

**Children of War.** Roger Rosenblatt. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1983, 212 pages, \$13.95.

*Reviewed by Mark Senak, The Institute of Mind and Behavior*

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*Children of War* is an attempt by Roger Rosenblatt, a Senior writer for *Time* magazine, to construct a portrait of the most helpless victims of war—children. In addition, he seeks to answer the overwhelming questions of why wars exist at all, who makes them, and for what reasons. While this lofty ideal cannot be successfully or substantively addressed in the two hundred pages that constitute this book, *Children of War* does offer an insight into the conditions of war through the eyes of children; this insight is vivid, apparently accurate, and compelling. The author felt that if it were possible to obtain any answers at all to his questions on war, it would be from children, because “children are vitally important to adults. One way or another, most grown-ups wish to say something to the world by speaking to or through their children; and the children, as objects of this desire, are in a strong position to know what the world is like.”

To discover what the world is like, then, Rosenblatt visited with, or interviewed, children of five troubled areas of the world: Belfast, Israel, Lebanon, Cambodia, and Vietnam. He chose these places on the basis of current turmoil and a history of war in one form or another for nearly 20 years, conditions which had, therefore, produced an entire generation of children at war.

It was the author's ideal goal to learn from these children “where and why violence grows in the heart.” Unfortunately, this is an aspiration too lofty for this type of book and this type of journalism, and the author had no illusions about the fact that the questions he posed could not be answered either by him or the children he met. This is not an in-depth psychological or sociological study. The author travelled for brief periods of time in each country, and he visited and met with relatively few children, informing the reader about even fewer. However, the book is a fascinating and well-written journalistic account of his travels through war-torn societies. Though at times it reads like a *Time* magazine mega-story, its real value is in giving the reader the opportunity to see, if even ephemerally, the world as it is seen through the eyes of people who have the greatest reason to be critical.

All of the children we meet in the book have been deprived of their childhoods. They are daily acquainted with the destruction and death of their neighbors, homes, and families. From the small Irish boy in Belfast who witnessed his own father's murder, to the shelling of a northern Israeli settlement, to the massacre of Palestinians, to the slaughter of families in Cambodia, to the butchering of children by Vietnamese, childhood is being obliterated and devoured by the irrationality of adult struggles for power. Yet children, those who would seem to be least apt and least equipped with sophistication to understand, are shown here to be perhaps those who can make the most sense out of their environments.

Rosenblatt posed a set of questions to the children he interviewed, questions which varied only slightly from place to place. The answers he received to his questions were so entirely gratifying and utterly profound, such rational answers, that one cannot help but wonder whether Rosenblatt's own optimism or fortitude entered into his results.

Questions put to brutally treated children, such as "Do you want revenge?" brought such responses as "Against whom?". Rosenblatt's question "Have you lost your faith in God?" received the quiet answer: "Not in God, in man." In the Orient, the author discovered that several of the children did indeed want revenge, but they then defined revenge as leading better lives, or as making life better for others. Last, there were brands of children who had not made some quiet sense of war, but who did indeed want eye-for-eye and tooth-for-tooth revenge. It is these children who have irrevocably lost their childhoods and who, when they are adults, will perpetuate that which oppressed them.

However, the overwhelming theme that emerges from the interviews is that while these children have spent their lives watching adults destroy one another, and ofttimes other children, rather than becoming products of their environments they have made willing, adult-like decisions that they do not want to continue this way of life. They are acutely aware that a better life exists, in spite of the fact that they have never experienced it first hand. They are a living definition of hope.

It is for this that *Children of War* is worth reading. The book discovers hope in the hopeless, and it is ultimately a story of the triumph of human spirit over tragedy. The Spanish proverb "Living well is the best revenge" is given life by this book.

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