



# Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America

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## **Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America** Jonathan Kozol

The story that jolted the conscience of the nation when it first appeared in *The New Yorker*

Jonathan Kozol is one of America's most forceful and eloquent observers of the intersection of race, poverty, and education. His books, from the National Book Award-winning *Death at an Early Age* to his most recent, the critically acclaimed *Shame of the Nation*, are touchstones of the national conscience. First published in 1988 and based on the months the author spent among America's homeless, *Rachel and Her Children* is an unforgettable record of the desperate voices of men, women, and especially children caught up in a nightmarish situation that tears at the hearts of readers. With record numbers of homeless children and adults flooding the nation's shelters, *Rachel and Her Children* offers a look at homelessness that resonates even louder today.

## **Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America Details**

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Author : Jonathan Kozol

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# **From Reader Review Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America for online ebook**

## **Eric says**

My wife suggested I read this book to balance some of my reading of Ayn Rand and Ron Paul and other free market proponents and constitutionalists. I am a strong believer in individualism and generally speaking, philosophy or policy based in collectivist reasoning does not resonate with me.

Having said that, on to my review... first, I thought the title was a little misleading. I thought this book was all about the story of Rachel and Her Children. While Kozol documents his dialogues with her, the book is not centered on this family. The book gives many different homeless people and families a voice to be heard. Kozol used the book to document their words and their feelings on their situation and place in society. Whether the opinions of the homeless are right or not is up to the reader to judge although the author strongly supports them.

Kozol states, "the purpose of this book is to attest to their existence [sad realities of homeless life:], to give witness to the toll they take upon the children of the dispossessed, and to pay tribute to the dignity, the courage, and the strength with which so many parents manage to hold up beneath the truly terrifying problems they confront." The author succeeds in doing this very well.

However, he inevitably oversteps his own stated purpose of the book by 1) vilifying all levels of govt and society in general throughout the book (actually calling them "terrorists" at one point) and 2) recommending numerous collectivist solutions to solve the problem of homelessness mostly in the form of bigger government.

Kozol undermines his own case though because he has a blatant double standard. He makes considerable effort passing judgement and shaming the collective govt and public for their behavior but he NEVER considered addressing the individual behavior (within their control) that led many of the homeless to their current state of affairs. His double standard weakens the subjective parts of the book, i.e. his own opinions.

I think this book, in part, did for me what my wife was hoping it would do; evoke sympathy and elicit compassion for those homeless individuals that are worthy of it (not all are in my opinion). In the end however, I feel like this book is a monument to the failure of collectivism and actually bolsters the philosophy of individualism. He actually says on p 183, "we have failed." Well of course "we" have failed. Human history has proven in extraordinary detail that collectivist philosophy always fails in the end. The answer lies in individuals.

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## **kelly says**

I love Jonathan Kozol. He is so widely read in the field of education that you can't really call yourself an expert or scholar of education or human services unless you've read his work. I've read several Kozol's books and it's always a pleasure to read them: "Death at an Early Age," "Amazing Grace," and "Fire in the Ashes," just to name a few. His books are like sitting down for a lecture with your favorite professor, only it's not a lecture, they're stories and facts as he collects them first hand out in the field.

This book is particularly heartbreaking. It was written in 1987 at the height of Reagan's notorious cutbacks on social services, but my God...it could have been yesterday. The topic of this book are the homeless residents of a welfare hotel in NYC in the early 80's, a crumbling, crime-filled building where the homeless are herded together and forced to endure miserable conditions, and, due to all kinds of bureaucracy, are promptly forgotten about. I love the way Kozol gives these people and their children a voice. The resilience of these people in the face of such odds is truly amazing.

I read "Fire in the Ashes" first and this book second, which I don't advise. Kozol's "Fire in the Ashes" follows up with several of the stories of the families from this book 25 years later. Definitely read this one first, it makes the continuation way more enjoyable.

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### **Eric says**

Written in 1987, this book that made people aware of housing the homeless is a tough read. The subject matter and the interview style aside, it seems to present only one facet of why the people are homeless, which he claims late in the book, "is not the issue" for his writing. Through his interviewees, he brings light to plight of people who have no voice. People who are left without water, food, and basic rights. Kozol is illustrating how homelessness affects people (children especially), the political discourse during the Reagan years, and how the label of "homelessness" shapes my (our) prejudice toward people who still need to be seen as human.

I was hoping to hear beyond the tales of heartache and health, all of which are terrible to happen to anyone. The tales are made more difficult to digest when Kozol talks about NY budgets, payments to landlords, and the bureaucracy that hinders any real solution in an efficient way. This may prove his point, but I grew tired of the interviews, which followed the same look and feel. I did find myself asking "why?" Why are they in the situation? Why is NY paying so much for such acts?

Maybe that is where the rest of us are to take up arms? Ask these questions for ourselves. Be involved. He does not strike me as being too sympathetic, if indeed one can be with any population that suffers, but he does not seem to ask those questions for each group.

I have thought how people end up in a shelter, homeless - I figured it was love. Love has saved me from being on a street. Finishing this book, I wonder if instead of handing people money it might change something if we actually take them to eat, sit with them, and listen.

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### **Caitlin Vaille says**

This was my first nonfiction book, and I wasn't disappointed. My eyes were opened to so many things, and the amount of sympathy I felt for these people is unparalleled

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## **Angel says**

I was reading this when I was attending the National Writing Project. Here is what I wrote in my journal back then:

>>It was one of the most infuriating and outrageous books I have read. Kozol is very able to illuminate how humanity can allow humanity to suffer through indifference and lack of compassion. The stories of homeless children simply wrench your heart as the reader is angered by the way in which the government bureaucracy simply allows people to live in subhuman conditions.

Kozol shatters the stereotype of the homeless as bums, people uneducated who have nothing to offer. As it turns out, many of these homeless were well-employed people who were hit by tragedy; loss of job, divorce, illness can all combine to bring any of us to an EAU (Emergency Assistance Unit) in search of a shelter. This is the most scary aspect of Kozol's book, the ease with which any of us can fall into homelessness. However, it does not end there.

Kozol provides specific stories of homeless families, of children who are basically allowed to die while the wheels of bureaucracy slowly grind. He also writes of those who profit from human misery and of the overburdened heroes struggling to restore some humanity to those whom the system views mostly as a number-a social security number, a Medicare number, a welfare case number, a bed in a shelter number, a body bound for Potter's Field number.

While the book was written in the 80s, all the reader needs to do is watch or read the news to see the situation has not changed. Thus the book is just as relevant today as it was a decade ago. The fact that the situation remains the same serves to validate his assessment that this country does not view homelessness as a crisis but as something to be swept under the rug. Overall, I found the book to be an eye-opener, a necessary piece of reading not just for activists but for each of us.<<

I wrote that in my journal a little over ten years ago, and it is scary to see now that the book is still relevant, maybe more so now. Sad however is the fact that no politician in the upcoming 2008 election even seems to have any idea about the issue or even be concerned about it. I have gone on to read and enjoy Kozol's other books. Infuriating at times, yes, but worth reading.

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## **Anna says**

Though I have studied genocide for years this is one of the hardest to get through books I have ever read. I couldn't get through it without crying, and though I loved the book, I almost dreading picking it up for how sad it made me. Kozol documents in painstaking detail the suffering of the oppressed and homeless in the United States, and with every horrific step shows the absurdity and hypocrisy of the systems that keep them in destitution. The evils of bureaucracy and American political corruption have never been so well documented. I can only hope these systems have been improved since this book was written - it is almost unbearable to imagine that they have not. I am about to begin working with homeless addicts, and I am so grateful to have read this book which so carefully humanizes the homeless and puts face and depth to their suffering. Walking around the city I can no longer look at the homeless the same way, and I hope this book will help me stay compassionate throughout my work.

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## Ari says

Perhaps THE iconic book on familial urban homelessness in the 1980s. At a moment when street homelessness among single adults was receiving a lot of public and scholarly attention, Kozol changed the conversation by focusing on homeless families, who comprised the majority of homeless people in New York City. In *Rachel and Her Children*, Kozol profiles some of these families, describing the circumstances that led to their homelessness, the filthy, unsafe conditions of the overpriced hotels in which they live, and the near-impossible struggle parents and children must endure to navigate a governmental system that, Kozol argues, is designed more to punish than to assist the very poor.

The string of personal narratives that comprise the majority of this book becomes almost exhausting to read. Kozol details again and again the appalling conditions of hotels like the Martinique, where the city paid thousands of dollars per family per month to house women and children (men were not permitted to reside in most of these hotels, one of the many cruel and inexplicable city policies that made life both strategically more difficult and emotionally more painful for these families). He discusses with great sympathy the terrible, absurd logic that governs most of these families' lives: that the City will pay tens of thousands of dollars more per year for a family to live in a rat-infested, heatless hotel than it will for a family to live in an apartment of its own; that it separates family members from one another, making shelter and welfare eligibility dependent upon single parenthood; that if parents reject such poor shelter and have no place else to go, the City can remove children on the grounds of "abuse and neglect." This is proof, he argues, that the system is broken: not just the system of government services that provides such "help," but the broader socio-political system that shames rather than supports poor people and makes it so very difficult for them to extricate themselves from poverty.

Kozol is calling for a more just and humane system of aid, and a more just and humane society—one that, perhaps, does not allow its people to reach such an abysmal state of being in the first place. He never provides many more specifics about how to produce this change, nor does he spend much space documenting the confluence of historical factors, including job loss, housing market inflation, and Federal and State funding cuts, that helped cause the crisis of housing in New York City. But he does what he does well, creating a terribly compelling portrayal of homeless families in dire need not of more research, bureaucratic supervision, or moral posturing, but immediate change.

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## Karolína says

I know absolutely nothing about the situation of poor families in America so this book was very interesting to me. I understand the author was trying to show, that not all poor people, that ended up on welfare, are these lazy drug addicts that never worked and never will, however I feel like he almost "romanticized" the characters, whose stories he described. The book was written almost 2 decades ago, so I really hope the situation of homeless families in USA is better. No child deserves to live in the conditions described in this book and my hart broke for the children dying from lead poisoning, unsufficient health-care and those so hungry, they cant focus at school. It does open your eyes a little bit, especially before the holiday season now, when i think most of us are bit more sensitive to those less fortunate. Good book!

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## **Kay says**

An important work on family homelessness, though I've always found Kozol's work to show a residual disdain for the poor--too many lurid details shared in a casual manner.

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## **Lynn says**

Rachel and Her Children was published in 1988 and based on events around Christmas 1985 when Jonathan Kozol decided to take a look at the Martinique Hotel where 3 floors were reserved for families who were homeless. In 1980, the federal government followed by state governments, began heavily cutting the social safety nets for the poor. Before that, the financial sports had remained stagnant since 1975 due to a recession. Parents who had often worked long term jobs found themselves out of work as businesses closed or they got sick, etc. NYC had really no plans regarding the homeless and were thrust into action from court order to court order. Kozol was great at giving a face to the homeless suffering and spurred a bit of a movement to help them. The crisis eased a bit in the 1990s as the economy improved but in the last few years cities are backtracking at any commitments to the homeless and the poor. A great book!

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## **Mollie Feltman says**

I appreciated the political perspective and the setting.

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## **Grace frasco says**

The purpose of the book, Rachel and Her Children written by Jonathon Kozol is to make people aware of homelessness in the United States and its effect on families, but mostly children and the community. The author interviews all kinds of people living at The Hotel Martinique in New York City.

The theme of the book is that homelessness happens to all kinds of people. Sometimes when you see a homeless person, you can think that the person is bad and they deserve to be homeless. This book makes you understand that good people are also homeless. There are so many homeless people living in the United States and we should try and help them better than we are doing right now.

I think the author used several styles when writing this book. It was a description of the homelessness population in New York around 1985. The author used narration by telling stories of the homeless people and how they became homeless. He also used argument by giving facts about a topic to help the reader understand how bad homeless is.

The book was very sad. It made me think how lucky I am to have a house and be healthy. It was sad because sometimes people have to wait a long time to get into a shelter. Then sometimes even when they can get into the shelter they don't want to live there because other people steal their stuff and there is a lot of sicknesses in the shelter and they don't want to catch the sickness. Homeless people always scared me before but after

reading this book I know that some of them are really nice people and it's not their fault they lost their homes.

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### **Natasha Polak says**

I read this book after wanting to find a good book about homelessness, so that in my monthly prayer group I could be more mindful when I prayed on that topic. From the moment I started reading it, I couldn't tear myself away! Yes, the data was from a good few decades ago, but what happened when I was reading was that it made me recall how I remembered my local community back then, the economic struggles, my first time ever seeing "bag ladies" rummaging through trash cans, and things like that. I could better understand from reading the results of poorly managed shelters how desperate the downtrodden could become, and did.

I appreciated the author's accounts of speaking with so many people from different walks of life, who all ended up homeless, and in despair, even if they had jobs. It was a depressing book at times, made me cry and want to go right the world, but at the end of the day, it was an eye-opening read that I think everyone needs to read if ever they hope to be in non-profits or to even just help out their local church's community outreach endeavors. I honestly couldn't put the book down, or stop talking about its points with my friends!

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### **Liz says**

Excellent excellent excellent. Compelling. Eye opening. Disheartening. Even though it was written in the 80s, the facts remain true (if not worse) today. When will it end?

I would HIGHLY recommend this book to anyone struggling to understand homelessness or wanting to understand the struggles of homeless families!!

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### **Peacegal says**

3.5 stars -- RACHEL AND HER CHILDREN is a look at the bleak prospects for families living in "long-term residence" hotels, particularly in the New York City of the 1980s. The irresponsibility and outright cruelty of state and federal-level politicians is examined, as well as ways in which the bizarre behavior of various agencies and charities help keep these individuals in dire straits.

There is a lot of talk of the future in this book, a lot of questioning whether future generations will be prideful of the 1980s' cold and cruel way of dealing with others and focus only upon personal wealth and success. A section is even titled, "Looking ahead to the year 2000." Well, writing from "the future," I doubt the authors would be very pleased. While I imagine many of the individual "fleabag hotels" profiled in this book long ago fell to the wrecking ball, tent cities of the homeless along riverbanks and under overpasses are a common sight even in small towns like mine. And with the election of one of NYC's most infamous symbols of wealth and excess to the Oval Office, America has reaffirmed that coldness and heartlessness is the way we want to define ourselves.

In a common yet uninformed analogy, the book offers this quote: *"We have a more efficient system in the US*

*to deal with stray pets,” says New York Congressman Ted Weiss, “than we have for homeless human beings.”* Well, of course we do, as domestic animals are completely reliant upon direct human care for their entire lives, and are moreover considered property in the eyes of the law. Adult human beings are autonomous persons. Moreover, in the 1970s and 80s the animal control system primarily functioned to capture and destroy stray animals; adoption rates were low and spay/neuter was still something most pet owners didn’t do. The number of animals both entering shelters and being destroyed was significantly higher than it is today. If homeless shelters took in people, held them for a short period, and then either euthanized or sold them to research, Mr. Weiss, then indeed they would have functioned as efficiently as the animal systems you’re cluelessly comparing them to.

The author’s interviews indicate that not all of the residents of the homeless hotels are the addicted and mentally ill, as many would assume. There are families headed by college graduates; people who until recently held full-time jobs. Then a catastrophic event, such as a health emergency, a natural disaster, or job loss completely wiped out everything they owned. It could happen to anyone. I noted that most of the couples in this situation had multiple young children. For me personally, that’s yet another reason to choose childfree: In the event of a catastrophic loss, the constant financial demands of dependent children, as well as the need for childcare, will keep pulling your head underwater and make it extremely difficult to save even a little money or find steady employment. Some interviewees even had babies born after losing their homes and finances. This isn’t terribly surprising, as those who cannot even secure reliable meals aren’t going to have access to reliable birth control. Children born to the homeless are at far greater risk of early death, stunted mental and physical development and even show symptoms of PTSD.

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## **Monique says**

What drew me to Jonathan Kozol's book was his attempt to understanding the plight of those who find themselves homeless. The author highlights the roles the government, institutions, everyday people, homeless organizations, and society play into the issue. Most important I grateful that he look beyond the numbers and his own disillusion with the homeless to know actual homeless people.

This book is not full of fake optimism or preachy advocacy. I found this interesting because I consider myself very interested and involved with several activist issues. Yes, I like advocacy and optimism.

However, this book confronts the raw, ugly, and fearful part of homeless - not just for those who are in it but for others who observe it as well.

I think everyone should read this book. I believe we will find that we hold unrealistic, uncompassionate, and misconceptions of all those who are homeless. We could try to deny these feelings or thoughts. We could become frustrated. We could become hateful to those who are homeless and take it out on them. We could, we have, and we have the control to stop this.

I beleive that we need to wake up to the issue and raise the consciousness of our society. Do not treat the syptoms only but the cause of homeless. The work is both urgent and slow. If we try small steps we can create the momentum needed to address this very important issue.

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## Angela says

A raw, enraged scream of a book. This is an "activist journalist" account of a bunch of homeless families living in a hellhole called the Hotel Martinique, in 1980s New York City. By the Kafka-esque nightmares of modern American capitalism and bureaucracy, the government (a) pays \$3000/month to house a family in a couple of cockroach-infested rooms, (b) allows homeless families a voucher of \$270/month for rent in Section 8 housing, while (c) the absolute lowest 1980s NYC rents start at about \$400. It is INFURIATING.

It's also tragic, and perverse. I've been lately thinking about how anti-social and anti-human our "corporate-first" American mentality is: women musn't have choices over how and when they have children, women and men musn't take more than a few weeks off to raise their newborns, the individual (and only the individual) is to blame for their poverty, and charity (Christian charity!) to the poor is "rebranded" as an "entitlement" that is blowing up our budget (while military spending, of course, is never questioned). Government's job is only to "keep us safe" (whatever that means), anything else is too much.

Anyway, so this book was written in the 1980s, during the Reagan years; another time when this anti-human corporo-theocracy was ascendant and Jonathan Kozol, the author, makes no bones about pointing an angry finger straight at the then-President. Chapters detailing the living conditions of these poor families, their hopes and dreams and fears, are interspersed with descriptions of Federal and state policies. If anything, the policy landscape around homelessness is irrational and, often, worse than nothing: it's a hodge-podge mix of efforts to address specific outrages uncovered by the media, and efforts to hide the problem and hope it just goes away.

That's the most heartbreaking parts of the book: when Kozol, and the poor families, understand a core truth about their situation - that the government policies aren't actually meant to help them, they're meant to HIDE them, and that there's an honest hope that they just go away/disappear/die off. Absolutely infuriating. Highly recommended, though this also needs to be updated! I spent a lot of the book wondering what was the same and what had changed in the last 30 years.

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## Ellen says

3.5 stars

Excellent reporting and still relevant today. Important subject.

I would have liked to have seen some of the individuals' stories more fully developed, but that won't stop me from reading more of his work.

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## Geoffrey Bateman says

Re-reading this book for a class I'm teaching this fall, and I just have to say how relevant and important this book remains, despite it being written in the mid-1980s and published in 1988. It's sad to think that as a country we have yet to really address homelessness on a systemic and structural level, and it's tragic that we seem to have to continue to learn the lessons of this book anew. But as long as we continue to need to educate people on the realities of homelessness and cultivate a much deeper understanding of it and the people who experience it, I fear this book will continue to be relevant. As a teaching tool, it works especially well to help students see the invisible realities that parents and children face when experiencing

homelessness or living in poverty.

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## **Liesl says**

I read this book based on a recommendation from Grant Lyons my sophomore year of high school in 1994. Yes, I did not read it until 2006, but I had it filed away as a "want-to-read" on my list :) This book provides a look into the trap and cycle of poverty in America. Times have definitely changed since it was written this book was written in 1987, but the fundamentals have not. The impossible, seemingly unbreakable cycle of homelessness is still here, just a few generations deeper and I believe even easier to become trapped. I am not blindly sympathetic to any person who falls on hard times --- we all must take accountability for our actions --- but I do think as a society we need to focus on how to raise people up, especially our children and elderly. I recommend this book to interested citizen who want to make our country stronger. I would reread this book.

"A society reveals its reverence or contempt for history by the respect or disregard that it displays for older people. The way we treat out children tells us something of our moral disposition too."

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