



LITERARY SALOON

RICK KOGAN

Words that will never leave you

Miles Harvey has written a book that will ever be on my Best Books I've Ever Read list, 2000's "The Island of Lost Maps." Also on that list is Alex Kotlowitz's "There Are No Children Here," published in 1991.

Those two names sit prominently on the cover of a stunning, stay-with-you-forever new book, "How Long Will I Cry? Voices of Youth Violence." Harvey is the book's editor and author of its introduction. Kotlowitz is the author of its foreword.

Their words are, understandably, polished and passionate. But they are not, and I am sure they would agree, the most powerful words in this gathering of voices from the front lines of the war that is ravaging a generation of Chicago's children.

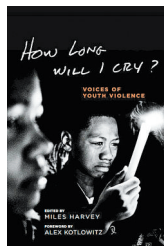
The book was born of the Sept. 24, 2009, beating death of 16-year-old Derrion Albert outside Christian Fenger Academy High School in the Roseland neighborhood on the city's Far South Side: "I was beginning to realize that Derrion Albert's death had left an indelible mark on my psyche," Harvey writes in his introduction.

An assistant professor of creative writing at DePaul University, Harvey dispatched more than 75 of his students into Chicago's meanest streets and most beleaguered neighborhoods to find people who would talk about their lives and the deaths that have cast long shadows.

The results — profound, chilling, philosophical, fatalistic



Phil Velasquez/Tribune photo



How Long Will I Cry?

By Miles Harvey, Big Shoulders Books.

They are the foot soldiers in a war and include a gang-banger and a nurse, a cop and a funeral home manager — and a lot of kids. Randomly flip the book open and you'll find:

→ "God sees everything. The detectives are on the case. I will be getting a phone call one day. I will be going to court like all the other parents who have lost their children to gun violence."

→ "I didn't have a lot of examples of my own. All the dads in my family are either dead, in jail or hang with gangs."

→ "That's my biggest fear — to lose another child. If I lose another child, I probably will lose my mind."

→ "I don't ever give up, I don't ever give up."

— wound up on the stage at Steppenwolf Theatre, where Harvey's friend Hallie Gordon is artistic and educational director for young adults. In reviewing that piece of documentary theater in March, my colleague Chris Jones wrote, "There just cannot be too many shows on this topic. This headier and more measured piece of theater is ... raising awareness, as it should. There is a lot to learn from this sincere, earnest piece."

A stage can handle only so many voices, so many words, and so this book is more expansive and detailed, and thus more enlightening. The people are remarkable in their candor.

These voices come from parts of Chicago few of you reading this know, places like Roseland and Englewood, Back of the Yards. As Kotlowitz writes, correctly, "These neighborhoods are so physically and spiritually isolated from the rest of us that we might as well be living in different cities."

The words here will stay with you and alter the ways in which you think. I guarantee that after you read this book, the next murder that screams across the headlines and television news will affect you more deeply than ever before.

This book is the first from DePaul's Big Shoulders Books, which aims to publish one book a year "that engages intimately with the Chicago community," according to a university statement, as well as giving students some experience in the business of book publishing.

This month is filled with programs for teens at city libraries (chipublib.org/forteens/index.php). The book includes a list of resources and a study guide. Also, paperback copies are available free to those willing to spread the word. (book.project@depaul.edu).

As "How Long Will I Cry? Voices of Youth Violence" now joins my Best Books I've Ever Read list, I leave you with these words from it:

"These stories belong to us all," writes Harvey.

"They make us all feel less alone," writes Kotlowitz.

Listen to Miles Harvey Oct. 20 on "After Hours with Rick Kogan," 9-11 p.m. on WGN-AM 720.

Rick Kogan is a Tribune senior writer and columnist.