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Literature Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



There Are No Children Here

by Alex Kotlowitz

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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ISBN: 978-1-93546-733-5

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Item No: 308167

Note to Teacher

This is the story of two boys who grew up in the public housing projects in Chicago in the 1980s.

The book is written by Alex Kotlowitz, who first encountered life in Chicago's projects as an investigative reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*. The book is based on his interviews and visits with members of the Rivers family and others living in the projects, as well as his interviews and research involving Chicago politics, the police department, and the Chicago Housing Authority. He also investigated the juvenile justice system in Chicago, the adult corrections system in Illinois, and the public welfare system, which depends on federal financing and state administration.

The story is woven around the culture of gang control of public housing, the local drug business, the prevalence of guns, and the pervasiveness of violence and death. The death of children in gunfights is described, as are funerals for some children. Some torture is also described. Various family configurations also are part of the story.

The dehumanizing side of poverty, the demeaning lack of repair in public housing, and the effects of dependency on long-term public assistance are dealt with in this nonfiction account.

Because of the need for accuracy of quotes, strong language is included.

All references come from the Anchor Books edition of *There Are No Children Here*, Random House, Inc., copyright 1991, by Alex Kotlowitz.

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to

1. describe the social realities of living in public housing in a dangerous neighborhood.
2. trace the effects of living in the projects of the developing characters of Lafayette and Pharoah.
3. discuss racial consciousness and how Lafayette and Pharoah each came to an understanding of what being black means in their lives.
4. discuss institutionalized segregation, and cite examples to show how this practice discriminated against black children in both education and economic opportunity.
5. describe the role of gangs on people living in public housing.
6. assess LaJoe Rivers as a mother.
7. suggest specific measures to reduce racial tensions in public housing.
8. evaluate the positive and negative aspects of public assistance (welfare), including cash subsidies and public housing.
9. discuss welfare fraud in the context of the extended Rivers family and in relation to the lack of job opportunities.
10. discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the public defender system.
11. assess whether police brutality exists in the Henry Horner residences, and discuss incidents to support this assessment.
12. trace significant incidents in the maturation of Lafayette Rivers.
13. describe the work and techniques of an investigative reporter.
14. discuss the world of Dawn and Demetrius, including her educational dreams and his role in her success, the size of their family, the impact of children on her education and his job prospects, and the ethics of their illegal use of a vacant apartment in Horner.
15. evaluate whether your own feelings about social issues have changed as a result of reading this book; these issues should include segregation, public housing, the welfare system, the juvenile justice system, and education in a major city.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Contrast the trials of Lawrence Jackson and Bobbie Driskel, accused of murdering the family of Urica Winder, and that of Jimmie Lee, reputed boss of the Conservative Vice Lords. Detail the charges, the witnesses, what the verdicts were intended to convey, and how the community reacted to the verdicts.
2. If you were the mayor of Chicago, how would you reduce racial tensions at the Henry Horner residences?
3. Analyze LaJoe Rivers as a person, including your evaluation of her as a mother and as a household manager.
4. Discuss the role and influence—both positive and negative—of Paul Rivers in the lives of Lafayette and Pharoah.
5. Select one person who appears in this book and discuss how he or she was a positive influence on Lafayette Rivers.
6. Discuss the implications of the statement, “Churches had lost their authority in areas like Horner.”
7. Evaluate the actions of Francis Higgins and Richard Marianos, the police officer and federal ATF agent involved in the death of Craig Davis.
8. Select three specific incidents, and discuss their importance in the development of Lafayette’s character.
9. Write a book review of *There Are No Children Here*, including whether it is convincing, its effect on the reader, and its strongest points.
10. Discuss the presence and role of the police at Horner, explaining how police brutality and racial prejudice are part of the police relationship with residents.
11. Describe the juvenile court system and how Lafayette’s hearing and sentencing affect him.
12. Discuss the research involved in writing *There Are No Children Here*, and analyze the author’s techniques for presenting information, including whether he is trying to present a particular point of view.

There Are No Children Here

Introductory Poems and Preface

1. What is the topic of the Langston Hughes poem?

2. What is the tone of this poem?

3. What is suggested by the Longfellow excerpt?

4. How does the author meet the boys Lafayette and Pharoah? How do they tie into the theme of the book, which is part of the subtitle, *The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America*?

Summer 1987

One

VOCABULARY

anemones – wildflowers known for their clear colors

sobriquet – a nickname

Underground Railway – a set of secret stops along a route that escaping slaves traveled to freedom

viaduct – a raised bridge designed to carry vehicles over an obstacle

1. What mission takes the boys up onto the railroad viaduct?

2. Why do they want a snake as a pet?

3. What happened to William?

Six

VOCABULARY

Molotov cocktail – an explosive made from a bottle and gasoline, then lit and thrown
respite – relief
stoic – unwilling to express emotions
verbalize – to put in words; talk about

1. As the summer of 1987 ends, what does Pharoah keep asking Lafayette to do?

2. Why does Lafayette continue to avoid the railroad tracks?

3. Pharoah has a physical symptom of stress that becomes a motif in this book. What is this symptom? Has it improved over the summer?
