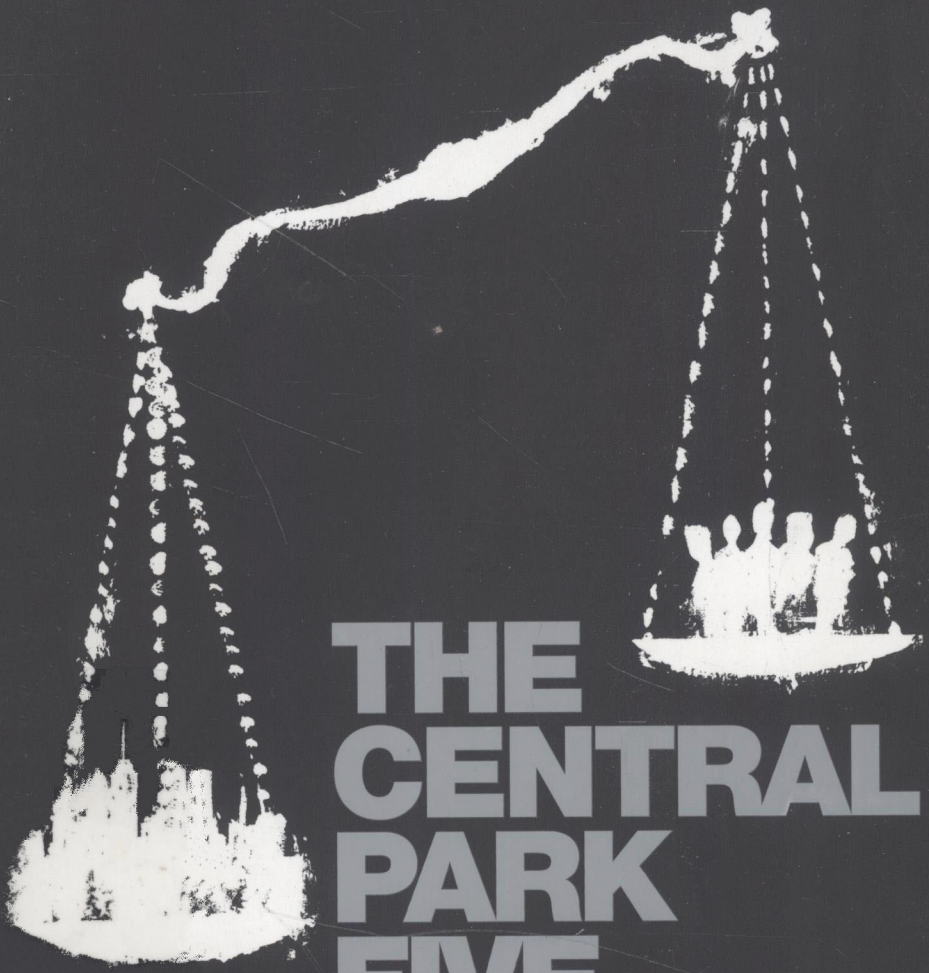
NOW A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE

THE UNTOLD STORY BEHIND ONE OF NEW YORK CITY'S MOST INFAMOUS CRIMES



THE CENTRAL PARK FIVE

SARAH BURNS

AS SEEN ON PBS.

"Riveting. . . . May serve as an allegory for some of the most pressing criminal justice issues of our time." —*The New York Times Book Review*

The Central Park Five

The Untold Story Behind One of New York City's Most Infamous Crimes

Sarah Burns

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Praise for

The Central Park Five

A Film by Ken Burns & David McMahon & Sarah Burns

"*Central Park* is at first discomforting, then enraging, then illuminating." —*The New Yorker*

"As grim a portrait of the criminal justice system as can be imagined." —*Detroit News*

"Timeless. . . . It encapsulates an era."
—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Watching *The Central Park Five* is a deeply affecting experience." —*The Wall Street Journal*

"Measured in tone and outraged in its argument, it is an emotionally stirring, at times crushingly depressing cinematic call to witness." —*The New York Times*

"A patient, righteous documentary."
—*Entertainment Weekly*

SARAH BURNS

The Central Park Five

Sarah Burns graduated from Yale University in 2004 with a degree in American studies and went on to work for Moore & Goodman, a small civil rights law firm based in New York. She has produced a documentary film with Ken Burns based on this book. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

For Antron, Kevin, Korey, Raymond, and Yusef

I think that everybody here—maybe across the nation—will look at this case to see how the criminal justice system works. . . . This is, I think, putting the criminal justice system on trial.

—MAYOR ED KOCH, *April 21, 1989*

PREFACE

On December 19, 2002, Justice Charles J. Tejada of the Supreme Court of the State of New York granted a motion to vacate the thirteen-year-old convictions in the infamous Central Park Jogger case. He did so based on new evidence: a shocking confession from a serial rapist and a positive DNA match to back it up. In 1990, Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson, Korey Wise, Yusef Salaam, and Raymond Santana, Jr., had been convicted and sent to prison for a combination of rape, sexual assault, and attempted murder of a female jogger named Trisha Meili in Central Park on April 19, 1989. The young men had already completed their sentences, having served between almost seven and thirteen years—but now they finally had the weight of felony convictions and sexual offender status lifted from their shoulders.

That the victim had been a twenty-eight-year-old successful white investment banker and that the five young men who were convicted were black and Latino teenagers from Harlem was not lost on the public or the media in 1989. In the weeks and months after the brutal rape, a media frenzy erupted, steeped in the emotions and fears that circulated throughout a city paralyzed by crime and a country struggling with its own complicated racial history. The media coverage of the crime exposed a racism, rarely acknowledged or examined, rife in American society, and the language used to describe the supposed perpetrators was filled with imagery of savage, wild animals, the same racist language that had been used to justify lynchings earlier in the century. The vicious

rape exposed the deepest fears of New Yorkers in the 1980s, and also in the country at large—fears lurking just beneath the surface for over a century: reckless, violent, dark-skinned youths rampaging unchecked, raping and beating a helpless white woman. The outraged response to the crime helped usher in the return of the death penalty in New York State and an era of aggressive law enforcement in New York City.

But even with the convictions vacated, based on a compelling confession and clear forensic evidence and supported by the same district attorney on whose watch the case had been vigorously prosecuted in 1989, many of those who participated in the original prosecutions, including many within the NYPD and one of the ADAs who oversaw the prosecution, still insist on the teenagers' guilt. They agree that another man raped the Central Park Jogger, but they argue that his culpability does nothing to contradict the guilty verdicts of the five young men, despite the overwhelming forensic evidence and the teenagers' confused and contradictory confessions.

These arguments, coming from individuals and organizations with powerful voices and a wide audience, have been effective in preventing the true story of the Central Park Five from reaching those who had followed the coverage of the convictions back in 1989. Many people have heard of this case, but most do not know the facts, and that the convictions were vacated. If they do, they believe that a "legal loophole" was responsible for the exoneration, or that because the teenagers gave confessions, they must be guilty.

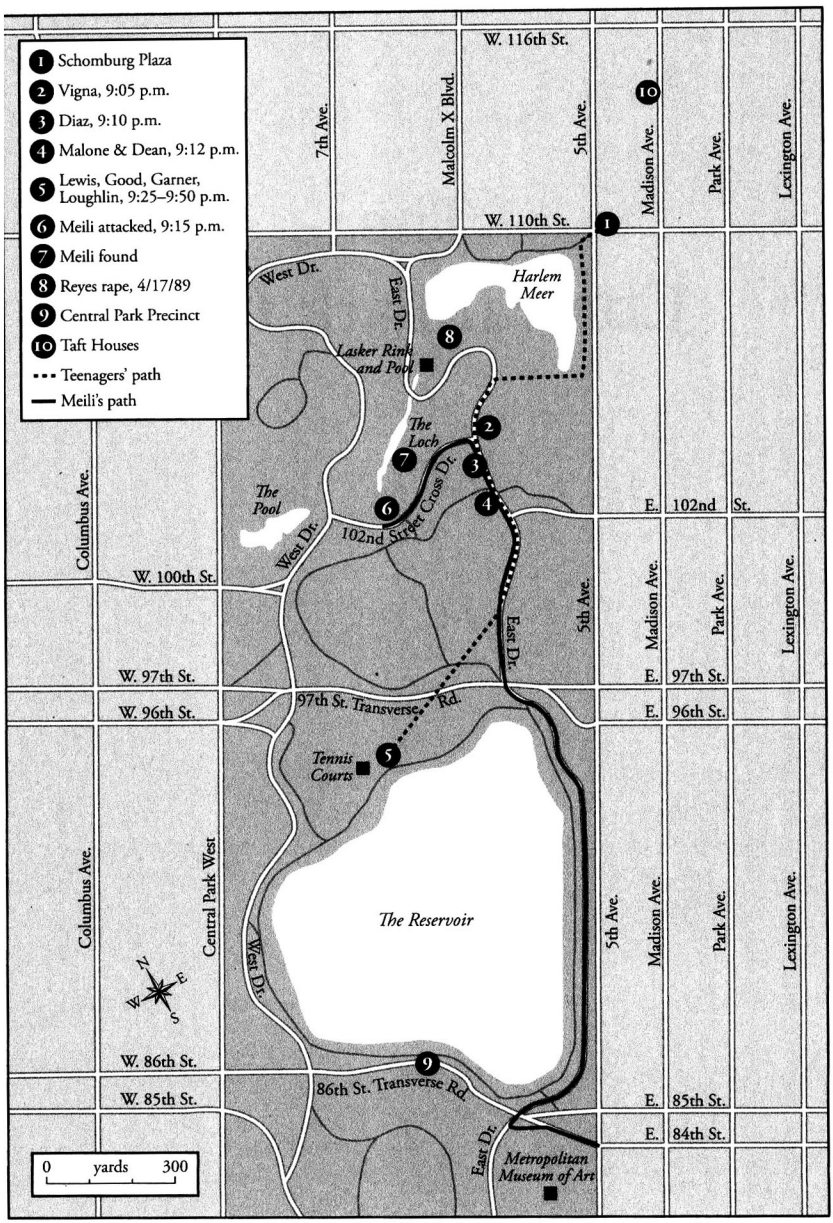
During the summer of 2003, before my last year of college, I worked as a researcher for civil rights lawyers involved in a civil suit on behalf of Antron, Kevin, Korey, Yusef, and Raymond. The convictions had only recently been vacated, and I was drawn into the stories of the young men who had been wrongly convicted, who had their lives stolen from them. I wanted to know how something like this could have happened. I went on to write my undergraduate thesis about the racism I saw in the media coverage of the case, but the story continued to haunt me, to demand my attention. I wrestled with the many explanations for this miscarriage of justice, and none was simple or satisfying.

The media coverage was certainly not the only reason these teenagers were wrongly convicted. The police, the prosecutors, and the defense lawyers all played a role. But this was not a case of rogue detectives beating confessions out of suspects, or of the police and prosecutors conspiring to frame individuals they knew to be innocent. If that were so, we could blame it all on those bad seeds and move on. Instead, this case exposes the deeply ingrained racism that still exists in our society. It shows us who and what we fear, and how easy it is for us to believe the sensational stories we hear from the media, who often fail to apply the skepticism their profession demands when competition drives them to sell newspapers or attract more viewers.

The false narrative, disseminated by the police and the media, was swallowed whole by the public because it conformed to the assumptions and fears of the city and the country. *Everyone* bought the story. But the fact that so many continue to promote this narrative tells us that even though we live, as some like to say, in a "postracial" society, the racism that fueled the original rush to judgment persists, and that we have not evolved enough from the days when even the suggestion that a black man had raped a white woman could lead to a lynching.

My goal in reexamining this case is not just to tell the story and explain the facts, to prove wrong those who refuse to admit that a miscarriage of justice occurred, but also to try to understand the broader forces that shaped the outcome of this case, to figure out a simple, but for me a persistent and nagging, question: How did this happen?

The Central Park Five


1 Schomburg Plaza
2 Vigna, 9:05 p.m.
3 Diaz, 9:10 p.m.
4 Malone & Dean, 9:12 p.m.
5 Lewis, Good, Garner, Loughlin, 9:25–9:50 p.m.
6 Meili attacked, 9:15 p.m.
7 Meili found
8 Reyes rape, 4/17/89
9 Central Park Precinct
10 Taft Houses
Teenagers' path
Meili's path
W. 116th St.
7th Ave.
Malcolm X Blvd.
5th Ave.
Madison Ave.
Park Ave.
Lexington Ave.
W. 110th St.
West Dr.
East Dr.
Harlem Meer
Lasker Rink and Pool
The Loch
The Pool
102nd Street Cross Dr.
E. 102nd St.
Columbus Ave.
W. 100th St.
W. 97th St.
E. 97th St.
W. 96th St.
97th St. Transverse Rd.
E. 96th St.
Tennis Courts
Central Park West
The Reservoir
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86th St. Transverse Rd.
E. 85th St.
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Metropolitan Museum of Art
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CHAPTER ONE

The day it happened, Wednesday, April 19, 1989, Raymond Santana, Jr., walked over to the Taft Houses in East Harlem to visit a friend. Raymond, whose family had moved to New York from Puerto Rico before he was born, lived with his father and grandmother in an apartment building on 119th Street, a few blocks north of the project, but he often hung out in the courtyard of the Taft Houses, where some of his friends lived. At fourteen, he was of average size—about five six and 130 pounds—with curly hair and small features. He was well liked at school, where his good sense of humor made him popular with girls. Even though there were always kids playing sports around the neighborhood, especially basketball and football in local school yards and the decrepit project courtyards, Raymond was more interested in drawing. He took art classes and spent a lot of his free time sketching.

As Raymond sat with his friend in the Taft courtyard that warm afternoon, a bunch of kids who lived there and in the surrounding buildings arrived. One of the boys in the group was Antron McCray, an exceptionally shy fifteen-year-old African-American from Harlem. Antron lived with his mother, Linda, and his stepfather, Bobby McCray, on 111th Street. He had adopted his stepfather's name at an early age and always considered Bobby his real father. The McCrays were devoted to their only son and were involved in his activities. Though he was a tiny five three and weighed only ninety-eight pounds, Antron was a good athlete and played shortstop on a neighborhood baseball team that his stepfather coached. They had gone to Puerto Rico together for an all-star tournament, a highlight of his Little League career. Antron was

enrolled in a small public school program called Career Academy, where he enjoyed his social studies classes and got pretty good grades. Antron and Raymond had seen each other before, since they went to different schools housed within the same building, but didn't know each other well.

Over the next hour, the group in the Taft courtyard grew to about fifteen teenagers. Raymond and Antron joined them as they all began to wander south along Madison Avenue, then turned west onto 110th Street, heading toward Central Park. A block ahead, at the corner of the park, was an apartment complex called the Schomburg Plaza. The Schomburg is made up of two narrow thirty-five-story octagonal towers and, behind them, a large, squat, rectangular building. The two towers sit facing the northeast entrance to Central Park on a traffic circle centered at the intersection of Fifth Avenue and 110th Street. They are by far the tallest buildings in the vicinity and dominate, like sentinels, that corner of the park. Built in 1975 as a city development for middle- and low-income families, all three of the unsightly structures are constructed of beige concrete, with deep grooves running vertically like scars up and down the walls.

Yusef Salaam and Korey Wise, both African-Americans, lived in the northwest tower of the Schomburg Plaza complex. Yusef and Korey were good friends but could not have been more different. Yusef was skinny and tall, nearly six three, even at age fifteen. Korey, at sixteen, was only five five, and stockier. Yusef was a talented kid. He had been accepted at LaGuardia High School of Music and Art, a highly selective public school that requires the submission of an art portfolio for admission. Yusef, like Raymond Santana, had been drawing since he was five and was interested in jewelry making and wood sculpture. He also liked to take electronics apart to see how they worked and to try to put them back together. Korey, on the other hand, had had hearing problems from an early age and a learning disability that limited his achievement in school. He was in the ninth grade in April 1989, but his reading skills were nowhere near that level.

Yusef came from a strong family. His mother, a freelance fashion designer and part-time teacher at Parsons School of Design, raised three children on her own, and pushed them to succeed. Yusef was a practicing Muslim and followed the tenets of his religion closely. But he had been kicked out of LaGuardia when a knife was found in his locker. After his expulsion, Yusef switched schools several times; by April of 1989, his mother had placed him at Rice, a private Christian school in Harlem. She had also signed him up for the Big Brothers Big Sisters program, which paired him up with David Nocenti, an assistant U.S. attorney with whom he'd been spending time for the past four years. Yusef, who was gregarious and laid-back, prided himself on having friends from all over the neighborhood.

Korey Wise was also raised by a single mother, Deloris, who was pregnant in April 1989, and he had three older brothers. Korey was a good friend to Yusef, fiercely loyal, and well liked. At that time, he was dating a girl named Lisa Williams, who lived with a foster family in the same Schomburg tower. But his childhood had been especially difficult. Korey had only recently moved back in with his mother in the Schomburg Plaza; before that, he'd been living in foster care, at a group home in the Bronx. He moved there, he said, because his brothers were "coming and going," and he needed a more stable environment, but Aminah Carroll, a director at the Catholic foster agency that monitored Korey's case, remembered a much more troubled household. Carroll suspected that Korey's hearing problems had resulted from physical abuse, and when she tried to get him treatment, his mother refused to sign the necessary paperwork. A few years earlier, Korey had been on a trip to an amusement park, where he was molested by a group leader.

At sixteen, Korey was a gentle, emotionally stunted boy, his problems amplified by his hearing loss. Korey's development was severely delayed and his ability to comprehend his complicated and sometimes dangerous surroundings was woefully inadequate.

That afternoon, Yusef Salaam, Korey Wise, Korey's girlfriend, Lisa, and their friend Eddie were sitting on a bench near the entrance to

Central Park. They were watching out for an older boy and his friends, who, they feared, were coming to start a fight. The young man wanted to date Eddie's sister, and Yusef and Korey were prepared to help Eddie fend him off. Korey, true to his loyal personality, had offered to fight the offender on Eddie's behalf. Eddie had taken a metal bar, at least a foot long, from Korey's apartment for protection, and it ended up in the pocket of Yusef's long coat. It was a solid piece of metal wrapped with black tape that was used in the Wise household to brace the apartment door against unwanted intruders.

As they headed back toward the Schomburg towers, Yusef noticed a large group of teenagers approaching along 110th Street from the other direction. He was certain it was the other kid and his gang coming back to fight, until he recognized a friend from his building, Al Morris. The group also included Raymond Santana, Antron McCray, and their friends from the Taft and other nearby housing projects.

Using Yusef's nickname, Al called out to him, "Yo, Kane!" and invited him to come hang out in the park. Yusef saw safety in numbers and joined them. He, in turn, invited Korey, who left Lisa behind and followed Yusef into the park. Still more Schomburg residents joined the crowd that was now headed into Central Park, including a fourteen-year-old African-American named Kevin Richardson.

Kevin lived with his mother, Gracie Cuffee, in the same Schomburg building as Yusef and Korey. Their small apartment was on the thirty-fourth floor of the tower, with a spectacular view of Central Park laid out below the window. Kevin's parents had split up, but his four older sisters often visited. He was the baby of the family, the boy his mother had always wanted, and the women in his family doted on him and taught him to be polite and thoughtful. Kevin attended Jackie Robinson Junior High School on Madison Avenue at 106th Street, where he played the saxophone and participated in a hip-hop dance troupe called Show Stoppers.

Kevin had started playing football while living in Virginia for a few months when he was twelve, and he had dreams of making the team

at Syracuse University. He was quiet and respectful at school and his teachers remembered him as having a good moral compass, though his grades showed that he was having trouble keeping up in class. Kevin looked young for his age, with a round baby face and large features. Kevin recognized Yusef and Korey from the building, but didn't know them well.

As the group, including Kevin Richardson, Korey Wise, Yusef Salaam, Antron McCray, and Raymond Santana, congregated at the northeast entrance to Central Park in the darkening twilight, Raymond counted thirty-three boys.

That same day, Patricia Ellen Meili woke up early, as she always did, so she could be at her office by 7:30 a.m. Trisha, as she was known to her family and friends, often worked long days at the office. She was employed at Salomon Brothers, an investment bank in downtown Manhattan, as an associate in the Corporate Finance Division. She had been at Salomon since moving to New York after finishing business school at Yale. At five o'clock, Meili decided that she would have to call off her dinner plans because she still had too much to do at the office that evening. She phoned her friend Michael Allen to cancel.

A few hours later, her colleague and former roommate Pat Garrett popped his head over from the adjacent cubicle. He wanted to know about the stereo system Meili had just gotten for her new apartment.

"Why not come over and take a look at it?" she said.

"Sure," he replied.

"Come around ten. That'll give me time to go for a run before you get there."

They made a plan to meet at 10:00 p.m. and Meili went home to her apartment on East Eighty-third Street, near York Avenue, where she lived alone. At ten minutes to nine, with the sky already dark, Meili left for her run, wearing black leggings, a long-sleeved white T-shirt over her sports bra, Saucony running shoes, and an AM/FM radio headset. Her