Book Review


Most of us read Alex Kotlowitz's There Are No Children Here and Jonathan Kozol's Amazing Grace and wondered how the world's richest country could let some of its children grow up in abysmal physical, social, and economic conditions. We read about children growing up in conditions so inhumane, it was unimaginable that they could survive and, in many cases, they didn't. We wondered if these books would provide a wake up call to the country for action on behalf of its children and, most of all, we wondered what the children felt. As LeAlan and Newman so eloquently report, the conditions have not changed—in fact, they have worsened—and this book lets us peek into the minds of the children because the authors are two young children growing up in Chicago's infamous public housing. They are the products of Ida B. Wells, Chicago's oldest African American public housing development.

This book had its genesis as two radio programs produced by David Isay for a series called Chicago Matters and broadcast by WBEZ in Chicago. Isay located two children from the Wells and gave them tape recorders. For seven days, the boys recorded what they saw and felt, and interviewed people from the housing projects, teachers, and their family members. Isay edited and presented their work as Ghetto Life 101 in May, 1993, on WBEZ in Chicago, and in June, 1993, on NPR's All Things Considered, to much public acclaim. LeAlan and Newman were 13 years old when they collaborated on this project. They spent about a year recording their second documentary, Remorse: The 14 Stories of Eric Morse, which was again broadcast by NPR in March 1996. By the time the second piece was broadcast, the boys were 16 years old. This book is based on more than a 100 hours of audiotapes they had produced for the two documentaries. In addition, the boys undertook some new interviews and revisited some of the people they had interviewed earlier. The result is a book that in turns wrenches at your heart, makes you smile, and leads you to admire the young authors'
brutal honesty and eloquence; at the same time it makes you angry, as well as sad, at what we are doing to our children and their families.

Part 1 of the book is about life in and around the Ida B. Wells public housing. The neighborhood is different things to different people. LeAlan, for example, noted that, “Our neighborhood is a fun neighborhood if you know what you are doing. If you act like a little kid in this neighborhood, you’re not gonna last too long. ‘Cause if you play childish games in the ghetto, you’re gonna find a childish bullet in your childish brain” (p. 33). LeAlan’s middle school principal noted that some teachers at her school have difficulty in seeing the skills that children from housing developments bring to the classroom. These teachers are only looking for how well the children do on their regular curriculum while forgetting that everything a child does can be used to educate her. The school principal quite rightly believes in holistic education—educating children in the context of their lives rather than adhering strictly to the mainstream curriculum that has little meaning for these children. LeAlan’s sister emphasizes that life for these children is not the same as for those in the mainstream; these children have seen and lived through things that most adults will never have to face. For example, she is sixteen and a single mother, and over 30 of her friends have been killed in the neighborhood. This is the neighborhood that ambulance drivers refuse to go to. Newman’s mother died in the neighborhood because no one could get an ambulance to take her to a hospital during a medical emergency. This part chronicles in some detail what it is like to live in this neighborhood.

In October, 1994, 5-year-old Eric Morse was thrown out of a 14-story window by two youngsters (10- and 11-year-olds) because the boy refused to steal candy for them from a local supermarket. Eric had been dropped twice. The first time, Eric’s 8-year-old brother, Derrick, held on to him, thus saving his life. The second time it happened, Derrick held on to him again but the two youngsters bit his hand and he had to let his brother fall to his death. The story made headlines throughout the US and everyone promised to do something about public housing in Chicago. Nothing was done. In fact, crisis counselors did not even make it to Eric Morse’s school till the end of the second week after Eric was killed, and then stayed for only 45 minutes to counsel the children about Eric’s death. Part 2 of this book includes LeAlan and Newman’s interviews with various people about Eric Morse’s death and its aftermath, with LeAlan providing commentary. It is one of the most moving set of interviews that I have ever read about violence perpetrated against children by children. But this violence occurs because of what we have done to the families of these children, by building high rise apartments for people in poverty who do not have jobs, money, or much education. These are families who are preyed upon by rapists,