

Emily Martinez  
Rosa Lee  
Book Report

### Rosa Lee: A Mother and Her Family in Urban America

This report is based upon the book *Rosa Lee*, written and copyrighted 1996 by Leon Dash. The book is 279 pages and is published by Basic Books, A Division of Harper Collins Publishers, Inc. Dash spends four years shadowing Rosa Lee Cunningham and her family with intentions of writing about the experiences. In this book he relays the harsh reality of urban America, and brings to light the vast complexities coupled with that reality.

Leon Dash's theme is simple, "intergenerational poverty is a difficult reality to overcome" (Dash 1996, 252). Dash describes the ongoing cycle that results from generational drug usage, prostitution, crime and incarceration. He brings painful awareness to the raw, natural habitat that many urban Americans live in. Instead of writing stories "on people who grew up in circumstances like Rosa Lee's and became brain surgeons," Dash wanted to divulge his time into a story where he could address his concerns for the increase of the black underclass trapped in a vicious cycle (Dash 1996, 259). In one of their interviews, Rosa Lee informs Dash that she used her 5-year-old granddaughter to transport heroin through a street drug market so they could both eat, Rosa Lee didn't see this as anything other than survival (Dash 1996, 33). Patty, Rosa Lee's daughter, prostituted her body for money and drugs, the same cycle she saw her mother go through. No matter how much Rosa Lee may have wanted to quit her heroin addiction, her "home is still the same apartment where Bobby, Patty and Ducky spend much of their time in pursuit of their next high" (Dash 1996, 32). The overwhelming hopelessness of the situation, the seemingly incomprehensible way of

life, is just another day for these people. Their lives are lived from one high to the next, from one prison cell to another. The revolution is simple, the children living in these impoverished neighborhoods are presented with all the opportunities for illegal activities and are denied “mainstream patterns of behavior” then turn to a life of drugs and crime, as so goes the life of their children and their children’s children (Dash 1996, 96-97).

Between the lines of the book, Dash masterfully beckons for a call to action. Dashes skillfully describes the environment in such a way that makes you as the reader want to help these people, but also feel the hopelessness of their situation. The strength of this book is the way Dash captures the straightforward and honest account of urban America. Being a black reporter who grew up with more privileges than the people he writes about, he still portrays them with respect. Even though they are criminals in all accounts of the law, they are only doing what they feel is needed to survive. This book is very current and necessary to show the realities that most Americans don’t want to deal with. Dash brings to light the results of poverty, and causes readers to face these circumstances. I would definitely recommend this book to others because it causes you to think about something other than yourself.

I am left feeling an array of emotions after reading this book. I am sad for the people who will live their entire lives thinking this is the only way of life. I am angry because the majority of these people do not even try to take the necessary steps in making a better life for themselves. I am overwhelmed with guilt at my unthankfulness for all the blessings that I have. But most of all I am aware, utterly, undoubtedly, painfully aware. There is no simple solution to this cycle. This matter will not be settled over night, or even in a few years. This will be a long process that may never be resolved. Thankfully people like Leon Dash will keep this topic ever before us.

## Bibliography

Dash, Leon. *Rosa Lee: A Mother and Her Family in Urban America*. New York, NY: BasicBooks, 1996. 279.