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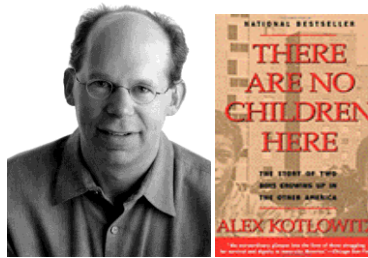
Chancellor's Reading Club 2010

There Are No Children Here: the Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America by Alex Kotlowitz

Chancellor's Reading Club Website <http://www.uncfsu.edu/readingclub/index.htm>

Chesnutt Library's Subject Guide <http://library.uncfsu.edu/reference/ThereAreNoChildrenHere.pdf>

Author's Visit to Fayetteville State University on September 16, 2010 at 2:00 p.m. in Seabrook Auditorium



AlexKotlowitz.Com: <http://alexkotlowitz.com/01.html>

“**Alex Kotlowitz** is perhaps best known for the bestselling *There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America*. The book, which was published in 1991 and has since sold over half-a-million copies, was the recipient of numerous awards, including the Helen B. Bernstein Award for Excellence in Journalism, the Carl Sandburg Award and a Christopher Award. The New York Public Library selected *There Are No Children Here* as one of the 150 most important books of the century. In the fall of 1993, it was adapted for television as an ABC Movie-of-the-Week starring Oprah Winfrey.”

Databases That Contain Book Reviews, Magazine and Journal Articles on the Book and Biographical Information on the Author

[Expanded Academic ASAP](#)

"From arts and the humanities to social sciences, science and technology, this database meets research needs across all academic disciplines. Access scholarly journals, news magazines, and newspapers - many with full text and images!

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Lyceum Agency Website <http://www.lyceumagency.com/alex+kotlowitz.aspx>

Brief Biographical Paragraph:

AlexKotlowitz.Com <http://alextkotlowitz.com/01.html>

Alex Kotlowitz. Contemporary Authors Online. Detroit: Gale, 2006. From *Literature Resource Center*.

Title: Alex Kotlowitz American Writer (1955 ? -)

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Document Type: Biography

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Updated:07/27/2006

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born c. 1955; son of a social worker and a novelist and public television executive.

Education: Attended Wesleyan University.

Addresses: Office: *Wall Street Journal*, Chicago Bureau, 1 S. Wacker Dr., 21st Fl., Chicago, IL 60606.

CAREER:

Worked on a cattle ranch in Oregon; producer of segments for the television series *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour*; reporter for Chicago Bureau of *Wall Street Journal*; free-lance writer.

AWARDS:

(With Kwame Holman and Susan Ades) George Polk Award for television reporting, Long Island University Journalism Department, 1984, for work on *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour*; Robert F. Kennedy Award for Coverage of the Disadvantaged, for articles which formed the basis of ***There Are No Children Here***; Helen Bernstein Award for Excellence in Journalism, New York Public Library, 1992, Carl Sandburg Award, New York Public Library list of 150 Most Important Books of the Century, and Christopher Award, all for ***There Are No Children Here***; George Foster Peabody Award; John LaFarge Memorial Award for Interracial Justice, New York Catholic Interracial Council; awarded three honorary degrees.

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

- ***There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing up in the Other America***, Doubleday, 1991.
- ***The Other Side of the River: A Story of Two Towns, a Death, and America's Dilemma***, Nan A. Talese (New York, NY), 1998.
- ***Never a City So Real: A Walk in Chicago***, Crown Journeys (New York, NY), 2004.

Sidelights

In ***There Are No Children Here*** Alex Kotlowitz presents a stark look at the lives of young people in urban America. His story focuses on two boys--Pharoah and Lafayette Rivers--who **are** growing up in the Henry Horner Homes, a public housing project located in a troubled area of Chicago, Illinois. The author uses data to show how the urban area has been both neglected by Chicago politicians and ignored by the media. Instead of focusing on these statistics, however, Kotlowitz provides a more intimate look at life in the Henry Horner Homes through interviews with numerous people connected with the project and by allowing the brothers to relate their own experiences of growing up in poverty. Regarding Kotlowitz's achievement, Lisbeth B. Schorr of *New Leader* stated, "**No** other book, **no** movie, **no** TV show so powerfully portrays the **children** and families who **are** outside the American dream."

Kotlowitz first met seven-year-old Pharoah and ten-year-old Lafayette Rivers in 1985 while working on a photo essay about poor **children** for *Chicago* magazine. In speaking about his first interview with the older brother, Kotlowitz stated in an article by *Insight* contributor Mark Lawrence Ragan: "I remember being horrified by his

tales. But what affected me the most was how little affect **there** was about him. He was so matter-of-fact about it. His was a face that, to look at it, you think, **here's** a kid who's just numb to it all. But, in fact, he's not numb to it. That's the sad thing. He takes it so deeply." Two years after his first encounter with the brothers, the author went back to the Henry Horner Homes where he conducted research for a separate series of articles about poverty-stricken **children**. According to Ragan, when Kotlowitz spoke of his intention to expand the series into a book focusing on the **children**, LaJoe Rivers, the mother of the boys, said, "But you know, **there are no children here**. They've seen too much to be **children**." LaJoe eventually volunteered to help Kotlowitz in his effort to write about life in the project. Kotlowitz stated, in an article by *New York Times Book Review* contributor Laura Washington, that LaJoe's "hope--and mine--was that a book about **children** would make us all hear, that it would make us stop and listen."

As Kotlowitz spent time in the project, he became increasingly aware of the adversity that Pharoah and Lafayette face in their daily lives. In the book he tells of how they reside with their parents and their six brothers and sisters in an apartment that is frequented by substance abusers. The boys' father, after losing his job, pawns a television set that belongs to one of his **children** in order to support a drug habit. The family's eldest daughter earns occasional money through prostitution and has given birth to three **children**--one of whom became addicted to drugs while in the womb. The boys' older brothers have dropped out of school, spent time in jail, and fathered **children**.

LaJoe Rivers supports her family primarily with the welfare check that she receives from the government, spending some of the money on burial insurance for her **children**. As a girl, she lived in the Henry Horner Homes, belonged to the Girl Scouts, and attended roller skating parties in the basement of one of the buildings. Over time, the public housing project--with its attractive baseball diamond and new playground--fell victim to neglect. As noted in *There Are No Children Here*, "The neighborhood had become a black hole.... **There** were **no** banks, only currency exchanges, which charged customers up to \$8.00 for every welfare check cashed. **There** were **no** public libraries, movie theaters, skating rinks, or bowling alleys." The two neighborhood health clinics closed in 1989. As evidence of the disregard for housing maintenance, Kotlowitz relates an incident during which LaJoe noticed a pungent odor in the apartment and alerted the building manager. When the supervisor went into the basement, he discovered decaying carcasses as well as human and animal waste. Although LaJoe and her husband once told their **children** that they would move out of the project, they have not been able to keep that promise due in part to their desperate financial situation. At the book's opening, Pharoah and Lafayette **are** playing near train tracks, trying to catch garter snakes with their friends. As a train approaches the field, the brothers run for cover. They have been told that if they **are** seen trespassing near the tracks they will be shot by people on the trains. Kotlowitz acknowledges that many of the passengers--most of whom **are** white commuters from the suburbs--likewise fear being shot and regularly back away from the windows of the train as they travel through the West Side of Chicago. On the basis of such scenes, Julia Flynn Siler of *Business Week* acknowledged, "Perhaps the book can help narrow the compassion gap between mainstream Americans and the inner-city poor."

Throughout *There Are No Children Here* Kotlowitz emphasizes how the fear of dying before reaching maturity is shared by many of the young people in the project. "We're gonna die one way or the other by killing or plain out. I just wanna die plain out," a friend tells Lafayette at a funeral for a teenager who was murdered by gang members. Kotlowitz also presents the tragic story of Craig Davis, a young man who was shot after he was seen running from the scene of a burglary. Kotlowitz shows how it was unlikely that Davis was involved in the crime, conjecturing that he was probably running to avoid a possible confrontation with the police. Before his death Davis regularly entertained Henry Horner residents by providing his services as a disc jockey on summer afternoons. Kotlowitz reports on how the shooting affected the brothers, contributing to Pharoah's stuttering problem and causing Lafayette to adopt a changed attitude toward outsiders. Kotlowitz writes: "He soon affected a long, jerky gait in which his upper body leaned forward as if it had been realigned; his eyes locked

with the ground as if to block out others around him. He **no** longer looked thirteen; his bobbing, cocky walk made him look older."

Much of the violence that occurs in Henry Horner Homes is associated with area gangs that **are** involved in the drug trade. Kotlowitz writes about how Lafayette and a friend named James worry about someday becoming involved in gang activity. "When you first join you think it's good," Lafayette says, "They'll buy you what you want. You have to do anything they tell you to do. If they tell you to kill somebody, you have to do that." James's solution to avoiding recruitment into the gangs is "to try to make as little friends as possible." The residents of the Henry Horner Homes often remain silent about gang activity when dealing with housing authorities and law enforcement due in part to the threat of violence.

Initially, Kotlowitz was not convinced by the stories he heard of the violence that occurred in the project or of the other atrocities that the neighborhood residents faced. Lafayette, after talking about a shooting that he had witnessed, proved his story by taking the author to a dark stairwell where blood stains still remained. Kotlowitz later had direct exposure to the violence when he had to jump under a table at a local restaurant to avoid being shot by gang members who were firing at a teenager. The author also refused to believe that kids from the Henry Horner Homes were not allowed to attend basketball games played in Chicago Stadium--a block away from the project. He took Pharoah down to the gymnasium where an usher turned them away, stating that neighborhood **children** weren't allowed entry. In *Insight* Kotlowitz regarded the incident as "the most insulting experience I've ever had." He later took Pharoah into the arena through a less-guarded entrance.

As the author worked on the book, he developed a close relationship with the two brothers. During Kotlowitz's visits to the Henry Horner Homes, younger brother Pharoah tried to downplay neighborhood violence for fear that the journalist would stop coming to the project. On one occasion the young people of the neighborhood surprised him with a thirty-fifth birthday celebration. With the money that he has received for telling the story of the Rivers family, Kotlowitz has helped fund private education for them, bought them clothes, and taken them on trips away from the confines of the inner city. During a fishing trip in Michigan, Kotlowitz remembers Pharoah spending a half hour enjoying his first shower. On the night before they went back to Chicago, both boys had terrible dreams in anticipation of returning to the violence of the Henry Horner Homes. Some reviewers noted that Kotlowitz's close relationship with the family might have compromised his journalistic integrity, but few faulted him for taking an active interest in their lives. According to Siler of *Business Week*, "At least, unlike most of the world outside the projects, he hasn't abandoned the boys."

Throughout the book Kotlowitz describes the brothers' struggle to maintain relatively normal lives in such an adverse environment. He writes about Pharoah's joy in seeing a rainbow and the brothers' love for playing basketball and marbles. He acknowledges their successes--Lafayette's graduation from eighth grade, Pharoah's attempts to overcome his stuttering problem and win the school spelling bee, and the brothers' ardent effort to avoid being pulled into the gangs. Admiring Kotlowitz's ability to avoid stereotyping the young residents of the project, a *Chicago Tribune Books* reviewer noted, "We come to know them not as pathological cardboard types to be feared and shunned but as young people with the same hurts and hopes, dreams and wants as other young people."

Many reviewers complimented Kotlowitz for helping the reading public come to a fuller understanding of the problems associated with life in the projects. Samuel G. Freedman of the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* regarded ***There Are No Children Here*** as "a triumph of empathy as well as a significant feat of reporting," and Karl Zinsmeister of the *Times Literary Supplement* noted that "in its outlines, the story will be depressingly familiar to observers of the modern urban scene; but only rarely do we get a picture of 'underclass' life as vivid and affecting as this. **There** is genuine humanity as well as highly skillful journalism to be found in the book."

Praise for the book has come from outside literary circles as well: *Insight* contributor Ragan noted that talk show personality Oprah Winfrey bought the rights to make a movie based on the book and that government Housing Secretary Jack Kemp described ***There Are No Children Here*** as "a call to arms." When Kemp visited the Henry Horner Homes in June of 1991, LaJoe Rivers expressed her gratitude for the opportunity provided by Kotlowitz to speak to people who **are** unfamiliar with life in the project. "Finally," she stated, as reported in *Insight*, "I've been heard."

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

- Kotlowitz, Alex, ***There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America***, Doubleday, 1991.

PERIODICALS

- *Business Week*, April 22, 1991, p. 14.
- *Insight*, July 1, 1991, pp. 40-42.
- *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, March 3, 1991, p. 1.
- *New Leader*, May 20, 1991, pp. 27-28.



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