

WILLIAM KOWALSKI

JUMPED  
IN



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WILLIAM KOWALSKI



RAVEN BOOKS

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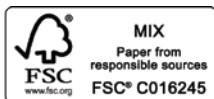
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# ONE

**Y**ou haven't seen me before, even though people like me are omnipresent.

*Omni* is Latin. It means "all." *Omnipresent* means "all present." Everywhere.

That's right. I'm everywhere, and yet you've never seen me. Not unless you were looking for me.

And even if you were looking for me, chances were you didn't see me anyway. I am good at not being seen. That's how I've managed to survive sixteen years so far.

I'll tell you something else about myself. It's embarrassing, but I don't care.

My favorite thing is to watch old TV shows on YouTube. I love them. *Leave It to Beaver, Father Knows Best, The Brady Bunch.* They give me this warm, cozy feeling, like everything is perfect in the world.

I know it's a lie. Everything is not perfect. But that's why I love them so much. I can pretend it's true, even though I'm smart enough not to believe it.

Watching old TV shows is what I do when I'm supposed to be at school. I figure it's safer. Just getting to school is as dangerous as running across a minefield. I have to pass by a lot of characters on the street. People talking to themselves. Gangstas with guns. Crazy people who just don't care who they hurt.

And you're not safe just because you make it to school either. Two kids got knifed there last year, one on the front steps and one in the cafeteria. Why should I risk that?

Just so I can learn how to do algebra?  
Uh-uh. Ain't worth it.

I'm probably learning more on YouTube anyway.

My phone is this crappy old thing I stole from somewhere. The screen is cracked, but it works fine.

I like to sit outside the 7-Eleven by my house and steal its signal. If you lean against the wall and hold your phone up high, you can get three bars. You just have to remember not to breathe through your nose. The dumpster is only ten feet away. From the way it smells, I don't think it's ever been cleaned.

I have earbuds. But I only wear one at a time. I gotta be able to hear what's going on around me. You never know when someone is going to come along and start something with you. Sometimes it's people with a beef. Sometimes it's gangstas.

Sometimes it's people who just aren't right.

There are a lot of crazy people up in this hood. Does the hood make people crazy, or do crazy people make the hood?

The old TV people live in a different universe. Their houses are clean, their neighborhoods are safe, their moms are sober, their dads exist. Everything is spotless and perfect. I like to imagine what these people would do if I just appeared in the middle of their show.

*Hey, wassup! It's me, a brown-ass teenager with nappy dreads and dirty clothes. Yeah, I know it's 1950 or whatever. Y'all are surprised to see me, right? I'm from 2016, bitches. Let's talk about Barack Obama.*

This is fun to think about, the same way it's fun to think about winning a million dollars.

TV people have problems, but they're all rich-white-person problems. Buddy needs

to find the courage to ask a girl to prom. Little Chip or Biff breaks a window with a baseball and is worried his dad might be disappointed in him. A bunch of folks get stuck on an island and have to make all their furniture out of bamboo for the rest of their lives.

Or—my personal favorite—a dad with three boys meets some blond woman with three girls. They get married and move in together. Somehow, instead of being all crowded together and broke, now they have twice the house and twice the happiness. Because that is life in the white world.

Or so these TV shows would have you believe.

I'm not really that dumb. I know TV is fake.

My eyes are not closed. They are wide open.

If they filmed that show in my neighborhood, here's what it would look like.



The dad would be so long gone, half the kids wouldn't even remember his face. And the mom's six kids would be by five different fathers anyway. The boys would be slinging rock on the corners or running it out to the soldiers on the street. The girls would be knocked up and hanging off the shoulders of some tattooed punks who all thought they were gonna be the next 50 Cent or Diddy. Maybe some of them would be in jail, or dead. Or maybe all of them would be dead. You never know.

That's the main difference between my life and these dumbass TV shows. On TV you always know what's going to happen. No matter what crazy stuff these white people get up to, you know none of them are going to get shot over it. Back then, in their black-and-white world, the worst thing that could happen would be that one of them would get a stern talking-to. If they ever even saw a cop, it was old

Officer Friendly waving from his patrol car, returning their lost dog.

Around here, I kid you not, half the time I wake up in the morning and wonder if it's gonna be my last day on earth. If the cops show up on my street with a dog in the back, you know that dog is gonna be chewing on somebody's arm in about three seconds.

And if I see a cop, I know I need to run like hell, or my ass is gonna get beat. It doesn't matter if I didn't do anything wrong. I was walking while brown. Around here that's a crime.

Besides, I don't even go home. Not until I absolutely have to. Because of all the places I hate most on earth, home is number one.

# TWO

Sometimes I feel like an alien scientist who's all alone on a planet of strange creatures. My job is to figure them out. Then I have to report back to my overlords.

This is the story I tell myself when I'm sitting behind the Seven, skipping school, hiding out from crackheads, trying not to get jumped in to the E Street Locals.

The E Street Locals, in case you didn't know, is the band of idiots that runs a territory in this city about three blocks square. I happen to live right in the middle of that territory.

And getting jumped in is what happens to you when you join a gang. Everyone stands around in a circle and beats the crap out of you until you fall down. If you don't die, you're in.

Real nice, huh?

The Locals think they're a gang. They're more like a collection of the greatest losers known to humanity. You know how after a rainstorm, there are little piles of trash caught up in the sewer grate? That's the Locals. They're the sewer trash of the city, stuck in the places that never get cleaned.

They would be a joke if they weren't so deadly.

The name of the leader of the Locals is Boss. Original, huh? That's the best name he can think of. He's just the latest in a long line of Locals who think they're Scarface. They keep getting arrested or killed. In two or three years, Boss will be replaced by someone else. Someone meaner and stupider.

Boss has a bunch of thugs under him. They call themselves lieutenants. I think they are giving themselves too much credit. You need brains to be a lieutenant. These guys are just mean. The worse of a person you are, the higher you rise in that gang.

The Locals sell rock and carry gats, and every once in a while they manage to shoot straight enough to kill somebody. Usually, though, if they hit you with one of their bullets, it's by accident. They don't even care if their shots go flying all over the place.

The world would be a better place without them.

If you want to avoid the E Street Locals, the best time to go out is around nine in the morning. That's because they're up all night, drinking forties and smoking weed. They usually pass out around sunrise, unless they're on a meth bender.

So if I need to bounce, that's when I go. Kinda like how on *Hogan's Heroes*,

every time they escape from prison, they know just when to move to avoid the searchlights.

That's what I do this morning. I need to get out of the house. I would go back to the alley behind the Sev, but I can't deal with that reeking dumpster anymore either. I need to get out and explore. Alien scientist on the move. Expedition number nine thousand. Mission, to observe and record. Try to understand. What is the world like outside Locals territory? What would my life be like if I wasn't me?

I like to walk around the nicer parts of town, over where the university is. It's strange, because I can be there in ten minutes, but I might as well be on the moon. That's how quick things change in this city. It's like there's an invisible line—poor people on this side, rich people on that side. They don't like you to cross it. You have to wear a disguise.

I keep a backpack on so I look like a college student. I carry a notebook too. This is where I record my observations. I try not to steal too many things. Only when I absolutely can't help it or when I get hungry. I don't want to get kicked out of this world. I like it here. No one is trying to shoot me.

It's nice at the university. Big plazas, fancy buildings, lots of trees, happy-looking people. On old TV, college students are always white. Here, you see all kinds of people. They must be trying to help everybody out these days. Scholarships and shit. Money for nothing.

Maybe I can get me some of that money. I could be at home here.

I wonder what it's like to be a college student. I don't even know what I would study. I guess I need to finish high school first. I haven't been to one class all year, so I'm not sure how that's gonna happen.

But it's nice to think about. Even if it is just a pipe dream.

Pipe dream. That used to mean the dreams people had when they smoked opium through a pipe. I guess opium was the jam once. People been smoking stuff through pipes for a long time.

I guess there have always been stupid people. It's not just a new thing.

I heist myself a muffin from the student union and eat it on the library steps while I watch the people walk by. Cute girls in their prime, everywhere. I look at these girls and wonder what it takes to be their boyfriend. They probably only want a guy with lots of money and good grades. Someone from a good family. Someone who is going somewhere in life. Someone with a car.

You can't really blame them. Who wants someone who comes from nothing, has nothing to give and is going nowhere?



I got dreams, sure. Like every other kid in my neighborhood, I wanted to be a rapper. Rappers are who we all look up to—big guns, nice cars, fat stacks of cash, hot chicks all over. I don't feel that way anymore though. Too much like the gang life. I don't know what I really want anymore.

I never really had a girlfriend. There was a girl I used to like once, but she runs with the Locals now. A while back I heard she got a baby. She wasn't but fourteen.

I make some notes in my notebook. I draw a few sketches.

Then I go into the library and grab a book. I don't look to see what it is. I don't care. I'll read anything. Besides, everyone else has books out, so I need one too. You wanna fit in, you gotta do what all the other kids are doing, right?

They have couches in here. I sprawl out on one and open up my book. It turns out

to be an encyclopedia. The letter M. I read about the mongoose.

Man, I never knew mongeese were so boring. Before you know it, I'm asleep.

No surprise there. I don't get much sleep at home, what with all the shouting and the sirens and the yelling. I tend to grab it when I can.

But this was the wrong place to fall asleep.

**WILLIAM KOWALSKI** is the author of the international bestseller *Eddie's Bastard*, winner of South Africa's Ama-Boeke Prize, and, more recently, *The Hundred Hearts*. His work has been translated into fifteen languages. Four of the titles William wrote for the Rapid Reads series have been nominated for the Ontario Library Association's Golden Oak Award. He lives with his family in Nova Scotia. For more information, visit [www.williamkowalski.com](http://www.williamkowalski.com).