



# *Bird at My Window* by Rosa Guy

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## **The Search for a Forgotten Life**

The streets of Harlem are a prison, holding inside of its walls all the dreams and potential of people too poor, hopeless, or tired to claw their way out to a life more like the one they envisioned as children.

This picture sets the tone for Rosa Guy's novel, *Bird at My Window*, which illustrates in wrenching detail the horrifying possibilities of a life that has been beaten, forgotten, and wasted. In Wade Williams's world, a day is something from which he desperately tries to distract himself, for fear that the emptiness of it will simply swallow him up. The gates of his life were put up long ago, and Wade currently lives his life from one day to the next, passing the hours drinking, not talking and not really listening to his few remaining acquaintances, and doing what he can to please and help out his family, the only thing of value or meaning in his life. A terrible act committed against his beloved sister, Faith, is the catalyst for Wade's closer examination of his life. He finds a long, messy past that has tied him up so tightly in guilt, oppression, and disappointment that violence is squeezed out of him, bubbling up as the only defense against what Wade sees as his unavoidable fate.

He wakes up in a mental hospital after a drinking-induced blackout, and the reader is thrust into the tangled mind of Wade Williams. This is not Wade's first time in a mental hospital, nor is it his first time blacking out, which he does sometimes without the aid of alcohol. After failing to fight through the haze to remember how it is that he has ended up here, Wade is informed that he attacked and assaulted his sister, Faith, and she is now in the hospital. Wade is shaken and stunned by this news; although he has a violent history, he would never hurt Faith, who has been his best friend and ally since childhood. This shift in his persona deeply disturbs Wade, and sends him back to reflect on his life, retracing the incidents and circumstances that have brought him to this point. What the reader finds is a portrait of complicated family in distress and a bleak and frustrated glance into 1960's Harlem.



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Harlem becomes a character in the plot, playing the part of the villain as well as the trusted confidant to Wade. He is torn between the comfort that the familiar neighborhood brings him, and the acute awareness that he is pinned inside of its boundaries. The poverty of the neighborhood serves to both tightly bind people together and keep them wary of each other as well. Harlem comes alive as a world existing within itself, its streets devouring people who are not quite strong enough to get out. Superhuman strength seems to be required to overcome its pull, and once out, an even stronger voice is needed to move past the taboo of Harlem that the rest of the world would prefer to ignore. Images of the residents of Harlem as forgotten citizens surface constantly throughout the book. Guy writes of the people who have been “herded together into one pen- a pen called Harlem” (p. 108)

Wade spends a good part of his life trying to rise above what is expected of him as a poor black boy from Harlem, which is to get a regular job and live quietly as a decent, law-abiding citizen. He is discovered to be a genius at a young age, and “suddenly the world opened up for him like a flower and he drew from it like a bee” (p. 86). Wade believed that because of his special talents, his life could be different from his mother’s, who had started her life on her knees picking cotton in the South, and seemed destined to end it in a one-room kitchenette in Harlem. The battle against the realities of his upbringing and surroundings proves to be a tougher task than expected. White parents in Manhattan have no desire to see a black boy from Harlem, no matter how academically gifted, in a classroom with their children. Wade’s family and friends interpret his efforts to improve his lot in life as being selfish and uppity. Desiring only recognition and approval from his family, Wade slowly gives up on his dreams to play the part of the family man, at which he ultimately fails as well.

It is Wade’s conflicting dreams and his inability to fulfill them that fuel the downward spiral described in the book. Guy’s unflinching descriptions of Wade’s violent tendencies, and her insistence on following Wade through his complete self-destruction, not satisfied until we have seen him falter through countless tragedies, leave the reader breathless. The jumble of unrealized dreams, wasted opportunities, and abuse force the reader to see how one’s life can flash by without warning, only to be left without anything to show for it.



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Guy questions throughout “Bird at My Window” just who is ultimately responsible for the outcome of a life. How much does environment and upbringing influence who we will become? Wade’s mother insists that her life has been guided only by God, and that He is the sole reason she has survived the difficult years. Wade feels that his life was decided long ago, and that the only thing he can do is continue to live it, unable to change the path already laid out for him. While all of these factors seem to be influencing Wade’s downfall, Guy never seems to fully embrace a reason why things turn sour for him, and it is the search for answers that provides the driving force behind the book. Wade backtracks through his life to find when he began to simply kill time and who is responsible for this shift. At the same time, the reader is left to piece together the incidents to form a snapshot of his past and a reason for his brutal future. It is clear to the reader the direction in which Wade’s life is heading, yet one can’t seem to look away, so compelling is it to search his life to see what it is exactly that caused it to go so awry. Although many forces are pushing against him- a domineering mother, the social structure of New York, and alcohol abuse, to name a few- Guy suggests that it is the complicated interaction of them all that snag Wade and leave him unable to rise above the prison that his life has become.

*Reviewed by Amy Kelsch*