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TITLE INFORMATION

SILENCE WAS MY FIRST LANGUAGE
Rich Dunning

BOOK REVIEW

Extreme poverty and astonishing perfidy underpin Dunning's gritty memoir.

Sealed inside blankets as an 8-year-old, trying his best to keep out the rats and roaches that ran rampant at night, the author says he never truly slept as a child. "My eyes would close, but my muscles stayed ready, as if danger could be met even in dreams." Dunning is describing the kind of emotional trauma that rewires vulnerable young brains for the worst and often sets people on paths that become lifetime journeys toward recovery. This deeply rich narrative recounting that terrible hovel in the Gun Hill section of the Bronx during the early 1970s, and the other broken homes that would follow, will leave readers haunted. "We were children in age but already old in spirit, weathered like someone with decades of exposure to the sun," the author chillingly reports. After his biological father packed up and left, Dunning, his siblings, and his mother were left in the tyrannical clutches of his new stepfather, Hector—per the author, a monstrous psychopath fueled by booze and cocaine whom the abused children called "Scarface," after the Al Pacino character in the movie of the same name. As an innocent child, Dunning is an instantly sympathetic character whose every defiant act against despair and depravity epitomizes heroism. But this unforgettable account doesn't come across as a man looking to make excuses for the shortcomings and failings that would follow him into adulthood; there's an established process for people overcoming addiction to make amends for the pain they've caused, and Dunning is very candid and clear about that, too. He recounts traumas (including receiving the most horrific birthday present ever) in darkly poetic detail. The harrowing text gives voice to a poor boy growing up on the mean streets of New York City, and it's a voice worth listening to.

A deeply moving story about triumphing over generational poverty, despair, and addiction.

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