes a racial issue.

At Yale, the reader sees the uppermost part of this equation, as rich, entitled (mostly white) students look down on others. They come from sheltered lives, and judge the blacks and other minorities as being beneath them. As Oswald says, people look at him and Rob with disgust because they see a dealer. To a degree, the judgmental people are right because Oswald and Rob are dealers. Oswald accuses Rob and even himself of perpetuating the cycle. In order for people to look at them in a more positive way, they need to do more positive things.

Rob's friends' lack of hope keeps them grounded, but it also keeps them from succeeding. Some of Rob's friends try to keep him in his place as well. Every time he has a plan, which is often, his friends either try to shoot holes in it or promise to help and then never do. Rob tries to rise above his station through real estate ventures, but it becomes clear pretty quickly that no one wants to put in the same amount of work as him. In some cases, the other people have it right, because they know that no one should invest in East Orange real estate with the hope of making a huge profit. They know he's not going to succeed that way.

Someone who wants to improve their life can be labeled as "uppity," meaning that the people and places they grew up around aren't good enough for them anymore. The only real use of this word in the book is when Skeet accuses Jackie of being uppity for wanting to send their son to a private school. It has enough of an effect on her that she doesn't do it right away. She does it after Skeet is sent to prison. Even her family doesn't understand why she would pay money for an education, while her school taxes are supposed to do that. Although that was the only use of the word uppity, the concept shows up several times throughout the book. When Rob is labeled as a Yale student, he is looked on with derision in his neighborhood. He becomes an outsider. He is accused

of slumming it by coming back to his old neighborhood, although in his mind, he never left.

Strength can be a weakness

When someone relies too much on certain strengths, those strengths can be a downfall. Several people throughout the book figure they will get by because they always have before. They rely on a certain strength to get them by. Relying solely on that strength limits their chances and causes them to fail.

Jackie's independence is one of the first times the reader sees a strength that works against someone. Although she can't afford her own home, she struggles as hard as she can so as to not owe anyone anything. In fact, her relying on her parents angers her. She has tried several times to move out, but each time she's had to admit defeat and come back. This can't be easy for her. Accepting help would make things a lot easier for Jackie, but she can't bring herself to do it.

Rob has many strengths, and they make him feel too safe. He is always able to talk his way out of problems. Whether it is the Yale dean asking him to promise to stop dealing, or avoiding a confrontation with the gang member "Boobie," he always manages to win people over with conversation and a smile. Even if the confrontation becomes physical, he knows he can hold his own in a fight. His confidence works against him because he thinks he can either talk or fight his way out of any confrontation. Another strength is his mind. He's smart enough to understand anything that Yale throws at him, and that makes him work less hard.

Rob's past successes set a bad precedent. This is a man who accomplishes most of what he sets out to do. He wanted to do well in school, and he did. He wanted to start water polo, so he learned to swim. He wanted to get his father out of jail, and he temporarily succeeded in that, too. With that track record, it's easy to see why he thinks that he will be able to succeed in the scheme that eventually proves fatal.

Dovetailing off the theme of potential, Rob's potential is another strength that turns into a weakness. He has always been told he is bound for better things. This places an unbelievable amount of pressure on him to succeed. When he is approaching 30, and he still hasn't succeeded, the remorse over wasted potential rots within him. It spurs him on to become desperate to find some way – any way – to succeed.

Styles

Structure

The book's structure is linear, offering a chronological sequence of events starting from a time before Rob's birth until a time just after his death. The author does not use any flashbacks.

There is a prologue where the author addresses the reader directly. Here, he explains his methodology into writing the book: who he interviewed, how he filled in gaps, and how much of the dialog is natural and how much is invented.

The bulk of the book comes from either first hand or second hand sources. During the scenes at Yale, Jeff Hobbs, the narrator, is interacting with Rob so there is a fresh first person perspective. During the times of Rob's life where Jeff is not present, he gets information about key moments in the life of Rob Peace through those closest to him. He does not provide multiple versions of the same event. Different people can have different opinions. However, he sticks to one person's narrative at any given time.

Several times, there are short scenes that mention the death of someone, or explains something dangerous that happens. Examples of this include the murder of Yale alum Lyric Benson, or the fight Rob gets into when he's recognized as being the Yale grad who came back to East Orange. These serve as foreshadowing to show that no one is safe.

There are a few pages of acknowledgments at the close of the book during which the author thanks the people who made the book possible, including his own family and friends for support. Included in this are major people in Rob's life, particularly Jackie. Also included are people Rob had never met, like Newark Mayor Cory Booker, who gave Hobbs some background on the city.

Perspective

Most of the book is written from a third person perspective. Rob is certainly the focus, but Hobbs rarely gets inside his head. Occasionally, Hobbs will imagine what Rob is thinking. For example, when Rob spends a few months in Rio, Hobbs writes that he can only imagine the tranquility he feels.

The point of view changes somewhat once Jeff Hobbs becomes a character in his own book. Rob continues to be the focus, or protagonist, and almost all of the action surrounds him. However, scenes in which Jeff plays a part are narrated with "I" instead of the distant third person narration that is in the rest of the book.

After Yale, and Rob and Jeff go their separate ways, the perspective returns to third person for the most part. There is a section every so often where Hobbs catches the

reader up on what is happening in his own life, or that of Ty or other important people from the Yale days. These sections return to using “I.” These scenes tend to be very short, and serve the purpose of edging the reader along the chronology so that the reader knows where everyone is during key moments of Rob's life.

Tone

Hobbs' tone is generally nonjudgmental. The narration itself usually doesn't pass judgment on the people. A notable exception is during Skeet's murder trial, when the narrator points out glaring issues with the case, such as the believability of the only witness.

The author appears conflicted on the events leading to Rob's death. Being a literature student, using the word “tragic” in the title is more than just an adjective. The author is likely invoking Greek tragedy, when a hero is beloved, but has flaws that ultimately seal their doom. It's clear that Jeff loves his friend, but also can't negate the role Rob's own actions played in leading to his downfall.

Instead of passing judgment himself, he speaks his concerns through quotes from others. For example, when Oswald calls Rob out for dealing and living a dangerous life even though he doesn't have to, it's clear that the author includes this sentiment because he agrees with it. The author is ambivalent, though. He does not place blame entirely on Rob for the situation he found himself in. Through interviews with a myriad of people in Rob's life, Hobbs paints a picture of a system at work that railroaded a young man into a course of action that would ultimately lead to his demise.

Quotes

I'm his father, he loves me, he can see me as I am.

-- Skeet (chapter 2 paragraph 37)

Importance: Skeet loves his son and it hurts him to be apart from him. Even at a low point in his life, freshly incarcerated for a double murder, he wants his son to be in his life. He doesn't want to shut Rob out. Jackie always creates distance between herself and Skeet. Skeet doesn't want that distance to also be created between himself and his son.

Uppity or not, Jackie saw beyond.

-- Narration (chapter 3 paragraph 1)

Importance: This bit of narration comes just as Rob is starting prep school. This is the private school that Jackie sends him to for \$200 a month. She sees potential in her son, and she doesn't want to see it squandered in the neighborhood.

She took his arm, about to give him a hastily prepared speech about focusing on work and taking advantage of this coming opportunity. But she said nothing. Rob didn't need to hear it; he already knew."

-- Narration (chapter 3 paragraph 90)

Importance: This is written after Jackie decides to send Rob to the expensive private high school. Money is already tight, and everything is riding on Rob being able to take this opportunity and make it worthwhile. It's significant that she doesn't need to tell the boy that this opportunity is important. He is aware of the challenges his family is facing and doesn't want to waste them.

It was as if all of these kids had spent so long working so hard to get here that the reaction to actually being here was to become idiots."

-- Narration (chapter 6 paragraph 12)

Importance: While there are a lot of people who worked hard to get to Yale, some take advantage of it and party a little too liberally. While some don't understand the opportunities this provides, there are some who do.

I just hate all these entitled motherfuckers.

-- Rob (chapter 7 paragraph 9)

Importance: Rob finally sounds off about the rich people who make up the majority of the Yale student body. The conflict between Rob's streetwise background and those of his fellow students, who didn't have to work as hard as he did and had life catered for them, is showing. The anger is there the entire time, but this is one of the few times he allows it to show.

He knew that I could never understand, and he was kind enough not to hold my sheltered obliviousness against me. This had become the rhythm of our friendship at Yale: he would share with me the smallest fragment of his world and then step back into the whole of mine.

-- Narration (chapter 7 paragraph 19)

Importance: This paragraph sums up Rob and Jeff's early interactions. It comes from a discussion of a slieght Rob feels when a group of rich, white men refuse to bus their trays and leave him to do it. This quote shows how much Jeff has to learn about race relations outside of his sheltered world.

You do dumb shit and you know it's dumb shit but it's the same dumb shit you grew up around so you do it anyway.

-- Oswaldo (chapter 8 paragraph 19)

Importance: Oswaldo and Rob have similar upbringings, as Oswaldo had grown up in Newark and was hoping for Yale to provide a way out to help support his family. He is a dealer as well, but he does very little of it. He tells Rob to be more careful, and to stop thinking he is invincible. He doesn't want Rob to blow his chance by doing the same stupid things that everyone from their neighborhood does.

If you want to, and you don't, then that's on you."

-- Narration/Rob (chapter 8 paragraph 55)

Importance: This narration is in italics, and the author is imagining what Rob is thinking. They are talking about Jeff's career path, and wanting to become a novelist. However, he is having doubts because he is surrounded by people who are more literary than he.

I lost my father three times. First when he went to jail. Second when he went back to jail. And now he's in the ground.

-- Rob (chapter 11 paragraph 65)

Importance: Here, Rob is talking to Victor after Skeet's funeral. Rob is feeling great loss. His father was taken away 19 years earlier for a crime that Rob doesn't think he committed. After working hard, Rob helps get Skeet a momentary release from prison before charges are brought back against him. Then, when Skeet is dying, Rob can't persuade the state to transfer Skeet to a different jail to treat his cancer. The system keeps him from getting any justice or fairness, even in death.

There are three ways out of the world we grew up in. I went domestic. You're going military. The third is Rob's way.

-- Raquel (chapter 13 paragraph 25-27)

Importance: Raquel is talking to her aunt, Ina, who is close in age and has started dating Rob. Rob had just tried to manipulate Ina into a scheme where she would buy guns and he'd sell them. Raquel understands that there are only a few ways off the street. Rob's way meant going off the street and into the grave.



St. Benedict's, Yale – it doesn't mean anything here. That's how it is. So I'm gonna make my own plans happen. C'mon now, aren't you all tired of struggling yet? You and me, the five of us, deserve to be doing more than getting by, doing what we can to keep a roof on our heads, just like everyone else. An opportunity like this doesn't happen every day, and we only have to do it once and, when we have the money, be smart with it.”

-- Rob (chapter 15 paragraph 10)

Importance: Rob's speech is what inspires the Burger Boyz to go in on his latest get rich quick scheme to buy bulk marijuana, convert it to Sour Diesel, and distribute it. It's a sad statement, and reveals just how defeated he feels. Doors were supposed to open for him, and they did not. It did not matter if he went to Yale, if he returned home to poverty. It is interesting to note that Rob no longer thinks of St. Benedict's or Yale as an “opportunity.” Obtaining a large quantity of marijuana for cheap is an opportunity for him, now.

The Burger Boyz had learned – or they believed they had learned – that at the end of the day education didn't matter. Potential didn't matter. Knowledge didn't matter. Only money mattered.”

-- Narration (chapter 15 paragraph 37)

Importance: This quote comes from a chapter where Rob and his friends are starting their drug distribution. They feel like this is their only option. Nothing they have tried up until now has panned out. The author explains in various segments about one or more of them getting laid off or injured, or something happening that steers them toward a desperate measure. Ultimately, it is all about money. They have friends, families, people who care. They have a degree of financial security, even if that means living in an old, run-down house in a crime-infested city. They don't have safety, and they don't have any options for long-term finances. All they have is a chance to make enough money to pay off all their bills and live comfortably for the rest of their lives.



Topics for Discussion

Why did Jeff Hobbs, a novelist, write this book as a work of nonfiction?

Hobbs writes in this book that he has published a first novel successfully, but the second floundered. Readers can discuss why the author decided to approach Rob's story as a work of nonfiction, with a few parts like dialog fictionalized, versus a total work of fiction.

Why does Jeff call him Rob, but some of Rob's neighbors call him Shawn?

Students should be encouraged to discuss the role of names in our society. People answer to different names and nicknames. In Rob/Shawn's case, his Yale friends called him Rob while his street friends called him Shawn, a shortened version of his middle name, DeShaun. Readers can also discuss whether they think Rob is more comfortable with one name over the other.

Why did Jeff pick the people he did to interview? What would the book be like if he had chosen different people? Would Rob have chosen different people to represent him?

Rob didn't get to choose who Jeff spoke to in order to get his story. Everyone has different points of view. Some have positive views and some have negative. Some are less important than others in the great scheme of the book. If, for example, Jeff had spent more time with Rob's high school friends and teachers, there could have been a different take on the book.

Jeff thinks Rob's fate is tragic, and it is. However, depending on your perspective, Jackie's story might be even more tragic. How do you think Jackie felt about Rob's death?

Jackie had sacrificed almost everything to make sure Rob had a better life, and it still ended after 30 years with nothing to show for it. Do you think Jackie resents her decisions? What would she change?



How much did Jeff really learn about his friend during the course of his research?

Rob keeps people in the dark about a lot of things he does. His drug dealing is the most significant. However, the author cites a few times when the people he interviewed didn't know where he was or what he was doing. Whenever someone does find out information, like the extent of his dealing, they are often very surprised.

Do you feel that Rob acts differently with different groups of people? Several people in the book say he showed different sides of himself. Do you think it's a good idea for him to do so? Conversely, Rob would say that he was never fronting. Do you agree with Rob that no matter what, he was still Rob?

Rob compartmentalizes portions of his life so that one group of people doesn't know about the other parts. He does this as a safety net. Keeping people in the dark protects him from their judgments. It also protects them from any bad people he might have come in contact with. This question is designed to ask how much compartmentalizing is really taking place. Perhaps Rob really isn't that different in each situation. All of those compartments are just shades that make up the whole.

What could Rob have done differently to avoid his fate? At what point did he go too far?

Rob kept trying for one more score. One more success and he'd be done. Perhaps it is easier to predict the ending from the point of view of a reader of a book where his death is announced in the title. Was there any point that Rob should have seen as a red flag to definitively change his path?

Why does Rob break down and cry when he's graduating high school?

When Rob is graduating high school, he is overwhelmed at the choices he has to make. He is paralyzed by options, because for the first time, he has them.



The author sympathizes with Rob, and takes the time to understand where he comes from. This explains the decisions that Rob makes. Are there any people who don't understand where Rob is coming from, and who don't see that he has a good heart?

People who get to know Rob see a lot more to him than the thug image that he sometimes projects. Readers can discuss minor characters, like girls in his life and the fraternity, and how they felt before they really knew him.

How did Rob make friends with people who were very different from him?

Rob has a lot of unlikely friends, starting with Hrvoje Dundovic. There's also, of course, Jeff Hobbs. Readers should discuss what the differences are as well as the similarities. Another good topic for them to discuss would be whether Rob and his different friends learned anything from each other.