

The Broken Cord Study Guide

The Broken Cord by Michael Dorris

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Plot Summary

When Michael Dorris is in his twenties, he decides that he wants to be a father. He is not seriously dating anyone at the time and decides to try to adopt. He applies and is almost immediately approved as an adoptive parent. Months later, he is told that an Indian boy is available. The social worker, Denis Daigle, makes certain that Michael knows that the boy has problems. Michael later learns that the child, who Michael names Adam, is a victim of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. He ignores the warnings from Denis and other social workers and bonds with Adam immediately. Social workers help facilitate the adoption and Michael and Adam are soon living together as father and son. When Adam has a series of seizures, Michael goes searching for answers though it is later that he will learn the full story of Adam's birth mother and the impact her drinking had on Adam. During Adam's first hospital stay, a young nurse points out to him that if Adam's problems turn out to be too serious, Michael can always stop the adoption process. However for Michael, who has already fully accepted the responsibility for Adam, it is not an option.

Michael later adopts another Indian boy, Sava, and a daughter, Madeline. After the three are an established family, he marries Louise Erdrich and they later have two daughters of their own.

Michael initially has little in the way of comparison to understand just how far behind Adam is. Over the early years, Michael remains hopeful that he will eventually find Adam's hidden talents, that Adam will get past his rocky start in life, or that something will just click for Adam so that he can grow into a happy, productive adult. Years pass before Michael gives up that dream and comes to realize that Adam will never be able to live completely on his own. The road to that realization is filled with trials. Michael insists that Adam be given every opportunity to learn and grow. Occasionally it seems that he has mastered some skill or learned something new but it typically drops by the wayside as soon as something else is introduced.

As Michael struggles to help Adam, he discovers that Adam's parents were alcoholics, that his mother died of alcohol poisoning and his father's death was also alcohol related. As Michael begins to learn about Fetal Alcohol Syndrome—or FAS—he sees dozens of children and case studies that are exactly like Adam. Michael has to eventually accept that not only does his son have little to look forward to in life, he has no idea what he has missed out on.



Foreward through Chapter 3

Foreward through Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

The story opens with a foreward written by Louise Erdrich, the woman Michael Dorris eventually marries. Louise recounts a day when Adam has a seizure in the snow and she rushes to hold him and help ease him through it—the only thing to be done for him. She also talks about her marriage to Michael, how Adam immediately accepts her as "mom" but that there are difficulties later. She says that at one point, she is home alone with the kids and Adam refuses to eat. Knowing that he will have a seizure if he does not eat, she cajoles, pleads and demands but he refuses. In a moment of frustration, she yells that he need not call her "mom" anymore. Though he has a seizure the next morning, he holds onto only one piece of information from that scene—that he is not to call her mom. Months pass with Louise spending a great deal of time and effort trying to repair the damage before he begins using the word "mom" again.

Chapter one opens in the Pierre airport where Michael is awaiting a social worker who is to take him to meet the child Michael is due to adopt. Michael, at twenty-six, is single and is in Tyonek, on the coast of the Cook Island, when he suddenly realizes he desperately wants a child of his own. He begins the process and is contacted by the Catholic Social Services of Alaska as a potential candidate for adoption. Michael then moves to New Hampshire where he plans to become a faculty member of a small university. Soon after settling in, Michael is contacted by Denis Daigle, a social worker who says there is a three and a half year old American Indian boy available for adoption. Denis tells Michael that the boy was removed from the home because of poor health, that he is "small for his age," has a very limited vocabulary and is not toilet trained. Michael says he is still interested. Michael goes to Pierre where he is picked up by a social worker named Rita and taken to Adam. The boy is outgoing and immediately says, "Hi daddy." Though Michael is cautioned to take time to think about the situation, he takes Adam back to the motel with him and a few days later flies with him back to New Hampshire. When they arrive, they find friends have created a celebration of sorts, complete with the gift of a dog named Skahota.

In chapter two, Denis Daigle is due for a home visit just before the holidays and Michael is so nervous that he cooks an entire meal for the event. In January, Michael has an interview in Montreal at McGill University. Adam has celebrated his fourth birthday. They make the drive but the return trip is long because of the weather. The next morning, Michael cannot rouse Adam and takes him to the hospital in Littleton. He is having seizures and Michael begins to look for answers. The doctor tells him several things it might be but when Michael goes to the library to research them, he discovers that they are completely unrelated diseases and comes to the conclusion that the doctor—with no idea what is causing the seizures—is guessing. The doctor advises Michael to go home with the promise that he will be called "if" Adam wakes. Michael calls on a friend who suggests that he take Adam to a larger facility. Michael hires an ambulance and Adam is taken to Mary Hitchcock Memorial Hospital's pediatric wing. Michael finally



goes to a motel but wakes when the clerk says that the hospital has called for him. He rushes there and finds that Adam is awake.

In chapter three, Adam and Michael return home but Michael fears that Adam's health will jeopardize the adoption process. Three weeks pass and Michael and Adam are snowed in one day. They spend the day playing, reading and enjoying themselves. The next morning, Michael wakes to find Adam feverish and in the midst of a seizure. He holds Adam and keeps him still while cooling him in an effort to make the fever go down. Michael calls the Littleton Hospital and is connected to the doctor who had not known what was wrong with Adam earlier. The doctor is belligerent and rude, suggesting that Michael contact the hospital Michael had chosen to move Adam to. Michael calls the pediatrician there and is told that he is doing everything he can for Adam but to bring him in as soon as the weather clears any.

Over the coming months, Michael seeks out other opinions but receives nothing concrete. Adam seems to recover but has tremendous problems with toilet training and never remembers a person's name with the exception of calling Michael "daddy." Michael begins a relationship with a woman named Eileen who comes to realize that she cannot handle the domestic relationship Michael and Adam require. Michael is then offered a job teaching Native American studies in Enfield, New Hampshire. Adam is enrolled in daycare and the staff believe they can make a difference. Michael hopes they are right.

There are several people who tell Michael that he needs to take time to think about what he is doing by adopting Adam. However, when Denis calls with the option to take Adam, Michael feels it is his one chance—a miracle that he has been approved at all because single men are often turned down as candidates for adoption. When he is in Pierre, the social workers urge him to meet Adam, take some time to think it over and let them bring the little boy to him in a week or so. Michael refuses and says that the social workers there basically turn a blind eye while he and Adam make their getaway. These people obviously want Michael to think about the responsibility but Michael seems to connect instantly with Adam and to accept him as a responsibility from the moment he is offered Adam. An interesting contrast to that reality is when a nurse in the Littleton Hospital discovers that Michael is in the process of adopting Adam. The nurse says that Michael can always give Adam back if the health problems turn out to be too serious.

Michael says that Adam is, very early, on a series of medications to address the seizures while the specialists look for something concrete to treat. Meanwhile, they just try to keep the symptoms under control—specifically the seizures—as Michael and others try to teach Adam the basics of potty training and other fundamentals, such as how to count. Michael says that he believes—always—that the medications are putting Adam in a fog that he cannot swim out of. Years pass before Michael is able to understand that Adam is never going to be better.



Chapters 4 through 6

Chapters 4 through 6 Summary and Analysis

In chapter four, Michael meets an anthropologist named Beatrice Medicine. She becomes one of Michael's closest friends though he also becomes close to Nina Sazer, the woman who founds the daycare Adam attends. Beatrice invites Adam and Michael to Standing Rock for a naming ceremony. In preparation, Michael allows Adam's hair to grow out. On the way, Adam chews a lot of gum and Michael thinks he has thrown it away but when they arrive at a motel, he discovers wads of gum in Adam's hair. A relative advises that he use peanut butter to remove it and he does but says that it is difficult to wash all the peanut butter out of his hair.

Michael notes that there are signs of poverty on the Indian reservation and he hears many complaints about the government programs that have been cut. However, he argues that the Indian people themselves should take responsibility for their homes and their lives. Michael himself is half Indian and he experiences the first instance of prejudice when a motel refuses to give him a place to spend the night. He notes that, alone, he does not look very much like an Indian but he and Adam together are unmistakable.

Michael and Adam meet up with Beatrice and go on to Standing Rock together. The night before the naming ceremony, Michael has a dream in which there are "huge birds" flapping against his windshield and that he tries to identify with them. Annie Medicine is "in charge" of the naming ceremony and she first calls to Adam and gives him the name, "Can Ra" which means "Wood Mountain." She then calls to Michael, presents him with a headdress and names him "Wamkbli Rapau," which means "Eagle Wing." Michael and Anna are amazed, considering the dream he had the previous night.

In chapter five, Michael puts in an application for Adam to attend a program in Norwich, Virginia. He is rejected and when Michael demands an explanation, the program director says that Adam is learning disabled. Michael demands to know where he got the information and the director produces a copy of a report by a group of Dartmouth psychology students who observed members of Adam's class. Michael objects and receives apologies from several sources, including the daycare. Michael says that his objections were correct—that the students providing this information were not qualified and the parents should have known that their children were being evaluated. However, he admits that the students saw what he kept refusing to believe with regard to Adam's learning disabilities.

Michael arranges for Adam to be tested by a professional and he scores at "borderline" with a marked inability to concentrate or understand abstract concepts. The psychologist then says that Adam has been pointedly staring at the breasts of the receptionist. Michael remembers that the woman dressed in order to bring attention to



her breasts and that if the psychologist is that far off base on that point, she probably is not qualified to diagnose Adam at all.

In chapter six, Michael says that he initially knew little about Adam's biological parents and counted it a blessing because it meant that they knew little about Michael as well, and that they were not likely to show up demanding that Adam be returned to them. However, Michael overhears social workers talking about Adam's family—that his mother is dead of alcohol poisoning at age thirty-three, that his father is in jail and his mother hanging around the bars, and that he has a sibling who was adopted and another in foster care. Michael says that a few years later, Adam's father is killed and Adam receives an inheritance of fifty dollars.

Michael then begins to focus on alcohol use and misuse among the Native Indians. Michael admits that he and a girlfriend get so drunk one night that she breaks her arm and they do not know it until the following day. He uses this as an example of the fact that drinking can be a problem but then says that it is more so among Native Americans, especially on the reservations. He finds an article that indicates that the Lakota men typically drink with few repercussions. However, the women are all but ostracized for drinking. That social taboo is not enough to keep all women from drinking and some, especially those expecting illegitimate children, drink to excess even while pregnant. The study, conducted in the 1960s, is later updated to indicate that more women are drinking.

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When Michael meets with students of the Native American studies class, he finds many who saw Adam's photo and say that Adam reminds them of someone "back home." Michael says he initially thought they were referring "simply to his appearance." He later talks about the fact that many children of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome have a specific look about them that is sufficiently defined to make them recognizable simply by appearance.

Michael believes that his intervention in Adam's life makes a difference. He sees, for the first time, the edge of what that life might have been when they are at the naming ceremony. Michael notes that Adam blends in and could easily have been siblings with any number of the children at the ceremony. Later, Michael is to witness children who have FAS in its most serious form, just like Adam's case, and that Adam is not personally any higher functioning than most of them. He cannot count, make change or consider consequences, despite having been given all the advantages Michael could give him over the children raised on the reservations.



Chapters 7 through 9

Chapters 7 through 9 Summary and Analysis

In chapter seven, Adam turns six in 1974 and Denis Daigle helps complete the adoption of a second son. Michael names him Sava for a fisherman he knew in Alaska. Sava is two years old when Michael adopts him. One day Michael is working in his office and the boys are playing in the bathtub when he hears Sava telling Adam to get out of the tub. Michael, sensing something is wrong, rushes to the bathroom and finds Adam having a seizure. He begins to do artificial respiration and suddenly realizes that having two parents would give Adam a better chance because he also needs to call for help. Adam eventually stops seizing and recovers.

Adam is enrolled in Cornish Elementary School and his first grade teacher, Alice Hendrick, spends a great deal of extra time with Adam, finally teaching him to read though he retains little, ignores punctuation and cannot answer questions about the story. Meanwhile, Adam is being seen at a pediatric clinic in Boston. The visits to the doctor kill Michael's optimism on Adam's behalf, but the fact that he can finally read makes up for a great deal.

In 1976, Michael calls Denis with a request to adopt a third child. Michael says that this time he wants a daughter and that she has to be young enough to fit in with the boys. Denis says it is impossible but agrees to submit the request. Michael hopes that having a woman in his life will further his cause for the third adoption and hints to Denis that he is on the verge of marriage. In June, Denis calls with the news that there is a ten-month-old girl available for adoption through the South Dakota Social Services Agency and that Michael has been approved. He goes the following Monday to Pierre to pick her up. He names her Madeline and notes that she is different from both Adam and Sava in that she seldom makes demands but is always "delighted" when given something.

After six years on the faculty teaching Native American Studies at Dartmouth, Michael is promoted to associate professor with tenure. Meanwhile, he tries to figure a way to help Adam want to achieve. He tries giving stars for good behavior but the idea of "saving" for large rewards is totally lost on Adam. So is punishment for unacceptable behavior. In second grade, a new special education teacher named Olivia Alexion takes over Adam's care at school. She is dedicated to every student and each year starts over teaching Adam the fundamentals that he can never fully master.

In chapter eight, Michael, Adam, Sava and Madeline attend the powwow at Dartmouth which includes a reunion for former students of Native American Studies. Among those attending is Karen Louise Erdrich. She is the editor of the Boston Indian Council newspaper and she and Michael quickly connect. Louise's mother later says that Louise tells her family that night that she has met the man she is going to marry.



Michael accepts a job in New Zealand, hoping that the change will be good for the children because of the emphasis placed on special education there. All three are enrolled in the Victoria Avenue School but there are no miracles for Adam. When they return to the United States, Michael impulsively decides to travel cross country by bus and takes all three children with him. He says the trip is wonderful, that they reconnect as a family and that they all arrive back home without mishap and with all their luggage.

When Adam is thirteen, Sava nine and Madeline six, Michael announces to them that he and Louise are getting married. They accept quickly and soon start calling her mom. She soon formally adopts all three children and then takes them to North Dakota for a visit. Adam is held back at least once but it is finally decided that it is time for him to go to high school and he is enrolled in Stevens High in Claremont. Adam does not progress there either, despite early predictions that he will and a series of expensive sessions with a counselor.

While Adam is in ninth grade, Louise's book, "Jacklight" is published and their daughter Persia is born. Adam continues to flounder and Michael and Louise learn of the Vocational Education Program at Harford High. The director, Ken Kramberg, says that Adam will never achieve a high school diploma through his program but will learn to live independently, perhaps hold down a job. Adam transfers there and spends long hours on the commute but the fact that there is no homework relieves a great deal of pressure. Pallas is born in 1985.

In chapter nine, Michael travels to a reservation where he meets young men who resemble Adam in both appearance and actions. The director explains that the boys are victims of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and says that nothing helps the boys learn to get along better in society. Back at Dartmouth, there is a constant conflict over the fact that the school's mascot is an Indian and the Native American students are upset by the image of college students dressing in feathers and braids and making fools of themselves. When Michael is taunted personally, he writes for a grant opportunity and prepares to spend the next year studying the effects of FAS on Indian reservations. One of the first things Michael learns is that FAS children who appear normal at birth suffer the long-term effects. The family move to accommodate Michael's research.

Michael has little to use for comparison with Adam during his early years but after adopting Sava, he realizes that Adam is truly lagging in many areas. Things that Sava accomplishes or that he tackles in specific ways are simply missing in Adam's life. It should have clicked by now for Michael that there is truly something wrong with Adam but more time passes before anyone says the words, "Fetal Alcohol Syndrome" to him.

Michael notes that Adam is exceptionally good-natured for the most part and that he is so loving and open to people that those traits are sometimes put in the place of academic or social advancement. The teachers says that Adam is a delightful child and Michael comes to realize that Adam is often thought to be making headway simply because of his good-natured attitude. Michael also admits that his own insistence that

the schools teach Adam results in grades appearing on report cards, regardless of the fact that Adam has not achieved those grades nor has he mastered any particular skill.



Chapters 10 through 12

Chapters 10 through 12 Summary and Analysis

In chapter ten, Michael arrives at the Rapid City Airport, leaves in a rented Citation and listens to an all-Indian radio program dedicating songs to a twenty-year-old boy who had committed suicide the previous day. Michael is on his way to a conference with a woman named Jeaneen Gray Eagle, director of a program called Project Recovery. Jeaneen is well-respected by her colleagues and several people tell Michael that she is in touch with the "realities" of alcohol addiction and of the impact on children. Jeaneen says that FAS is made more horrible by the fact that it is commonplace and that it could be prevented. Jeaneen says that many people compare her to "Chicken Little" who is yelling about a problem that does not really exist. She says that, in her estimation, about half of all pregnant women on the reservation drink, at least on weekends.

Jeaneen says there have been efforts to stop pregnant women from drinking. She says that education about what alcohol is doing to the baby does not faze the women and that some have suggested that women who refuse to stop drinking be jailed. Jeaneen says that, in at least some cases, telling families that the pregnant woman will be jailed prompts the families of the women to monitor them, though those same families, provided with information about FAS, had been unconcerned. Jeaneen cites the case of an FAS girl who will "never be accepted" in society. She says that if a mother had done that damage to that child after her birth, she would be punished for it. Jeaneen says that acceptance of alcohol makes people passive to the problem.

In chapter eleven, Michael and his family settle in to their new home and Adam gets a part-time job at a Pizza Hut, picking trash up from the parking lot, refilling salt shakers and other menial tasks. However, he almost immediately has problems. Other workers who see him as gullible convince him to say curse words to the boss and he cannot stay focused without supervision. When he does not have something demanding his presence, he stays in his room alone.

Michael interviews Dr. Phil May, a sociologist who has conducted the only government-funded FAS study for the past several years. Phil believes the problem to be serious but believes Jeaneen's numbers to be exaggerated. He does admit that his requirements for determining what child is—or is not—an FAS child are more stringent than most and that any child deemed "borderline" is discounted entirely. Phil says that any ethnic group with a problem as serious as Jeaneen indicates will eventually die out. He says that Pueblo Indians demand that women not drink and any woman who defies that is essentially ostracized. He says that those women, cut off from family, friends and a support system, typically continue to drink and give birth to multiple FAS children. The funding for Phil's program is soon to come to an end and Phil says all he can do is hope that the people who have been trained will continue to educate the people about the dangers.



Michael goes to a place called Rosebud to interview a Lakota woman named Brenda. She says that the governor of South Dakota has appointed a task force to address the issue of identifying FAS children. She says that, as of Micheal's visit, there have been thirty-three children identified and that only two of them are not Indian. Brenda says that alcoholism is common among Indian communities and that families tend to either be alcoholics or to refuse it altogether.

In chapter twelve, Michael comes to realize that he will be writing the book on his research from a personal point of view but wants to be sure Adam understands that personal aspects of his life will be put on paper for anyone to read. Michael challenges Adam to write his own memories and Adam takes on the project with more attention and enthusiasm than he has given anything in a long time. Meanwhile, Michael continues his research.

Michael meets a woman named Charlotte Brave Heart who is a counselor who works with Jeaneen. Charlotte says that people do not think of drinking as something that might hurt them and seem genuinely surprised to learn that someone who died did so because of alcohol. She also says that FAS children always wind up in foster care or adopted. Michael says that during that conversation, he becomes angry with Jeaneen because she seems to be the only person he has met who might reasonably be expected to come up with an answer but she has not.

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Jeaneen says that many women have a problem thinking through long-term situations, that they believe they should have more children because that makes their welfare checks increase. She says that the women cannot think past the point of the increased money and that they cannot fathom that the child's care will cost more than their increase. This lack of long-range planning seems typical of FAS children and it seems likely that what Jeaneen describes is a woman who also suffers the effects of FAS living as an adult, having more children who will also be born in FAS. One point made is that women who have no money cannot drink and Michael wonders whether keeping people very poor would lower the number of cases of FAS.

Phil May talks about his methods of education and seems to think that showing women the brain of a normal infant in comparison to the brain of an FAS infant makes a great impact. He says that they also tell women that they are cutting IQ points off their children with every drink. This seems a rather abstract idea to present to a group who are essentially unable to make good long-term choices. Phil seems to believe that it is the most effective tool at his disposal.

While Michael is talking to Brenda, he comes to realize an important fact about Adam's life. Michael says that Brenda points out some resources that are available to FAS children, including medical care. Michael's son, Adam has been treated by "Harvard-trained specialists" practicing at university medical centers but it has not made any significant difference in Adam's quality of life when compared with those children with FAS who are born and raised on the reservations. Michael only then realizes that the



only thing that could have really made a difference for Adam was his mother's decision to drink. While Adam arguably has a better life because of being adopted and cared for by Michael, his abilities and overall quality of life are no different. It is Brenda who reminds Michael that the FAS children born and raised on the reservation are happy in their lives—they love their parents and do not long for a better life because the reservation is all they know.



Chapters 13 through 15

Chapters 13 through 15 Summary and Analysis

In chapter thirteen, Michael says that he watched the movie, "Escape from the Planet of the Apes," in which the time-traveling ape named Zira leaves her newborn offspring safely and unobtrusively hidden in a circus caravan. Michael says that the viewer of that movie, because of the "compassion, reasonableness and enlightenment of his parents," expects that the youngster grows up successfully. However, Michael says that years later, when he watches the show again, he realizes that Zira enjoys the taste of an alcoholic beverage and drinks often. He finishes this story by saying that Zira's child "didn't have a prayer."

Michael then poses some questions related to FAS and responsibility. He says that every person who becomes a parent has a "duty" to their child and he included fathers in this generalization. He says that even though the mother is typically more involved, the father also has responsibility. Michael later mentions a study that suggests that a man who is drunk at the time of conception can also impact the child's health.

In 1986, the family is still living in Minnesota as Michael works on research related to FAS. They are slated to return to New Hampshire that summer and Michael learns of a program called "Outward Bound." The program takes youth to an area along the U.S./Canadian border where they are taught to become more self-reliant. Michael and Louise decide to enroll Adam. As the date for his leaving approaches, he goes along to buy necessary supplies but shows no excitement at the possibility. He also does not show any particular reluctance to leave his family. When the date arrives to pick him up at the airport, Michael goes alone. Louise and the rest of the children return to New Hampshire.

Michael and Adam meet in the airport and hug and Michael says that it is impossible to tell which of them is most relieved that the trip is over. Michael immediately asks Adam if the trip was "wonderful" and Adam simply says, "no" until Michael prods for additional details. Part of the program required that participants spend a night on their own and Michael asks about that. Adam said he simply went to sleep until they returned to pick him up the following day. Back in New Hampshire, Adam returns to the school that had previously offered the life skills classes while Sava and Madeline, both requiring some "special education" help, return to their previous school.

Michael begins work on the book and realizes that he has gathered an impossible amount of data from various sources. He says that he suddenly realized that he spent a great deal of time thinking of FAS as an "Indian problem" but learned that there are reports and concerns from nations all over the world regarding FAS children. There Michael hears many viewpoints on the subject, with one researcher saying that it would be impossible to jail a mother for harming her unborn child by drinking because the mother's rights are also considered before those of the child. Michael also notes that



most people are focused on their own particular research topics and care little for the opinions and ideas of others.

However, Michael does learn some things that he agrees with. He says that one researcher points out that the brain takes the longest to develop and is therefore more susceptible to damage than any other organ. There are studies that indicate the son of a man who drinks is likely to drink as well—even if that child is raised by adoptive parents.

At another conference in Tucson, Michael is asked to speak. While the other speakers that day address the technical and clinical aspects of FAS, Michael tells about Adam in order to make the topic personal to the audience. Others who talk that day describe aspects of FAS that create serious problems for parents and other caregivers. The children tend to be small, meaning they are usually excused from doing age-appropriate tasks. They are unable to focus, incapable of grasping abstract concepts and easily distracted though they can often sound as if they understand something. Their inability to retain that knowledge makes teachers think they are not trying. Michael says that while most of those interested in FAS are working on various aspects of treatment or research, he is—first and foremost—the father of a child with FAS.

In chapter fourteen, Michael says that he and Louise are struggling with the decision whether Adam should be sterilized. He says that it is not fair that Adam should have to be celibate for his entire life but that he would not be able to care for a child and so should not father one. He does not say what decision they make.

Michael says that one of the biggest problem Adam faces on a daily basis is "imagination." He said that he is not talking about the ability to dream up a story but is referring to the ability to figure out consequences. For example, Adam goes into a bathroom he is not supposed to be in and causes a leak. He simply goes to bed without realizing that the water will cause serious damage. By the time Michael and Louise discover the leak, the water has gone through the floor of the bathroom and into the kitchen below, ruining paperwork on the kitchen table. Michael says that he and Louise realize, at that moment, that they simply cannot think of every possible scenario that might happen to Adam and therefore keep him safe from them.

Michael arranges for Adam to work for the Parks Service one summer and those overseeing his work go out of their way to help him. Despite that, Adam looks for ways to avoid working at tasks that do not interest him and has to be constantly supervised. He is not rehired the following year. When he is twenty, Adam moves out on his own. He has a job in a bowling alley, picking up trash from the parking lot, cleaning up inside and washing dishes. He is able to function at this level and is living in a supervised group home nearby. Michael goes to see him one day and notes that Adam has not recently shaved or washed his face and that his lip is bleeding because his lips tend to chap and he has not been using lip balm on them. Michael wants to buy some lip balm but realizes that Adam will not use it after Michael is gone, so resists the impulse. Adam is later laid off, a combination of a downturned economy and the fact that he has been injured or had seizures at work several time. Michael goes to pick Adam up for his



twenty-first birthday party. Michael prompts a conversation about Adam's age and Adam says that he had been told by people at work that he will now be able to buy liquor. Michael reminds Adam that his father and mother had both fallen victim to alcohol and that he cannot drink, but it is clear that Adam does not believe anything bad will happen to him if he does drink.

The final chapter of the book, chapter fifteen, is written by Adam. This chapter is the result of the challenge Michael issued that Adam write the "Adam Dorris Story, by Adam Dorris." Adam's views on some things are different than those presented by Michael though many things he mentions can be easily related to stories Michael tells. Adam says that he can remember being "held" in foster care and playing on the floor the day Michael comes to pick him up. In Adam's words, "I looked up and sure enough it was my father." He tells about the different houses he can remember and describes the smell of urine in his room in the mornings, going on to describe the baths after those nights of wetting the bed. He recalls the arrivals of Sava and Madeline and remembers the day Sava hit his head and required stitches. He remembers Michael telling him not to eat his lunch before lunch time but ignoring the instruction and eating his lunch on the way to school. He says that Michael said he was "tired of telling me the same thing over and over" and that Michael stapled the lunch bag closed, apparently ending the problem.

Michael attends a convention in Wild Dunes, South Carolina, where researchers on all aspects of alcoholism gather. One researcher there makes the joke, "If my mom had not drunk during her pregnancy, I might have been an internist instead of an OB/GYN." Michael says that the joke got the expected response and that he was immediately an outsider, the only person in the room who had a child impacted by FAS and who took this personally so that he did not believe it to be funny at all. Another says that FAS makes children both ugly and stupid, indicating that one without the other would have been more acceptable. He does not delve into how it makes him feel but it seems that his feelings must have been hurt over the careless remarks.

Michael goes into great detail about the economic impact of drinking. He points out that an FAS child is more likely to be born premature and underweight, as Adam had been. That premature birth means more health issues including some specific to FAS children such as teeth problems. In addition, that child will never be able to hold the productive, full time job that he would otherwise have had the opportunity for.

Adam relates a story of being caught in Madeline's bed. He does not say whether Madeline is also in the bed but says that his father "caught him there" and that Adam keeps "making up lies" to explain his presence before finally admitting the truth. Michael does not tell this story but he also does not eliminate it from Adam's story. It is left to the reader to determine the significance. Michael does, however, say that he and Louise are faced with the decision of possibly having Adam sterilized in order to prevent the possibility of him fathering children. There is no indication that these two events are related.



Characters

Michael Dorris

Michael is living in Alaska when he sees the families around him and realizes that he wants to be a father. With no serious girlfriend at the time, he sets out to adopt. Odds are against single men adopting but Michael is notified that he has been approved and months later is told that there is a boy available. That boy is taken in by Michael who has already decided to name him Adam. Michael's determination to adopt is an example of his character. He is serious, has worked hard to achieve his education, and is willing to work at anything he sets out to do. This is evidenced by the fact that he convinces social workers just a few years later to allow him to adopt a second son and then a third child, a daughter, before he marries. Michael's determination and dedication are seen in the fact that he is warned about Adam's health issues but wants to take the boy in anyway. Michael ignores a suggestion later that he can always interrupt the adoption process if Adam's illness becomes too serious. Michael's biggest shortcoming is that he rails against Adam's limitations and refuses to believe that he is limited, let alone that Adam might not be able to overcome those limitations. At one point Michael admits that he was unwilling to see Adam as anything other than a boy who would excel, given the right encouragement and care.

Adam Dorris

Adam is three and a half when Michael adopts him. Adam's writings seem to indicate that he remembers meeting Michael for the first time but he might simply have been recalling events he has been told about. From Adam's point of view, Michael has always been his father but is simply chosen that moment to come claim him. Adam is a victim of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. He is placed in the foster care system because his mother is unable to care for him. He has trouble learning, especially abstract concepts. Though he is taught to read during first grade, he is unable to understand the purpose of punctuation and reads with little comprehension. He also has serious physical problems because of the FAS. Michael deals with the first of these soon after he adopts Adam. Michael wakes one morning to find Adam in the throes of seizures. Adam does recover though it is unclear for a short time whether that will be the case. From that point, Adam is on an array of medications aimed at controlling seizures. Though Adam is eventually able to move out of his parents' home, Michael admits that it is clear Adam will never be able to live without supervision.

Louise Erdrich

The woman who marries Michael after he adopts the three children. She is a writer and she and Michael have two additional children of their own. She writes the foreword for the book and describes some aspects of life with Adam that Michael does not focus on,



including the frustration of dealing with Adam when he refuses to see reason and consequences. She also talks about the positive sides of Adam and seems to genuinely love the boy.

Sava

The second child adopted by Michael. He is younger than Adam and provides Michael the first real basis for comparison. Michael notes the differences soon after adopting Sava in specific areas, specifically the ability to focus and retain learned skills.

Madeline

The third child adopted by Michael, she is ten months old when Michael is given the opportunity to take her. Michael calls Dennis with the request for a daughter and both Michael and Dennis are when Madeline becomes available to Michael, who is still a single parent at that time. Michael notes the differences between Madeline and the boys, saying that she is always "delighted" with anything and that "goody" is her first word.

Denis Daigle

The social worker who helps Michael with the adoptions of Adam, Sava and Madeline. Denis seems surprised when Michael is approved to adopt Adam and more so when he is granted permission to adopt a second child. When Michael says that he wants to also adopt a daughter and wants her to be young enough to fit in with the boys, Denis is skeptical and seems incredibly surprised later when he calls to say there is a ten-month-old girl available for Michael.

Beatrice Medicine

An anthropologist who takes Michael and Adam for a naming ceremony at Standing Rock, she is Lakota Indian and becomes a close friend of Michael and Adam.

Annie Medicine

The woman in charge of the naming ceremony at Standing Rock. She provides the names for both Michael and Adam. She chooses "Eagle Wing" for Michael which is strange because Michael has a dream the previous night about large birds. In the dream, he feels as though he is united with the birds.



Jeaneen Gray Eagle

The woman who runs Project Recovery on the Indian reservation and one of the first people Michael interviews about Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. She believes that the problem is far larger than most professionals want to admit and is touted by colleagues as a person who knows "the realities" of alcohol addiction and the impact on children.

Dr. Phil May

A sociologist who has been involved in a government-funded FAS study prior to Michael's professional interest. Phil says that he does not believe the problem can be as serious as some are claiming because it would mean the end of the ethnic group.

Charlotte Brave Heart

A counselor who works with Jeaneen, she says that people do not believe that alcohol is dangerous and that they seem genuinely surprised to discover that alcohol can cause serious health problems or death.



Objects/Places

The Cook Islands

Where Michael is working when he decides that he wants to be a father.

Catholic Social Services

The Alaskan Adoption Agency that agrees to allow Michael to adopt Adam.

Pierre

Where Michael goes to pick up Adam.

New Hampshire

Where Michael is living when he adopts Adam.

Littleton

Where Michael takes Adam after the four-year-old's first set of seizures in Michael's custody.

Mary Hitchcock Memorial Hospital

Where Adam is taken after being treated briefly in Littleton.

Standing Rock

Where Adam and Michael are given Indian names.

Dartmouth

Where Michael is teaching when he adopts Sava and Madeline.

The Dartmouth Powwow

Where Michael and Louise meet again for the first time after her graduation.

Project Recovery

The program operated on the Indian reservation and directed by Jeaneen Grey Eagle.



Themes

The Effects of Alcohol

The author tells the story of his attempts to understand and provide for his adoptive son, Adam, who is the victim of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. Through his efforts to understand the condition, Michael Dorris comes to learn about FAS, the people it impacts and the effect on society as a whole. Michael begins his research among Indians and for that reason, seems to come to the conclusion that it is an ethnic problem. However, he soon learns that there are FAS babies being born in every country to every race of people. The biggest problem facing those who are trying to eradicate FAS is that the condition is completely avoidable if the mother does not drink immediately before or during pregnancy. Michael points out that some researchers believe that a father who is drunk at the time of conception can also impact the child's health and intelligence. In addition, sons of men who drink are more likely to drink to excess, even if that child is raised by adoptive parents with no real access to liquor. Michael learns that there are some economic costs associated with FAS children as well. These include medical problems resulting from the disease and the fact that the children will grow up to be adults incapable of holding a job.

Coming of Age

The coming of age theme in this book is somewhat different than might be expected. Michael Dorris adopts a child with all the hopes and dreams that a biological father has for his child. Over the course of the book, that child—Adam—ages and grows into a young man of twenty-one. However, he ages only physically. Emotionally and socially, Adam remains forever locked in the mind of a child, doomed by the alcohol his mother consumed. The coming of age theme in this story is seen in Michael, Adam's adoptive father. Michael has many plans for Adam, dreaming of all the typical milestones in a person's life. However, as it becomes clear that Adam will never experience most of these, Michael has to learn to live with the disappointment and with accepting his son as he is. As Michael tries to find a way to deal with the anger and frustration, he finds himself struggling not to take it out on Adam. He says that it is difficult to find a way to accept Adam's situation without giving in to despair. He also finds it nearly impossible to demand more of Adam, usually more than Adam can reasonably be expected to deliver. Michael's moment of truth comes when Adam has caused the house to flood and Michael says that, at that moment, he realizes that he can never fully anticipate all the pitfalls that might be awaiting Adam and therefore cannot prepare him for them all. This seems to be the moment Michael finally comes of age with regard to accepting Adam with his limitations.



Responsibility

Michael spends some time soon after Adam's adoption on the Native American reservations. There he finds extreme poverty and deprivation. While he blames at least part of the situation on the government cutbacks and the situation, he points out that the Indian people have a responsibility to take care of themselves. Even when programs and opportunities are available, many of the people are not taking advantage of those chances but are seeking easier ways of dealing with life—such as having more children so that the welfare check will be larger. To illustrate this point, Michael recounts a story about an Indian and a white man who are catching crabs. Both have a bucketful of crabs when they leave for a short time and when they return the Indian's bucket is still full while all the white man's crabs have crawled away. The Indian explains that the crabs in his bucket are "Indian" crabs, and that whenever one of them tries to escape, the others pull him back in. This is an example of what Michael sees as a tendency of the Indians to tear each other down rather than help each other and take responsibility for their own lives. Michael discounts the theory that Indians are not responsible for alcoholism.

Style

Perspective

The book is written in first person from the perspective of the author, Michael Dorris, who adopts three Indian children, including one with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. The person who expects this to be a book only about Michael's adoption of Adam and their lives together will be disappointed. In reality, Michael spends a great deal more time focusing on the condition, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, its causes and effects on children, families and society as a whole. In fact, Michael glosses over a great deal of his life so that the reader has only a vague sense of the trials and frustrations that are part of everyday life for this family. There is a foreward by Michael's wife, Louise Erdrich, that seems clearer on the point of the difficulties faced by Adam's family. Louise tells of a scene at the dinner table in which Adam, a young teenager, refused to eat the meal. Louise says that she cajoles, pleads and yells, knowing that Adam will probably have a seizure if he does not ingest enough calories. However, when he continues to refuse, she yells at him to stop calling her mom. Out of the entire scene, including the seizure that invariably follows, Adam holds to the instruction that he not call her mom. Louise says that it takes months and a great deal of effort to reverse that. Michael's perspective focuses on his relationship with Adam only in vague terms through a few events and stories. This seems to change near the end of the book when Michael tells more about Adam as an adult and his coming to terms with the fact that Adam is never going to grow past the effects of FAS. As the book draws to a close, Michael talks more about letting Adam leave home and the fears associated with that life change.

Tone

The overall tone of the book is one of hope though it is underwritten with the despair of knowing that Adam will never grow into the adulthood his father dreams for him. This despair comes through in the book though the author also remembers the good points about Adam's childhood. In some places, the author comes across as overly easy-going and almost saintly in his ability to deal with the frustrations of Adam's condition, though Adam paints a somewhat different story, telling of times his father yells at him. This is probably typical of any parent-child relationship but may also be evidence of Adam's view of things. Though Michael sets out to research Fetal Alcohol Syndrome as he writes the book, he splits the book between the results of that research and life with Adam. However, he seems to gloss over the real-life parts, making statements such as "it was frustrating," which seems an incredible understatement. The reader who expects an epiphany ending or a sudden solution to the situation is likely to be disappointed. Since this is a real-life story of real people dealing with a problem that cannot be resolved, the only resolution described is that Michael finally comes to terms with the reality that Adam will always be low-functioning. The reader should note that published newspaper accounts indicate that Adam (actually a pseudonym) dies at age twenty-three when he is hit by a car.

Structure

The book is divided into fifteen chapters that vary only a little in length. Most are around twenty pages. Each chapter is numbered and there are no chapter titles. The book opens with acknowledgements written by the author. There is a foreword, about the same length as the chapters, written by the author's wife, Louise Erdich. This foreword describes a typical incident in which Adam suffers a seizure and Louise's struggles to deal with a boy with special needs.

The first chapter begins with Michael describing how he comes to decide that he wants to adopt a son and how the adoption comes to be. Chapter two covers Michael's adjustment to being a parent and chapter three begins in the hospital. Chapters are not really divided into events but seem to last for a specific amount of time and space. The final chapter is "The Adam Dorris Book by Adam Dorris," which is Adam's version of the events of his life. This includes spelling and punctuation mistakes, apparently meant to be exactly as Adam wrote it. In this section, Adam refers to Sava as "Jeffery." In a footnote, Michael explains that Adam's adopted brother's name is Jeffery Sava and that Adam uses the first name. The fact that the boy is apparently better known to Adam as "Jeffery" but that Michael refers to him as "Sava" seems to shed some doubt on the story as a whole. In fact, "Adam" is apparently a pseudonym used by Michael for the book. There has been some criticism of the book as a whole, including some who allege that Michael is not part Indian as he claimed. Published newspaper accounts indicate that Michael was accused of abusing his children and died of suicide in the 1990s.

Quotes

"What chance has this kid had to develop? I believe in the positive impact of environment, and with me he'll catch up." Chapter 1, p. 10.

"We watched each other, those strangers and I, like the finalists in a bad news lottery, each willing the other to win. Statistically, some of us would escape this night with our child and our lives intact, but not all." Chapter 2, p. 26.

"For years I assumed I was fighting the effects of his medication, battering the barriers of his late start, scaling self-protective walls erected against the neglect he experienced as an infant. It was not until the following summer, when Adam was still five years old, that I began to have an inkling that my real adversary was the lingering ghost of Adam's biological mother already dead in 1973 of acute alcohol poisoning." Chapter 3, p. 45.

"I was so busy being right, however, that I never allowed myself to tolerate the notion that a junior in college, a preschool teacher, a well-meaning administrator reading a set of simple observations, could recognize a danger that was invisible to me. I willed Adam to be fine, and he wasn't." Chapter 5, p. 71.

"Reading was important, was a true step, for Adam, but if it was his bus ticket to adulthood, it was no express." Chapter 7, p. 104.

"His learning problems at first appeared so marginal, so near a solution. With just the smallest nudge he would pass over the line into the normal range." Chapter 7, p. 110.

"Drunk expectant fathers may, at least as far as it is currently know, hurt only themselves and those unfortunate enough to get in their way; drunk expectant mothers can grievously and irreparably cause harm to their unborn infants." Chapter 9, p. 146.

"I thought of resources that had been available to Adam—Harvard-trained specialists, a university medical center—and what little impact that had made upon his life after years of concerted effort." Chapter 11, p. 191.

"It seemed, sometimes, as though I were throwing darts at a blank wall, and every spot I hit was a bull's-eye. There was no irrelevant information, yet no single source provided the breadth of a comprehensive picture." Chapter 12, p. 196.

"I was the messenger she would like to shoot, and she was the only person I had met who might have a workable solution, and she didn't." Chapter 12, p. 216.

"There suddenly loomed whole unimagined categories of things to worry about, pitfalls we couldn't anticipate before they had occurred. That was the time, I think, that we finally, completely accepted that Adam was never going to learn enough to survive on his own." Chapter 14, p. 249.



"Then after that had happened he one time asked me to go into her room at one time and at that point I said to him that I was no longer allowed into her room then after I said that to him he said that I could go into her room and I said that I was not allowed into her bedroom anymore then he started to lose his patients (sic) with me at that very moment. I was in very deep trouble at that moment." Chapter 15, p. 276.

Topics for Discussion

Describe Michael Dorris. What was it that prompted him to want to adopt? What were the hurdles in his way? How did he overcome them? Describe Michael's family. How many children did he adopt? In what other ways did his family grow?

How did Michael know that Adam had learning problems? What was his reaction when he was told? How did he initially deal with this disability? How did he eventually learn the extent of the problem?

Describe Adam Dorris. What were his shortcomings? What were his strengths? What was the learning disability that he dealt with? How did that disability come about? What is "The Adam Dorris Story?" Why was it written?

Who was Sava? Madeline? Persia? Ken Kramberg? Jeaneen Grey Eagle? Phil May? Louise? Charlotte Brave Heart? How did each come into contact with Michael? How did each impact him? How did each impact Adam?

List at least three specific daily situations that were problems for Adam. Why did some people view his attitudes as laziness or stubbornness? What were the long-term implications for these shortcomings?

What is FAS? Describe how Michael came to be involved in FAS research. List three facts that he learned about FAS. How is FAS prevented? Why are some victims of FAS recognizable by sight alone? What are some other symptoms?

Michael grows angry at Jeaneen Grey Eagle and says it is because of all the people he had met, he believed that she might be the one to have answers to the FAS problem. Is he right? What are some possible answers proposed? What kinds of success are associated with those answers?