

**Book Title: There Are No Children Here**

**Author: Alex Kotlowitz**

**Publisher: Anchor Books**

**Year: 1991**

**Type: Nonfiction**

**Book Review by Mindy Crisp**

**Graduate Student**

**University of St. Thomas**

[mindycrisp@yahoo.com](mailto:mindycrisp@yahoo.com)

This story about two young boys names Pharaoh and Lafayette takes place in the streets of Southside Chicago. Like the other children who lived there, Lafayette and Pharaoh had it rough. These two brothers had three older siblings and three young siblings (triplets). The three older siblings were very much a disappointment to their Mother, LaJoe. All of them dropped out of school, had been in jail and/or prison, and were doing drugs. She vowed to never let that happen to Pharaoh and Lafayette.

The odds were against these boys, however. Nearly half of the 9th-grade students at the local high school (Crane) would not make it to their senior year of high school. Children were killed daily on the streets due to gang fights and drug deals. LaJoe tried several times to get her family on welfare but she was denied. The apartment in which they lived had large depressions in the windows, bedrooms without doors, leaky faucets, no heat, and animal carcasses in the hallways. The boys' father had overdosed several times on drugs and alcohol, which eventually kept him away from his children. The boys witnessed the killing of their friends and neighbors.

Even with everything stacked against them, LaJoe was not about to quit on her youngest five children. Throughout the novel, She remained happy, optimistic, and determined to do better for her children. Pharaoh was an excellent student, especially in spelling. He practiced his spelling words for hours each night until his eyes were so strained he couldn't see straight anymore. Because they didn't have many lights in the apartment, he used the light under the door to read by. He was determined to be successful.

Lafayette had a more difficult time with school and, as a result, did not like to attend. He had trouble with words (reading) and with sounding out letters to write words. However, he was good at math and very much enjoyed it. He had a few truancy issues throughout school but was able to graduate from 8th grade. This was a huge accomplishment for him and a major success for his mother as well.

With the help of Mr. Kotlowitz (the author), the boys enrolled in a parochial school. Pharaoh was making great strides and gains at his new school. His reading and math scores were low but he was able to work his way up and continued to strive for success. Lafayette had a rough time at the private school. He was unable to keep up with the workload and soon returned to public school. He did, however, devote several hours on Sunday afternoons to studying and improving his scores.

Throughout the book, I was able to visualize the gleam in the boys' eyes and to imagine their desire to get out of the "projects." They yearned for something more stable, loving, and worthwhile. This book reminded me of my students. So many of them are striving for something better, knowing it's out there, just not knowing how to get there.

As I sat reading this book in my new, well-kept, clean townhouse, I couldn't help but feel lost, discouraged, and ungrateful. Kids like Pharoah and Lafayette worry about if their friends are alive and safe. They worry if there is food on the table, drug dealers on the street, and how they are going to survive just one more day. What kind of a childhood is this? Most of us have never had to think about the things that Pharoah and Lafayette deal with everyday. It made me think, "What would I do if this were me?"

This is why I do what I do. This is why I try so hard to make a connection with my students. This is why: to give children one moment in the day that they do not have to worry about the world, to give them an opportunity that they may not otherwise have, to give them hope like Pharoah and Lafayette, and to find their strengths and build success. This book paints a picture that gives us another opportunity to understand the magnitude of difficulty our students encounter on a daily basis.