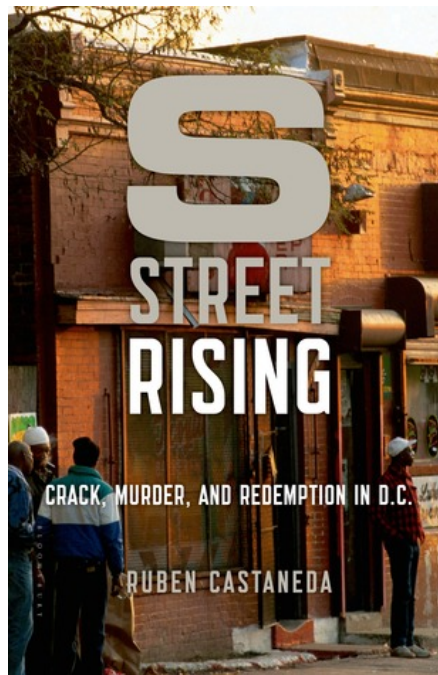




S Street Rising: Crack, Murder, and Redemption in D.C.

Rubén Castañeda

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S Street Rising: Crack, Murder, and Redemption in D.C. Rubén Castañeda

During the height of the crack epidemic that decimated the streets of D.C., Ruben Castaneda covered the crime beat for the *Washington Post*. The first in his family to graduate from college, he had landed a job at one of the country's premier newspapers. But his apparent success masked a devastating secret: he was a crack addict. Even as he covered the drug-fueled violence that was destroying the city, he was prowling S Street, a 24/7 open-air crack market, during his off hours, looking for his next fix.

S Street Rising is more than a memoir; it's a portrait of a city in crisis. It's the adrenalin-infused story of the street where Castaneda quickly became a regular, and where a fledgling church led by a charismatic and streetwise pastor was protected by the local drug kingpin, a dangerous man who followed an old-school code of honor. It's the story of Castaneda's friendship with an exceptional police homicide commander whose career was derailed when he ran afoul of Mayor Marion Barry and his political cronies. And it's a study of the city itself as it tried to rise above the bloody crack epidemic and the corrosive politics of the Barry era. *S Street Rising* is *The Wire* meets the Oscar-winning movie *Crash*. And it's all true.

S Street Rising: Crack, Murder, and Redemption in D.C. Details

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From Reader Review S Street Rising: Crack, Murder, and Redemption in D.C. for online ebook

Stephanie says

A fascinating read, particularly if you are familiar with DC neighborhoods. Castaneda seems to hold nothing back in his recount of his addiction, and I'm so happy he chose to speak his truth and share it with readers.

Erika Pont says

An enjoyable must-read for any Washingtonian.

David Fitzpatrick says

An enjoyable read throughout, Castaneda has recounted a life lived that reads like fiction, but packs punch behind it, as well. His tracking the routes of DC and the surrounding areas is especially interesting to a local; someone who worked not far from one of his buying zones and lives in another. A great story overall and a quintessential DC read.

Kathy says

A true story written by the one who lived it, Ruben Castaneda. I can remember some of the incidents described in the book and found it fascinating. A fast and enjoyable read.

Mike Rogers says

If you live in DC, you should read this

Megan Geissler says

2.5 - I kind of had a hard time getting through this because of the uninspired writing style. It's at times very elementary and overly explanatory, while at others, unfamiliar idioms are used, making it less accessible. The author seems to want to reach people outside of 1980-90s DC crack-murder world but then tries to lend himself street cred so he seems more authentic as the narrator, but it comes off as overly earnest and like he's trying too hard. What I liked about it was relating the places and names to contemporary DC and being able to actually walk through the locations that used to be drug dealing territory. I found the details of his personal grievances with local media and law enforcement politics to be a bit tedious and overwrought, but it's his story so I can't fault his reactions to what was going on at that time. I'll look for other works on this era but it was an okay introduction.

Barbara says

My book group was honored by the presence of the author. While sometimes this could be intimidating, Castaneda is a searingly honest and open person, characteristics that likely make him such a great journalist. This is not always an easy book to read as Castaneda describes in depth his descent into crack and alcohol addiction. He arrived in Washington DC from LA at the height of the DC crack epidemic. Not only was crack endemic, but so was murder. For several years running, murder totals close to 500 deaths. Most of the victims were young African American men, and east of 16th St., one of the main streets that runs the total length of the District, and divided the wealthy mostly white part of the capital from the poorer, majority black section of the city. I use the past tense because runaway gentrification has changed the racial profile of DC. I work in a university immediately adjacent to the Trinidad neighborhood. This is a neighborhood that has experienced spikes of crime so violent that at times the police have barricaded the area, only admitting residents. Kitty corner to Trinidad, the neighborhood facing my university is now labeled by some realtors as Capitol Hill despite the fact that it lies 15 blocks north of the center of what is traditionally considered "the hill".

S Street Rising also tells stories that reveal the depth of the corruption of some parts of the DC government. At the center of these stories is the late Marion Barry, dubbed "mayor for life" in the 90's. Barry is infamous as the mayor caught smoking crack -the first but then followed by others, most recently Toronto mayor Rob Ford. The book doesn't mention that Barry rose to prominence in part because of his history as a Civil Rights leader. It is hard at times to reconcile the two Marion Barrys, but it is clear in this book that he also commanded a huge political machine, fueled by financial malfeasance, and corruption.

There are heroes in this story including the police captain, Leo Hennessy, and Pastor Jim who establishes a church on S Street, in the middle of a crack zone. Hennessy has enemies, and some with political power go after him. Pastor Jim sets up Manna, an organization that helps working class residents buy homes. Manna was enormously successful. It still exists but is struggling to survive in the face of escalating property values.

Anyone interested in urban America, and specifically in Washington DC will find this a fascinating read.

Emily says

Ok, here's the thing. I genuinely liked this book. I grew up in the D.C. suburbs and call D.C. home today. I remember much of the drug epidemic and clearly recall Marion Barry and the bitch setting him up. It was great to read about what happened from someone who was experiencing everything and living amidst it all.

But, man, and I mean man, were there no developed females in this book. None of the prostitutes he visits and has relationships with have any depth whatsoever. The one female editor is written as vindictive (although I'm not sure she was so off-base) and the author just mentions, off hand, a girlfriend or two every once in a while.

I really enjoyed the descriptions of the homicide cop, Lou and the pastor, Jim. They are, great, interesting, well-written humans, who I'm glad to be on the planet with, and I'm pleased I was introduced to them in the book. Even the drug king pin, Baldie, was written as a full, and nuanced character.

But I disliked the way the author treated women in his book and I couldn't really get past that. Regardless,

I'm glad he wrote the book, I'm glad he's sober and I'm glad we were able to learn from his experiences.

Eleanor says

Must read for anyone who lives in or loves DC!

Olivia Johnson says

I thought this was an excellent book. I actually had moments where I didn't want to put the book down and wanted to continue reading, which is usually not the case for me when I am reading a nonfiction book. The book seamlessly ties together the lives of a crime reporter addicted to crack, a police officer, and a pastor. It offers a unique perspective of how the crack epidemic effected different people, while tying together their lives and showing how they were able to coexist, and even form friendships. I would highly suggest this book to anyone looking for something good to read. I received this book for free from Goodreads First Reads.

David says

A note on the former Wonder Bread factory on S Street, in front of which, in the 1990's, was the unconcealed drug market where the author went on page 35 (and other times after) to buy. On page 242, Castaneda says of the building: "Eventually, the lower floors would be home to restaurants and boutiques. The upper floors would become loft offices."

The building now (2016) houses a tech incubator and shared working space, no restaurants or boutiques on site as of this writing, probably none soon. This is a quibble over a very minor error of fact.

I wrote a blog about that neighborhood (then my home) in 2015, including a post about this property here. The nature of police problems had changed considerably for the better: the building was now being visited by law enforcement because the tech incubator was providing beer free of charge to the tenants as a part of their leases, an activity which, in the opinion of the DC government, required a liquor license. These licenses generate income for the city, so, like parking tickets, the enforcement is vigorous.

The book is actually several interlocking stories, of which the author's is the most prominent and dramatic, so it has been pushed (understandably) to the front by those who wish to get the attention of the book-buying public. But the other stories are well-told and worth attention, especially the one about the honest and effective cop who is pushed aside by city and police department politicking. There has been some attempts of late to gloss over the ugly facts of DC politics in the wake of the death of Marion Barry, and it's good to see a book push back against that. The politics was ugly and as a result people died and their murderers went scot-free. To some extent, that will happen always and everywhere, so it's easy to become indifferent. Don't become indifferent. Buy and read the books, magazines, and newspapers of those trying to make it right.

I also liked this book because it used the serial comma in its subtitle, and was a Christmas gift from my Long-Suffering Wife.

March 2016 update about the Wonder Bread Factory:

<http://www.washingtonian.com/2016/03/...>

Lacy Broemel says

Fast-paced, clear and sharp writing with fantastic "characters." Really enjoyed this book. I would say anyone who lives in DC should read it. Intriguing from start to finish.

Michael Fischer says

Everyone should read this book, but this is required reading if you have any connection to DC whatsoever. Where to start? How about with one of Castaneda's juiciest stories.

Castaneda, a Washington Post crime reporter, randomly stumbles upon The Vista Hotel when Marion Barry goes down. Castaneda rushes to a payphone to call his editor, who, at first, thinks he's bullshitting. The editor tells Castaneda to get a room on the paper's dime to gather as much info as possible. Castaneda comes up dry after interviewing hotel staff. No big deal, right? He returns to his room, orders lobster, and calls his connect, a prostitute who buys his crack in return for a rock of her own and oral sex. Castaneda's fetish is smoking while getting head. Picture this: twenty minutes later, Castaneda watches the Barry news break while smoking crack and getting oral from a prostitute in the same hotel Barry was just busted in. As Castaneda and the prostitute finish, the screen flashes to a black SUV dipping into a J. Edgar Hoover parking garage. Unbelievably brazen. The next time you see the infamous "bitch set me up" clip, imagine Castaneda doing the same thing less than an hour later in the same damn hotel.

Despite its entrancing street tales, "S Street Rising" doesn't glamorize DC's crack era, when DC was dubbed "the Murder Capital" (400-500 annual homicides in a city of 600,000 between the late 80s and early to mid 90s). Castaneda weaves several threads into a cohesive, powerful narrative. Castaneda lives a double-life by covering neighborhoods, like 6th and S NW, on his crime beat where--hours later after work--he scores drugs.

We meet Jim, a pastor from Arkansas, who facilitates Castaneda's spiritual journey. Jim, a white man, erects a church in an open-air drug market on S Street, and eventually earns the respect of the neighborhood boss, "Baldie," and his corner slingers. Baldie sends his children to the church's youth programs. The corner boys donate profits and offer protection. While Jim doesn't condone the drug game, he doesn't talk to the police. He navigates the situation masterfully. Most importantly, Baldie and his crew sense Jim's genuine care for the neighborhood and its people.

We meet several prostitutes, or "strawberries," like Champagne and Carrie. One of the more touching moments is when Castaneda confides his shame to both for relapsing. We meet a MPD Homicide commander embroiled in toxic Barry-era politics--who's also at the center of the 1994 MPD Headquarters shooting--and several others who play a part in Castaneda's redemptive journey.

The book is well-written. The sentences are clean, tight, and crisp. Some of DC's most legendary neighborhoods (mostly uptown) and crews are featured, like Potomac Gardens, 5th and O, 6th and 7th and S in Shaw (near Howard Theater, north of Rhode Island Ave), 1st and Bates NW, 14th and E. Capital SE (near RFK), and the Kennedy Street Crew ("KDY") responsible for the MPD Headquarters shooting. 4/5 stars.

Karen says

this book is hard to put down. Anyone who is interested in the history of Washington DC during the 1980s and 1990s will love it. Any one who is interested in addiction will also love it.

Courtney Sieloff says

A must read for DC residents. Really honest and powerful.

Peter says

I picked this up solely on the strengths of the author, and my general thirst for Washington, DC local history. Now I can recommend it on the strength of the writing, and the universality of the text. This memoir weaves various strands together-- the author's own story of ambition and crack addiction, the exploding crime rate, the police working to combat it, and the pastor face-to-face with it. Exciting enough as it is, but Castaneda's style moves the action at a brisk pace, and his unflinching honesty keeps you riveted. More than anything, it's essential reading for Washingtonians with an investment in the city's past and future. You have to know where we have come from in order to get where we are going. More than that, it's an intensely personal story that takes a ton of guts to tell, and that honesty makes this story relatable. Whether you're dealing with crack addiction or not.

Peter Lynch says

I loved the snapshots of DC life in the 80's and 90's--good and bad. Fast paced, well written and intriguing, the book was a hit. A great conversation starter for people who live in, or have experience in, DC.

Broadsnark says

I kept reading the book mostly because I found the background on Manna and the New Community Church interesting. And I mostly found that interesting because I've been peripherally involved in ONE DC, a neighborhood organization related to both. Castaneda's window into policing in the area (good and bad) was sometimes interesting as well, but all his personal life stories were lacking anything that resembled self awareness or real reflection. Just a self involved dude going after the high (crack, the big story, the hot girl...)

There are two big heroes in the book, the pastor for New Community and Castaneda's BFF who ran the homicide division for a while in DC. The rest of the people, especially the women, have barely a detail about them. (Though despite a lack of detail, he manages to convey his contempt for the one woman boss he had at the post.) How are you going to write a book about "chocolate city" and your life as a crack addict who paid sex workers to buy drugs for you and have the most fleshed out people be two white dudes?

And how are you going to write about Marion Barry scandals and never really explain why he had such incredible support in the city?

Castaneda claimed over and over that he was able to have relationships with all sorts of people, including "gangsters" but you won't find anything resembling a cross section of perspectives in the book. (And no, Baldie doesn't count because it is told almost entirely from the perspective of the pastor.)

Disappointing.

Marykay Pogar says

Interesting view of the drug trade in D.C., but he's no David Simon.

Susan Grodsky says

Three related stories, each strong on narrative (what happened) but weak on analysis (why did it happen, what does it mean). There were so many questions left unprobed and unanswered. What, for example, happened to the strawberries Ruben used and disposed of? What made Baldie tick?

But if you are a Washingtonian (Guilty. Born in the now defunct Columbia Hospital) you can't help but be fascinated. Ruben gets so much right. I especially liked his describing the PG county police as having a culture of brutality (I experienced a small, dilute drop at the University of Maryland), contrasted with Montgomery County's prosperous and refined environment. Yup.

The stories don't quite meld together and the last 50 pages, in particular, have a hurried, slapdash feel, with careless sentences and misspellings (example: "ledes" for "leads").

But I can only thank Ruben for being willing to venture into those rough neighborhoods and reporting what he saw. I would never have dared. It's not where you're likely to find a nice Jewish girl from Montgomery County.
