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Posted at 05:30 AM ET, 12/17/2012

## Homeless for two years, James Allison wrote poetry in his truck, and now publishes "Dark Waters"

By [Tom Jackman](#)



James Allison spent nearly two years either living in his pickup truck or in homeless shelters in Northern Virginia in 2009 and 2010. While he did, he wrote poetry to capture the experience, and the poetry has now been published. (Tom Jackman - The Washington Post)

*Four days in my truck motel*

*the hands of time moving backwards*

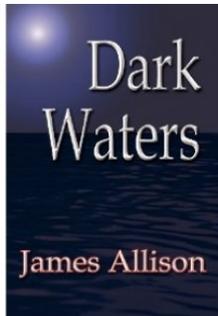
*my life stalled in reverse*

— from "Life in Reverse," by James Allison

Throughout his life, James Allison always wrote poetry. Filled dozens of notebooks with it, but never published anything as his life wound from northern Indiana to northern California to Northern Virginia.

Then in 2009, at age 55, he suddenly had a dramatic, compelling subject: homelessness. His own. He was living in his 1999 Mazda pickup truck, spending most of the next two years parked in church or shopping center parking lots, and living during the coldest months in homeless shelters.

Sitting in the driver's seat of that pickup truck, often in the morning, Allison would pull out a pen and a notebook and record what he saw, what he felt and what he feared. He eventually found a job and a place to live, and this year he published "Dark Waters," a volume of poetry which captures the despair, and the moments of hope, of living on America's streets in the 21st century.



The cover of the poetry book "Dark Waters" by James Allison, written while he was homeless in Northern Virginia in 2009 and 2010. (James Allison - Amazon.com)

The self-published book has been so well received that he is already most of the way to publishing a second volume, "Lifecycle: Through the Dark Waters," which should emerge next year.

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Rick Conte and James Allison. Conte allowed Allison to move in with him in late 2010, and has helped support him as he published his first volume of poetry based on his experience being homeless. (Tom Jackman - The Washington Post)

"Those who have never been homeless are going to get an education if they read this," Allison said the other day, sitting in the Hilda Barg Homeless Prevention Center in Woodbridge, where he spent parts of the winter of 2010.

Allison got lucky. He found a true good samaritan in Rick Conte, who took him into his home in Stafford in December 2010. But there remain plenty of others, living in the woods or the shelters or the vacant lots of Northern Virginia, who remain homeless in our wealthy area.

*Tired of false hope and false promises*

*and a future that is anything but secure*

*I am ready to leap into the dark waters*

*and take my chances*

*in what could be my only hope*

*of survival*

— "Dark Waters"

Allison grew up in South Bend, Ind., then moved to San Jose, Calif., for college. He married and lived there until 1992, when his wife was transferred to Northern Virginia. They divorced in 2001, and Allison moved into an apartment in Triangle, in Prince William County.

His descent to homelessness began in December 2007, when he lost his job cleaning carpets for Stanley Steemer. The economy went into the tank, Allison could not find another job and went on unemployment in 2008. In April 2009, he could no longer afford his apartment, and he was evicted.

"I was an emotional wreck," Allison said, "but physically I was fine."

He moved in with a friend for several months, but still couldn't find a job. By the summer, he had worn out his welcome there, and began living in his truck.

"I was always looking for work, applying at different places," Allison said. "I started spending nights on a church property down in Stafford, in the truck."

As this life began, Allison went to Walmart and bought a couple of composition notebooks. "I knew the importance of writing down my experiences," he said. "The first piece I wrote is the first piece in the book," which was "Life in Reverse," excerpted at the top of this post.

He liked Whitman. He liked Erica Jong. He liked Jim Morrison of the Doors, and studied both his lyrics and his poetry.

He scribbled and he scrapped to survive. He huddled under blankets and coats at night in the truck. He found a church in Fredericksburg to park in, but when he shared his poetry with a church member, he said the church found it too "dark and sensuous" and kicked him out.

Taking refuge in shelters in the worst weather, he met other homeless

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people and learned their stories. He also was able to drive them to errands and appointments, doing his own little bit to help.

But when his own truck needed help, he met Rick Conte. Allison was attending the Unity Church of Fredericksburg, and in December 2010 he told Conte he needed some assistance getting his truck in order.

As they drove around, "I found out more about his circumstances," Conte said. "I said, 'Why don't you come live with us?'" Conte, a retired engineer, had space in his home in Stafford, and had already taken in another man who was down on his luck.

"We just have that type of attitude toward life," Conte said, "help each other out."

Allison moved in, and began compiling his poetry on a computer at the Porter branch of the Central Rappahannock Regional Library in Stafford. A friend told him about Publish America, located in Frederick, Md., and by the summer of 2011 he had a deal to publish "Dark Waters."

By early 2012, Allison had a copy of the proofs of the book in hand. "I just broke down reading it," he said. "I lived that. It shook me. It was the first time I was reading it."

By the spring, the book was published. It can be purchased through [Amazon.com here](#).

Allison also now has a job doing phone surveys. His health is good, his life is looking up, and he's working on his second volume. But "Dark Waters" is a powerful reminder of the tragedy that lives all around us.

"This was a very dark period of my life," Allison said. "The waters are up to your head and you have no idea if you're going to get through it or not. You go through periods of depression and discouragement. You have no idea what the next day's going to bring you. As I was writing it, the phrase kept coming up in different poems, 'dark waters' or deep waters."

Here is one of Waters's poems in full, "Invitation":

*The tapestry of time draws to a close*

*Another heat wave upon us --*

*an August rush*

*of high humidity*

*& steam*

*& pregnant minutes passing by*

*The sounds emanating from the forest*

*explode in one rapt chorus*

*The green foliage from the trees*

*is painted on earth's living canvas*

*I breathe deep the stale summer air*

*& exhale meters and lost prolific rhymes*

*I have no place to call home*

*but earth will do for now*

*with her shores at my feet*

*and the illusive invitation of life*

*hanging in the balance*