*All the Dreams We’ve Dreamed: A Story of Hoops and Handguns on Chicago’s West Side*,

by Rus Bradburd

Review by Myles Schrag, Soulstice Publishing

How fitting last week for me to sit down and write my review of Rus Bradburd’s *All The Dreams We’ve Dreamed: A Story of Hoops and Handguns on Chicago’s West Side*, and perk up when a woman on my local NPR station recited Langston Hughes’ heart-wrenching poem, “Let America Be America Again,” from whose words Bradburd based his title.

I was already pondering the takeaways of Bradburd’s 2018 book, which was released in paperback earlier this year, in the context of the tragic death of George Floyd by Minneapolis police that has led to a swell of protests around the United States and renewed conversations about race in our society. Bradburd’s book is not about police violence, though there is some of that, along with a better understanding of police relations with citizens and school officials in Chicago’s dangerous West Side neighborhoods. Reading *All the Dreams We’ve Dreamed* in these turbulent times is to be reminded that American racism and riots don’t appear out of a vacuum. Inertia and indifference are powerful factors that kill dreams.

At the macro level, the book is about the violence in inner-city Chicago. That story has been told many times, and quite well. Add in the basketball overlay and again, been there, done that … successfully (including in the ground-breaking documentary *Hoop Dreams*, whose influence oozes all over Bradburd’s story in setting, themes, and even some casting crossovers). *All the Dreams We’ve Dreamed* is a masterful and heartfelt story of a neighborhood, a school, and a basketball team caught in a web of violence. But the through-line of the author, a former coach of the book’s protagonist, Shawn Harrington, trying to help that player, creates a rich opportunity to dive deeper into the societal frustrations that keep conditions in a place like Chicago’s West Side mired in hopelessness.

Bradburd injects himself into the story with a display of self-awareness that is refreshing and rare for college sports. He provides thoughtful details about a host of dysfunctions—fickle healthcare insurers and feckless administrators, the contemporary gang landscape, high school sports transfer rules, to name a few—but he doesn’t spare the ethical morass that is college athletic recruiting and his past role in perpetuating a transactional system that treats athletes as disposable. His doggedness on behalf of Harrington feels like penance and is essential to understanding the heart of this book. Bradburd’s honesty is admirable; he never fully lets himself off the hook.

This review is purposely vague in plot details. The map in the front matter of Harrington’s neighborhood where he grew up and played ball at Marshall High School will tell you plenty about killings and shootings (my recommendation is that you flip past it until you’ve finished reading the book). But even if you know the broad strokes of what is going to happen, Bradburd deftly leaves multiple storylines hanging to create narrative tension. He travels back two decades to provide vital background to his connection with Harrington and Chicago hoops before culminating in his investigation into why one player was killed; a desperate PR campaign for his friend that includes the likes of former LSU coach Dale Brown and his star Shaquille O’Neal, journalist Bryant Gumbel, former US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, and many others; and finally a climactic trial.

The randomness of the tragedies is distressing, even if you believe you understand the extent of Chicago’s violent reputation. However, strangely, you will find something to smile about in this book, primarily thanks to Harrington and his family and the two Marshall coaching legends to whom the book is dedicated. Their moral compass is what we have to cling to as we follow Harrington and Bradburd’s journey.

Bradburd ends with strands of hope, much like Hughes’ poem, whose penultimate stanza proclaims that in spite of centuries of broken promises:

*O, yes,*

*I say it plain,*

*America never was America to me,*

*And yet I swear this oath—*

*America will be!*

We need authors of Bradburd’s caliber to tell more stories like this—no matter how often or how well similar stories already have been told—in hopes we will pay attention and someday not have such a distressing volume of them to tell. Bradburd’s contribution deserves to be part of that collection, with distinction.