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There Are No Children Here

The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America

by

Alex Kotlowitz

1991



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Diane Clapsaddle

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The story is set in Henry Horner Homes (a low-income public housing project), ("the projects") and the surrounding neighborhoods in the inner city of Chicago, Illinois. The time frame of the novel is.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Lafayette Rivers - He is one of two brothers who live in the projects of Chicago and who are the subject of Alex Kotlowitz's exposé of life for the children of the run-down inner city. Lafayette is the one who is most affected by the dying of his dreams and the loss of his friends to violence.

Pharoah Rivers - He is the other brother and the one who is most outwardly sensitive to life in the inner city. He worries whether he will grow up, is easily reduced to tears, and hides behind his youth to avoid worrisome situations. He is also the more intelligent of the two brothers and will no doubt be more successful in escaping the life he despises in the projects.

LaJoe Rivers - The boys' mother, LaJoe is a deeply emotional person who hates the life her children must endure. She worries constantly about them and is their rock. She, too, however, feels the stress of life where she frequently hears gunfire and even has bullet holes in her apartment walls. She always finds a way to.....

Many additional major and minor characters are identified and discussed in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Protagonist - The protagonist of a story is the main character who traditionally undergoes some sort of change. The protagonists of this book are Lafayette and Pharoah. Together they face many obstacles that young black boys endure living in the inner city of Chicago. They have different ways of coping, but

Antagonist - The antagonist of a story is traditionally the force that provides an obstacle for the protagonist. The antagonist does not always have to be a single character or even a physical character at all. The antagonists in this book are many: the social system that creates impoverishment for minorities; the.....

Climax - The climax of a plot is the major turning point that allows the protagonist to resolve the conflict. The climax of this story occurs when Lafayette is arrested for vandalizing a car, a crime he.....

Outcome - Lafayette is sentenced to a year's probation and 100 hours of community service. The author gets both boys into a private school even though Lafayette is unable to meet the challenge and returns to public school. Pharoah thrives in the school's atmosphere, getting good grades and learning to overcome his tendency to daydream and forget his responsibilities. Rickey begins running drugs for one.....

SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

Lafayette and Pharoah are two brothers growing up in the horrors of inner city Chicago in a low-income public housing project in 1987. The author asks their mother for permission to follow their lives for two years as a way of exposing life in "the other America." He follows and catalogs their disappointments, joys, and tragedies.....

THEMES

Parts of America are War Zones - The first important theme is: parts of America are warzones. Inner city Chicago as examined in this book is a place where children live in sub-standard housing, often with only one parent (usually their mother), and who face gang violence everyday. They frequently have little to eat, do poorly

in school, have a miniscule support system, and are let down by their own government. Their futures are bleak and the rest of America would rather hide its head in the sand and pretend these children are doing fine.

The Ravages of Poverty - The second important theme involves the ravages of poverty. The Rivers family is in a "Catch-22:" they will never escape the projects without a good.....

Additional themes are identified and discussed in the complete study guide.

MOOD

The mood is almost entirely dark and gloomy because of the daily existence the two boys face. However, there are moments of hope such as Pharoah's second place in the spelling bee, Dawn's graduation from.....

BIOGRAPHY OF ALEX KOTLOWITZ

Alex Kotlowitz was born and raised in New York City. He is the son of an author with four novels to his credit (Robert Kotlowitz) and a social worker mother. His mother Billie, who died in 1994, ran the Thematic Studies Program at John Jay College. His brother, Dan, is a professor of Theatrical Lighting Design at Dartmouth. Alex attended and graduated from Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut.

Prior to working for the Chicago bureau of the *Wall Street Journal* beginning in 1984, he worked on an Oregon cattle ranch for a year and then contributed to a local alternative newspaper "The Lansing Star", in Lansing, Michigan for a year. For the next five years he freelanced, writing articles and contributed to *The MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour* on PBS television, the *New York Times*, and *National Public Radio*. His focus.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES AND ANALYSIS

ENTRE

Summary

The book is preceded by two poems: Langston Hughes' "A Dream Deferred" and one about children by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. In both, the reader is made to think about a world where one's dream is destroyed and where children are lost. What are the consequences, Hughes seems to ask, if we continually destroy the dreams of the children who are born in the worst conditions our country has to offer? What kind of explosion are we allowing to build up? Longfellow says that if children disappear, are made to grow up long before their time, we can expect that we'll see a desert behind us and darkness in front of us. In both cases, the poets are attempting to awaken the reader's sense of outrage that children are made to suffer needlessly, also the goal of the author of the book.

PREFACE

Summary

In the Preface, the author explains how he met Lafayette and Pharoah when he was asked to write the text for a photo essay a friend was doing on the children in poverty in Chicago. The friend had met them at the local social services agency, and Mr. Kotlowitz went to their home to interview them. He had a number of children to interview, but he was unnerved at the time at the relentless violence that Lafayette described. The boy was only ten years old and already spoke in terms of "if he grew up" rather than "when he grew up." He wasn't sure he would make it to adulthood. Kotlowitz also explains that the title of his book came from LaJoe, the mother of the boys, who when asked if he could write about her children, told Kotlowitz, "But you know, there are no children here. They've seen too much to be children." Kotlowitz goes on to explain that one in every three children in Chicago lives in poverty, a higher number than the national average, and by the time they have entered adolescence they have experienced more terror than most people confront in a lifetime. LaJoe comes to accept the idea of a book, because she feels it's important to tell their stories. She had once said that she occasionally wished she were deaf, because there was so much noise from guns, screaming, and shrieking that

she thought it would drive her insane. The book therefore becomes a way to make us all hear, make us all stop and listen. So it turns out to be a narrative which follows the boys for two years as they face many obstacles in their search for some inner peace. It doesn't have a neat and tidy ending, but it is a beginning, the dawning of two lives, and the story of two brothers and two friends.

Notes

The Preface, although important for explaining how the book came to be, is more important for setting the stage. As we begin to delve into Lafayette and Pharoah's stories, we already know that it won't be something we particularly want to hear. However, it is something we need to listen to, think about, and hopefully, become galvanized to help change.

SUMMER 1987

CHAPTER ONE

Summary

In this chapter, Pharoah is nine years old and Lafayette is almost twelve. They are making their first visit to this particular set of railroad tracks on a warm Saturday afternoon in early June. There are five tracks in all, leading from the western suburbs of Chicago. From this high point in the city, Pharoah can see the downtown skyline, his own home, a red brick, seven-story building, his elementary school, and the towering spire of the First Congregational Church. He is also distracted from the view by the small amount of nature present here – a butterfly and wildflowers that grow along the rails. Also with the boys are Porkchop, their younger cousin and Pharoah's best friend, and James Howard, Lafayette's close friend. They are each carrying a crowbar or other tool for digging, because they are looking for snakes. An older friend named William had nabbed one the summer before and allowed the boys to touch it and hold it. Of course, that memory is tempered by the realization that William is another statistic of the projects. He died when a friend accidentally shot him with a gun he believed was unloaded. They also try searching in a ten-foot-high stack of worn automobile tires and an empty boxcar. The boxcar quickly becomes refuge from a commuter train heading their way. The children had heard that the suburb-bound commuters would shoot at them for trespassing on the tracks. Pharoah finds himself crouching in the weeds nearby as the train whisks by him. He becomes lost in his thoughts and doesn't want to leave this place with its smell of flowers and a diving sparrow in the sky. They are not ready to stop for the day, but the sun is going down and the place is dangerous at night. They slide down and begin the long trek for home.

Notes

This chapter best presents the kind of impressionable child that Pharoah is. He loves the smell of the wildflowers, the flight of the butterfly, and the diving momentum of the sparrow. In later months, he will recall this place as one of tranquility and he will come to savor this sanctuary when he most needs to escape reality.

Another important aspect of this chapter is the contrast of the gentle sanctuary to the memory of William's violent death. This is the rule rather than the exception in these boys' lives.

CHAPTER TWO

Summary

The Henry Horner Homes are known to the children as the "Hornets" or "the projects" or simply the "jects" (pronounced *jets*). However, to Pharoah they are known as "the graveyard." Nothing here is as it should be. There is no enclosed lobby to the building. There is a dark tunnel cutting through the middle. All the first floor mailboxes have been broken into, and there is so little outside lighting that the residents carry flashlights. Even the summer itself turns duplicitous: during Lafayette's twelfth birthday, gunfire breaks out. As the eldest, he makes the children hold their heads down until the shooting subsides, and then they crawl back to their homes. In the process, Lafayette loses all but fifty cents of the eight dollars he had received for his birthday to buy radio headphones.

The one constant in the children's lives is their mother, LaJoe. She is known for her warmth and generosity, but the neighborhood, which hungrily devours its children, has taken its toll on her as well. So many of the women of the projects must be like LaJoe: grandmothers by their mid-thirties, and great-grandmothers by their mid-forties. They nurture and care for their boyfriends, former boyfriends, sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons. LaJoe had once been so pretty as to try modeling for a while, and she is still attractive enough to receive whistles on the street. However, the confidence of her youth has left her. She has watched the neighborhood slowly decay when businesses moved to the suburbs and the city lost a third of its manufacturing jobs. To her, it has become a "black hole." She can more easily recite what isn't there than what is. There are no banks, no public libraries, no movie theaters, no skating rinks, no bowling alleys. There are only two clinics and both will close by 1989. The infant mortality rate exceeds that of Chile, Costa Rica, Cuba, and Turkey. There is also no rehabilitation center even though drug use is rampant.

Furthermore, LaJoe feels that her family has mostly let her down. Her three oldest have disappointed her, as all three have been in jail at least once and all have been involved with drugs. The oldest, LaShawn, has worked as a prostitute from time to time. The next child, Paul, named after his father, has served time in an Indiana prison. The third one, Terence, is the greatest disappointment of all, because she is closest to him. He's only seventeen, but had begun selling drugs at the age of eleven and had been in and out of trouble ever since.

She also has a set of four-year-old triplets, Timothy, Tiffanie, and Tammie. All eight of her children have the same father to whom LaJoe has been married for seventeen years. Unfortunately, they have fallen out of love, and he lives at home only sporadically. In his absence, she turns to Lafayette as her confidant. She relies on him as much as the younger children do. He had been a carefree child, a bit of a ham, and he loved to draw, but over the past year, he has begun to change. He had been caught shoplifting and has been placed in the Chicago Commons' Better Days for Youth program. He's also become bossy around the younger children, because he worries so much about them.

Pharoah is different from all the children. His only friend is Porkchop, and he clutches on to his childhood with the vigor of a tiger gripping its meat. Frequently, he becomes so lost in his daydreams that LaJoe has to shake him back to reality. However, these flights of fancy seem to help him fend off the ugliness around him. He giggles at the slightest jokes and cries at the smallest of tragedies. He has developed a slight stutter, but he delights in the attention of his elders who adore him. He is also the delight of Lafayette who treats him like a friend as well as a brother.

LaJoe is aware that she is not alone in raising children who grow old quickly, but she is determined that the hopelessness and despair that others have given in to will not affect Lafayette and Pharoah. However, she is also a realist, and that summer she begins paying \$80 a month for burial insurance for her youngest five children.

Lafayette has always promised his mother that he won't allow anything to happen to Pharoah, but for one brief moment he loses him. Three days after his birthday, gunfire breaks out again. Lafayette and his mother hustle the triplets onto the floor of the hallway in the apartment building, a drill they have practiced many times. Two rival drug gangs are firing at each other from one high-rise to another. Lafayette loses track of Pharoah who he finally sees taking cover behind trees and fences. LaJoe won't allow him to go after Pharoah. Meanwhile, James, Lafayette's friend, meets up with Pharoah, and they sprint for the apartment door. They scream to be allowed in, but no one hears them over the gunfire, and they have to run to a friend's apartment upstairs. The police have taken cover as well, thinking they are the targets. Passersby lie motionless on the ground. Then, as suddenly as it begins, the gunfire stops, and amazingly, no one is hurt. The police tell a reporter who calls about the gun battle that there is no record of a shoot-out. However, Lafayette knows and so does Pharoah.

Notes

This chapter emphasizes two major ideas: how poverty and gang warfare affect the residents of Henry Horner

and how disappointing LaJoe's children have been to her. The neighborhood around Henry Horner is a war zone, and as a result, business and community resources have been lost. The children grow up in an atmosphere that is no better than children in the Middle East or in Kosovo is. Yet, this is America! The atmosphere and lack of hope in this environment have contributed to the failures of LaJoe's children. She mourns for what might have been.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Lafayette Rivers - Lafayette is the ultimate example of the dream deferred. He is one of two brothers who live in the projects of Chicago and who is the subject of Alex Kotlowitz's exposé of life for the children of the inner city. Lafayette is the one who is most affected by the dying of his dreams and the loss of his friends. He faces in the beginning of his adolescence more tragedy than most adults face in a lifetime. He sees.....

Pharoah Rivers - He is the other brother and the one who is most sensitive to life in the inner city. He worries about whether he will grow up, is easily reduced to tears, and hides behind his youth to avoid worrisome situations. He is also the more intelligent of the two brothers and will no doubt be more successful in escaping the life he despises in the projects. He is a delightful little kid, with buckteeth and

LaJoe Rivers - The boys' mother, LaJoe is a deeply emotional person who hates the life her children must endure. She worries constantly about them and is their rock. She, too, however, feels the stress of life where she frequently hears gunfire and even has bullet holes in her apartment walls. She always finds a way to bring a little cheer into their lives even as she prepares them for the possibility of a future as.....

Additional major characters are analyzed in the complete study guide.

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The plot is divided into sections beginning with a Preface explaining the author's purpose in writing the book, followed by sections named with seasons and years. It begins with Summer of 1987 and ends with September 29, 1989. Each section is then divided into 31 separate chapters. There is also an.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

Parts of America are War Zones - The theme of parts of America are war zones is so important to the purpose of Kotlowitz's story. Just as if a reporter had gone to Beirut or Gaza City or Kosovo or Darfur, he would find the same kind of children that he could find in the projects of Chicago, Illinois, USA. These children have lived through so much violence that they can be easily labeled with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. And this is America! Kotlowitz examines how the violence, the poverty, and the hopelessness of the inner city affects two little boys, who growing up under other circumstances, would be real success stories. Children should not have to grow up like Pharoah and Lafayette. They shouldn't have to depend on the.....

The Ravages of Poverty - The theme of the ravages of poverty runs throughout the narrative. Those who are its victims are trapped in a vicious cycle from which they cannot seem to escape. Most of the people in the projects have dropped out of school and have few skills that would make them desirable employees. As a.....

Additional themes are analyzed in the complete study guide.

AUTHOR'S STYLE

Alex Kotlowitz is a reporter, and as such, he creates a narrative that is much like reading a newspaper. His prose is sparse and to the point without much philosophizing. He leaves most conclusions about what

RIISING ACTION

The rising action begins with the boys' trip to the railroad tracks, which leaves a lasting impression on Pharoah and ends with Lafeyette's arrest for vandalizing a car.

FALLING ACTION

The falling action can be found in the Epilogue where the author tells the fates of all the important

POINT OF VIEW

The point of view is third person omniscient. The author has total control of the narrative and tells it, with the exception of the Preface and the Epilogue, as if he is god-like. In the Preface and

OTHER ELEMENTS

FORESHADOWING

There are several other literary devices that pop up at various times in the story. One is foreshadowing which frequently presents clues of something that will happen later in the novel. Some examples of foreshadowing include:

1. LaJoe's assertion that you can smell the coming of death in the fetid pools of water, the garbage, or rotting cat carcasses foreshadows Bird Leg's murder.....

IRONY

One of the most important elements to note is **irony** – when something happens, or is seen, or is heard that we may know, but the characters do not, or that appears opposite of what is expected. Some examples of irony include:

1. It is ironic that Henry Horner Homes sit so close to downtown Chicago that all the important white people and tourists could watch from the Sears Tower as Lafeyette ducks gunfire on his birthday.
2. Lafeyette cautions Pharoah about Rickey who could get him in trouble, but in the end, Lafeyette begins to hang out with Rickey himself.....

IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS - QUOTES AND ANALYSIS

The following quotations are important at various points in the story (Anchor Books Edition, 1991):

1. ***“If I grow up, I'd like to be a bus driver.”*** (pg. x; Lafeyette made this statement when he was ten, indicating that to children in the projects, life is very tenuous.)
2. ***“But you know, there are no children here. They've seen too much to be children.”*** (pg. x; LaJoe makes this statement when the author proposes a book about her children.).....

SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / IMAGERY / SYMBOLS

Other elements that are present in this novel are **symbols and metaphors**. Symbols are the use of some unrelated idea to represent something else. Metaphors are direct comparisons made between characters and ideas. There are many symbols and metaphors used by the author such as:

1. The neighborhood around the Horner Homes is described as a metaphor of a beast devouring its children.
2. LaJoe thinks of the neighborhood as a black hole.....

IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

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

Author: Alex Kotlowitz

Date Published: 1991

For the complete study guide: <http://monkeynote.stores.yahoo.net/>

Meaning of the Title: It refers to the comment LaJoe, the mother, makes when Kotlowitz asked her permission to write a book about her children and how they are growing up in the projects. She says there are no children here, because they have seen and experienced too much to be children anymore.

Setting: Henry Horner Homes and its surrounding neighborhoods, Chicago, Illinois, from the summer of 1987 through September 29, 1989

Protagonist: Lafayette and Pharoah Rivers.....

STUDY QUESTIONS - MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ

1. The railroad tracks are for Pharoah
 - a. only a place to catch snakes .
 - b. a place that represents respite from his life.
 - c. a place to see all of the city of Chicago.
2. The children call their home
 - a. Horners.
 - b. jects.
 - c. hell-hole.....

ANSWER KEY

1.) b 2.) b 3.) c 4.) a 5.) a 6.) b 7.) a 8.) c 9.) b 10) c 11.) b 12.) a 13.) a 14.) c 15.) b

ESSAY TOPICS - BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. Pharaoh is determined to hold onto his childhood at any cost. What metaphor is used to describe this determination? Using several examples, show how he hides behind this idea.
2. Lafayette tells his mother at one point that he is “just tired.” Explain what he means and how he came to feel this way.....

END OF SAMPLE EXCERPTS

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