Dear First-year Student:

On behalf of the Department of Literature and the College Writing Program, we welcome you to American University. To set the stage for your first year here at AU, we have chosen a book that we call our “community text” for you to read before you arrive in August. You and your classmates will discuss the book and write about it in your College Writing class. The College Writing Program and the Campus Store will also sponsor an essay contest to honor the best writing inspired by the community text.

The dialogue we develop around the challenging themes that define our community texts unifies our students and faculty in an intellectual experience. When we ask tough questions, explore controversy, listen to one another respectfully, and sharpen our claims, we illustrate how writing is a social act at the heart of an academic community. Welcoming our text’s author to campus to discuss their work is an essential part of that shared intellectual experience.

We’re delighted to announce this year’s choice: Ruben Castaneda’s *S Street Rising: Crack, Murder, and Redemption in D.C.* A former reporter for the *Washington Post*, Ruben Castaneda has won several journalism awards, including recognition for feature writing from the Washington-Baltimore Newspaper Guild Front Page Awards. We will bring Mr. Castaneda to campus this fall for the nineteenth annual Writer as Witness Colloquium on Wednesday, September 7 at 8:00 p.m. in Bender Arena. He will address the American University community and meet with students and faculty to discuss the book, as well as the craft, artistry and research that went into its creation.

In *S Street Rising*, Castaneda weaves an incisive narrative of Washington, D.C. during the apex of the crack epidemic in the late-80s and early-90s. Through provocative – and even uncomfortable – moments, readers are given an unblinking account of the challenges this epidemic created for the D.C. community, city officials, law enforcement, and even Castaneda himself. The *Washington Post* calls *S Street Rising* “A tense, unflinching chronicle,” and “a gritty and utterly convincing street-level portrait of a dark chapter in the city's history, reflected in the dark mirror of Castaneda's own addiction.” But Castaneda’s account is not without redemption; as *Publisher's Weekly* notes, “Castaneda writes movingly of the unlikely wellsprings of solidarity and hope in communities that society has written off.” *S Street Rising* was a finalist for the 2015 International Latino Book Awards for English-language biography, and was named one of the best books of 2014 by the website Brightest Young Things.

The American University Campus Store is offering *S Street Rising* at a discounted rate. You may order the book directly through the Campus Store website: [www.shopamericanu.com](http://www.shopamericanu.com). Copies will also be available for purchase at the Campus Store during all of the New Student Orientations, when you’ll have your first opportunity to talk with classmates about *S Street Rising*. You will find additional resources on this website prepared by our colleagues in AU’s Bender Library: [http://subjectguides.library.american.edu/collegewriting](http://subjectguides.library.american.edu/collegewriting).

As you read this summer, think about possible questions for the author to address during the September Colloquium. You may email questions or comments to cwp@american.edu, or share them through social media on Twitter (@WriterAsWitness) or Facebook (search for Writer as Witness). You also will have the chance to ask your questions directly at the Writer as Witness Colloquium on September 7. We look forward to meeting you there to hear your responses to the provocative questions raised by Ruben Castaneda’s work. Enjoy the rest of your summer. And welcome to AU!