

THE KIDS AREN'T ALRIGHT

REVIEW BY MIKE WOLD

CHRIS URQUHART, a 22-year-old recent graduate of McGill University, had her life changed when she went to a Rainbow Gathering in New Mexico in 2009. She was working on an article about homeless teenagers with her photographer friend, Kitra Cahana. What she found started her on a three-year career of dropping in and out of the “traveler” or “nomad” youth subculture. This book is part embedded journalism and part memoir, a hybrid that will likely leave the reader disappointed on both counts.

The most interesting aspect of “Dirty Kids” is that it gives a ground-level, worm’s-eye view of various cultural events and subcultures that promote a kind of anti-consumerist, socially accepting alternative to mainstream society, in which it is possible to live on very little money, share whatever you have and challenge your hang-ups about gender, possessions, hygiene, nudity, personal space and security. The “nomads” of the title, the majority gay or transsexual, many of them kicked out of their childhood homes, move around the country from event to event, hitching rides or begging gas from gas station customers, attracted by free food and an atmosphere of tolerance at many of the locations, and by the expectation of reuniting with other friends in the subculture.

Urquhart’s first couple of chapters about her experience at the Rainbow Gathering set the stage for her quest for authentic community and ecstatic experience. The quest is sometimes satisfied, but often disappointed in the rest of the book, as she attends a couple of Burning Man events, regional Rainbow Gatherings, a punk festival in Detroit and a protest encampment of mostly trans women outside the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. She crashes at various communal houses and squats between events.

In the process, she starts to come apart. Suffering from unexplained mental illness (indicated by references to meds she’s supposed to take and to at least one previous stay in an institution), she becomes increasingly anxious, an anxiety that seems understandably fed by not knowing when she’ll eat, where she’ll sleep or whether she can trust the people she’s traveling with. She very quickly loses journalistic distance.

Urquhart was initially attracted to the traveler subculture partly because it seemed a place where she could act crazy and still be accepted. She wonders early on if she could just stop taking her meds without anyone noticing. Very soon, though, she starts worrying that she’s not ever going to be accepted by the people around her because she’s a reporter and someone who has a parental home to go back to. It doesn’t help that Cahana, her frequent companion, seems to move in and out of the subculture effortlessly while keeping her boundaries intact.

Perhaps it’s this loss of distance, or perhaps it’s the strict chronological order of chapters (rather than, say, arranging the material by topic), that starts to make the narrative seem increasingly repetitive, an ongoing round of rough living and random connection punctuated by Urquhart’s increasing mental instability, which itself is intensified by a couple of bad drug trips. After a while, the reader may start to long for more context, whether it’s statistical (how many people are living this lifestyle?); structural (what do the organizers of Burning Man or the Rainbow Gatherings have to say about these young people?); or historical (what are the families and places like that they came from?). Urquhart, who is Canadian, presents this as an American phenomenon. Isn’t there a subculture like this in Canada too? In addition, while there’s not much discussion of race, the subculture appears to be mainly White. Why is this?

The real movement of Urquhart’s narrative is her gradual breakdown. The book doesn’t work well as a memoir because



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we only catch glimpses of who she is outside of the events she’s reporting on — mostly as side comments about her economic privilege relative to most of her subjects. Given her growing discomfort and anxiety, it also becomes difficult to understand her continuing attraction to traveler life.

The muted reaction of her traveler friends to her difficulties, including one life-threatening drug overdose, makes the acceptance she finds there seem very close to indifference and the freedom she seeks not that different from the freedom we have in the rest of consumer society — in which it’s every person for themselves.

In an epilogue, Urquhart, who decided the traveling life wasn’t for her, writes about why it continues to attract her:

“With the world crumbling around us, it’s liberating to move fast, to get lost, to feel the ground underfoot. When you’re slow, and still enough, you can feel your skin burning, your eyes turning; you can see all the memories you’d rather forget. ...You learn how to be fully present — profoundly present — in the good times, and you move forward when things go south.”

Eloquent as this passage is, its substance isn’t supported by Urquhart’s narrative; if it had been, it would have been a more compelling book. ■

Review courtesy of Real Change News

SO YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT RACE

REVIEW BY S.E. FLEENOR

IN HER BOOK “So You Want to Talk About Race,” author Ijeoma Oluo tackles more than one could think possible in a 238-page book. Each chapter is framed as an answer to a question. The overall goal is for readers to finish the book with a better understanding of how to talk about, respond to, and combat racism.

In a country so divided that we can’t even agree on the same set of non-alternative facts, how on Earth are we going to talk about race? Well, Oluo just so happens to have some thoughts on that.

Using anecdotes, research, and helpful tips and exercises that help bring home big concepts, Oluo guides the reader through difficult or under-discussed issues that impact life in the U.S. The book covers various controversial and important topics, including: affirmative action, the “n” word, police brutality, and cultural appropriation.

Oluo acknowledges that the tone of this book is more serious than much of her writing, which is typically infused with wit and sarcasm, but she has set a serious goal for herself. Opening race dialogue and learning in our country is no small feat. She is brutally honest, while being incredibly thoughtful and, at times, even gentle with the ignorance and fear many white people have when discussing race. She never allows the reader to forget, though, that it is people of color

who suffer under racism and that examining and discussing race is not the same as living in a racist society as a person of color.

Somehow, “So You Want to Talk About Race” is simultaneously “Race for Dummies” and a philosophical treatise on oppression. There are so many layers to the narrative that readers may find themselves encouraged and challenged in the same chapter, or even in the same sentence. While the book directly addresses both white readers and readers who are people of color, Oluo has been vocal about her hopes that the book will affirm and support people of color even as it pushes white people to become more engaged in social and racial justice.

Oluo breaks down common terms used by the “woke” crowd that can be alienating or confusing to the newly awakened. She does so without being condescending, while reaffirming the importance of these topics, which include: microaggressions, “checking” your privilege, intersectionality, the school-to-prison pipeline, and tone policing.

There are instances in the book, such as when she recalls talking with her white mother about race, where you can almost feel the act of excavation that digs up old wounds and lays bare Oluo’s fight for freedom.

“As uncomfortable as this conversation was, it needed to happen,” writes Oluo. “The initial discussion led to a very long talk about race and identity and the differences between being a white mother who has loved and lived with black people, and being an actual black person who experiences the full force of a white supremacist society firsthand.”

Oluo doesn’t back down from hard moments in conversation and the same can be said for the book. However, even in the moments of unabashed calling for accountability, the narrative reads as a labor of love carved out of Oluo’s own flesh.

Her goal is not to have the final word on talking about race and justice, but rather to open the door for future generations. She reminds us, “No matter what our intentions, everything we say and do in the pursuit of justice will one day be outdated, ineffective, and yes, probably wrong.”

Two of the most refreshing and unique aspects of Oluo’s work are: one, the fact that intersectionality is a guidepost for her and, two, she doesn’t shy away from reflecting on the omissions that have been present in her own work.

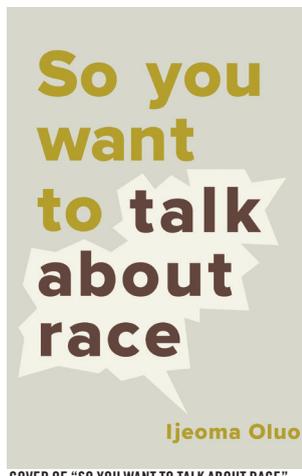
She challenges even the “wokest” readers to think about the ways in which our movements fail to consider the whole human—not solely the woman Oluo is, not solely the black person Oluo is, not solely the queer person Oluo is, but the black queer woman who must live in the white supremacist patriarchy. Oluo demands that we do the same for all people, taking into consideration how, for example, disabled black women are impacted, or forgotten, by our social justice movements.

In chapter fourteen, Oluo reflects on how her work has neglected to include Asian-Americans as whole people. She doesn’t just do this superficially or flippantly. She reflects on the ways Black and Asian Americans have been pitted against one

another by white supremacy before dedicating the rest of the chapter to dispelling the myth of the model minority, a harmful stereotype.

Go pick up “So You Want to Talk About Race.” You won’t regret it. White readers will find answers to many of the questions we might be afraid to ask. Readers who are people of color will find their experiences seen, heard, and believed. All readers will find themselves enraptured in this heartfelt, powerful narrative.

Her final chapter is dedicated to the types of action readers can take to dismantle the racist and classist systems that keep people of color oppressed. Oluo’s conclusion is surprisingly hopeful: “We can do this, together.” ■



COVER OF “SO YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT RACE”