

"the other side of the
river" by alex
kotlowitz essay
sample



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The body of a black teenager, Eric McGinnis, was found in the St. Joseph River, drowned. The only question everybody asks is: How did he get there? People wonder whether this was an accident or a suicide? The two towns, Benton Harbor and St. Joseph, divided by both race and the river, grapple with the possibilities in this difficult case.

Alex Kotlowitz, the author, puts his sharp reporting skills to good work here, describing in detail everything that is known about Eric McGinnis's short life and untimely death. "The Other Side of the River" is the story of two small towns "whose only connections are two bridges and a powerful undertow of contrasts." On one side of the river is St. Joseph, white and prosperous; on the other is Benton Harbor, black and poor — "landscapes so dissimilar ... the view can take your breath away." So are described these two towns in the book.

Benton Harbor assumed Eric had been murdered; St. Joseph, ... actually it depended on whom Kotlowitz asked. Kotlowitz uses Eric's death as the central theme in a larger story of racial divide, symbolized, of course, by the long-running river.

Kotlowitz spent years pursuing the story, talking with more than 200 sources, hoping to discover something definitive about how and why Eric died. This search gives *The Other Side of the River* the intensity of a mystery or true-crime tale; but Eric McGinnis' death, whether accident or murder, also displayed the greater-than-geographical distance dividing the citizens of Michigan's Twin Cities. Benton Harbor's African Americans and St. Joseph's European Americans perceived Eric McGinnis' death and investigative work

by police and prosecutors through eyes deeply affected by their own histories and their own myths. Kotlowitz's well-researched account includes testimonies from a wide range of subjects — from investigators to teachers, teenagers to long-time community members.

Black teenagers argue that McGinnis was killed by St. Joseph whites for dating a white girl; white teenagers link McGinnis's death to gang migration from Chicago. Others maintain that McGinnis was not murdered at all.

Alex Kotlowitz uncovers layers of both evidence and opinion, and demonstrates that in many ways, the truth is shaped by which side of the river you call home. Kotlowitz tries to solve the mystery of the body in the river and indeed comes up with a number of possible solutions, some more probable than others.

Although focused on the death of a young man, this book is more about the racial divides that exist among Americans more than thirty years after the civil rights movement reached its apogee. People from both sides tend to keep to themselves, looking with suspicion at the other. " To those in St. Joseph, Eric's death is proof that race blinds their neighbors to the obvious. To those in Benton Harbor, it is proof that because of race even the obvious is never what it seems."

When the body of a black teenager from Benton Harbor is found in the river, unhealed wounds and suspicions between the two cities' populations also come to the surface. The investigation into the young man's death becomes, inevitably, a screen on which each town projects their resentments and fears.

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The Other Side of the River sensitively portrays the lives and hopes of the town's citizens and reveals the attitudes and misperceptions that undermine race relations throughout America.

The author does not climb up on a soapbox, agenda in hand, and tells the reader what they should think. Instead, he lets the facts speak for themselves. The result that this book has caused many in the white St. Joseph community to go howling in protest, railing against this "unfair" portrayal, only goes to show that bare facts apparently don't leave much cover for those who would like to hide their fear, loathing, and head-in-the-sand refusal to believe there's a problem, behind a pretty tourist brochure facade.

Painfully even-handed, the book does not exactly paint a pretty picture of either the white or the black communities involved. Rather, it offers a map of several incidents and betrayals that have led these two towns to such a sorry state. That there can be no real conclusion to this book leaves the reader to think about their own prejudices and assumptions. It also leads you to wonder if there can ever be a conclusion to the race problems in our country as a whole... which is perhaps at least a first step to getting there - just thinking about it at all!

Alex Kotlowitz did a really great job in presenting both sides to this story. It is hard to write a non-bias story when you have your own views on the situation. This topic is really a worthy one to look at. He addresses an important problem to the area.

As already said above Kotlowitz tries to describe both sides but as he says himself, " As would any journalist, I wanted to uncover the truth, but it wasn't to be that simple. When race is involved, truth becomes myth, myth becomes truth, and your perspective...all depends on which side of the river you live on."

Bibliography:

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