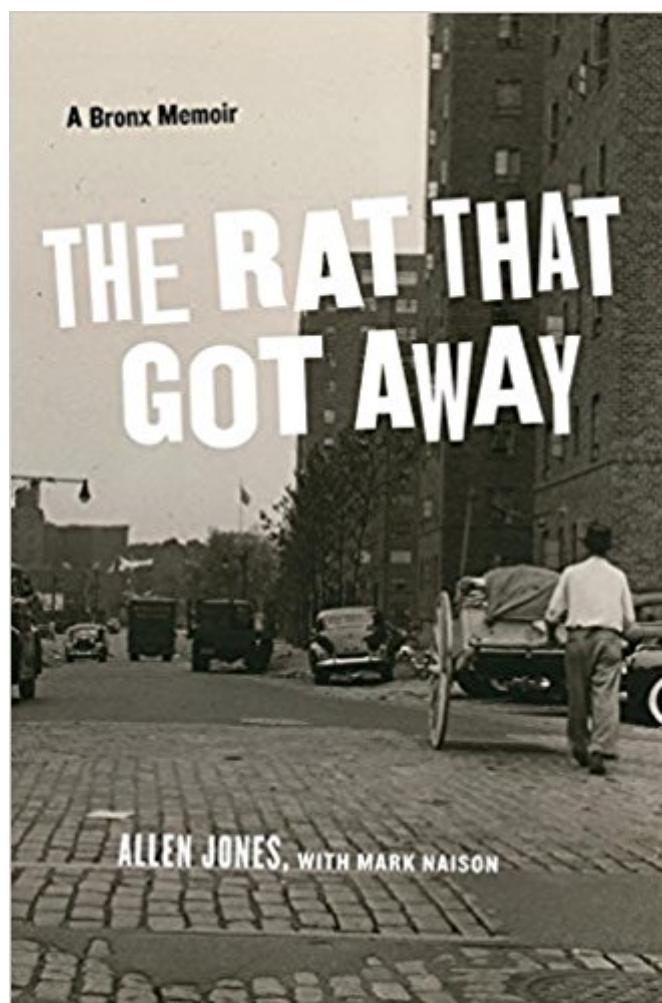


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# The Rat That Got Away: A Bronx Memoir



## Synopsis

The Rat That Got Away is an inspiring story of one man's odyssey from the streets of the Bronx to a life as a professional athlete and banker in Europe, but it also provides a unique vantage point on the history of the Bronx and sheds new light on a neglected period in American urban history. Allen Jones grew up in a public housing project in the South Bronx at a time—the 1950s—when that neighborhood was a place of optimism and hope for upwardly mobile Black and Latino families. Brought up in a two-parent household, with many neighborhood mentors, Jones led an almost charmed life as a budding basketball star until his teen years, when his once peaceful neighborhood was torn by job losses, white flight, and a crippling drug epidemic. Drawn into the heroin trade, first as a user, then as a dealer, Jones spent four months on Rikers Island, where he experienced a crisis of conscience and a determination to turn his life around. Sent to a New England prep school upon his release, Jones used his basketball skills and street smarts to forge a life outside the Bronx, first as a college athlete in the South, then as a professional basketball player, radio personality, and banker in Europe. A brilliant storyteller with a gift for dialogue, Jones brings Bronx streets and housing projects to life as places of possibility as well as tragedy, where racism and economic hardship never completely suppressed the resilient spirit of its residents. A book that will change the way people view the South Bronx.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 224 pages

Publisher: Empire State Editions; 3 edition (September 1, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 082323102X

ISBN-13: 978-0823231027

Product Dimensions: 9 x 0.4 x 6.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 15.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 15 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #596,056 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #114 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Regional U.S. > New England #275 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Regional U.S. > Mid Atlantic #278 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Sports & Outdoors > Basketball

## Customer Reviews

It is rare to find a book that creates as much excitement among teenagers as The Rat That Got Away did at Harlem RBI. After the authors spoke with the young people in our program, every

student suddenly wanted a copy of their own. The book not only talks about the real life conditions that many inner city youngsters face, it teaches them how to use their "street smarts" to achieve success. The book is an invaluable resource and gift to anyone working with at-risk youth.

(*Richard A. Berlin Executive Director Harlem RBI*) A chronicle of Jones' life, from his youth in a Bronx housing development to a career as a professional basketball player in Europe.

(*Columbia College Today*) This is a story that can be appreciated by all walks of life, on and off the court, in and out of the streets, novice and expert of the social norms of the ghetto, as its message rings true for all of humanity. (*Pamela Lewis Bronx Historical Society Journal*)

Few could have imagined the path the troubled youth would travel. Leaving behind a life of drugs and crime, Allen Jones became an international banker. (*Roanoke College Magazine*) Reading this book to my 4th grade all boys class was risky, however the learning

experiences and the dialogue we had with Allen and Mark hit a chord in these urban exposed children. (*Michael Napolitano P.S. 140*) Jones pursued two successful careers in Europe: professional basketball player and banker. If you met him, you might not guess he spent his teen years as a heroin dealer in New York. His memoir, written with Naison (history & African American studies, Fordham Univ.) focuses on his experiences growing up in a Bronx public housing project, playing serious basketball, ignoring school, dealing and doing drugs, and eventually lucking into a series of experiences that led to a professional basketball career in Europe. Jones credits his success to his supportive family, coaches, and neighborhood elders, but ultimately his is a tale of luck. The young Jones makes rash decisions, avoids his responsibilities, lies, and steals but also encounters many unlikely second chances. In another writer's hands, this blessed

triumph-over-adversity story line might be trite and irritating, but Jones draws readers in with his direct, conversational style, and the tale is gripping even though readers know it will end well.

**VERDICT** Recommended for memoir lovers and anyone interested in a first-person perspective on 1960s-era urban adolescence. (*Library Journal*) The engrossing story of one Bronx housing project is told through the eyes of Allen Jones, who endured and participated in its grim transformation over the course of a turbulent decade. (*City Limits Weekly*) The memoir paints an earthy picture of the neighborhood in the 1950s, when the projects were home to working-class black and Latino families who pushed their children to excel, through the 1970s. (*The New York Times*)

Allen Jones, born in the Bronx, is a manager for foreign currency exchange at Dexia Banque Internationale at Luxembourg. Mark D. Naison is Professor of History and African American

Studies at Fordham University, where he also directs the Bronx African American History Project. He is the author of three books, including *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*.

I just finished reading "The Rat That Got Away" by Allen Jones and his life story is so compelling, you feel you are right on the streets of the Bronx with him. I do not know how I came across his book. I just finished my book last year, "My Life At The World Trade Center" and I guess I was on google and came across Patterson Projects where I once lived and saw the cover of Mr. Jones' book. A picture of the Patterson Projects in the 1950s or earlier. I immediately found it on and purchased it. Tears rolled down my eyes when he described the court scene where his mother cried out, "Please Lord, don't take my son away." I cannot tell you how much I related to that scenario on many levels. The socio-economic situations were and still is in some cases, exactly as Mr. Jones describes it in his book. Climbing out of poverty and into a better life is no small feat, not by any stretch of the imagination. What he did right, and what I wished I had the opportunity to do for my sons, was move away from everything! So many souls of the projects never been out of their environment, never seen the world. All they know is the Bronx, Brooklyn or Harlem. But, Mr. Jones was definitely the Rat That Got Away, and proved there is life after the street life. Every young person should read this book.

This book was my best birthday present from my husband Larry! Out of the Bronx comes many remarkable people, some already famous like our newest Supreme Court Justice, a Hispanic woman, Sonia Sotomayor and some, relatively unknown, but deserving of fame, an African-American like Allen Jones. Mr. Jones' memoir, *THE RAT THAT GOT AWAY*, pulls no punches; he reveals frankly, graphically and often brutally, that he almost didn't get away, that the excitement and temptations of the mean Bronx streets in the 1950's and 1960's, almost cost him his life! In this extraordinary captivating, well-written page turner-book, Allen describes growing up in the projects both when the projects were filled with working class families of diverse backgrounds and later, when they deteriorated and the drug culture took over. Although he came from a loving 2-parent home, the lure of the street life, the buying selling and using drugs, gang fights, robberies at knifepoint, not going to school, early intro to sex, all these things hooked him. It was not until spending 4 months at Rikers Island and learning of his best friend Greg's shooting death, that the allure of the streets started to fade and he got a second chance. With intervention by caring people, he is sent to a private school in Massachusetts and becomes an honor student in a mostly all white school. (As a teacher, I especially loved this part of the book!) Allen's basketball skills earn him a

scholarship to a Southern college and from there , he goes on to play basketball professionally in Europe ,wins fame and fortune, and eventually becomes a respected banker in Luxembourg, where he still lives, 30 years later. There is so much to learn and admire about how Allen turned his life around,overcame enormous obstacles and wound up not only as a successful business man, but even more important,became a wonderful caring father and human being. Young people reading this book will learn from Allen's mistakes and missteps and triumphs. I can visualize the movie made from this book now-starring, of course, Denzel Washington! My husband sure can pick inspiring books!Janet Mayer

The subject matter and life story are quite interesting, but the writing is rather elementary in style. I wish there was much less self-praise in the success part of Allan's story. I recommend it with some reservations, based on the "overcoming great obstacles" way in which he got free of the negativity into which he was born.

In the memoir, "The Rat That Got Away", by Allen Jones, with Mark Naison, I experienced one of the most remarkable and powerfully written stories I've ever had the privilege of reading. From beginning to end, this book captures what is undoubtedly one of the most inspiring narratives ever penned. Where to even begin...Dispelling the widely held notions of the South Bronx as some sort of lawless outpost, Mr. Jones describes the experience of growing up in a working class community filled with role models, caring teachers, supportive adults, stern yet loving parents, and a neighborhood which was as racially and ethnically diverse as it was vibrant.As Mr. Jones writes about the characters that shaped his early years, we see the richness of his experiences through figures that are multi-dimensional and compelling in their own right. A father who administers swift and harsh punishment while constantly pushing his son to stay away from forces he himself is drawn to. A mother whose warmth of heart and unswerving loyalty to her son, at times blinds her to his numerous transgressions. Siblings who deal with the pressures brought about by urban decay in their own unique way. Dealers who inflict harm upon those who cross them and yet contribute both monetarily and in other intangible ways to the community they operate in. Nothing is presented as one dimensional, and none of the characters we read about are romanticized or demonized. Rather, they are portrayed as real people, struggling to survive in a world which steadily collapses around them.From the moment I picked up this book, until the final sentence, I found it nearly impossible to put down. In spite of having completely different life experiences, the depth of this story is such that there were moments when I found myself connecting to what I think is one of the

most profound messages that comes from this memoir: namely, the fact that no matter how much darkness we find ourselves surrounded by, whether at our own hands or those of another, there is always a moment when we have the choice, or the chance to turn away, and to draw upon some intangible force that can move us in an opposite direction. As with any book that has ever stolen my heart, there is always a moment, a line, that brings me to the sudden awareness that I am completely hooked. So it was, when I came across the following passage: "...as I was being led out of the courtroom, my hands cuffed behind my back, I heard a voice that froze my heart. My mother cried out, 'Dear God, please don't take my son away!'. In this lone passage, Mr. Jones managed to affect me in a way that few pieces of literature have. The universality of a loving mother who, when faced with the prospect of losing her son, cried out for someone, anyone to hear her plea struck a chord that I think would affect anyone who has ever been moved by the written word. The memoir progresses alongside historical events that come to life in the face and actions of both an individual and an entire community. The assassination of JFK. The rise of the Black Power movement. The Vietnam War. The scourge of heroin and the crack epidemic. The loss of blue collar jobs and the flight of working class whites from urban neighborhoods like the ones Mr. Jones grew up in are all given a human face. One of the most striking elements of this memoir is the humility and courage that pours from each line. It never resorts to being preachy or condescending towards others who may not have 'made it' in the way that Mr. Jones ultimately does. In fact, we see a story of someone who credits his difficult upbringing and never tries to shy away from who he is and the lessons that the streets taught him. Mr. Jones is able to clearly recognize the strengths he gained from his upbringing, while acknowledging that he had to ultimately leave the very environment he found himself nearly consumed by. As someone who has spent more than twenty years working with at risk youth from tough urban environments, this book should be read by any young man or woman who finds themselves lost and without a compass. It should be read by every educator who cares about young people in such circumstances. This story should be read by any public figure who is interested in gaining a better understanding of the rich and nuanced history of urban life and it should be read by any policy maker whose decisions will have an impact on inner city neighborhoods anywhere in America. Truth be known, it should be read by anyone who loves the written word, and is moved by the transformative power of personal testimony. My sincerest congratulations to Mr. Jones for sharing this courageous, beautifully written and enormously compelling story and to Dr. Mark Naison whose love of history and words helped make this book possible. With sincere admiration and respect, Victor Gunsalus

I loved reading this book, first by myself and then with a group of NYC teenagers, some of whom live in the Bronx. Sets some of the burning issues that are still of our time in historical and vividly personal context.

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