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BOOK REVIEW

Children Under Fire: An American Crisis

by **FRAN WITHROW**

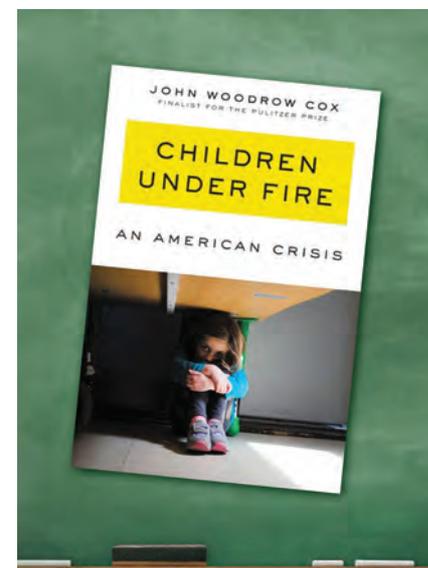
TYSHAUN, AGE NINE, IS good friends with Ava, age eight. Tyshaun lives just outside of Washington, D.C., while Ava lives in South Carolina. They connect via video often, even though their backgrounds are different, because they share one critical commonality: they both live with the aftermath of gun violence.

Tyshaun revered his dad, who was gunned down in the neighborhood while Tyshaun was in school. Ava's best friend Jacob was shot to death by a teenager while she and her classmates played on their school playground.

Both children have been deeply, irrevocably scarred by what they experienced. Tyshaun lashes out at school, and school authorities struggle to help him maintain self-control. Ava became so terrified at school that she suffers periodic episodes of rage, and must now be homeschooled and treated with anti-anxiety medications. The story of Ava and Tyshaun in "Children Under Fire: An American Crisis," exemplifies how the American epidemic of gun violence affects our youngest citizens.

John Woodrow Cox has thoughtfully explored just how debilitating gun violence is to children around the country, and his book is a sobering read. Cox, a Washington Post reporter, spent years discovering that children do not need to be victims of violence themselves to be devastated by the experience. The aftermath can be severe: children who cannot tolerate loud and unexpected noises; children afraid to play outside; children who write notes to their families during lockdowns, expecting to die.

It is a misconception to think that as long as children are not physically hurt, an encounter with a shooter will not have long-term consequences. We think of children as resilient and able to adjust to life's traumas. Yet while children can adapt after dealing with a crisis, it's not always easy. In addition, not every child exposed to violence gets the counseling they need. Even with therapy, exposure to violence wreaks havoc on children's emotional and social lives.



While shootings themselves are terrifying, lockdowns and active shooter drills can also traumatize and frighten children. And though schools are still inherently safe places to be, the nationwide perception that they are unsafe is overwhelming. I was heartsick to read about one school that performed a practice drill, but told everyone a real shooter was on site. This drill left children crying, having asthma attacks, and texting their families goodbye.

Cox suggests three ways to combat the rampant epidemic of gun violence in our country. His first suggestion is an age-old one: universal background checks for gun owners. Not only would this screen people who buy a gun; it would also make those owners less likely to engage in gun-trafficking because the gun could be traced back to them. Secondly, we must educate gun owners about how vital it is for firearms to be inaccessible to children. And thirdly, additional research is needed to discover what other tools might protect children from the devastation of gun violence.

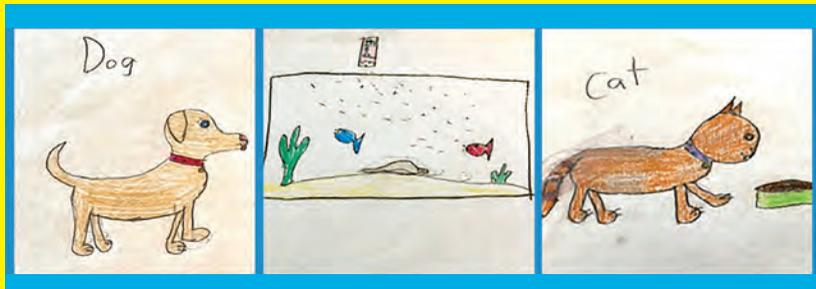
Until these things happen, this American crisis will continue unabated.

And there will be more stories like those of Ava and Tyshaun. **NS**

**Children Under Fire:
An American Crisis**
By John Woodrow Cox
\$35.99
Harper Collins
328 pages

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BOOK REVIEW

The Overground Railroad

by FRAN WITHROW

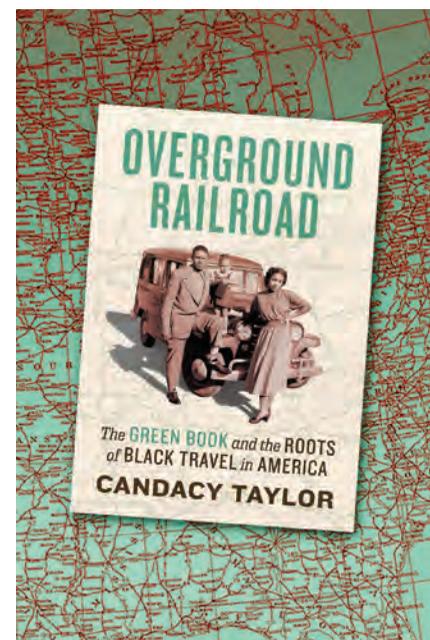
WHEN I WAS small, my family would drive from West Virginia to New England to visit our cousins. Sitting in the back seat of the station wagon with my squirmy siblings, I never worried that gas station owners might refuse us service, that we might be unable to find a restroom we would be allowed to use, or that we would not be welcome in any restaurant we wanted to patronize.

This example of my white privilege was brought home to me repeatedly as I read "Overground Railroad," Candacy Taylor's revealing account of Black travel from the 1930's through the 1960's.

From the 1930's on, many Black families could finally afford a car. This freedom, however, presented them with new challenges as they continued to face racism throughout the country. These new auto owners toured the country anyway, planning for contingencies by packing their own food as well as emergency toileting supplies. They brought blankets with them in case they were denied hotel entry and forced to sleep in their cars. And they hit upon ingenious methods for protecting themselves if they encountered an antagonistic police officer.

For many Black families, another essential travel item while on the road was the "Green Book," a travel guide for Black tourists published originally by Victor Hugo Green in Harlem. Green had only a seventh grade education, but he went on to print the "Green Book" from its inception in 1936 until his death in 1960. The travel guide continued to be distributed under the tutelage of his widow and others until 1967.

The "Green Book" was a lifeline for Black sight-seers, listing a variety of safe places to visit while on the road. Black-owned restaurants, hotels, garages, beauty parlors, and night clubs were among the amenities listed for each state. With this guide, Black drivers could rest assured that, as long as they could get to the places found in the "Green Book," they and



their money would be welcomed with open arms.

The chapters in Taylor's book are divided by year, and she blends discussion of what was in the travel guide for that year with what was going on in the country during that time. Taylor traveled the country as part of her research, documenting as many of the remaining Green Book listings as she could. (Many sites are gone or have fallen into disrepair.) Her book brims with photos of some of these places, including a snapshot of each "Green Book" cover.

Taylor talked with many people, including her own stepfather, who reminisced about travel during those turbulent years. It is obvious that it took ingenuity, courage, and a lot of planning for Black travelers to take to the road. The "Green Book," which eventually expanded to include international travel, was a valuable tool for these intrepid drivers.

Taylor's insightful, informative book shows how far we have come in the fight for justice and equality for Black people.

And also just how far we still have to go. **NR**

Overground Railroad: The Green Book and the Roots of Black Travel in America

By Candacy Taylor
Abrams Press
360 pages
\$35.00

Sweet Water in The Deep South

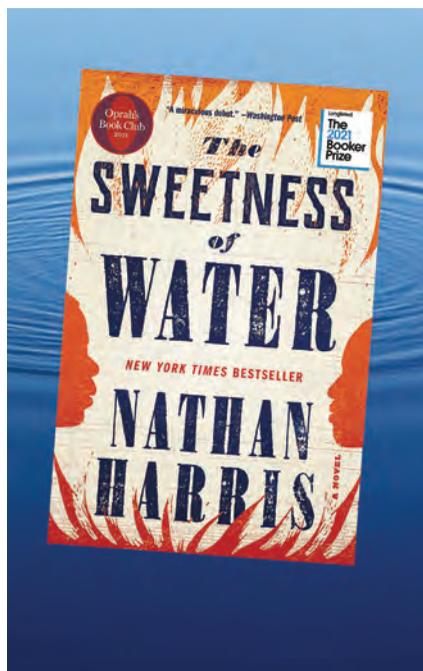
by **FRAN WITHROW**

PICKED UP “THE SWEETNESS of Water” because of the exquisite title, then became spellbound by the beauty of the writing. Lyrical and haunting, Nathan Harris has written a tale about the South just after the Emancipation Proclamation with understated power, pulling the reader into the story with an accomplished hand.

George and Isabelle Walker are transplanted northerners who live on a farm in Georgia. They recently heard that their only son, Caleb, died fighting in the War Between the States. Grieving, George wanders often through the woods of his land, where one day he finds two newly freed Black brothers, Landry and Prentiss, who were enslaved on the adjacent farm prior to being freed. The brothers have been struggling to survive in the forest, hoping to go north. Noticing that these two young men are the same age as his beloved son Caleb, George invites them to live in his barn and help him work his land, a proposition they accept.

When Caleb surprises everyone by returning home alive, he inadvertently sets in motion a cataclysm of events. Meeting his lover in the woods for a tryst one day leads to the murder of a witness. Caleb bravely confesses all to his parents, and the whole family ends up calling for justice, despite resistance from many of the townspeople. Prentiss, devastated by what has happened, stands up to the white sheriff, and the Walker family rallies around him with true courage and integrity. Isabelle, in particular, turns grief into action. Instead of fading into the woodwork, she cleverly finds ways around obstacles, ending up transforming her sorrow into something poignant and meaningful.

This is Harris’ first novel, and his writing is utterly compelling. He brings to life the struggles of Blacks during this turbulent period, as well as the confusion, fear, and anger simmering among the Whites. There is a muted, restrained tone to his prose, a sparseness to the way conversations are written, that actually lends an air of reality to the events of the story. Descriptions



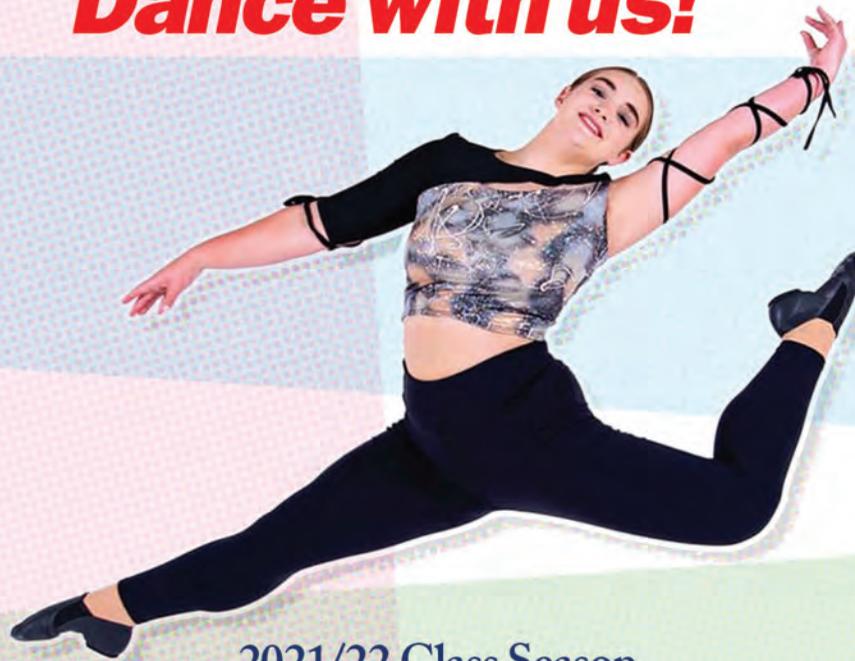
of newly emancipated men and women hiding in woods or huddled in alleys is never maudlin. Even violent events, like the hardships and suffering experienced by Prentiss and Landry before they were freed, are written in a matter of fact way that somehow makes them even more powerful.

The ending of this noteworthy novel is stirring, as Isabelle and George give unstintingly for the cause they champion. All this leads up to a satisfying, heartwarming finale, one as sweet as water.

I love reading the author biographies and looking at their photos on the dust jackets of my books. Harris seems impossibly young to have written such a standout. Though there is a plethora of historical fiction about the Civil War and its aftermath, this one is worth your time. Harris writes with keen insight about the thoughts, motivations, and intentions of both Blacks and Whites during this unsettled era. I expect we have not heard the last from this talented author. **NB**

The Sweetness of Water
By Nathan Harris
Little, Brown, and Company
363 pages
\$28.00

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