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Kozol, J. (1995). *Amazing Grace: The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*. Crown Publishers. New York, NY.

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Amazing grace, how sweet the sound....

This critique is not just about a book called *Amazing Grace*. It is a critique of the injustice of poverty. This is the type of book that gets under your skin, haunts your nightmares and inspires people to take up arms against the war that is waged against children.

If you visit Manhattan you are in the seventh richest congressional district in the nation. The outlying area is the poorest. This is the area known as Mott Haven in the South Bronx. It has been made infamous by Kozol's eloquent descriptions of the tragic situations in his books.

In this, the lowest income area in the South Bronx, two thirds are Hispanic and one third is black. Thirty-five percent are children. In 1991, the median household income of the area, according to the *New York Times*, was \$7,600. (p.3) With a low socioeconomic level such as this there are bound to be struggles. Through this literary work we are introduced to many "characters", but they are more real than the casts on reality television shows many Americans watch huddled in front of their TV sets. One can get lost in the accounts and believe they are reading fiction because the stories are too brutal, engaging, and powerful for the average person that sleeps snug in their warm beds at night, blessed with things like electricity and good health.

One of the main schools that is examined in this book is P.S. 65, and it is very highly segregated. There is even a new term for how segregated the New York schools are: "Hypersegregation." This is a school in which all, with the exception of a few token white children, are of Hispanic or African American descent. Written up in the *New York Times*, the Harvard Study in 1993 compared school segregation in New York with that in other states. This was the study in which the term "hypersegregation" was first utilized and the phenomenon was finally recognized. "A total of 200 in a school of approximately 3,200, " are Caucasian. Almost a thousand students out of these 3,200 are officially "discharged" for poor attendance or a number of other reasons, including violent behavior, every year. (p.151)

On the average school day instead of just pledging allegiance to the flag and going over the school roll, they have a slightly unusual morning routine. The teacher coaches them by asking what the holes are in the window and the students reply in unison, "bullet-holes." They then go over a drill, very similar to a tornado drill, where they practice getting down if they hear gunshots. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, students have certain needs that must be met before they are able to learn in a school environment. How do children learn when they are listening to the sound of their empty bellies rumbling and listening to hear a bullet shot before it leaves the gun? How can we demand high test scores and work completed correctly when the personal hunger and safety needs of the students continue to be unmet even in the classroom?

According to the principal, there are many students who bring to the school physical evidence of pain and hardship. Some wear their pain in the form of the inhalers that almost every child carries for asthma and some with burns from fires in their neighborhoods. He explained, "Some of our children have been horribly disfigured in fires. I notice, though, that the other children treat them kindly and not make fun of them. There is a protective feeling that can be extraordinarily moving. There is nothing predatory in these children. They know that the world does not much care for them and they try hard to be there for each other." (p. 64)

Self-efficacy is not high in this school and it becomes apparent when you hear the voices of the children in this book. They see how others view their environment. The self-esteem of children has been crushed to the degree that students ridicule themselves, as David Washington told Jonathan, by making a bitter joke out of the letters of the school's name. "'Taft,'" they say means "Training Animals For Tomorrow." (p.152) The students see that they do not get an equal education compared to other students in the city. These are not students who are unintelligent; they were simply dealt a bad hand. The question that one wants to ask is: What do other kids deserve and how is the whole idea of a "deserving" or an "undeserving" person used to mask some of the cumulative consequences of injustice? (p.154)

There are children who do not have bedrooms; but one adolescent named Anthony who sticks out in this book as one of the hopes of Mott Haven explains that he is not ambitious for a bedroom. He explains that he is "ambitious for more books." Luckily, towards the end of the book we learn that this insightful young man just may get a chance to broaden his horizons because he will be going to Jerusalem with the pastor from his church. Upon reading this, the readers find themselves cheering inside. We want these children to get out of this situation, to rise above the poverty that is drowning them. Another young man that could sing his sweet song of freedom from the poverty is named David. In the book his grandmother explains that he has just been accepted to City University with full financial assistance. David's grandmother explains her feelings about this fantastic news to Jonathan: "I'm happy," she says, smiling through her tears, and she keeps saying it, "I'm happy. Something good has happened, something GOOD! No one can take that from him now." (p. 236) It is the first time that Kozol saw her cry that way, without embarrassment, without constraint, without trying to conceal, because they were tears of hope for this generation.

That saved a wretch like me....

"Nearly 4,000 heroin injectors, many of whom are HIV infected, live here. Virtually every child at St. Ann's knows someone, a relative or neighbor, who has died of AIDS, and most children here know many others who are now dying of the disease." (p. 4) These burdens are seen on the faces of the children and in the stories that the adults tell about the horror of living in this type of disease-ridden environment. It affects the culturally diverse community deeply. In this city 9 out of 10 children who are born with AIDS are black or Latinos. (p.174) AIDS creeps into the lives of both unsuspecting drug users and the quiet babies in the wombs of their mothers. The incubation period for the development of AIDS in infants is, generally, shorter than for adults. It is on average three years but most die in 18 months. Only 5% live to be twelve years old. (p. 195) These lives and the dreams they could have fulfilled are lost. Those babies will never grow to be the Anthony who goes to Jerusalem or the David who gets accepted into the college.

The parents too are leaving this earth due to this virus. By the spring of 1993, 1,381 women and 3,428 men in the South Bronx had been diagnosed with AIDS. (p.194) According to the creator of the Orphans Project for those children that are left alone due to the tragedy of AIDS, "Only the great influenza pandemic of 1918 ... offers a partial analogy from diseases of the twentieth century.... We are only the beginning of this phenomenon. We do not yet know the outcome." The *Times* refers to this section of New York as the "the deadliest blocks" in the "deadliest precinct" of the city. (p.5)

Then there are the children and parents who do survive a life of poverty surrounded by drugs and AIDS. It is recognized that many children in poor neighborhoods such as Mott Haven have been neurologically impaired, some because of low weight at birth, some because of drug ingestion while *in utero*, and many from lead poisoning in their homes and also, shockingly enough, within their schools. (p.155) The lead paint that is used in the schools is often old and cracked and not maintained, and once again even the schools become unsafe, not the havens that these children deserve as American citizens.

"Why do you want to put so many people with small children in a place with so much sickness? This is the last place in New York that they should put poor children. Clumping so many people, all with the same symptoms and same problems, in one crowded place with nothing they can grow on? Our children start to mourn themselves before their time." (p. 11) In all of this sickness, the ratio of doctors to patients in the area is 30 times less than in Manhattan.

Where are the mentors, heroes and leaders in this community? All you need to do is look around and see who has the flashiest car, the gold chains, the snazzy suit, and who has the ability to throw thousands of dollars into the street. In Mott Haven, this man's name was George Caldron. "He'd been a heroin user himself since he was ten years old," explained a woman when describing the local drug lord. "By 1986 or '87 he was renting certain corners to the lower-level dealers for \$200,000 yearly." This was a man who got others addicted and brought down the neighborhood but he was a hero to some of the once wide-eyed inquisitive children that had potential, that stuck a needle in their veins with dreams of wiping away the pain of poverty. However, the poet Mr. Castro explained, "when he died, he was deeply mourned. His funeral was well attended. The great hero of *Paradise Lost*, of course, was Satan. He is much more interesting than the angels."

There are other heroes in this neighborhood. Some are the mothers who, like angels, oversee the community. Their tales are as harrowing as a ten-year-old drug user. "I think of a woman, Charlotte Smith, who this morning buried her fourth child but remains a fighter, upright and unbroken. But good Lord! The miseries around her are so vast." (p. 72)

I hear on the sidewalks people sneering at the homeless and casually saying, "Get a job." But what if like in Mott Haven, there simply are not enough jobs? "The greatest need in the neighborhood is real employment. Some of the men come in here and they want a job so bad. You see it in their eyes. They ask. They question me continually. I have to tell them honestly that there is nothing her," explains the security director of a complex. (p. 62)

I once was lost....

Lost on the sea of poverty without a paddle to steer them to safety, Anthony tries to examine why we are here and why his peers can't move in the right direction with their lives. "I believe that we were put here for a purpose, but these people on the streets can't see a purpose. There's a whole world out there if you know it's there, if you can see it. But they are in a cage. They can not see." (p. 24) When you can't see past the storm because you know that you can't even find your compass, you can feel very trapped, indeed.

The power of Anthony's insights hits home because of the simple way that he states the truth of his community. He tosses aside the political correctness that runs rampant in our college courses and speaks from his gut about his peers. "I feel afraid of my own people, my own race, black people, students my own age. You step on someone's foot or look at somebody the wrong way - if he doesn't like your attitude, he might pull out a gun and kill you." (p. 47) How can Anthony even leave the house when he is so afraid of the dangers of the street and his own people? Kozol's book does not hand us these answers, instead he lets the reader formulate the questions and brainstorm the answers.

There are other voices in this text that tell the story this area of New York. One poet that lives in the community paints a picture with his words. "I see New York as a symbolic city," explains poet Mr. Castro, "These buildings are our concrete prisons piled up like Babel. A satanic technology surrounds us. What we see is apparatus, not humanity." (p. 45) Mentions of feeling trapped or imprisoned are peppered throughout the book adding to the sense of claustrophobia and the impression that there is no way out.

When Mr. Castro was asked by Kozol why the children in the nazi camps came to his mind when we were speaking of this neighborhood, he answers with a caution I have heard from others, Mrs. Washington included, when a reference to the holocaust was made. "It is not the same," he says. "But there are some similarities. There is the feeling of eclipse. There is the likelihood of death for many. There is the sense of people watching from outside but seeming paralyzed and doing nothing. And there are the miracles." (p. 240)

The injustices in this community are so great that they hardly ever utter the word "injustice." Father Glenworth Miles explained the reason for this, "How often do you speak about the air? If

something touches every aspect of existence, every minute of each hour of your life, it needn't often be spelled out. But it is always there." (p. 81)

Rats, like injustice, are a constant threat to the people in this community. In the Bible it says that during Armageddon, there will be 10,000 rats for each person. "These rats are fearless. Light don't scare them. Noise don't scare them. You can see them in the park at noon. Any time you see the rats at noon, it's time for people to move out." But even though these people understand that the rats can be unhygienic and often disease ridden, moving away without assistance can be nearly impossible. Especially if you are a new mother, the tears of frustration may be in vain because there is no way out of the horrific situation. A mother tells of a seven-month-old boy who was attacked by several rats that climbed into his crib. "Doctor said he hadn't seen bite marks like that in years. The baby's fingers were all bloody. I think it was the third time that this baby was attacked. His mother's terrified but can't move out. The city put her in this building and she don't have any money to move anywhere else." (p. 114)

When questioned about what they are the most afraid of, a sixth grade boy replied, "the rats with red eyes." One small girl with curly hair and round plastic glasses replied, "Growing up." A young Russian immigrant said, "What I hate the most is the unfairness on this earth." Several children answer, "Dying." (p.123)

But now I am found....

I remember that my bedtime prayer as a young white girl from an affluent upbringing huddled in my bed was the traditional "Now I lay me down to sleep..." that speaks of our souls going to heaven. Kozol tells of overhearing the bedtime prayer of a pair of young Mott Haven siblings. Standing in the doorway he listened to, "God bless mommy, God bless nanny. God, Please do not punish me because I am black."

Death is so close to the daily lives of these people that they must see the silver linings. When speaking about an eight-year-old child that has been killed, a young mother in the neighborhood explained, "God knows when somebody has suffered long enough. When it is enough, He takes us to His kingdom. In heaven there is no sickness. Here there is sickness. In heaven there is love. Here, there is hate. On earth you grow old or else you die in pain. In heaven you are young forever." (p. 106)

Children can often speak through drawings easier than through words. Kozol talked to children about their drawings that represented AIDS. These are the drawings of the children whose lives are being touched deeply by AIDS. "Meet Mr. HIV", wrote an 11-year-old child, over a diamond-shaped face from which six scaly legs extend. "He invades your body. This is what he looks like when he does," another child writes over a scary-looking monster that resembles a tarantula. An HIV-infected 12-year-old draws a transparent yellow picture of his body filled with hairy, blob-like creatures that resemble paramecia and amoebae. "I hate you because you do bad things to my body," writes another boy. "Go pick on someone your own size." (p.196)

Some children express their feelings about death verbally. A five-year-old named Cassie, with a grown-up's help, composed this message for her mother, who had died some months before:

"Mommy, I want you to know everything.... I am going home from the hospital today.... I am starting kindergarten next week. I am going to wear my dress, which has flowers on it and is black.... I wish I could fly [into] the sky to be with you." (p.196)

The knowledge that a stigma is attached to AIDS, however, keeps some children from confiding thoughts like these to other children of their age. A 16-year-old whose mother has AIDS, which some children in New York refer to as "the skinny disease," says that she has "never told a single friend" about her mother's illness. "It's like I always carry this big secret...." An eight-year-old says that when he feels afraid or sad while he's at school, he goes into the bathroom, to a toilet stall, and flushes the water so that nobody can hear him cry. (p.197)

What is beautiful to these children? When asked, virtually all of them reply, "heaven." Instead of the vacation spots and places that children from higher-class homes would cite as beautiful, they choose a place that they know that they could eventually get to. How do they picture heaven in their imaginations? "A peaceful place with only the innocent," replies one child. (p. 125) Some of the children's visions of heaven were portrayed in simple drawings. One drawing, by a ten-year-old boy, showed a brick wall with a large gate in the middle. Above it were eight puffy clouds. On each cloud there is a small stick figure. Next to it is the word "me" with an arrow pointing to his head. Another arrow indicates "my friends." A drawing by a 12-year-old showed heaven as "God's house" with a friendly looking sun smiling above it. In front of the house were three angels with wings, standing on clouds. A sparkingly happy young girl, named Anabelle, explained what heaven is in the following quote.

"People that are good go up to heaven. People who are bad go down to where the Devil lives. They have to wear red suits, which look like red pajamas. People who go to heaven wear a nightgown, white, because they are angels. All little children who die when they are young will go up to heaven. Dogs and kittens go up to animal heaven. But if you loved an animal who died you can go and visit with each other on the weekend. In heaven you don't pay for things with money. You pay for things you need with smiles." (p. 129)

I was blind....

Cover it up. Hide it. We don't want to know about it. The affluent don't say this with words to this town, but they do it with action. "The city had these murals painted on the walls, she says, not for the people in the neighborhood—because they are facing the wrong way—but for tourists and commuters.

"The idea is that they mustn't be upset by knowing too much about the population here. It isn't enough that these people have to be sequestered. It is also important that their presence be distinguished or 'sweetened.' The city did not repair the buildings so that the kids who live around here could, in fact, have pretty rooms like those. Instead they painted pretty rooms on the facades. It's an illusion." (p. 31)

Kozol explains that if he talked with his white upper class friends about whether or not they "impose" this life on these people they would react with statements about how they simply got to New York, worked hard at their jobs and settled into their homes. He states that, "This is that

great luxury of long-existing and accepted segregation in New York and almost every other major city of our nation nowadays. Nothing needs to be imposed on anyone. The evil is already set in stone. We just move in."

Some of the older generation of Mott Haven have seen too many times the acts of charity that the upper class people provide when it will make the rich feel best, for example, the food that they donate on Christmas. "What gonna happen on December 26? Who is this charity for? In a way it's for themselves so they won't feel ashamed goin' to church to pray on Christmas Eve. Maybe they think this way they won't end up in hell. We have our hell right here on earth. They'll get theirs after their last breath." (p. 44)

Caucasians typically speak about the "they." The "they " that are referring to, as the cause of problems in the white neighborhoods is the African Americans in neighborhoods like Mott Haven. The residents in this area of New York have a different viewpoint. The "They" that is the issue is the decision makers that make the wrong choices according to an insightful adolescent named Isabel from the South Bronx can cover a multitude of bases. "When we talk about the people who are making these decisions, we keep saying 'they' and most of the time we think of 'they' as being white. We don't even know who 'they' might really be, yet we keep saying 'they.' This is because we have no power to decide these things. Something's always happening where the last and final vote was not the one we made. So we say 'they did this' and 'they' seems extremely powerful, but we do not know who 'they' are." (p. 40) Isabel explains that the ones who make the decisions that are so vital to how the community lives are the welfare workers, healthcare workers, or police. She also alludes to the fact that she realizes that they do not have the true power because " they" do not run the city, the politicians do.

What strikes me as incredibly ironic are the accounts of the feelings of the people in this section of New York City about Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. Because this was written in 1995, the effect of the World Trade Center bombing had yet to become the horrifying reality that it is now. The views of the mayor two months into his term could be strikingly different to these people if it was written now. However since this is a critique of a book that was written before the terrorism that hit the nation so hard, I must explain why they felt the way that they did at the time and what they felt. "The Nation's Mayor" who is helping us to rebuild our lives and faith in our country, was to them the man that cut back sanitation, inspection services and programs for children and teenagers, the early stages of what would prove to be, "wide-sweeping cuts in a variety of services relied on by poor people, as a consequence of the most drastic cut backs in the city's budget since the Great Depression." (p.100) "The man turns flowers into stones," is how a neighborhood man explains Giuliani. "He is too dry and brittle, like the cold judiciary out of which he came. He has the mechanism of the law, but not its spirit. He tells the beggar, 'Don't sleep on the grass.' He should explain, 'This grass is sacred. Don't defile it. It is the banquet of our Creator.' It may be he does not understand the human factor. He is too absolute. There is something missing in his personality." One of his top deputies suggested that all the people on welfare including dependent children be forced to wear green uniforms and clean up graffiti and pick up papers. These are the same things that the people in the South Bronx prison have to do. Is it any wonder why when asked about the new hairstyle in the neighborhood that is termed "25-year- to-life" a young boy replied, "You don't have to be in jail to be in prison."

In fact, for some prison can be the safest and warmest place to reside. A nun explained that a woman "begged us to not take her out of prison ... until her baby was delivered, because there was a four-month waiting list for prenatal care at Lincoln Hospital." This nun wonders, "Is this what we do? Incarcerate people so that they can get the services that they need?"

Those babies that are born in prison, what life will they encounter? Reverend Overall feels that it is not quite different from "being born in any other ghetto if you know it's where you'll probably die." He explains that the racial makeup of the prisons and Mott Haven is virtually the same. (p. 147) Prisons, churches, and schools are probably the most segregated institutions in our nation. New York City schools are often even more segregated than the prisons.

What is wrong with the "ghetto life?" According to Jonathan Kozol, himself, "So long as there are ghetto neighborhoods and ghetto hospitals and ghetto schools, I am convinced that there will be ghetto desperation, ghetto violence and ghetto fear because a ghetto in itself is an evil and unnatural construction."

But now I see....

Kozol's honesty with himself regarding the emotions that boil up inside him as he interviews are blatantly obvious because he writes with such heart and candor. The following passage describes a moment when he felt a bit overwhelmed by the power of the qualitative studies that he constructs....

"I soon forget to take notes and almost forget that I am here in search of information. I find myself searching for something other than information but I can't tell what it is. There will be other evenings like this in the year ahead. Often during times like these I have to fight off feeling that I am about to cry. I do fight it off because I don't want to be embarrassed. Outside the apartment, when I leave, I sometimes give in to these feelings, which I never can explain because they do not seem connected to the things that we talk about. It's something cumulative that just builds up during a quiet time." (p. 46)

The deep melancholy that Kozol feels is evident also in the children who reside in Mott Haven. Manuel Rodriguez, the principal of P.S. 65, explained that in the last two weeks he had had three serious suicide threats due to the depression of his elementary school students. He had one sixth-grade student who "stays up until four A.M. He takes a shoe and hammers at roaches all night long. He's not destructive, just so terribly unhappy." A parent explains that she was trying to get her child help with depression through the psychiatrist, "I put her name down, but her teacher said they couldn't see her for a long time because there are many children like her in the school." (p. 65)

Death continues to create a deep hole in the lining of the fabric of the community. When an eight-year boy falls to his death in the elevator shaft of his apartment building while he is playing, the city does not run to take care of the building's damage so that it does not happen to a child. I think of the uproar that I saw on the television when a young white child was struck by a car while playing when in the suburbs and injured. The news coverage was extensive and a streetlight was put in almost immediately. Instead of the city taking a proactive step for the

welfare of other students, the city blamed the family. This is what was explained to Kozol through a letter, "...for letting an eight-year-old go in the hallway. But they got to go somewhere." Going "outside" means going in the hallway because the real outside is simply too dangerous. Kozol's view of where Bernardo played for the eight years of his life is, "The kennel where I live is cleaner and smells better. The kennel also has a place where dogs can go outside and have some fun in the fresh air."

The deaths of the young children were so common place that while he wrote this Kozol had to find a system for keeping the deaths straight. Those kids who were once filled with life and exuberant energy quickly became symbolic pins in a map of south Bronx. He used a symbolic coding system, one for death by fire, one for death by accident, and one for death by gunshot.

The whole final chapter of this book is titled "In Memoriam." Included in this chapter are the obituaries for those who lost their lives in Mott Haven while Kozol was conducting his study. Twenty of the people mentioned were mere children.

Buried today and everyday until the world takes notice of this forgotten part of New York City and the other areas of the world in which poverty is a way of life, is the innocence of children. It is time to stop the crushing blow of poverty from taking the life of these kids before they reach adulthood. Children's laughter and joy is being extinguished, as if the flame that Lady Liberty holds so proudly is being put out. It must be relit with education and adequate funding before it is too late.

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About the Reviewer

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