



## Our America

*LeAlan Jones , Dave Isay , Lloyd Newman*

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## **Our America** LeAlan Jones , Dave Isay , Lloyd Newman

Through two award-winning National Public Radio documentaries, and now this powerful book, LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman have made it their mission to be loud voices from one of this country's darkest places, Chicago's Ida B. Wells housing project. Set against the stunning photographs of a talented young photographer from the projects, *Our America* evokes the unforgiving world of these two amazing young men, and their struggle to survive unrelenting tragedy. With a gift for clear-eyed journalism, they tell their own stories and others, including that of the death of Eric Morse, a five-year-old who was dropped to his death from the fourteenth floor of an Ida B. Wells apartment building by two other little boys. Sometimes funny, often painful, but always charged with their dream of *Our America*, LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman reach out to grab your attention and break your heart.

## **Our America Details**

Date : Published May 1st 1998 by Scribner (first published 1997)

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Author : LeAlan Jones , Dave Isay , Lloyd Newman

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## Bianca says

This book was about two boys name LeAlan and Lloyd and how their lives were in the projects on the southside of Chicago. The projects they lived in were "Ida B. Wells". Ida B. Wells was no joke. You had to be tough or at least acted tough because in these projects if you didn't. You would be picked on or even killed. LeAlan and Lloyd interviewed their families and others about how they felt about living in the projects. But, they also asked personal things about their lives and how could they change it. Both teens were determined to graduate from highschool and go to college because they wanted to be somebody and they did.

Predictions, I made before I read this book was that its going to talk about how tough life was for African Americans on the Southside & how death affected them. I made this prediction because on the front of the cover it had kids on there that looked tired and desparated of finding or doing something. The other prediction I made was this book is going to be sad and shocking. I made this prediction because A quote on the cover says "Our America is meant to stir the mind and break the heart, and it does just that" by Judith Newman. The predictions I made came true and life was real tough for LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman.

The connections I made with this book was a Text to Self Connection because I can relate to some of the things in this book. One thing I related to in this book was How tough life was for African Americans because when I was younger it was tough on me and my mom Pg "66-67". I also can relate to this book because I seen alot of deaths happen and in this book they're alot of deaths that happens "pg 89". Lastly, I can relate to this book because Losing someones affected me Emotionally and Physically "pg 109- 111". This helped me better understand the text because I knew I wasn't the only one that had it hard when I was younger and it also help me to understand because I want to get out the hood and go to college just like they did. Lloyd says " what college are you going to?" LeAlan says Howard". "pg 198". I Also made a Text to World Connection because the violence that happened in this book is happening in this world now.

A visualization I made while reading was when a little boy name Eric Morse was thrown off a fourteen story building by two boys name Johnny and Tyrone. "Tyrone bit Derrick (Eric big brother) hand and Eric let go." Where he fell fourteen stories down. Where his poor body laid. "Eric was pronounced dead ten minutes later""pg.89". This visualization helped me better understand the text because it shows me how Tyrone and Johnny parents had no control over them. If they did they would have never thrown this poor little boy off a fourteen story building. This was a tradgy because Eric was only five years old and his life was taken because he choose not to steal candy for them.

An inference I made when I was reading this book was that this book is mainly about LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman. I made this inference because on "page 29" its says "My name is LeAlan Jones, I am thirteen years old, and I live with my family in a house around the corner from the Ida B. Wells. It also says " My name is Lloyd Newman, I am just fourteen years old and I live in a row house in the Ida B. Wells. I know usually when characters give out this information in a book. The book is mainly going to be about them. When I was reading my inference was true because through the whole book it talked about them and their lives. But it talked about other people lives but not as much as it talked about Lloyd and LeAlan Lives.

I enjoyed this book because I related to it in many ways. I liked how Lloyd and LeAlan interviewed different people about how they felt about living in the projects. I also liked how they had their mind on school and not the street. They thought about doing what was right rather than their classmates. They could have took the street route at anytime. But they thought about how better it would be if they stayed in school and

graduated "pg 15". I also liked LeAlan sister Janell because even though she had a son at a young age. She was determine to keep her son out the streets. "my baby is going to be great. He's going to get a good education and my baby is not going to be sitting around here selling drugs or holding a gun to nobody head. "he's not going to be like that-If I have to move out of this whole country and go somewhere else to keep him away from it!"pg. 181".

I give my book a rating of five stars because I related to it and it interested me because it had real situations in it that I have faced in my life. I really would recommend this book to people who dont know what african americans went through and I guarantee when they read this book they would feel our pains and struggles and they would probably change their thoughts they had about us.I would also recommend this book to someone else because if I relate to it. Im sure many others will too. I learned that my likes about the book was shocking because Im having it good where I live and the two characters in my book had it worse than I do. I didn't have any dislikes. Im going to seek out a another book I think I could relate to because when I read about books like this one. It gives me a reason to smile because I Have an Internal thought because I use to Argue with my thoughts about how im the only one and now I dont have to feel like that because now I know they're other people who feel the same way I do.

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### **Maddie Schwarz says**

I had to read this book for an anthropology class, and it was one of the greatest things I've ever did. I sat down and read it in one sitting, and now I am trying to find out what happened to each person mentioned in the book. I fell in love with these two boys, and their strength and optimism inspires me.

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### **Airton Depina says**

I like this book a lot because it contain an different story than what Im use to. It tells a story of a "Different America" and many people relate to this story. The author gives us the idea to look at THEIR AMERICA different from AMERICAN you might everyone knows. I learned from this book that not everyone has the same realities in this country and other dont have the same opportunity to live in Country that we believe to be the first in the nation.

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### **Shani says**

I don't know how to adequately describe this book and give it it's proper justice. This is perhaps one of the greatest and devastatingly true stories I have ever read. I always rolled my eyes at "white privilege" arguments and always figured it was victim mentality that was the key to a life of poverty. This book has changed my thought process, my compassion, and my drive. It is hands down one of the most important books I have read to date. Poignant and real.

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### **Jamiroquai says**

Fantastic! Such an intimate portrait of life in the ghetto and how people survive the war zone. Amazing and

## Grant Workman says

For the book *Our America* By LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman i would rate the book a ?. This book is a podcast from two 13 year old best friends that grew up in the wells which is a project in west chicago in 1993. They provide several stories about their childhood and they explain throughout the story that things need to change and the kids that grow up in ghettos deserve all the same chances/ voice as kids that grow up in richer areas.

Vivienne from goodreads stated "A very powerful book." I completely agree with this statement because i could never imagine how hard it would be to get out of bed and try to succeed everyday if i lived in an environment like them; For example these two kids stated during the summer time as kids they would be hearing gunshots and having running back inside so often it felt like a marathon. This book is powerful on its own, But it more or less it deserves to be spread to give people a reality check of how bad things are in ghettos, and how things need to change ASAP.

Next is a statement that i disagree with, Phil states " The book, however, boasts a selection of profane language and contains far too many illustrations." I disagree with his statement because i feel that these boys use their language to express themselves and therefore is relevant to be a part in this book. Also the amount of pictures is perfect in my opinion because it helped me get a better picture of how these people looked and what situations they were facing ; Also there was a picture on page 92 of a boarded up apartment, i felt like this picture is relevant because it shows someone's apartment in the projects with all the windows boarded up, it gives a more real view to how their neighborhood looked like because of all the vacant apartments and even owned ones are boarded up their windows because people would take a brick and smash their windows and commence to steal all their belongings. Also to add on to this statement a 5 year old got dropped 14 stories right down the hall from where the photo was taken because he wouldn't steal candy for a 10 and a 11 year old, This shows how out of hand some people's behaviors are in these projects.

Finally this is relates to Paul's quote saying this book has too much profanity , LeAlan states on page 200 . "Some people might look at me and say, "He's just some nigger from the ghetto that knows some big words." well true. That might be. But listen to what i'm saying." This quote is important because of how he uses the statement "He's just some nigger from the ghetto that knows some big words." This gives a different perspective. I believe that he is trying to explain to the readers that even kids grow up in rough environments they still can have good views and deserve to be listened to/ have a voice. On page 197 they are reunited at the age of 17 and reminisce on old times. LeAlan said "Man I think if we make it out of here we deserve a medal of honor or a purple heart. Because if you aren't wounded you are wounded spiritually." I feel that They are reflecting to give all the stories a more significant purpose than just being scary in the moment, it shows how they were effected in the long term aspect of things from the experiences they had endured because they were living in the projects on the west side.

Going back to my ? rating i believe this book discusses very much need topics such as how kids in ghettos don't have the same privileges as the rich kids. Also how the project system needs to be changed due to all the violence that occurs in them . This book had very interesting experiences that these kids went though is terrifying and i could never imagine being in their shoes trying to survive in the ghetto. If i ever meet LeAlan or Lloyd in real life i would shake their hands and have a conversation with them on how were they able to

persevere through all the pain and life changing incidents they have to endure. The reason i rated it ? vs 5/5 is the fact that this book wasn't a book that someone had to tear it out of my hands.

#### Works Cited-

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#### **Piper says**

I've never been a particularly strong reader. I often find myself lacking interest in the topics I'm reading and quickly losing the motivation to finish it. So naturally, after being assigned the intimidating responsibility of reading a nonfiction book, I chose the shortest one within arm's reach. After completing *Our America*, I can finally say that my laziness has paid off.

Overall, I would give this book a solid 4 out of 5 stars. *Our America* delivers a surprisingly thought provoking, compelling account of two kids surviving in the Ida B. Wells projects. The story follows their daily struggles, as well as the bigger tragedies they face as a community.

Within a few pages of the book, I was shocked by the amount of interest I had in the writing. The authors used subtle but meaningful words to capture the strong emotion. For example, LeAlan writes "Don't look at us like we're an alien or an android or an animal or something." (83). Literally, the word alien means to belong to another person, place, or thing. This shows how detached he feels from the rest of America. Like in the title, he uses the strong vocabulary to express how different his world is from everyone else's and how they're treated. LeAlan feels dehumanized because of where he lives. Words like these help the reader take on the unique perspective of a child living in the Wells and struggling with everyday life.

In addition to this, the quotes and interviews helped me better understand their lives. While reading through reviews at GoodReads.com, I noticed a strong review from a user named Vivienne. She writes "The direct quotes and narration from the denizens of the Ida B. Wells has helped my students put themselves into another person's shoes." I agree that the dialog helps the reader understand the situations; it is a point that needs emphasizing since so little people have actually experienced the struggles talked about in the book. Many of us live sheltered lives so the direct quotes make the moments feel real to the reader.

Another factor of the book that I really appreciated was its seriousness. Vivienne from GoodReads.com, wrote "At times, it can get too heavy-handed..." I think Vivienne is mistaken because they overlook the problem that the issues discussed in the book are serious. If they were written any differently, it would be serious. Also, I think the heavy writing of the book is what makes it so great. For example, on page 82 it says "If you took the time to think about all the death that goes on around here, you'd go crazy! But that shows you how life is valued now. 10-year-old kids kill for a piece of candy. Life has the value of a quarter now." The very purpose of the book is to share the struggles of living in the Wells. The complete honesty provokes emotion from the reader, which is something that many books lack.

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### **Chase Parsley says**

This book is a real and raw look into Chicago's South Side. It is basically a series of interviews, all taken in the mid 1990s, by two young teenagers living in the ghetto. It reads fast. At one point, their lifestyle is compared to a war zone, with bullets to dodge, PTSD, a survival mentality, and more.

This book reminds me a bit of "Hoop Dreams", a Chicago documentary from around the same time. One of the most powerful things this book does is to humanize the people living in the ghetto. They are warm-blooded, intelligent, and gritty people who want the best in life despite the enormous obstacles they face. An excellent book!

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### **Marcus says**

This book is an incredibly written piece from the perspective of two young men whom live in a world that is routinely spoken about but rarely revealed. The power of the book transcends what had to be the authors original purpose as nearly 15 years later the themes resonate true not only in Chicago but in cities around the world.

As an educator dealing with children in this situation and sharing this book with students it is an incredible link and eye opener for them to see that others have lived and been transformed through a story similar to their own. Hopefully inspiring them to overcome obstacles in their lives, through their own writing. This book does indeed show OUR america.

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### **Brett Van Gaasbeek says**

I have read this book multiple times. The language and content is a little rough, but that is to be expected in the subject matter. I initially read this in college and have since used it for years in my government classes to discuss the roles of the federal, state and local governments in the lives of people in the projects of the south side of Chicago. The book is acceptable to all readers and the subject is exceptionally powerful and full of discussion material. I have never had a student say they disliked this book, which is a rarity.

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### **Chris Ibert says**

Thanks to Anne for recommending this moving book. I highly recommend it, the narrative format is unconventional (the two boys were given tape recorders and these are the transcripts of their interviews and conversations), but makes for easy reading, at least structurally though certainly not emotionally. I have ordered a class set for my juniors to read this year.

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## **Laura says**

A necessary read for understanding human rights, cycles of poverty, and the lives lead by those living in America's ghettos. The book shares the insights, personal thoughts, and interviews of two young boys, LeAlan and Lloyd, living in Chicago's Ida B. Wells housing projects during the mid- to late 1990s. The boys were given recording equipment for a week and told to capture what their lives are really like, living in the projects. Their words are powerful; their story is unforgettable.

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## **Vivienne says**

A very powerful book. At times, it can get too heavy-handed and narrowly focused for my own tastes, but I give it four stars for how excellent it is for teaching. One of the greatest challenges of working with ninth graders is teaching empathy, but the direct quotes and narration from the denizens of the Ida B. Wells has somewhat helped my students put themselves into another person's shoes. It is a very powerful book, and it lead me to do a lot of fascinating other research to augment my lessons, which is where it got really valuable for me. My students like the pictures a lot, and it was nice to be able to incorporate visual literacy into my curriculum, as well as finding more recent pictures online to add into lessons.

I can't put my finger on what's missing, though, but something is definitely missing. If my students weren't enjoying it so much, I would have given it a three star rating, but it is getting a strong response from the kids, which is the whole purpose of reading it.

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## **Griselda Iniguez says**

Read this in the seventh grade, just reread for an English class. I think it's one of the must-reads. It is brilliant, honest, and heart-breaking. Always gets me on a personal level because I am a Chicagoan that lives on the Southside. Nobody ever likes talking about "that" part of the city, just like everything else that makes us uncomfortable.

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## **Lizbeth Martinez says**

I think this book is great so far. What i would like to say to say about this book to someone who hasn't read this is that if they are interested in learning about how different the world is, this is the book for them. this book is about adventure, friendship, vlife, and death. LeAlan and Lloyd's purpose for writing this book is to show people how different other people are. They also wrote it to show people not to judge eachother just by the way they look, live, or where they come from. This book tries to show that not all people are different and that people can actually turn out to be the same. this book shows that the world is not always perfect maybe because nobody and nothing is perfect in the world. I enjoyed this book because it was interesting and i thought it was fun to learn about life, death, and friendship in certain places where people come from. This book can also show people not to judge eachother by their race, color, where they live/ come from and how they look.

