

Cox's work provides 'essential experience'

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"Children Under Fire: An American Crisis" by John Woodrow Cox. New York: Ecco (an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers), 2021, 336 pages, \$28.99 (hardcover).

JOHN WOODROW COX
FINALIST FOR THE PULITZER PRIZE

CHILDREN
UNDER FIRE

AN AMERICAN CRISIS



"Gable-roofed chicken houses stood among cow pastures and rolling fields of hay, wheat, corn and soybeans, and everyone shopped at Dollar General, nicknamed the 'Townville Target,' " John Woodrow Cox explains near the beginning of "Children Under Fire: An American Crisis," his in-depth investigation of the impact of gun violence on kids. "It was a world that, in Ava's mind, had always been safe and always would be."

Ava is an 8-year-old who lives in Townsville, S.C.

"That changed one afternoon in late September 2016, when she walked outside her school for recess just as a teenager drove up to the playground in a Dodge Ram, jumped out of the pickup and pointed a gun," Cox writes. "One of the bullets he fired struck 6-year-old Jacob Hall, a classmate whom Ava loved dearly. Three days later, Jacob died. She was so overwhelmed by the loss, and the terror of what she'd witnessed, that a pediatrician later diagnosed her with post-traumatic stress disorder and recommended that the girl be home-schooled. Ava, who was prescribed both antipsychotics and antidepressants, began hitting herself and yanking out her eyelashes."

When a book begins like this, you know you are probably in for a grueling yet somehow essential experience. You are not disappointed on either count.

The manuscript is extensively researched, with 14 pages of source notes after the 16 chapters and epilogue that form the main text. The book is based on a series of articles that initially appeared in The Washington Post (for which Cox was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in feature writing in 2018). One of the aspects of the book that impressed me was the fact that most of the stories were based on personal observations and interviews with hundreds of individuals. The literary style is conversational and captivating; you are literally taken inside the narrative with each installment. And the portrait that eventually emerges is a powerful indictment of our reckless, shockingly irresponsible and ultimately self-serving response to the 15,000 children who have been killed by gun violence over the past decade.

And just in case any of my Second Amendment friends are tempted to run screaming from the room, this is decidedly not a political treatise. It is simply an attempt to illuminate the impact gun violence has on the most vulnerable among us. The focus is not on the promotion of any particular

strategy to deal with the problem or curtail anyone's individual liberties. Cox desperately wants us to understand how children are affected by the events that dominate the news cycle with increasing regularity. He believes there are solutions that can satisfy almost everyone's needs – but first we need to have a collective epiphany based on a visceral awareness of the devastating impact these unfortunate events have on those who do not yet have the capacity to conceptualize and compartmentalize things that are in fact devoid of any satisfactory explanation.

As Cox repeatedly emphasizes, there are dimensions to this phenomenon that extend far beyond the inherent violence that is endemic to these episodes. It doesn't take an actual shooting to potentially inflict a lifetime of trauma on a young child or adolescent, as he notes in "It's More Than Just Protecting Children from Bullet Holes," the 11th chapter:

"School shootings remain rare, even when accounting for the 25 in 2018, a year of historic carnage on K-12 campuses. What's not rare are lockdowns, a hallmark of modern American education and a byproduct of living in a developed country that has prioritized giving so many of its citizens unfettered access to lethal weapons over guaranteeing that children are not shot to death in classrooms 10 or 15 or 20 times a year. Lockdowns save lives during real attacks, but even when there is no gunman stalking the hallways, the procedures can take a considerable emotional toll, and the number of children who have experienced these ordeals is extraordinary."

An enterprise reporter (staff writer) at the Washington Post, Cox's resume includes stints with the Tampa Bay Times and the Valley News in New Hampshire. He attended the University of Florida, earning a B.S. in journalism as well as an M.S. in management. Moreover, he has taught narrative writing for U.F.'s College of Journalism and Communications and currently serves on the Department of Journalism's Advisory Council. His accolades include winning the Scripps Howard's Ernie Pyle Award for humanistic storytelling, the Dart Award for excellence in coverage of trauma, and the Columbia Journalism School's Meyer "Mike" Berger Award for human-interest reporting.

Another characteristic of Cox's prose that lends an aura of credibility is his comprehensive knowledge of history. He is able to connect what is currently happening in the United States and elsewhere with similar events that have happened in the past, this providing a much-needed context that is always essential to accurate interpretation. Consider the following from "I Cannot Promise You That It Will Be Easy," the 15th chapter:

"Finding purpose, along with support from caring adults, has helped sustain thousands of children who've endured violence, including survivors of war and genocide. Two decades ago, Roberta R. Greene, then a professor at the Indiana University School of Social Work, interviewed 13 Holocaust survivors and reviewed more than three dozen studies that explored their lives. What mattered most to children who'd lived through the Holocaust, Greene learned, was not so different from what mattered to kids who'd experienced mass shootings on their campuses or the gunning down of a parent. Faith and family, supportive peers and teachers, all had an impact, as did, time and again, what the children made of their experiences."

This is an important book that should be required reading for anyone who has, or cares about, kids – which ideally includes all of us. I'm not sure what Cox's competition was for the Pulitzer Prize, but I can't imagine the subject matter was more captivating – or more gut-wrenching – than "Children Under Fire." Make time to check this one out. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.