



## **There are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America**

*Alex Kotlowitz*

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This is the moving and powerful account of two remarkable boys struggling to survive in Chicago's Henry Horner Homes, a public housing complex disfigured by crime and neglect.

## **There are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America Details**

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# **From Reader Review There are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America for online ebook**

## **Dennis Henn says**

Painful, depressing, and mostly hopeless. Those were the feelings I had reading Kotlowitz's book detailing the lives of families, particularly two boys, "imprisoned" in the projects of Chicago in the late 1980s. This must be a bit what living in a refugee camp must be like. This must be what living in Afghanistan or Iraq or Gaza must be like. Gangs, drugs, crime, lack of opportunity, distrust of the police and legal system, no employment opportunity. How does anyone escape? How does anyone survive? The epilogue offers a tiny ray of hope, and various chapters show the capacity of children to carve a place of safety and chase rainbows, but the picture left me very discouraged. Despite that, I am very glad to have read the book and glimpsed a U.S. that I never understood.

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## **Frank Stein says**

I realize now I've been reading a lot of books about the old Chicago projects. Many of them tend to blur together into one tangled mess of shootings, pregnancies, drugs, and live-in fourth cousins, but this one really broke my heart.

Instead of trying to detail every catastrophic news blurb that makes it out of the projects, a white reporter named Kotlowitz somehow manages to spend years hanging out with just two project boys, Lafayette and Pharaoh. He sees Pharaoh's first birthday party, which he had when he was 10, and which was interrupted by a shooting and an uncle who passes out in his own urine. He reports on the killing of Lafayette's friend Bird-Leg, and the ganglords that attend his funeral.

The book presents a whole universe that can really only be described as "down the rabbit hole" from everything one thinks about a typical American life. The family must constantly huddle in a hallway to hide from stray gunshots ricocheting around their apartment, a mother must desperately pray for just one of her children to graduate from high school, sinks either run constantly for months on end or overflow with sewage, 10 or twelve people, and three or four generations, huddle together in a few crumbling rooms. But Kotlowitz is best at conveying the psychological effects of all of this, the boys fear of growing up, or of not growing up at all ("if I grow up I want to be..."), and the desire for peace or for any sign of hope among the other residents of the projects.

It was written over twenty years ago, and most of these projects have been torn down, but its not dissimilar to much of what goes on in those that remain today.

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## **Raquel Richardson says**

I read this book over the Christmas holiday. It's an old read, but still a good story and I'm sure lots of information is similar to how it is today (sadly). Two major things bugged me about this... 1) So many people in roles who are to help kids in these situations just gave up. I was reminded to never, ever, judge

people and their situation, desire, capacity, etc. I need to always meet people where they are, not where I think they are and 2) Oprah helps people all around the world but these kids are just blocks from her home. I don't have the answer for fixing all of this, but I do like to help people who want to help themselves, and, kids in situations that cannot do anything about their place in life should be given a solid place to learn and grow.

I like to think our America is a good place, but there are parts that are unlike I have ever experienced. I'm just a couple years older than the kids in this book. While they were dodging bullets I was riding my bike to the pool, hanging all day with my friends, eating an insane amount of candy and not even aware of how hard life could be... how childhood should be.

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### **Nancy says**

This reads like a sociology textbook, rather than a novel, which it is not. In all fairness, I lost interest halfway through the book. The climax that set the rest of the book apart hadn't shown up in those first 150 pages. Every day was conflict and climax. It is heartrending yet achingly difficult to not ask myself, as a middle class Caucasian, why did she continue to have children when the father was out of the picture? Why didn't she seek employment sooner?

But, as I pointed out, the circumstances of these people are so foreign to me that it was and proves to be, a very good education on the projects of Chicago.

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### **Tim says**

This book changed my entire perception of the power of journalism. Kotlowitz follows the lives of two young boys growing up in the projects of the near West Side of Chicago. I consider it a seminal book in my life. It was both heart-wrenching and mind-opening. The writing is smooth and thoughtful. It is exhaustively researched, and his access to the subjects just astounds me. That he could get them to trust him as much as they did is astonishing. Then the story he records just astounds. Before reading this book I would never have believed that life could be so destitute and hopeless for people inside the United States of America. It's informative without being preachy, too, which I like. It challenged many of my assumptions about government, birth control, criminal justice and gangs.

If I could give this book six stars, I would. A must-read.

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### **Maki says**

Although this is a true story and very sad, I did not find this book very interesting. I don't know if it was because I have not worked with children this poor in the past, although I have worked with some very low income families, but I have not been around the world of drugs and guns as I am from the countryside and not a big city girl, although I have lived in some massive cities around the world. This book was an okay read, but I kept waiting for their to be a drastic, devastation to the story that never really happened...

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## **Anne Tommaso says**

This book ended abruptly for me. I think it's because I wanted to keep hearing about Lafayette and Pharoah's days...make sure they were okay. I've felt a void not reading about them since I finished it. That is one sign of an exceptional book.

There is so much chaos in the Lafayette and Pharoah's lives. The book affirmed the importance of school with all its rules and rituals. The Spelling Bee! The biggest idea I take from this story is, as a teacher, school can offer some order, structure, some connection between cause and effect for kids who don't have it in their homes and families.

I'm also really interested in all the descriptions of space in the book. The lack of a common space or formal entry way in the Henry Horner Homes, the putrid, wasteful mess in the basement, doors falling off hinges in apartments, how hallways provide safety from stray bullets, the lack of grocery stores, restaurants, or businesses near the projects, and the looming money-filled United Center just a few blocks away. There is no respect for boundaries or the separation between public and private space. It's part of what makes life so tiring and dangerous.

I know there's more to say. I'm grateful for what this story has made me think about.

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## **Jana says**

This book has been on my to-read list for a while. Those two little boys (who are now grown men who are older than I am) are going to haunt me - I haven't stopped thinking about them since I finished the book. This is an especially harrowing read in the wake of the Trayvon Martin tragedy. If you're not comfortable challenging your perspective on privilege, race, class, and social justice, this book is not for you.

(Higher Ed friends - it reminded me of A Hope in the Unseen in many ways, so if you liked that you would probably like this one, even though this story is much more dated at this point.)

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## **Kay says**

This is a wonderful book. In some ways, much has changed since Kotlowitz wrote this book: the Henry Horner Homes have been demolished in Chicago -- a relief considering the poor construction documented in the book, many cities are experiencing an urban renewal, and though Chicago is still plagued with violence, it's down significantly from the era this book documents (possibly due to the absence of lead). But at the same time, much has stayed the same. Poverty still limits far too many children in America, and even though it's certainly lessened, it's still a traumatizing reality for far too many people.

The stories are the heartbreaking reality of what it means to grow up poor in an American city. It means not just struggling to make ends meet, but struggling for your very survival. LaJoe, the mother of the two chief

characters in the book -- boys Pharaoh and Lafayette -- constantly fears that her sons will be conscripted by the gangs or even outright killed in the crossfire.

The entire time I was reading the narrative, I had a sinking feeling things didn't end well for these boys. I was, sadly, correct. Both have spent time in prison, and now in their mid-30s, one is out on parole and another awaits release for a chance at a better life.

The optimist in me wants them to get it. The pessimist in me fears they won't.

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### **Peacegal says**

Readers may have to continually remind themselves, "This book is taking place in America. This is not a war-torn, third world country. This is the richest nation in the world."

The writing style is dated, but the things described here are still occurring every day in our nation. You think of all of the money spent to do things like give police in podunk towns military-grade vehicles and subsidize the production of junk food, but we can't even perform enough maintenance on low-income housing to make the buildings safe and suitable for human life, let alone all of the other stuff going on here.

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### **Rob says**

An non-fictional account of American poverty as experienced by two adolescent boys and their mother in a Chicago housing project during the late 1980s. The author was a young journalist who initially became acquainted with the family while doing a related story for the Wall Street Journal. He felt compelled to elaborate on what he saw by spending several days a week and many weekends just hanging out with the kids and their mom over a two year period, and then wrote this book about it. He interviewed everyone he could in the project during that time, learned who the gang members and the drug lords and the politicians and the teachers were, and became quite close with the family. He completely immersed himself in their world, and described it from the perspective of these two kids and their mom. From all this work, he became intimately familiar with the environment and the characters, and he strung together incredible stories straight from the mouths of the children he spent time with. Incidentally, the book reads more like a novel than a work of non-fictional journalism. Emotionally it was not an easy read - one can't help but feel an attachment to the boys and feel for the injustice of their situation. Some people die, and there aren't really any happy endings for any of the people in this story - and that is the hard part: knowing that these are real people and not just fictional characters. The impression that these stories left with me is that good people in bad situations can't help but be stifled. And if I was born in their situation, how do I know I would turn out any differently? The beauty of this book is in its ability to transport the reader to a different place and time, and see it through the eyes of someone entirely different than you. It is truly empathetic. I can't think of a better way to really understand poverty. It is a well-written account that is also enjoyable to read, keeps moving, and refrains from subjective rambling or preaching. None of that is needed, as the accounts speak for themselves. Anyone who wishes to truly understand poverty and help those in need should read this book.

As a side note, I only became aware of this book because I saw the made for TV movie that it inspired in 1993, when I was about the same age as the boys in the story. It stars Oprah Winfrey as the mother, and has cameos by Michael Jordan and Maya Angelou. Anyways it left such an impression on me that I never forgot

it, and thanks to the internet was able to dig it up several years later (great movie too).

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## **Rachel says**

An all around harrowing depiction of children robbed of their childhood that grow into disenfranchised adults robbed of life. Despite being quite aware of the income inequality, injustices, and general corruption that plague many America cities, this story was still enlightening. By focusing on the lives of two young boys instead of a housing complex or city as a whole, Kotlowitz illustrates how trauma, tribulations, and every day life for marginalized inner city children stacks up - very much like an unsteady house of cards. Also, while it may seem as if Kotlowitz is using the happenings at Henry Horner Homes as a pity-and-shame filled spectacle at first, the intent and purpose of the novel becomes more clear with the passing of each chapter. In other words, it is worth reading even though it is a bit of a struggle to begin with.

Above all, the novel is an important reminder that we must work towards providing each and every child with the resources and experiences necessary to have a fulfilling and content life.

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## **Amar Pai says**

For those wondering what happened to Pharoah and Lafayette, here's a quote from the author, taken from a 2011 *Chicago Tribune* article:

In 1991, the same year the book was published, Henry Horner residents embarked on a legal battle that led to a federal consent decree to have the site redeveloped. The towering high-rises were eventually demolished and replaced with town houses, condominiums and public housing apartments.

Public housing now in Chicago is "not perfect, but it's quite different from when we first started," Popkin said, citing the transformation at Horner, the CHA's commitment to resident services and the way that the agency is managed.

But many things remain the same. The poor are still extremely segregated, Kotlowitz said. Deadly violence still defines impoverished communities where rampant shootings are committed by a new generation of so-called cliques.

The characters of "There Are No Children Here" have met mixed fates. Several people the writer interviewed have been killed.

And Kotlowitz said readers of the book constantly send him emails, asking how Lafayette and Pharoah Walton are doing.

"I think they really genuinely feel that they've gotten to know these two boys and they care about them and only want the best for them," he said. "You can tell by the emails that they are kind of rooting for them."

The brothers, now 36 and 33, have dealt with their share of adversity. They have both served time in prison and continue to struggle with poverty.

Pharoah Walton, depicted as the inquisitive younger brother, was paroled last year on a drug-related conviction, Department of Corrections records show. Over the years, though, he's joined Kotlowitz for speaking engagements and in 1993 was in the author's wedding.

Lafayette Walton lives on the South Side and works inside a laundry. He was paroled this year after being convicted on separate drug, drunken-driving and handgun charges.

Depicted as the reserved older brother, Lafayette Walton said that he was conflicted about the success of the book during the 1990s.

While he got to travel the country and earned a bit of a celebrity status, the family was still poor. His mother had a nervous breakdown, forcing him to take on the role of caretaker for his younger siblings.

But Lafayette Walton credits the experiences with Kotlowitz with giving him a broader view of the world, better able to cope with the stresses of the streets.

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## **Sheena at Hot Eats and Cool Reads says**

This is one of my favorite books. It's so amazing that Alex Kotlowitz was able to experience these kids lives and be able to share it with the world. Most People are oblivious to the things that go on in Henry Horner or any other project in America and this book shows the every day struggle that "The Other America" goes through. At times I felt sick to my stomach while reading this book but it's the realness that affects you most of all. This book details building conditions (the way they were built to repairs never being made), violence and crime (the lack of police, also murders and gang activity), and families caught up in the middle trying to raise their kids the best they can with what they had.

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## **Cameron says**

A story of two young brothers growing up in an infamous project in Chicago known as Horner Homes. The book spans 4 years and deals mostly with describing how the boys are affected by poverty, violence, drugs, gangs and run-ins with the police. Won the Robert F. Kennedy Award for Journalism.

I'd been meaning to read this book for some time now. While visiting a friend, I saw it on her shelf and asked her how was it. She said, "It's good, but it's depressing. It's really depressing."

I'd say it was more depressing than good. It was fairly well written and I'd recommend it to anyone interested in the subject, especially folks who work with children regularly, but it didn't contain any surprising, enlightening information. It also, in my opinion, seemed to lack direction. Many of the chapters brought little development - you just sort of watch the kids suffer. Maybe that's what Kotlowitz was going for.

The chapter where Lafayette (the older brother) confronts his dope-fiend father seemed like the climax to me. I almost cheered.



The last chapter of the novel describes how the juvenile court system fails Lafayette, accusing him of a crime he did not commit. I commiserated quite strongly with this chapter. I also had a run-in with the law when I was his age and I recall, at 15, being amazed at how spectacularly ineffective and counter-productive the juvenile court system was. I was arraigned in a packed, public court room - juvenile proceedings are supposed to be private. I was given 2 years of probation and never went to a single probation meeting or received a single call from my P.O. I was given 400 hours of community service and didn't serve a minute of it. What I did get from my encounter with the courts was instant acceptance from all of the worst troublemakers in my high school. The dealers, users, vandals, thieves and bullies - they all immediately welcomed me with open arms into their clique. I was invited to parties, greeted warmly by people I used to fear and avoid. I had instant street cred and a new group of friends.

Though Kotlowitz never details it, the reader can see that Terence, the boys' eldest brother, encounters the same irony. The public court system that is supposed to rehabilitate him, instead banishes him to a prison where he can socialize and be educated by more criminals, leading him further into a life of gangs and violence. I feel like an armchair quarterback saying it's a screwed up system when I have no solution...but...it's a screwed up system.

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### **Jared says**

Interesting read, and I respect what Kotlowitz achieved in bringing the troubles of inner-city America to suburban audiences nationwide. However, the pace is glacial and the book not particularly well-written; in addition, I noticed an astounding number of typos and other errors in this text. Surprisingly sloppy for a 20 year old bestseller from a major publisher. I rarely if ever notice spelling errors in books, but could not help but be distracted by the frequent errors in this edition. And before you complain, I don't mean quoted text contains slang and misspellings, only the portions outside of quotation marks.

Glsl I read it, but that is about all the praise I can muster up here.

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### **Kathy says**

I grew up in Chicago - Northwest side, Logan Square - and always thought my family was kind of poor. We wore hand-me-downs. We didn't go on vacations. I knew better than to ask for anything because the answer was always "No, we can't afford it", whether I was asking for money for a school trip - or lunch at the Woolworth counter. But we had a decent apartment in a safe, lower middle class neighborhood, adequate schools, and plenty to eat.

The lifestyles and environment of people who lived in Public Housing such as the Henry Horner Homes in Chicago, on the other hand, were so far below my standard of living, as to make me ashamed for ever having used the word "poor" in regards to my childhood.

This book takes you into the Projects, where you can almost feel the frustration, fear, and hopelessness that the Rivers family and their neighbors lived with on a daily basis. It wasn't a "happy" read, but it was certainly an educational one. Everyone should read this book, especially those who are quick to judge and condemn. Walk a mile in your brother's shoes first – if only vicariously!

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## **Jessica says**

This book is a true story about two boys that grew up in the project. It talks about how their mom protected them from the dangers of their situation. All around the boys were drugs, gangs, and violence. Everyday there was a shooting right in front of their house. Also their house was full of cockroaches no matter how many times the supervisor of the building sprayed. Their house was never what they wanted but they made it work for them. They take their terrible situation and turn it into something good and look for the good in all the bad. Always thankful that at the end of the day they still have each other.

I personally really enjoyed this book. Honestly even if I did not have to read this for my paper I would have still read it. I loved how it brought alive all the things that could happen in a child's life and how they can overcome that. Reading through the struggles of that lifestyle showed how family is everything and that above anything or anybody else they come first. It really captures what is going on in this world and shows how there are children who go through horrendous things and still come out on top.

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## **Elizabeth Lockhart says**

This nonfiction account follows the lives of Lafayette and Pharoah Rivers, two brothers growing up in Chicago in the late 1980s. Lafayette and Pharoah live in the Henry Horner Homes—a public housing development—with their mother, LaJoe, and an assortment of other relatives who come and go at random. Though LaJoe does what she can to keep her children safe and off the streets, the boys are daily subjected to violence, murder, gang warfare, and the damaging effects that drugs can have on a community. Lafayette, who is in his early teens, is forced to grow up fast and take on adult responsibilities, largely due to the frequent absence of his father. In contrast, Pharoah, the younger of the two, is a dedicated student, but he clings to his childhood and tries to avoid conflict at all costs. As the brothers grow up, the challenges they face are numerous and, sometimes, overwhelming.

I didn't want this book to end. I became so attached to Lafayette and Pharoah that, after I finished reading, I jumped online to try and find out where they are today. *There Are No Children Here* disturbed me, challenged me, changed me, and—in the end—broke my heart. This book is a must-read for everyone. Seriously, just read it.

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## **Teri says**

At the time this book was written, I was nearly the same age as the main characters and living only 12 miles away in the near west suburb of Bellwood. We thought we were poor back then but this book has opened my eyes to bottomless abyss of poverty.

I'm now convinced that it is nearly impossible for people to rise out of their circumstances. We're not all born with equal opportunities. This book describes a culture where children can't learn because they're hungry/tired/distracted by violence, women become mothers in their early teens and grandmothers in their late twenties, and young people are told by every authority figure that they're future criminals. How can you escape when you have no one to help? No family to move you out or lend you money? No agency that can see the individual in the crowd or on the waiting list? And the vicious cycle continuing when your child's

lack of education lands them right back in the projects?

On the other hand, I also came away from the book with the realization that the people described should not be understood based on their circumstances. Despite their situation, the Rivers family could be any American family: genuine concern for each other, a desire to improve the lives of the next generation, good intentions with the occasional bad decision.

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