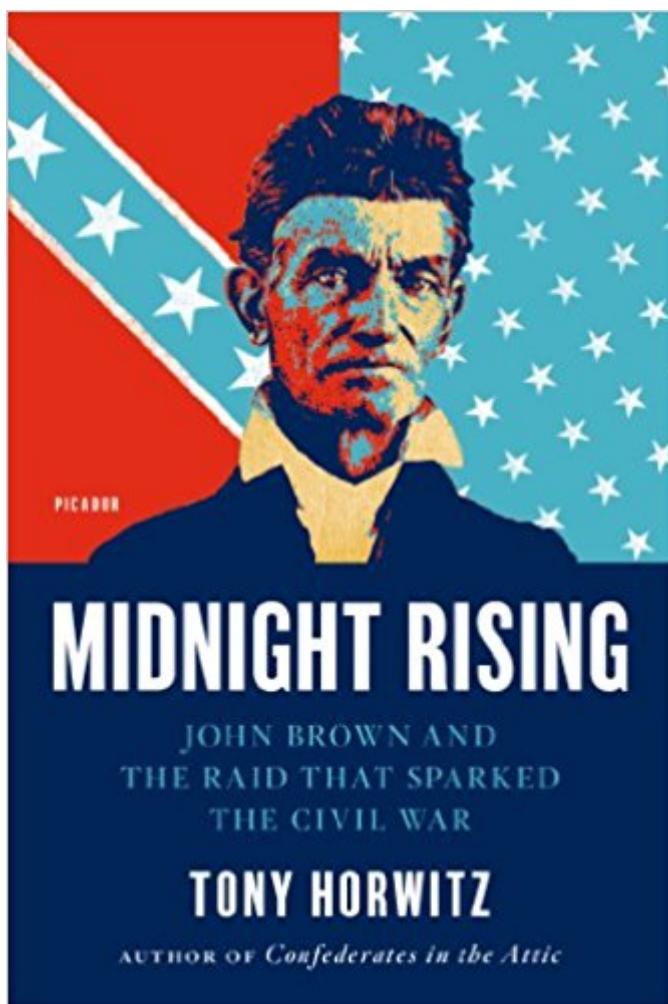


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# Midnight Rising: John Brown And The Raid That Sparked The Civil War



## Synopsis

A New York Times Notable Book for 2011A Library Journal Top Ten Best Books of 2011A Boston Globe Best Nonfiction Book of 2011Late on the night of October 16, 1859, John Brown launched a surprise raid on the slaveholding South. Leading a biracial band of militant idealists, he seized the massive armory at Harpers Ferry, freed and armed slaves, and vowed to liberate every bondsman in America.Brown's daring strike sparked a savage street fight and a counterattack by U.S. Marines under Robert E. Lee. The bloodshed and court drama that followed also shocked a divided nation and propelled it toward civil war. Tony Horwitz's *Midnight Rising* brings Brown and his uprising vividly to life and charts America's descent into explosive conflict. The result is a taut and indispensable history of a man and a time that still resonate in our own.

## Book Information

Paperback: 384 pages

Publisher: Picador; Reprint edition (August 7, 2012)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0312429266

ISBN-13: 978-0312429263

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 1 x 0.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 188 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #59,599 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #42 in Books > History > Americas > United States > Civil War > Abolition #48 in Books > History > Americas > United States > Civil War > Campaigns & Battlefields #74 in Books > History > Americas > United States > African Americans

## Customer Reviews

“A hard-driving narrative of one of America’s most troubling figures” Horwitz describes the disaster in riveting terms. It’s impossible to read this fine book without thinking about modern-day Browns. Kevin Boyle, *The New York Times Book Review* (a New York Times Notable Book, 2011) “Horwitz’s skills are a good match for this enormously compelling character, and his well-paced narrative incorporates masterful sketches of Brown’s family, foot soldiers, financial backers, admirers and prosecutors.” The result is both page-turning and heartbreakingly a book to engage mind and soul. “The Boston Globe” Horwitz, an exceptionally skilled and accomplished journalist, here turns his hand to

pure history with admirable results. *Midnight Rising* is smoothly written, thoroughly researched, places Brown within the context of his time and place, and treats him sensitively but scarcely adoringly. (The Washington Post, Best of 2011, Notable Work of Nonfiction) "Midnight Rising is a richly detailed and engaging history." Horwitz's moment-by-moment account of the doomed raid unfolds with such immediacy that he reintroduces suspense to a story we all know from textbooks. (The San Francisco Chronicle) "Horwitz describes guerrilla action and the run-up to war with a deadline writer's immediacy." A brilliant researcher, he integrates diverse sources into a cogent adventure. (The Washington Times) "What do you call John Brown? Is he a terrorist or a freedom fighter? ... Tony Horwitz settles upon the word insurgent -- and the label seems just right, as does Horwitz's book as a whole." *Midnight Rising* rolls through a series of indelible scenes. The book becomes a graceful narrative, ever engaging, with the reader allowed to connect Brown and his contemporaries to conflicts that continue to our day. (Seattle Times) "In captivating detail, Horwitz animates the wild-eyed, long-bearded crusader . . . Make no mistake, the infamous October 1859 raid on the federal armory at Harpers Ferry by John Brown and his 18 men was the stone that began the avalanche that became the Civil War." (The Cleveland Plain Dealer) "A brave and highly successful attempt to revive the legend of Brown's martyrdom for the 21st century reader." Horwitz's vivid writing style makes for a superb historical narrative. (Buffalo News) "A beautifully crafted, richly detailed, and riveting narrative of a pivotal episode in American history . . . *Midnight Rising* is at its best reconstructing the lives (and deaths) of the relatively anonymous conspirators -- especially the African-Americans." (The Florida Courier) "Horwitz's potent prose delivers the facts of this bellwether incident in riveting fashion." It is an absorbing portrait of the often frustrated but passionately driven firebrand who successfully convinced a country of the shame of slavery and, to the South's great regret, earned martyr status in the aftermath of his execution. Brown qualifies as America's first important post-revolution terrorist. Horwitz brings events to life with almost cinematic clarity, and for American history and Civil War aficionados, *Midnight Rising* is required reading. (Bookpage) "Horwitz's description of the little band of idealists and adventurers who signed on for Brown's offensive -- including five black men and two of Brown's own sons -- is both fascinating and touching. His careful recreation of the bloody events of October 16, 1859, the day of Brown's disastrous raid on Harpers Ferry, is both suspenseful and heartwrenching." (Christian Science Monitor) (one of the 15 Best

Nonfiction Books of 2011) "In *Midnight Rising*, [Horwitz] not only gives us an action-packed adventure story, but also provides detailed historical background and vivid character portraits of the principals involved" Assiduously researched using archival sources, Horwitz's riveting tale is on sound factual footing. And he does a wonderful job of bringing to life the fascinating, messianic leader who, on the way to the gallows, would incite a nation toward civil war. "Compelling reading." "Wichita Eagle" "The lively narrative focuses on the 1859 attack on an armory in Harpers Ferry, W.Va, by Brown and his ragtag followers -- the event credited with lighting the fuse on the deadliest conflict in U.S. history. "A groundbreaking study of the Harper's Ferry raid that makes a number of fascinating points: Brown was not a madman or a fanatic, he knew his death would serve as a moral lightning rod, and the fallout from his actions has echoed for generations." "Superb and amply researched" [Horwitz] renders with empathy and insight the lives of the individuals Brown touched, whether they were family members, victims, or the idealistic raiders who followed him to Harpers Ferry. Brown's raiders thus appear more human, poignant, and fallible and the whole venture more noble, futile, benighted, heroic, and sadder than heretofore. "Gripping, disturbing and heartbreaking... Horwitz brings all his gifts of character building and storytelling to Brown's rise and self-promotion" Horwitz's Brown did not die in vain. By recalling the drama that fired the imagination and fears of Brown's time, *Midnight Rising* calls readers to account for complacency about social injustices today. This is a book for our time. "Lucid and compelling" The author's archival sleuthing pays off with a rich narrative. "A vivid biographical portrait of Brown gives us an American original: a failed businessman and harsh Calvinist with a soft spot for the oppressed and a murderous animus against oppressors" Brown's raiders--a motley crew of his sons and various idealists, adventurers, freedmen, and fugitive slaves--come alive as a romantic, appealing bunch; their agonizing deaths give Horwitz's excellent narrative of the raid and shootout a deep pathos. "There's a brilliance to this book that put me in mind of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, only Horwitz's *Midnight Rising* is set deeper in America's dark past. With stunning, vivid detail, he has captured the sheer drama and tragedy of John Brown and that bloody raid at Harpers Ferry that helped propel America toward civil war. "Erik Larson, author of *The Devil in the White City* and *In the Garden of Beasts* "Tony Horwitz's gifts as a vivid narrator of dramatic events are on full display in this

story of John Brown's wars in Kansas and his climactic Harpers Ferry raid in 1859. Brown's family and the men who joined him in these fights against slavery receive a more fully rounded treatment than in any other account. Of special note is the discussion of Brown's self-conscious emulation of Samson by pulling down the temple of bondage and dying a martyr in its ruins.

James M. McPherson, author of *Battle Cry of Freedom* "Midnight Rising is a deeply compelling work, richly researched and elegantly written. The events surrounding the raid on Harpers Ferry--and the complex character of John Brown himself--come vividly to life in Tony Horwitz's irresistibly readable account."

Annette Gordon-Reed, author of *The Hemingses of Monticello* "With his customary blend of rich archival research, on-location color, and lyrical prose, Tony Horwitz has delivered a John Brown book for our time. Part biography, part historical narrative, *Midnight Rising* is a riveting re-creation of the Harpers Ferry raid, told with an unblinking sense of Brown's tragic place in American history. Writing with enveloping detail and a storyteller's verve, Horwitz shows why Brown was--and still is--so troubling and important to our culture."

David W. Blight, author of *American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era* "Tony Horwitz knows how to tell a story, and here his considerable gifts as a writer bring John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry alive in a style that is just as electric as its subject."

Joseph J. Ellis, author of *Founding Brothers* and *First Family* "Beautifully written and sparkling with fresh insights, *Midnight Rising* resurrects the multiple faces of John Brown: avenging angel or murderous terrorist; slavery's nemesis or deluded fanatic; abolitionist hero or subversive insurrectionist. In this thrilling, magnificent and essential book, Tony Horwitz shows how one man and a single event set the nation on a doomed course where the crimes of a guilty land could only be purged by blood."

James L. Swanson, author of *Manhunt* and *Bloody Crimes*

Tony Horwitz is the bestselling author of *Midnight Rising*, *A Voyage Long and Strange*, *Blue Latitudes*, *Confederates in the Attic*, and *Baghdad Without a Map*. He is also a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who has worked for *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New Yorker*. He lives in Martha's Vineyard with his wife, Geraldine Brooks, and their two sons.

What is one to make of John Brown? In his day, John Brown was a controversial figure, admired by some, hated by many and loved by few. It was his devotion to God juxtaposed to his attraction to violence that left many people puzzled and uneasy. We are still perplexed about him 155 years after his death. John Brown was a misdirected man who though highly moral saw violence as the most

appropriate and necessary solution to the problem of slavery. Tony Horwitz has taken on the challenge of explaining this seemingly inexplicable man. The manner by which John Brown, a rigidly religious man ended up being hanged for treason is the subjects of this well crafted and well written book. The narrative is rich and the research impeccable. I rated this book a five since it allowed us into the mind of this complicated man and allows us to make our own judgements. For those who admired Horwitz’s previous books, especially his ability to put himself into the story, be warned that this is a different kind of book. In Confederates in the Attic, Horwitz walked the streets of the South in search of his narrative. For this book, he claims, “walking the footsteps of history is not the same as being there.” He might see the same sights that Brown saw but he sought a more intimate experience. He wished to be inside Brown’s head. This is a tall order. For historical figures, one is limited to reports of a person’s behavior rather than his innermost thoughts. Nevertheless in the process of researching this book, he has attempted to gain insights into the mind of John Brown and he has shared these insights with us. Whether these insights are sufficient to fully explain John Brown is up to the reader to decide. Horwitz attributed John Brown’s religious convictions as well a propensity to violence to his father who was staunchly religious, a confirmed abolitionist as well as a believer in corporal punishment. John was subjected to his father’s sermonizing and at the same time to his severe beatings. He thus came to believe that violence was an acceptable means to achieving God’s will. Horwitz explains that Brown’s Puritan forbearers “believed that they had a covenant with God to make America a moral beacon to the world...and that slavery was a breach of divine law.” That John Brown sought violence to defend God’s law is understandable and in a sense predictable. According to Horwitz, Brown began to see violence as the only way to achieve abolition when he learned of Nat Turner’s unbridled and cruel efforts to end slavery. Nat Turner was an African-American slave and minister who was born the same year as John Brown. Turner led a group of slaves on a rampage, resulting in the deaths of 55 white men, women and children. This action resonated with Brown’s religious commitment and baseline violent predisposition. Brown attempted to echo Turner’s actions by his own efforts in Kansas and at Harper’s Ferry. Both Brown and Turner traumatized the country, and helped to ignite regional differences, which eventually erupted into the Civil War.. Although Horwitz is a journalist by trade, it would be a mistake to believe that the book is simply reporting. Some will recognize the structure of drama in the journalistic report. As one remembers from freshman English, the structure of drama consists of 1) an exposition, during which

the characters and issues are introduced, 2) a crisis describing an acting out of the conflicts and 3) a denouement when the conflicts are resolved. Horwitz begins the exposition with a report of the characters. Here the story takes on an epic quality with the description of the Brown family, his two marriages and his 20 children. His father was an influential figure in Brown's life and helped to shape his belief system. Like his father, John was an avowed abolitionist, but unlike his father he was a "warrior" rather than a pacifist. Most importantly, John inherited his Calvinist beliefs from his father. Calvinism attempts to confront the problem of free will in the face of an omniscient and omnipotent God. As a Calvinist his father taught John that God has a pre-determined plan for everyone. For Calvinists there is no free will, only the will of God. Thus, one must accept the notion that God is responsible for our actions, but does not necessarily approve of them. Approval comes with being chosen as one of God's elect. The process of election is arbitrary and is independent of the actions of the believer. One can only hope, through faith that one is of God's chosen. John Brown spent his life searching for this answer. The crisis consists of the raids in Kansas and finally at Harper's Ferry. Here Brown modeled his actions on the Old Testament figure of Gideon who was instructed by God to take a small band of men and to destroy the Midianites at night. Acting out the Gideon story Brown assembled his men for a final bloodletting in Kansas and Harper's Ferry. His goals were not well formulated, but he hoped to provoke a slave rebellion. The attacks in Kansas accomplished little but to further inflame both sides in "bleeding Kansas." The attack on Harper's Ferry is described in detail by Horwitz and represents the culmination of all that preceded it, but is anticlimactic, accomplishing little. The significance of the Harper's Ferry raid was not evident at the time. It appeared to represent a minor event ending in failure. Nevertheless it had profound consequences. The attack helped spark the civil war that would come 2 years later. Horwitz concludes "Brown's dream of arming blacks to fight for their freedom was realized not at Harper's Ferry but in the trenches of Petersburg and in the low lands of South Carolina." The midnight raid of John Brown led to the rise of an oppressed people and in so doing gave the nation "a new birth of freedom." The denouement of this drama is provided in the final chapters, which describe Brown's execution. It is at this moment that important characters that will shape the future all come together, as if frozen in time: Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, Jeb Stuart and John Wilkes Booth. It was by his death, that the meaning of his life was made clear and his influence became manifest. Preparing for his death, Brown is portrayed as serene and at peace

with himself. He seemed confident that he would meet his God as one of the elect. Horwitz began his book with a promise to get inside the head of John Brown. Are we satisfied that he has done that or was he simply reporting what he knew? Perhaps he gets inside the mind of John Brown by telling his story in as a complete a fashion that he could, but he goes beyond the telling of a story, he relates a drama. It is a drama that the whole nation was privy to. One recalls Hamlet who said, "The play 's the thing, wherein we will catch the consciousness of the king." The conscience of the nation was caught by the story of John Brown. Having said that, we wonder whether John Brown was a good man or a bad man. Is it possible for a good man to do bad things and for a bad man to do good things? We once again, turn to Hamlet: "There is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

John Brown is among the most enigmatic figures in American History. Horwitz's dispassionate perspective avoids an agenda-driven view of Brown. Here we meet a difficult man whose passionate hatred of slavery and love of humanity (but not necessarily human beings) drive his motivations. I was struck by the devotion of his followers to him and his cause. The closing chapters on the trial and brief period before his and his followers executions are particularly illuminating. Horwitz's analysis about the significance of Brown's raid is as balanced as could be hoped for. I only wish that more had been written on Brown's earlier life and the events that shaped him. I also would have liked to have learned more about his family and his accomplices. Nevertheless, this is a satisfying read and should be valued by anyone interested in pre-Civil War history.

Though, in no way intended to be a comprehensive history of the times or even of John Brown, this fairly quickly read book again confirms the predominance of the slavery issue in mid-19th century America, often driven by men of fanatical, moralistic outlooks with a predisposition for egregious acts of violence in support of or in opposition to slavery. It is indisputable that the institution of slavery and the treatment of African-Americans have cast a pall across almost all of American history; but it was becoming obvious by the 1830s that American social and political institutions would not be able to contain this huge fault line in America. The author makes a strong case that it was John Brown's failed attempt to lead a slave rebellion at Harper's Ferry in Oct, 1859, that propelled the unstable North/South standoff to the point of no return, sparking a four-year conflagration killing and wounding over one million Americans, surely the most horrific, detestable experience in American history. Brown, born in rural Conn in 1800 into meager circumstances, was a tough, imposing, uncompromising abolitionist, who after frequently moving across the old Northwest

region and producing a huge family, found himself swept into the ferocious, "bleeding Kansas" conflict in the mid-1850's. There, now seeing himself as a captain in a fearsome crusade, he led a small band of men in several bloody skirmishes inflicting terrible retribution on pro-slavery forces while seeing his own men, including his own sons, paying terrible prices. But Brown was becoming a mesmerizing national figure, admirably known as "Osawatomie Brown," a darling of Northeastern abolitionists though he had a bounty on his head. Although the author provides some details concerning Brown's movements among wealthy supporters and sympathizers, his fund-raising, buying and staging supplies, trying to recruit conscripts, and the like, the steps that he took to conceive of a plan to foment a slave rebellion within Africa, Brown's term for the South, are actually quite murky. Beyond logistics, the bigger question is what was Brown actually trying to accomplish? His plan was no more than a collection of haphazard bits and pieces that had absolutely no chance of succeeding; yet, it is not obvious that Brown, a driven fanatic, realized this until abject failure stared him in the face. The author describes in fairly careful detail every misstep that Brown and his men took in the days surrounding the capture of the armory at Harper's Ferry and the loss of it within thirty hours to an overwhelming force resulting in the death of most of his men, including two sons. The murky "facts" of Brown's half-baked assault on Harper's Ferry are almost an irrelevancy to the larger story. No one could have possibly anticipated how this audacious moment in time would resonate throughout the nation. However, even so, had John Brown died in the Harper's Ferry incident with his men, it seems likely that the incident would have receded in the public's mind. Or, had he been declared insane and locked away from the public, again, it is likely he would have been largely forgotten. But that is not what happened. Who could have predicted that Brown could literally recast himself as the conscience of the nation? Brown, though badly wounded in the assault by the US military, comported himself with immense dignity after his capture, continuing as he had done while holding hostages in the armory. There is no doubt that Brown recognized immediately that he had been presented with a last chance to get his message to the public. He knew instinctively that his life would not be spared for long. He was patient and accommodating with the press as he forcefully made quite cogent points that slavery could hardly exist in a nation founded on fundamental liberties and stood in sharp contrast to the morality central to religious precepts. His entire approach, as well as the moral force of his arguments, attracted many of leading intellectuals of the day, including Thoreau and Emerson. Resisting efforts at clemency, rescue, or an insanity defense, Brown seemed to sense that accepting his own death with steely resolve would make the greatest and most lasting statement. As the author notes, if there was any doubt in Southern minds of the existence of resolute individuals in the North who would stop at nothing to eradicate the

Southern system, Harper's Ferry ended that fantasy. Southerners stiffened their resolve against the North and towards individuals who even hinted at questioning their way of life. Even though Lincoln was a moderate, his election added to the disaffection already at a fever pitch, essentially lighting the match to the powder keg that Harper's Ferry represented. John Brown is a difficult man to pin down. It is almost impossible to understand how a man who led such an erratic life ended up at Harper's Ferry. His single-mindedness, determination, imperturbability, and willingness to endure personal hardship explain to some degree; but there are hints that Brown suffered from some form of insanity. It almost seems inevitable that the highly discordant events of the times would produce "a" John Brown. Yet, it was "the" John Brown who emerged, who became notorious overnight, remaining so 150 years later. It was he, regardless of how inadvertent or unlikely that may have been, who sliced open the festering slavery wound in the body politic, forcing the nation to see that the wound could no longer be bandaged. Perhaps it is best left, as does the author, to let Frederick Douglass have the last words regarding the significance of John Brown. Speaking in 1881 at Storer College, a black teacher's college founded in 1867 in Harper's Ferry, Douglass acknowledged African-Americans' and his immense debt to John Brown: "His zeal in the cause of my race was far greater than mine - it was as the burning sun to my taper light. I could live for the slave, but he could die for him." Brown's message had such moral resonance that, as Douglass says, Southerners "could kill him, but they could not answer him." The South had one last gasp: "they drew the sword of rebellion and thus made her own, and not Brown's, the lost cause of the century." The story of John Brown almost transcends the book. Even though Brown to some extent remains an enigma, the author tells the amazing story of how one man and a raggedy band of twenty men made America realize it was living a lie in regards to liberty and equality for all men. No mist or haze for Brown: "against truth and light, legislative enactments were mere cobwebs - the pompous emptiness of human pride - the pitiful out-breathings of human nothingness," as so said by Douglass.

**Addendum:** The author does not specifically address the question of whether the John Brown affair launched the Civil War - but it does lurk. He convincingly demonstrates that John Brown loomed large in the nation's consciousness at a time when gasoline did not need to be poured on the fragile North/South standoff. Obviously, Brown did not explicitly kick off the War, because the Southern states did not secede until over a year after Harper's Ferry. But there seems to be considerable evidence that the South ratcheted up its awareness that abolitionists were coming in some manner, either legislatively or militarily. The South's overreaction to Lincoln's election confirms that. Of all of the Republicans, Lincoln may have been less hostile to the South than any of them. Clearly, he had no intention of ending slavery. Northerners were completely wary

of the so-called Slave Power - the disproportionate power that the South had at the Federal level. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the fiasco in Kansas, and the Dred Scott decision - all added to their feelings. But there were no calls to invade the South, or anything like that. On the other hand, the South was already prone to call for seceding conventions and the like long before John Brown. The South had its "fire-eaters." Any dispassionate examination of what started the Civil War would quickly realize that it was the South who wanted a confrontation of some sort with the North over the slavery issue. That is the context in which the John Brown affair must be examined in terms of its relevancy in kicking off the War. John Brown was, if anything, an emotional event. It fed directly into the hypersensitivity - the paranoia - of the Southern mindset. The South basically went into a mode after the Brown affair of looking for that one action or event that would confirm that the abolitionists were coming. And for them, that was the election of Lincoln, even though they misconstrued his intentions. That is what the author suggests. I think he is correct. Brown took the nation and especially the South to a point from which it could not return - to a point where all that could happen was an explicit turn to separation from the North and all that would follow. Of course, the causes to the Civil War were mostly long-term and deeply rooted in American society. But in 1850s there was steady increase in tensions, which seemed to culminate in the John Brown affair.

A very thorough story, yet you're left marveling how such a contradictory man got so far. But stick with it. This is where the Civil War starts. It goes a long way towards explaining why the two sides couldn't negotiate.

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