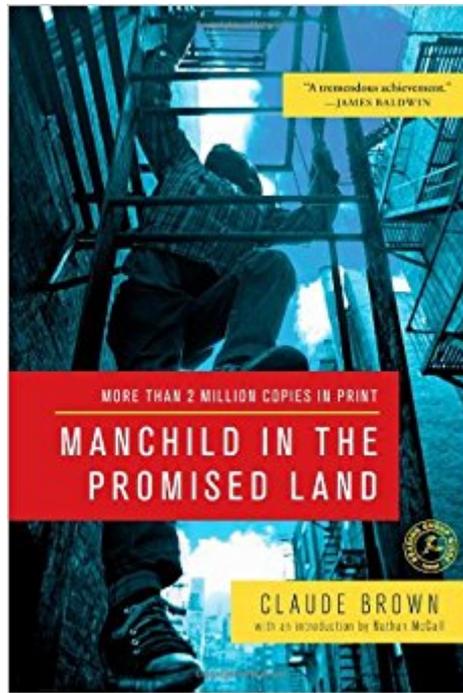


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# Manchild In The Promised Land



## Synopsis

With more than two million copies in print, *Manchild in the Promised Land* is one of the most remarkable autobiographies of our time—the definitive account of African-American youth in Harlem of the 1940s and 1950s, and a seminal work of modern literature. Published during a literary era marked by the ascendance of black writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Alex Haley, this thinly fictionalized account of Claude Brown's childhood as a hardened, streetwise criminal trying to survive the toughest streets of Harlem has been heralded as the definitive account of everyday life for the first generation of African Americans raised in the Northern ghettos of the 1940s and 1950s. When the book was first published in 1965, it was praised for its realistic portrayal of Harlem—the children, young people, hardworking parents; the hustlers, drug dealers, prostitutes, and numbers runners; the police; the violence, sex, and humor. The book continues to resonate generations later, not only because of its fierce and dignified anger, not only because the struggles of urban youth are as deeply felt today as they were in Brown's time, but also because of its inspiring message. Now with an introduction by Nathan McCall, here is the story about the one who "made it," the boy who kept landing on his feet and grew up to become a man.

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## Customer Reviews

"*Manchild in the Promised Land*" is a rare achievement: an autobiography written in clear, lucid prose without an ounce of self-pity, self-justification, or moralizing. While Claude Brown's life was

difficult, dangerous, and violent, and he shows all of that in unflinching detail, he also recalls much of his childhood with pleasure and a good measure of pride that he survived. Most of all, for me, Brown's memoir is filled with regret for the many from his Harlem neighborhood who died, victims of crime, poverty, alcoholism and drug addiction. Indeed, one could say that one of the major characters of his story is heroin, which Brown describes as the scourge of his generation. The power of heroin to destroy is most poignantly described in Brown's recounting of his relationship with his younger brother. Claude took his responsibilities as an older brother seriously, but his younger brother fell victim to addiction, and Brown was forced to admit that he had lost him. As the book develops, an interesting change occurs in Brown's narrative voice. In the early stages, he describes with a defiant pride his wild exploits as a child and adolescent, which landed him in juvenile homes, and nearly got him killed. As he describes himself getting older and he eventually leaves Harlem, Brown's voice takes on a mixture of affection and regret as he talks about going back to the neighborhood and seeing old friends, many of whom had fallen on hard times. In the end, Brown's story is one of achievement. While he escapes the poverty of his youth, he refuses to forget his roots. In this sense, "Manchild"'s spiritual descendant is Sandra Cisneros' great novella, "The House on Mango Street," whose main character realizes that one must "go away to come back." Brown forges an inspirational story that overcomes despair in its power to shape memory and find meaning in a difficult life.

This was without doubt the most important book I read as a teenager. I moved to NYC from California when I was twelve and was pretty naive in the workings of the city. Reading this book when I was 13 helped me immensely. It was a street-wise primer for survival at the time (we're talking 1964). But I would hold that the subject matter is just as relevant today. If you don't know about a "Jones" or what makes a three-card-monty mark want to come back for more, then I suggest you are just as vulnerable as I was. It's also one of the all-time cautionary tales (without being preachy) about drug addiction. I did a lot of drugs in the late 60's, early 70's, but never touched heroin, primarily from reading this book. The writing, while maybe not on the level of Richard Wright, surpasses Malcom X's and Eldridge Cleaver's memoirs, and that's saying something, as those were both powerful works as well.

this book changed my life in a way... not that i have similar experiences or grew up in that time because i'm only 24. This was an excellent book all the way but it did a little more for me. This is one of those books that touched me and will always get praise. My mother was an addict and up

until i read this book i held a grudge because she left me at the age of 5. This book made me understand the mind of an addict and that she would have probably the best mother in the world if it were not for the drugs. I understood the control drugs had over people and my mom. The book wasnt just about drugs but you can overcome and rise from the evils of the world. But for me this book made me forgive my mother.

Claude Brown's slightly fictionalized autobiography recounts his childhood and early adulthood throughout the 1940s and 1950s. *Manchild in the Promised Land* also documents the changing atmosphere of Harlem and the people it affected. Brown tells stories of himself as a hell-raiser, involved in theft and drug dealing, and spending time in juvenile detention centers like Wiltwyck and Warwick. He was able to establish a feared and respected name for himself both among the streetwalkers of Harlem and the inmates of the reform schools. Lacking formal education (resulting from years of playing hooky) and idolizing the criminal elements around him, he seemed to be heading down a short road of vice and danger. Only after Brown moved to Greenwich Village shortly before turning twenty was he able to begin viewing Harlem with a more objective eye, and see the factors that led him down the downward spiral he had been traveling. One of the main reasons Brown believes he and his friends were wrought with such violence and recklessness is due to the mentality imported by their parents from the South. The thing that mattered most to them was fighting: for one's money, girl/family, and manhood (Brown 260). He feels that that rural mentality had been brought to a crowded city life that was not only incompatible with the setting, but also destructive. He laments, "it seems as though if I had stayed in Harlem all my life, I might have never known that there was anything else to life other than sex, religion, liquor, and violence" (Brown 281). As a youth, Brown excelled in these very base attributes. It wasn't until the introduction of heroine, or "horse," as it was first introduced in the early 1950s, that he feels Harlem truly became unable to cope with their values. Instead of young men fighting for honor, they were killing and robbing for money to sustain their overwhelming addictions, introducing more guns into the neighborhood with desperate people wielding them. He witnessed his friends begin to fade away into scratching, nodding junkies. However, by this time Brown was able to leave and slowly break away from the crumbling Harlem he once knew, watching from afar many of the individuals he once hustled with fall victim to the crimes they themselves would perpetrate. Many opted instead to stay in Harlem and live the street life. He attributes this to the attitudes of whites outside Harlem and the racism they encountered. To live a "clean" life usually meant to work for a white man who underpaid, referred to them in a racially derogatory manner, and made them perform the most labor

intensive tasks. When it came to these prospects, most understandably chose the life of a self-employed drug dealer in Harlem over the self-effacing menial work elsewhere, despite the danger (Brown 287). Where some people turned to drugs or religion to deal with these problems, Brown found his calling through more established and secular means. Education and music became outlets for him to express himself, gain a self-pride through non-criminal means, and eventually lead to a promising career as a lawyer and author. One of the things that make this autobiography interesting is its use of language. Brown writes in a notable street dialect, however, the language itself evolves with the character. For instance, "cat" slowly comes into use around page 67 and is used throughout, though it receives less use towards the end. More notably, on page 109 the young Claude begins idolizing a street pimp named Johnny: "To Johnny, every chick was a b\*tch. Even mothers were b\*tches." And so on page 114 Brown writes "Jackie was a beautiful black b\*tch." From then on women are regularly referred to as "b\*tches" until the character matures enough to treat women with more respect, and Johnny's spell seems to have completely worn off by the time Brown falls in love with a fellow student. Likewise, the sentence structures become less erratic and grow in sophistication as the book goes on, using less slang chapter by chapter when he begins to change. This seems to be by design. Claude Brown's personal accounts are no doubt fictionalized to some degree, for his characters go on exhaustive speeches several times, and he certainly didn't tape record them for every word. However, Brown's intentions are to present Harlem and its difficulties in approachable and creative ways. To allow readers (such as white-suburban-me) an inside look into the ways of urban life it invites an understanding and, hopefully, sympathy for the situations of the junkies, prostitutes, and drug dealers that we pass on the street. He shows them in a way that cannot be easily neglected, in intimate, personal relationships that reveal the influences and regrets that have placed them in those situations. These factors were not unique to the 1940s and 1950s. They existed before and do so today. Brown allows insight into the hardships while telling an encouraging tale of one who made it out. By personal drive and education, through art and self-expression (as this book is), he shows that the situation is not dire, but attitudes must change before the world will follow.

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