

Ivy, weed and murder: The story of Robert Peace



The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace by Jeff Hobbs

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"The Short and Tragic Life" of Robert Peace" by Jeff Hobbs tells the devastating story, to quote the subtitle, of "A Brilliant Young Man Who Left Newark for the Ivy League." But don't expect a happily-ever-after ending. After graduating from Yale with distinction in molecular biophysics and biochemistry, Rob Peace returned to Newark, where he was murdered nine years later in a basement marijuana lab. The author, who was Peace's college roommate and good friend for four years in New Haven, bases his fascinating account on four years of observation and hundreds of hours of interviews after Peace's death, but he shies away from trying to provide a succinct answer to the question: "Why?" In the compelling style of a novel, Hobbs tells a heart-breaking, memorable story that is hard to put down.

The "brilliant young man" was two different people. At home, he was known as Shaun and "Newark-proofed" himself in order to survive as a nerd on the mean streets. At Yale, he was known as Rob and was "incredibly skilled at not showing how he felt" and at "concealing who he was and who he wanted to be." Despite his frequently expressed disdain for "fronting," he fronted in both worlds, pretending to be something other than a serious and successful student.

Peace's story raises questions about society's efforts to help gifted young people from disadvantaged backgrounds "escape" their roots. He demonstrated the ability to swim against the current from a very young age and, by leaving home for an elite university, he also showed his willingness to step outside the only world he had known. But, in the end, perhaps key to understanding the choices he made after graduation, is the strong pull he felt from friends and family back home, his loyalty to the people he grew up with. And — perhaps — although the author does not examine its relevance, the fact that Rob began frequent use of marijuana and drinking at age 13.

From a very young age Rob had remarkable drive to learn and succeed. Although his parents never married and lived separately, both were involved in his life. His father, Skeet, always had a job but was also a small-time hustler. He drilled Rob daily on handwriting and school work, but he worried that his son's academic success would make him "soft."

Additionally, Skeet knew everyone in the neighborhood and took his son with him to spend hours hanging out and visiting, modeling the sociability that became one of

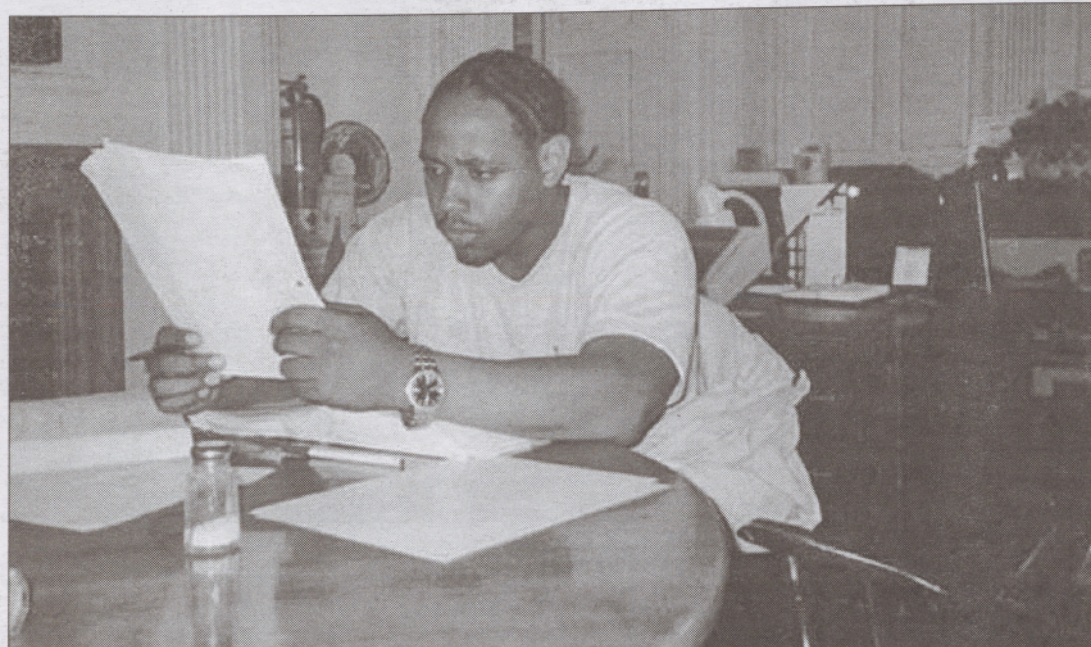


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Rob's principal traits. When Rob was seven, Skeet was convicted of murder and imprisoned.

Peace's mother, Jackie, worked in a hospital kitchen. She was determined to protect her son from life on the streets and to see him take full advantage of his gifts. She made substantial sacrifices to put her son in private schools, spending one third of her income on tuition.

At St. Benedict's Prep, Peace was chosen for the school's most important student leadership position, won the school's most prestigious achievement award and got all A's and 1510 on his SAT's — all while regularly visiting his father in prison and working on the appeal of his conviction. He also drank and smoked marijuana regularly.

At Yale, Peace was, at first, closer to the dining hall staff than to most students. However, because he was genuinely interested in most people he met, he became very popular among a diverse group of students, even joining a secret society during his senior year. A couple of outbursts, however, suggested his resentment of students who were privileged and self-entitled.

Smoking weed (almost all the time) and drinking regularly did not keep him from earning A's. Also, Peace did very sophisticated scientific work in a cancer research lab in the medical school. Ostensibly because he needed help with his college expenses, he started to deal marijuana to students, netting \$100,000 in cash by the time he graduated. His St. Benedict friends' visits to Yale and Rob's frequent trips home sustained his Newark

social bonds.

Upon graduation, instead of pursuing a career in science, Peace returned to Newark. His friends from high school were there, most having failed at college for various reasons. He pursued few options and taught biology at St. Benedict's for five years, winning the award for teacher of the year around the time his father died, then leaving to work as a baggage handler at the airport.

He talked about applying for graduate school, but his life became less like that of a Yale graduate and more like other men in the neighborhood — making big plans, unsuccessfully preparing to flip real estate and becoming a small-time marijuana dealer.

In the end, his group of life-long friends each put up money to buy 50 pounds of marijuana, which Peace was to convert to "designer weed" in the basement. While Peace was selling the resulting product, someone broke into the basement and murdered him.

No one was ever charged.

A wasted life? In the words of Oswald, one his friends at Yale who escaped from a similar background to become a psychiatrist, Peace was "[s]o fucking smart, but so fucking dumb." He was a paradox. The story of this remarkable young man stays with the reader, who is left to ponder why someone with prospects like his would make the choices he did and why he would waste the opportunities he had created for himself.

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Robert Peace studying at Yale. Peace graduated with a degree in molecular biophysics and biochemistry.



Dignity



Poverty