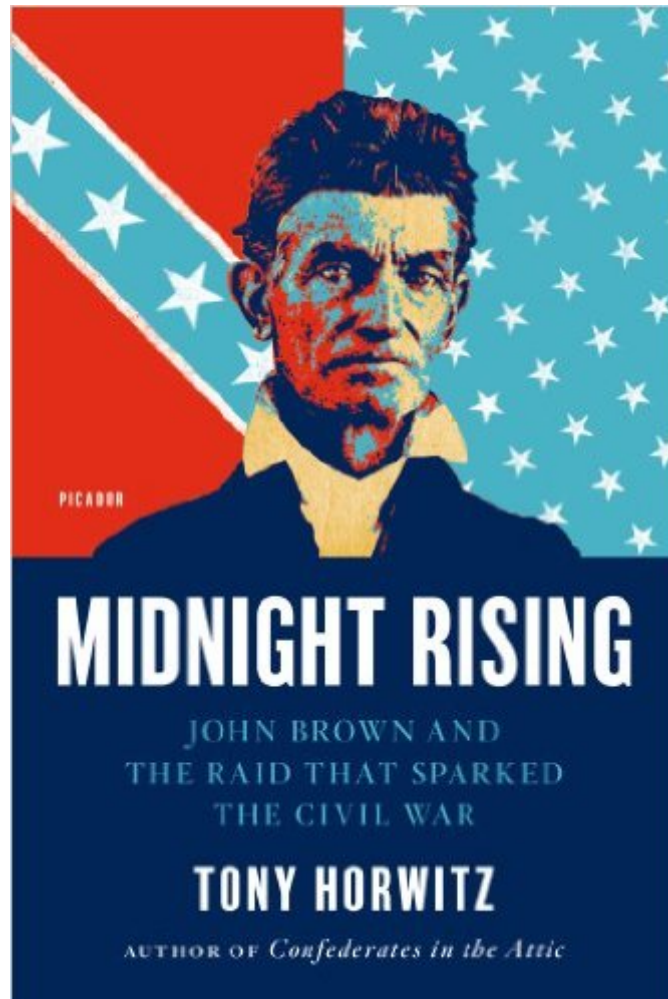


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Midnight Rising: John Brown And The Raid That Sparked The Civil War



Synopsis

A New York Times Notable Book for 2011
A Library Journal Top Ten Best Books of 2011
A Boston Globe Best Nonfiction Book of 2011
Late 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

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Customer Reviews

"Midnight Rising" by renowned historian Tony Horwitz presents the riveting story of John Brown, whose attack on the U.S. armory in Harpers Ferry, (West) Virginia might well have been the first salvo of the U.S. Civil War. Mr. Horwitz delivers a fresh perspective on one of 19th Century's most pivotal events in a way that is certain to reinvigorate the debate about Brown's legacy for many years to come. Exceptionally well researched and written, this thoroughly engaging book is destined to become a must-read for serious students of U.S. history. Mr. Horwitz vividly reconstructs the startlingly different time in which Brown was born and raised. Often living a harsh frontier existence with few luxuries and beset by personal tragedy, Brown nonetheless cared deeply for his family and

worked hard for their comfort in the steadfast belief that all were made equal before God. The fact of slavery's evil coexistence alongside free, industrious people deeply affected Brown, moving him to speak out against slavery and provide whatever assistance he could to the African- and Native American peoples he met. Mr. Horwitz reminds us that in 1850s America the southern states were often able to impose their will, if not politically then by force. We learn that Brown first gained notoriety by fighting back against southern aggression in Kansas, whereupon his life changed forever as he moved underground to avoid arrest. As Brown subsequently spent much of the decade plotting his next, more ambitious move to take the offense and strike at the heart of the slave power, he came into contact with many of the leading progressives of the era including Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, Henry David Thoreau and Harriet Tubman. Mr.

It's a commonplace that real history is much more interesting than what's taught in American schools, but the accuracy of the observation struck me anew as I read Tony Horwitz's book on John Brown and the Harpers Ferry raid. The rough outline of those events will be familiar to anyone who retains memories of high school history classes, where they're dutifully and rapidly treated as a precursor to the American Civil War. But it's the nuances of the situation that are truly fascinating. I'm tempted simply to repeat some of the more surprising nuggets of information here, but just as the reviewer of a comedy ought not spoil the good jokes, the reviewer of a popular history ought not spoil the good "factoids." Suffice it to say that Horwitz has the gift of any good popular historian: the ability to assemble the myriad details of the historical record into a generally coherent and compelling narrative. I gather from other early reviews that Horwitz generally mixes his history with contemporary and personal observations, and that the absence of the latter from this book, which stays rooted in the nineteenth century, is a disappointment to some readers. That's fair enough, and it's certainly true that *Midnight Rising* is a straightforward historical narrative lacking individual voice. However, as a reader unfamiliar with Horwitz but interested in history, I admired the book for what it was. The author handles his large cast of characters (nineteen raiders and about as many uninvolved allies, to say nothing of those, from government officials to soldiers to ordinary residents, who fought against the raid) deftly, providing enough memorable personal detail to make each player stand out. The only exceptions are male members of John Brown's extended family.

Tony Horwitz has written a thoroughly researched and eminently readable account of the life of one of history's most complicated and vexing characters. John Brown was a visionary hero ahead of his time. He was also a radical outlaw willing to match violence for violence and even take life in cold

blood. He was also a seriously flawed human being whose inflexible nature and single-minded devotion to his cause and utter inability to manage business affairs left his wife and brood of children in near poverty and very likely imperiled his own mission. There is simply no way to reconcile this singularly complex figure into any of the neat packages history has tried to stuff him into - whether hero, madman or villain. Yet this fanatical hero-villain, in the course of a blundered raid, lit the spark that ended slavery and exploded the "Southern Way of Life". After a brief prologue setting the stage for the raid on Harper's ferry, Horwitz returns to the beginning to trace what is known - and what Brown himself reported - of Brown's childhood and early life. Brown was raised by a strict Calvinist who espoused hard work, piety, strident punishment of sins, and the equality of all people, including blacks - a radical idea at the time, even among abolitionists. John, left motherless at age eight by his mother's death in childbirth, seems to have emulated his father in both temperament and action. Early in this life, Brown "consecrated" himself to the cause of ending slavery, and he enlisted his wife and sons as a sort of independent army. While his business affairs careened up and down, Brown's passion, determination and independence brought him the attention - and financial support - of wealthy Abolitionist backers from Gerrit Smith to William Lloyd Garrison.

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