

Look Me in the Eye: My Life with Asperger's Study Guide

Look Me in the Eye: My Life with Asperger's by John Elder Robison

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Contents

Look Me in the Eye: My Life with Asperger's Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters 1 and 2.....	4
Chapters 3 and 4.....	6
Chapters 5 and 6.....	7
Chapters 7 and 8.....	9
Chapters 9 and 10.....	11
Chapter 11 and 12.....	13
Chapters 13 and 14.....	15
Chapters 15 and 16.....	16
Chapters 17 and 18.....	17
Chapters 19 and 20.....	19
Chapters 21 and 22.....	20
Chapters 23 and 24.....	22
Chapters 25 and 26.....	23
Chapters 27 and 28.....	24
Chapter 29.....	25
Characters.....	26
Objects/Places.....	29
Themes.....	31
Style.....	34
Quotes.....	36
Topics for Discussion.....	38



Plot Summary

"Look Me in the Eye," by John Elder Robison, is an autobiographical account of John Robison's life, career, and his struggles with Asperger's Syndrome. John showed unusual behavior early in life. When John was just three, a playmate made the fatal mistake of placing a red block on John's neatly stacked blue blocks. In retaliation, John boxed the kid on both ears. When he went to nursery school, the other kids steered clear of him because he didn't interact with them in a normal fashion. He had trouble communicating with other kids. He had inappropriate responses to their comments and they didn't understand him. He also showed streaks of violence that stemmed from the frustration he was feeling because he knew he didn't fit in but couldn't figure out exactly why that was the case.

As John matured, he learned that his natural tendency to blurt out the first thing that came to his mind was not socially acceptable. He also learned to acquire facial expressions that were more "normal" than the stoic face he usually wore no matter what was taking place. When John was young, Asperger's Syndrome had not yet been recognized as a malady that fell into the vast array of autistic conditions. He mainly struggled on his own because his parents didn't understand his behavior or how to deal with it. They did take him to therapists but they usually concluded that John was just rude and arrogant by nature. John did connect with one therapist, Dr. Finch, but as it turned out the psychologist had his own mental problems and may have done more harm than good.

Later in life, John recognized that he had some characteristics that were savant-like. He was naturally brilliant at math and was extremely creative in the pranks he would pull off and the stories he would make up. He dropped out of school at sixteen and earned a GED with a 96 percent score. John went on to become a sound engineer for some of the top rock groups at the time including Judas Priest, Blondie, and the Talking Heads. He developed a long term relationship with KISS and created special effects and exotic lighting designs for the band. He accomplished this without any training. This type of inborn genius is a characteristic of a savant.

By forcing himself to become socially acceptable, John was able to bridge the gap between his introspective world and his savant-like tendencies and the normal world. He wanted to be normal and he understood the obstacles that stood before him. Although it was a struggle and continues to be one, John went on to achieve outstanding successes in both his personal and professional life.



Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 1: A Little Misfit, John Robison's three-year-old playmate, Doug, annoyed him. When John had all blue blocks stacked up, Doug would put a red one on top to mess it up. John would whack him on both ears which would make his mother and father very upset. Doug was John's only friend. When Doug's father graduated from medical school, they moved away. Years later John would learn that Doug fell in an irrigation ditch and drowned. But his mother kept the news from him when he was young.

John's mother enrolled him in preschool. The kids didn't like him and he got in trouble for hitting them even though he thought he was just petting them. John liked a little girl named Chuckie. He tried very hard to make friends with her but she resisted. John became frustrated and started smashing toys and sobbing. He didn't understand why she ignored him.

A person with Asperger's lack empathy for the other person which empathy usually guides one in his behavior and interaction with the other person. After Chuckie's rejection, John didn't try to be friendly with anyone else. He withdrew inside himself. John related much better with adults. He played alone with his toys, preferring complex toys like Lincoln Logs and Legos. He felt safe around machines and animals. When he first got his dog, Poodle, he didn't know what to do with him. He would yank his ears and hit him. When the dog bit him, he understood not to hit the dog. Poodle chewed on furniture so John tried chewing on it, too.

John would hear his parents argue at night when they thought he was asleep. It would scare him and he would cry. Later he found out that his father had an affair with another woman. He was really frightened when his father wasn't home one night. His mother told him that his father was in the hospital for a rest. His rest lasted a whole month.

After John and his mother returned from a vacation to her mother's, Poodle was gone. John accused his father of doing something to the dog but he denied it. It haunted John for years. His father got meaner and began to drink. His parents argued more often. After his father graduated from college, he got a job in Seattle. They traveled in their small VW bug cross-country from Philadelphia. He liked the backseat because it was small and compact and made him feel safe. In their new neighborhood, John didn't have any better luck with the kids there. They wouldn't let him play with them. He did make friends with a younger boy, Jeff, who was a misfit like he was. The next year the family moved to Pittsburgh where his parents promised him he could have a bike. He connected bikes with big kids. Maybe, he thought, the other kids would like him once he was a big kid.



In Chapter 2: A Permanent Playmate, John hated to leave his friend, Jeff, behind. But he didn't like Seattle. He'd have to deal with a new set of kids when he started first grade in Pittsburgh. John realized he didn't communicate properly. If a kid said, "Look at my truck," John might respond with, "I want some cookies." He understood that he had to work harder at responding to the actual words of the other kid. The adults in his life had never told him what he was doing wrong—they just went along with him. With his new approach, John made friends with kids in the neighborhood. He wasn't the life of the party, but at least he wasn't being rejected.

John's mother told him that she was having a baby. He wanted a boy so he could have a permanent playmate. He was very happy when Christopher was born. He felt jealous of his mother who seemed to spend all her time with the baby. The baby, who John called "Snort," didn't do much at first. But after about a year, John was able to teach him some tricks.

John's father was still looking for a permanent job. He was getting meaner and more silent. He drank a lot of sherry. His father finally got a permanent job at Amherst. They moved to a rural area and moved into an old farmhouse. John was excited about exploring the area around their house. He made friends with kids in nearby farms. Snort was starting to say words and was trying to walk. In fact, John helped him learn and kind of nudged him along. John liked being around Snort—Snort seemed to idolize him and follow him around. A new experience for John.

When he interacted with other kids, John always felt lonely and inferior to the other kids. He seldom laughed and didn't feel happy most of the time. His parents and teachers told him he wouldn't amount to much because he was too contrary. He'd wind up pumping gas, he was told. He vowed to show them they were wrong.



Chapters 3 and 4

Chapters 3 and 4 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 3: Empathy, Betsy, a friend of John's mother, was visiting and mentioned that the son of another friend died. Betsy was angered when she saw that John, now 12-years-old, was smiling. She asked him how he could smile at something like that. John didn't think his reaction was wrong. After all he didn't know the person who died. He wasn't dead and his parents and brother weren't dead. From that incident and from other similar ones, he realized that he had to have "appropriate" reactions even if they weren't genuine ones. He's taught himself to act normally. But as he matured, it was difficult for him not to blurt out what he was thinking and began to find himself getting into more and more trouble.

In Chapter 4: A Trickster Is Born, John found that being a clown endeared himself to some of the kids. As long as he was playing pranks on people, he was popular. In addition to pranking, John read so much that many people thought of him as a child prodigy. When John was fourteen, he and his mother and brother were at a park. When his mother went to the ladies' room, John convinced Chris, then six-years-old, to hide in a nearby shed. When his mother returned, he told her that John left with a man named Paul who said he was a friend of her's. Of course, she panicked and ran and got the police. When she returned with the cops, Chris was standing there and confirmed that he had gone off with the man.

John's biology teacher was always on John's back. He would ridicule him in front of the class and gave him the worst grades he could. John had porn magazines and a life-like inflatable girl sent to the teacher's home. The biology teacher flunked him, and in retaliation John had a driveway full of crushed stone delivered to the teacher's driveway.



Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 5: I Find a Porsche, after John's father got tenure, the family moved to a new house in a small town called Shutesbury. John made friends with kids at school and in the neighborhood. One day while exploring in the woods surrounding his neighborhood, he saw a new bright blue Porsche in a clearing. He was positive that it was left there for him. He crept up to the car and looked inside and opened the hood. There was no engine. John ran and got his friend, Ken, who was older than John. They came back and looked at the car. Ken thought it was a police stakeout, a lure for a car thief. There was probably a camera on them right then. The next day the car was still there. John got in and fantasized about being in a car race and driving 150 mph. The next day, a truck came and took the car away. Later, John learned that the woods was a dumping off point for stolen cars.

Three years later while staying with his grandparents in the summer, his grandfather told him he bought a used Porsche. John and his grandfather drove to pick the car up. John was thrilled with the car. It was a 914, the most powerful model. John drove the Porsche even though he didn't have a license. He washed and waxed the car and took good care of it hoping his grandfather would give it to him. Instead, his Uncle Bob took the Porsche out and ran it into a tree. It wouldn't be until he was 25 years old that he would get his own Porsche. It was a beige 912 that he bought used. He refinished and refurbished the car and once he was done and there was nothing left to fix, he sold it and bought another Porsche to restore. In all, John owned seventeen Porsches and fixed and restored each of them. He would never buy a new one. Fixing up used ones took a craftsman, an artist. That's what John wanted to be.

In Chapter 6: The Nightmare Years, John's father's drinking was increasing and tensions were high between his parents. He was getting meaner. One day without provocation, he grabbed John, shook him violently and slammed him against the wall. His father would sit in the kitchen and watch an old black and white TV and drink and smoke and sometimes pass out. He would go from hugging John and telling him he loved him to beating him with a belt if his mother wasn't around.

Even when John would sneak away and get in his bed his father would sometimes come in his room and beat him. John thought of the hunting knife his grandfather gave him and of grabbing it and plunging it into his father's body. The next day John would go out in the yard and smash his brother's toys with rocks. One night his father grabbed Chris and put out a cigarette in the toddler's forehead. Needless to say, the boys were terrified of their father.

Both John's parents came from bad childhoods and into a bad marriage and their children suffered for it. His mother began to slide into madness. She began hallucinating and eventually had to be hospitalized and restrained at the Northhampton State



Hospital. His parents were driving each other crazy and would have driven John crazy except for his Asperger's which served to insulate him. And despite the circumstances in his home, John was excelling at school. At the end of the year there were seven special achievement awards given out - John received six of them.

His mother arranged for family therapy with Dr. Finch who Chris wrote about in his book, "Running with Scissors." At first, only John and his parents saw the doctor while Chris stayed with a babysitter. Dr. Finch accomplished two important things for John. He told John he had permission to call his parents whatever he wanted and he told his father that he could no longer hit John. His father listened to the doctor because he never hit him again. Though he was initially helpful, Dr. Finch would display bizarre behavior later. John named his mother "Slave" and his father "Stupid."

John's grandfather warned John about Dr. Finch. He had read about him and learned that he had been run out of town in Kingsport, Tennessee. Dr. Finch was eccentric but John initially had a positive experience with him but that would change.



Chapters 7 and 8

Chapters 7 and 8 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 7: Assembly Required, when John was thirteen, he was given an electronics kit for Christmas. It was actually a rudimentary computer that he had to assemble. His parents bought him "how to" books yet he struggled to get everything in place and operating. Even though he was just in junior high, he qualified for a high school electronics class. He accelerated in the class and finished it in two weeks—instead of the usual full semester. He began looking into college electronics classes. His mother contacted a family friend, Professor Edwards, at UMass. Dr. Edwards opened a whole new world for him. He allowed him to work and study in the engineering labs. John went to the lab almost every day.

John started taking old TVs and radios apart to see how they were constructed. His father built him a workshop in the basement which was where John began spending all his time. Things between his parents were deteriorating. John's father was drinking more and often stayed in bed all day. His mother was becoming more manic and eventually had a psychotic break that required hospitalization. John began hanging around the audio-visual center at school. Learning how TV cameras, tape decks, phonographs, and other equipment were put together. He became valuable because he was able to fix equipment that was in disrepair. John met Mary Trompke in the AV room. She also repaired equipment and the two became friendly. She eventually would become John's first wife. Mary was a shy damaged kid like John. John felt Mary understood him.

In Chapter 8: The Dogs Begin to Fear Me, when John was thirteen, he spent the summer at his grandparents' house in Georgia. His Uncle Bob decided to teach him how to drive a car. After successfully driving the car to his great-grandmother's house, John drove the car into a ditch and crashed into his great-grandmother's mailbox. Nothing was badly damaged. Back at the house, Uncle Bob took a post hole digger from the shed. John was immediately fascinated with the tool. Later, after they repaired the mail box, John took the digger out to a field and dug a hole which would be the first of scores of holes he dug over the summer.

Back home, John found a posthole digger among his father's tools. There was a big pile of wood mulch that had been on the driveway for so long it was decomposing. He was able to dig a deep hole in the pile and called out his little brother to take a look. John dropped Chris into a few shallow holes first but finally dropped him in the deepest one that was taller than Chris was. John went inside and left Chris in the hole for fifteen minutes. When he came back out, Chris was still trying to get out. John pulled him out before his hollering would alarm the neighbors. For Halloween, John rigged the holes with flash powder. When trick or treaters came to the door, he'd blast one of the holes with a remote detonator from his room. After word got around, there weren't many trick



or treaters willing to brave the blasts so John and Chris got to eat all the candy their mother had bought.

John's pranks took on a more serious tone the older he got. He felt all-powerful and thought to himself that he had once feared dogs, now they feared him. One night he sneaked out of his house after everyone was asleep. He walked about a mile from the house and set paint cans laid out in the shape of a pentagram on fire and rigged up a dummy on a noose over the flames. He made an anonymous call to the police reporting that there was a ritual hanging. John hid in a tree and watched as the police came. They were duped and thought the dummy was a real person. Next fire trucks with their sirens blaring and lights flashing arrived on the scene. John got great pleasure from the prank and felt no remorse that he had wasted the time of the public servants who responded to the fire and had placed them at risk as they tried to retrieve the "dead body."



Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 9: I Drop Out of High School, when John was sixteen, he was hanging around in bars with bands and failing every subject at school. His parents seemed oblivious to his problems. Dr. Finch was exhibiting increasingly strange behavior. He sometimes walked around town holding a dozen balloons in order to, he said, bring attention to his causes. His mother was more paranoid, warning John that his father was homicidal and going to kill them all. John felt conflicted about Dr. Finch. He had really helped him but he was very odd. And sometimes he seemed to calm his parents down while at other times he seemed to rile them up. Looking back on that time, John can see that his father was clinically depressed and that his mother was insane. At times, she would become manic and literally howl like a wolf. She claimed she saw demons watching her.

John's father had a brief stay in the state hospital. A few months later, his mother was institutionalized at the same hospital for a lengthier stay. It was a difficult time for John and Chris. They had each other and there were family friends and neighbors who looked after them. John developed some tics including excessive head bobbing, staring into space and the inability to look people directly in the eye. He still had problems having the appropriate reaction to people and to what they said. He was having trouble at school and was sent to the principal's office more than once.

Over the years, John's parents had not ignored John's issues. His parents enrolled him in a program for troubled kids. They had taken him to more than a dozen of mental health care professionals. Asperger's was not a diagnosis at the time but autism was but no one even hinted that autism might be his problem. Therapists concluded that he was just lazy, angry or defiant. He got straight F's on his report card when he was fifteen. He was a problem and the school wanted to get rid of him. They suggested he take the GED and if he scored at least 75 percent, they would treat him as a graduate. He took the test and scored 96 percent.

John spent a lot of time walking in the woods around his house. One day he encountered Paul, a homeless disabled veteran. Paul lived in a tent and stayed in the area. He showed John how to forage in the woods and how to dig through dumpsters for food. He showed him how to walk quietly in the woods in case there was an enemy about and to watch where he walked in case there was an explosive. Paul told John about his time in the army, how he got hurt and about faraway places. Paul stayed in the woods most of that summer but when it got cold, he started talking about going to Florida. One day, John came out to see Paul but he was gone. He never saw him again. It was time for John to come out of the woods and join the civilized world.

In Chapter 10: Collecting the Trash, at fifteen, John bought a motor scooter. It was in disrepair and he was able to fix it. He liked it because it gave him a way to get away



from home. At a party at another professor's house, several people bragged that their children would be attending Harvard and Smith. John told them he had started a career as a sanitation engineer. As such, he had seen many strange things including a dead baby that had been discarded by an Amherst student. The people were shocked. They were even more shocked when he told them that he often ran into feral children on his route. These children ran in packs and were armed with knives.

The hostess knew that John was making the story up and insisted that he apologize. John told the group and said he had to leave because another sanitation company was bombing their trucks and they needed his assistance.



Chapter 11 and 12

Chapter 11 and 12 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 11: The Flaming Washtub, John friend's Jim Boughton had been working on a secret project and called John over one day to see it. Jim had made a "blast furnace" from scrap. He described it as a "nonferrous foundry for casting aluminum and bronze" (p. 102). The furnace could not attain temperatures enough to smelt steel. Jim ignited it and John was astounded by the heat and roaring sound it generated. Jim demonstrated the furnace's power by throwing chunks of aluminum into it. The aluminum quickly liquified. John helped Jim pour the melted aluminum into a mold. After the metal cooled, Jim cracked the mold open revealing a pair of arms. Jim's younger brother had posed for the mold.

Jim had a close call with another invention. He had created a vat that he used to clean auto parts. The vat was fitted with a pump and the liquid used to clean the parts was gasoline. One evening when John was over, things got out of control when Jim plugged the pump in and a spark jumped across the room, setting the gasoline on fire. Everyone ran out with Jim the last to run from the shed, grinning widely despite suffering minor burns.

The fire department came but Jim warned them that the fire contained magnesium and that hosing it down with water would be dangerous. They needed to use foam. The firemen didn't listen to the kid and doused the fire with water. The magnesium and gasoline exploded and dropped balls of flaming magnesium across the yard. The magnesium balls were burning holes in a van in the driveway and on the roof of the house. Eventually, the entire yard was on fire and it took the firemen an hour to extinguish it.

John's personal life was falling apart. Mary Trompke, who he affectionately called Little Bear, wanted nothing to do with him but wouldn't tell him why. John's parents officially separated. John's mother then decided she was bisexual and began getting involved with women. Eventually, she became involved with a girl a year younger than John. His father was struggling to make it on his own and had stopped seeing Dr. Finch who he characterized as "crazy." John began to question the doctor's sanity himself. Dr. Finch was let go from the state hospital staff. Although Finch at helped him, John finally stopped seeing him. Later, Finch was charged with insurance fraud and his doctor's license was revoked. John became more involved with the rock scene and Chris was just kind of left on his own.

In Chapter 12: I'm in Prison with the Band, the band that played at the Rusty Nail, a local nightspot, invited John to move in with them. The band members, including the lead singer called "Fat," lived together in a farmhouse. John could live there free of charge plus the band would pay him \$80 a week to keep their equipment in good repair. John spent his days working on the sound equipment and would help tote the band's



equipment to their gigs. John's whole world had changed. He left home and had a whole new set of friends. He was adapting fairly well. John was invited along on a vacation the band was taking to the Caribbean. John hated the Caribbean because all the familiar things in life including his food were missing. He had no idea how to vacation. The band members were all using drugs. Suddenly, there was a drug bust one day and everyone was arrested and jailed. Just as John was contemplating how to break out, he and the other were all released on bail. The guys got a lawyer and a trial was set for the next week. The charges against John were dropped. Several of the band members had to pay relatively small fines. After returning to the states, John didn't remain living at the farmhouse much longer. He didn't feel that he belonged there.



Chapters 13 and 14

Chapters 13 and 14 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 13: The Big Time, the winter of '78 held good news for John. He reunited with Little Bear. She had abandoned him because of a lie that someone had told about him. They resumed their friendship and eventually moved in together. A national sound company hired John. The company had done sound for Pink Floyd tours. Pink Floyd had the biggest sound system in the world. John came to their attention when he noticed that the amplifiers at a concert at Amherst were breaking down. He told Mick, the head of the sound company known as Britro, that he could fix the them.

Mick brought John to a workroom at their facility and he was astonished at the whole wall of amplifiers that were in need of repair. In three days, he fixed all but two of them—fifty-two in all were repaired and passed Mick's sound test. Mick was impressed and asked John if he could design and build a five-way crossover sound system. Little Bear helped John make the circuit boards. He completed the five-way and delivered it to Mick with no time to spare. It would be tested at the actual show. Britro was doing sound for Meatloaf that night. It was a sell-out crowd and the sound system that John had designed worked perfectly. John had become a sound engineer. As a regular with Britro he worked on the sound for Judas Priest, Talking Heads and Blondie. He and Little Bear went on a tour with a band through Canada which was where he turned twenty-one. He loved the road. It made him forget about his screwed up family.

In Chapter 14: The First Smoking Guitar, one day when John arrived at the warehouse where Britro had their workshop, he heard the unmistakable sound of KISS. They rented a sound stage to prepare for their tour. Ace Frehley asked John to put a smoke bomb in his guitar that would ignite at the end of his solo. John suggested that they rig his guitars with bright, flashing lights in addition to the smoke bomb. Ace liked the idea.

John got together with Jim Boughton and they rigged the guitar with a system comprised of a smoke bomb and lights and a battery to run the system. They also insulated the guitar so that the heat wouldn't damage it. The guitar worked like a charm. Ace was impressed and so was the audience. Ace kept John busy for the next two years with ideas for more special effects. John who had never been popular was now being sought after by old friends and family for tickets and backstage passes.

There were a lot of girls always hanging around backstage waiting for the guys. John didn't feel comfortable around them. Sometimes he brought his little brother, Chris, on tour. Everyone was impressed that John worked with KISS. Maybe it was an Aspergian thing, but John was never impressed by celebrity. They were just people. He saw the work that he did with KISS as a partnership similar to that of a race car driver and his mechanic.



Chapters 15 and 16

Chapters 15 and 16 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 15: The Ferry to Detroit, John made sure he called his brother every weekend. Chris was staying at Dr. Finch's house while their mother was hospitalized. With their parents both struggling, John helped to support Chris. On one occasion, he told John it was urgent that he see him. John had Chris flown to Cleveland and picked him up in a rented Cadillac.

Chris' emergency was that he wanted to go to the mall and buy some new clothes. John, still up to his pranks, told the fourteen-year-old Chris that there were no stores in Cleveland. The entire city was a religious community and the people were called Clevites who didn't believe in retail stores. He told Chris that the closest place to shop was in Detroit which was an over an hour away by ferry. He warned Chris that Detroit was a depraved society and that sinners and drug dealers would be greeting him. John gave him \$200 to cover the cost of new clothes and the ferry. Chris asked around how to get to the ferry to Detroit. When he told them he wanted to shop, one of the musicians told him there was a mall less than a mile away. He realized that his brother had once again successfully tricked him. John took him to the mall and bought him the new clothes that he wanted.

In Chapter 16: One with the Machine, many people with Asperger's love machines. Part of John's attraction for machines was the fact that he controlled them. He had problems "reading" other people. With machines, he knew exactly what to expect. At concerts before the band came out, the room was totally dark. When it was time for the show to start, it was all up to John as the sound engineer to light up the stage. So much depended on him. In a way he had a lot of power. The brilliant lighting design seemed like magic to the audience but it was John's know-how and hard work that had made it all possible. By just moving his fingers forward on the controls, he would bring a million watts of lighting to life. To John, it was never enough. His goals were always to have brighter lights and louder amplifiers. His machines were run with 100 percent perfection for every show. He could depend on them.



Chapters 17 and 18

Chapters 17 and 18 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 17: Rock and Roll All Night, John went on the Return of KISS tour in the summer of 1979. He'd been working for months on special effects. He always worried whether his special effects would work. The first date was in Orlando, Florida. After he arrived, he took out all the rigged guitars from his bags to make sure they had not been damaged during the flight. He checked the lights to make sure they all worked. He brought the guitars to the venue and showed everyone his new light design—moving ripples like those on a pond. Ace loved the new effect.

Ace urged John to work on some new special effects. Could a rocket come out of his guitar, he asked. Or could he make a laser guitar or shoot ammunition from his guitar? John's head was spinning but promised Ace he could do it all. The next day he began working on new designs. The other guys tried to get John to hook up with some of the backstage groupies but he had a girlfriend and had no interest in cheating on her. The drugs that were part of the scene made John nervous. He didn't like anything that made people go out of control. On some occasions, he had tried some drugs and drank too much but didn't like how he felt. While in Munich, one of Frehley's guitars was damaged beyond repair. John flew home, created a replacement for the guitar and flew back first class—one seat for him and one for the guitar.

In Chapter 18: A Real Job, although he was working for big bands, John was almost broke. He only worked for them when they were on tour. After the tour, he went home and had no means of income. He realized he needed a job with a stable, reliable income. He had offers to go to Hollywood or New York City but he couldn't leave Little Bear and even though he hated them, he was afraid to move far away from his parents. He wanted to stay near in case his brother needed him. John partnered up with Jim Boughton and the two began installing light and sound systems in the local nightclubs, first in Amherst and then they expanded their business to Boston and Hartford.

John observed the people that came to the nightclubs. He wished he could walk up to them—both girls and guys—and talk to them but he just couldn't. He just couldn't integrate himself in the groups around them. John's designs were getting more and more complex. He needed expensive testing equipment but couldn't afford it. He needed a job and a steady paycheck. John answered an ad for electrical engineers that were needed to design electronic games. He studied up on designing games and by the time he had his interview, he was able to convince the company that he could do the job. He was hired at a starting salary of \$25,000 a year.

John was afraid that he would fail at his job and was fearful that he wouldn't fit in. He had never had a job at a company before. John's group would be designing the first talking toys. The environment was much better than the drugs and hookers always

present on the rock and roll tours. Within a year, he was responsible for designing his own projects. He felt that he finally was fitting into the normal world.

Chapters 19 and 20

Chapters 19 and 20 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 19: A Visit from Management, John wore a tie everyday to work and was on time most days. Eventually, his department would have offices in a corporate facility but until that time, his office was located in the factory. It wasn't John's idea of a professional job but his boss assured him that he wouldn't be in the factory very long. John was still up to his pranks. He used a razor and shaved Formica off a counter in the office. He put the powder on a mirror, rolled up a twenty dollar bill and set it next to the powder. He was hoping that the cops would be called in by management for a drug bust when the suspicious looking powder was spotted. And when the real source of the substance was discovered, whoever reported it would be soundly embarrassed. As it turned out one of the vice presidents of the company began snorting the white powder and eventually took it all. John couldn't believe how his prank turned out. Later he heard that the vice president was arrested downtown with the pimps, whores and crack dealers. John had thought that white-collar executives were born into their positions and were fundamentally superior to him. He found he was wrong.

In Chapter 20: Logic vs. Small Talk, being very logical is an Aspergian trait. That's why John had trouble with ordinary conversation because it was rarely logical. He felt more at home with computer programs which were always logical. Small talk was a challenge for John. He learned as a young boy that adults didn't like that he blurted out the first thing that came to his mind. But people felt at liberty to approach him with unsolicited comments and then become disturbed when they didn't get the responses they wanted. That's why severely autistic people don't talk to other people at all. Normal people have a set of pat questions and responses that they learned and that are acceptable. In addition, the exchanges they have are often far from logical.

Aspergians appear normal unlike a person in a wheelchair who immediately receives the sympathy and compassion of others. Aspergians are just as handicapped as someone who is wheelchair-bound. However, because they are not perceived as disabled, their inappropriate responses to others are seen as rude and arrogant.

Chapters 21 and 22

Chapters 21 and 22 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 21: Being Young Executives, John got a job at Milton Bradley. He and his colleague, Bob, were certain that the toys that they would design would "change the world." But something unexpected called corporate politics was involved. They were assigned to update an older version of a role-playing board game, Dark Tower. The challenge that John and Bob faced was to update the game for virtually pennies. Bob created the update and came in under budget. A few weeks later, they learned that another higher-ranking engineer took credit for the design and received an award for it. John was able to solve a problem with the company's hand-held video game system called Microvision. Sixty percent of the customer base was complaining that the toy was defective. John traced the problem to static charges and implemented the necessary steps to prevent damage to the game system thus stemming the flood of complaints.

When John was 25, he married Little Bear. John lost his job at Simplex which placed a lot of stress on him since Little Bear had returned to school and wasn't working. He was the only breadwinner. Tragedy struck when Little Bear's brother, Paul, was killed in a car accident. The young couple began to grow apart. In the next six years, John had moved through three more jobs and was finished with the corporate world. They were tired of him as well. He was told that he was rude and inconsiderate and not a team player.

In Chapter 22: Becoming Normal, John had to continually struggle to make the transition from Aspergian to almost normal. John's theory is that there is a continuum from autism to Asperger's to normal. Autistic children withdraw and live with only their own thoughts. It is difficult for anyone to get through to them. The polar opposite of these children are those who are extroverted and may not make great engineers but get by on their interpersonal skills. John feels he is in between the two extremes in that he is chiefly introspective but has the ability to relate at some level to others. Those Aspergians who have great intensity for a subject are referred to as savants. John can see savant-like characteristics in himself but only in limited areas. John's own development followed a pattern. An intense growth period in introspective abilities was followed by a period of communicative development. The ages four through seven were critical in John's social development. However, had he not had external stimulants to reach to that other side, he could have become more savant-like.

John quit his job and went into the car renovation business. He mortgaged his house for the start-up money. He bought cars, refurbished them and sold them, for what he hoped would be a profit. His first car earned him a \$1,500 profit but as the year went on, he lost the original \$30,000 investment money and was another \$50,000 in debt. John had no choice but to forge ahead and work even harder. He decided to work on high-end cars like Rolls Royces and Land Rovers. After twenty years in the business, Robison Service employed a dozen people and was a huge success. He was so successful that

the bank that he did business with asked him to become a member of the Board of Directors. He was no longer an outcast. He was a legitimate member of the community.

Chapters 23 and 24

Chapters 23 and 24 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 23: I Get a Bear Cub, in early 1990, John's son was born. Little Bear had been sick almost the entire time. Because his wife was sick, he feared that his son would be born sick. Jack was born apparently healthy although he was very small. John still had fears that something was wrong with him. He was also afraid that the hospital might switch babies on them. John made note of the numbers on his hospital ID bracelet. He marked his arm with a felt-tip marker as another method of identification.

John proudly took his son with him everywhere. He wanted to expose Jack to people so that he wouldn't have the same social problems as he did. When Jack was very young, Jack was six when John was officially diagnosed with Asperger's. Since the condition was hereditary, John was concerned that his son might have the condition. John thought he spotted some of traits in Jack but he developed normally both socially and intellectually. Jack was gifted like his father at math and creativity. John's hope for Jack was that he graduated from high school and college.

In Chapter 24: A Diagnosis at Forty, T R Rosenberg became a friend of John's when he brought his Land Rover into John's garage for repair. T R was the polar opposite of John. He was warm and friendly and outgoing. T R was a therapist by profession and over the years noticed some troubling traits about his friend. T R brought John a book, "Asperger's Syndrome," by Tony Attwood. T R felt bad about springing the issue on John but he felt strongly that John exhibited symptoms of Asperger's. After reading the book, John agreed with T R. It was almost comforting to have a label for what he was and that there were many others with the same condition. The book helped him. He began to make conscious efforts to look people in the eyes. He taught himself to use socially accepted questions and answers.

Chapters 25 and 26

Chapters 25 and 26 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 25: Montagoonians, John had a difficult time remembering people's names. In order to cope, he made up names for most everyone. He called his little brother Snort and then later Varmint. He called his wife Little Bear. He named animals and dogs as well but always selected names that made sense. His dog's name was "Poodle." He named his house, "The House." As a young boy he named his toy tractor, "Chippy." When his therapist told him he could name his parents, he named his father, "Stupid," and his mother, "Slave," - names they were not thrilled with. When he introduced a friend from Montague, Canada, he referred to them as Montagoonians.

In Chapter 26: Units One through Three, John never had a problem picking out a machine or vehicle but picking out friends was always a challenge. He was always fearful of rejection and put on a front that he didn't care about a person he liked just in case they didn't like him back. He felt that people should put more effort in choosing a mate. Most people take more care in selecting a car than they do a spouse. The divorce rate wouldn't be so high if people chose more wisely.



Chapters 27 and 28

Chapters 27 and 28 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 27: Married Life, there was a history of divorce in John's family. His Uncle Bob married three times. His father married twice. John himself was also married twice. His second marriage was more successful because Martha understood his condition better than his first wife. Martha was more tuned into his moods which were difficult to detect in Aspergians because they rarely showed any expression. She was always patient with him and his need to ask the same question repeatedly. Martha always had a calming and comforting effect on John.

In Chapter 28: Winning at Basketball, after John divorced and remarried, Jack spent half his time with each parent. John wanted Jack to be in the best school and the Amherst school district was one of the best. Despite all the bad memories associated with Amherst, he decided to move back there for his son's sake. There was another reason John wanted to return to Amherst. He failed to graduate from high school and his family life was a disaster. By returning there as an adult, John felt he was turning failure into a success. He would have a son who graduated from high school and would have a happy family life in a new home in the ashes of what was a disastrous childhood.



Chapter 29

Chapter 29 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 29: My Life as A Train, John always loved trains. His grandfather and father did as well. His son, Jack, seemed to have inherited the same attraction for them. For John the appeal of the train was on a very personal level. His mother often read him the story of "The Little Engine That Could" to him when he was a young boy. He loved the part when the engine struggled to get up the hill and kept repeating, "I think I can! I think I can!" John felt like that little train all his life.



Characters

John Robison

John Robison was born with Asperger's Syndrome. However, when he was born, the condition had not yet been recognized as part of the vast array of maladies associated with autism. Early on, John displayed bizarre and socially unacceptable behavior. He did not play well with other children. Other children steered clear of him because of his odd comments and demonstrated flashes of violence.

John's home life was a further burden on the troubled boy. His father was depressed and an alcoholic who became mean and abusive when he drank too much. His mother had the expected protective nature of a mother; that is, until she became psychotic and paranoid and had to be institutionalized. Over the years, John's parents did seek therapeutic help for him but the counseling was ineffective. He spent years undergoing therapy with a psychologist named Dr. Finch. But his time with this therapist may have done more harm than good because Dr. Finch had mental problems himself.

John was brilliant in math and had a creative, inventive mind but his social skills caused him to be an outcast in school and fail in his studies. He quit school at sixteen but his intelligence led him to an unusual and successful career. His inborn abilities and sheer genius led him to become a sound engineer for some of the top rock bands at the time—something he achieved with no training. He learned how to appear more normal socially although it was always a struggle. He parlayed his experience as a sound engineer into a high-paying job as a design engineer for a top toy company.

Realizing that the corporate world wasn't for him, he left a lucrative salary and established his own company. He repaired and refurbished high-end cars like Rolls Royces and Land Rovers and though it was not a cake-walk eventually turned his business into a highly successful operation. John and his second wife had a son, Jack, who John idolized. Much to John's relief, his son developed normally and was his proudest achievement.

John's Father

John's father was a well-educated man and a college professor at Amherst University. However, he struggled with depression for much of his life. His depression led to severe alcoholism, which had a devastating impact on his young family. When John's father drank too much, he became a mean drunk. He would violently shake John and slam him against the wall. When young John would try to get out of his sight by crawling into his bed, his father would follow him into his bedroom and beat him with a belt. On one occasion, he put a cigarette out on Christopher's forehead.

John's parents had a turbulent marriage. Their arguing and fighting would terrorize John and his younger brother, Christopher. As time went by, John's parents' animosity for one



another only escalated. Although the family sought therapy, it was ineffective. John's father eventually sunk into a deep depression that was so severe that he literally stayed in bed all day, allowing his tenure to be in jeopardy.

Eventually the couple divorced and his father remarried. After John was an adult and on his own, he would sometimes get a call from his father who would be so drunk that he would pass out while on the phone with his son. Some of his father's depression could have been due to his son's condition. This however is not an excuse for his behavior but rather a possible cause.

John's Mother

John Robison's mother was a loving and protective mother until she was struck with a psychosis that led to her being institutionalized. She and her husband eventually divorced.

Christopher Robison

Christopher Robison is John's younger brother. He suffered from abuse in his childhood. As an adult, he changed his name to Augusten Burroughs and is a successful writer. He authored the bestseller, "Running with Scissors."

Dr. Finch

Dr. Finch was a therapist who counseled the Robison family when John was a young boy. John feels that Dr. Finch helped his family but also may have hurt them. Dr. Finch had mental problems himself.

Mary Anne Trompke

John met Mary Anne Trompke when they were both in high school. He nicknamed her Little Bear and the two eventually were married. The marriage ended in divorce.

Martha

Martha was John's second wife. Martha understood John and his problems. She always had a calming and comforting impact on him.

Jack

Jack is John's son. When he was born, John feared that he might be sick since his wife suffered from morning sickness. He was also fearful that someone would kidnap him from the hospital.



Bob Houghton

Bob Houghton was a friend of John's. They both loved to invent devices and design machines. Bob burned down his work shed on one occasion when the combination of gasoline and magnesium he used in one of his inventions caught fire.

Ace Frehley

Ace Frehley was the lead guitarist for the rock group, KISS. John endeared himself to Ace when he rigged his guitar with a smoke bomb and blinding lights that went off at the end of his solo.



Objects/Places

Asperger's Syndrome

Asperger's Syndrome is a condition that falls in the wide-range of maladies associated with autism. Aspergians have difficulty communicating and developing acceptable social skills.

Pennsylvania

John Robison was born in Philadelphia and lived there during his very early years. Later, the family moved to Pittsburgh, PA while John was still a child.

Mulberry Tree Nursery School

The Mulberry Tree Nursery School was John's first experience with other kids. It was difficult for John because his bizarre behavior was off-putting to the other kids who steered clear of him.

Seattle

When John was a young child, his father was seeking a position with a college and moved the family to Seattle for a few years in that pursuit.

Amherst

John's father eventually was hired by Amherst University in Massachusetts as a professor.

Britro

Britro was a sound company that worked with KISS and other superstar rock bands. John had a natural talent for design engineering and impressed the head engineer at Britro when he was able to repair over fifty amplifiers that they had tossed aside as useless.

KISS

John impressed guitarist Ace Frehley with his special effects abilities including rigging Ace's guitar with smoke bombs and blinding lights.



Milton Bradley

John worked at Milton Bradley as a design engineer. He created the first "talking" game and solved a production problem that saved the company over \$100,000.

Robison Service Co.

John took a mortgage out on his house to enter into an auto service company that catered to high-end vehicles. The company was eventually a huge success.

The Caribbean Vacation

John, who was the sound engineer for a local band, was invited by them to go on vacation with them in the Caribbean. He regretted going when the local police conducted a drug bust on the house where they were staying. He wasn't using drugs but was arrested along with the others.



Themes

Overcoming Adversity

"Look Me in the Eye" by John Elder Robison is the story of the struggle of a young man just to be normal. It sounds like an easy accomplishment. However, the young man in question was a victim of Asperger's Syndrome, a mild form of autism. At every age, there was a new challenge for John. As a toddler playing with blocks, John boxed another toddler in the ears when he dared put a red block on John's stack of blue blocks. In nursery school, the other kids avoided him due to his odd behavior that sometimes included violence. As he progressed in school, he would sometimes do very well in his studies because intellectually he was brilliant. But his social skills were so poor and, in large part, unacceptable by others, that he was shunned by his peers which showed up in his grades.

As evidence that John was a disciplinary problem, the school suggested that he quit school at 16. If he passed the GED with a 75 percent grade, they would recognize him as a graduate. John scored a 96 percent on his test and left school. The kids didn't want him and neither did the teachers.

John focused on the things that were holding him back and making him stand apart from the crowd. His facial expressions, he was told, were inappropriate and showed no emotion. His responses to comments or questions were usually off base and off topic. He was determined not to let those traits hold him back. He knew that in order to fit in at least at some level, he had to appear to be normal. He worked hard at learning pat questions and pat answers that were socially acceptable. They would not be things that he would ordinarily say but he was willing to fake it in order to have some semblance of normalcy. He also practiced appropriate expressions and trained himself to show the "right face" at the right time.

Despite the fact that he was literally forced out of school and missed out on going to college, John's brilliance and natural abilities led him to a successful career as a design engineer and a corporate manager. It was a combination of his intelligence, determination and his willingness to change himself that made his achievements possible.

Finding Your Niche

If there is anything that emerges from the book, "Look Me in the Eye," that everyone has a place where he belongs. However, where that place is is not always readily apparent. John Robison who struggled with Asperger's Syndrome his whole life found a unique path, a circuitous route that finally led to the place where he belonged. While his condition presented many barriers to success, John was also blessed in that he was gifted with a genius for math and electronics.



John was able to parlay his unique abilities into several successful careers including one as a sound engineer for rock and roll superstar bands and another as a design engineer for an international toy company. As a very young man, John was able to secure a position that was paying him over \$100,000 a year. But he reached a point that no matter what the earnings, he knew that what he was doing was not for him. He did not feel comfortable being in a corporate position where he managed other people. John liked to work with his intellectual ability, imagination and creativity and make things and fix things with his hands.

When John realized that his success was completely in the wrong pursuit, he left behind a large salary and a great future in favor of entering into a risky venture that had no guarantees but was what he really wanted to do. John found his way by first trying to mold himself into something he wasn't. He realized that if he stayed in the corporate world he would never achieve real success on a personal level, something that he craved and that his soul needed.

Child Abuse

John Robison and his younger brother, Christopher Robison, both were the victims of childhood abuse. Although Asperger's Syndrome, a mild form of autism, was not a recognized condition when John was a child, he displayed abnormal behavior early in his life. As he developed, his parents recognized that he had developmental problems and sought help for him. However, the therapist of choice was a psychologist named Dr. Finch who had his own behavioral and mental problems.

Even though they were warned that Dr. Finch was not the therapist that John needed, his parents none the less continued therapy with him. As adult, John looked back at his therapy with Dr. Finch with great conflict. He felt he helped him in some regards but in other ways probably did damage to him. The most important role of a parent is to protect a child from harm. Unfortunately, John's parents were not equipped to be good parents and subjected him to a therapist who did not properly address his serious condition and whose methods led to the deepening of his problems.

Although the foregoing was a nuanced form of child abuse, there were other forms of abuse that were not so subtle. John's father was an alcoholic and when he drank too much he became a mean drunk. He would take young John, who admittedly had annoying behavior, and shake him violently and slam him against the wall. He would beat him mercilessly with a belt for no apparent reason. In a drunken range, his father once put out his cigarette on Christopher's forehead. John's mother had mental problems and in her paranoia would tell her sons that their father planned to kill them. There was no adult to step in to protect the children against a mother who needed help and who was terrifying them.

John's father and mother had a shattered relationship that was heading for divorce. However, they stayed together way too long much to the detriment of their children. The entire family sought therapy with Dr. Finch but unfortunately in the end he did more

harm than good. Had the couple gotten real help for the family or divorced years before they did, it could have spared the children a miserable childhood.



Style

Perspective

"Look Me in the Eye" is the story of John Elder Robison who suffered from Asperger's Syndrome, a mild form of autism. Like the severe form of the disease, Aspergians have difficulty in communicating in the normal manner. Since the author of the book is John Elder Robison, there could be no one better to tell his story than the man himself.

The story is told in the first-person narrative and as such the reader learns not only the events that occurred in Robison's life but also his reactions to them and his personal thoughts on what was occurring. The story does a public service for the community and other victims of the syndrome. It sheds light on the struggle and the ostracization that children endure because they are different. Although Aspergians don't reflect much emotion on their faces, the reader learns that the hurt and humiliation is just as deeply felt.

For a person who was officially diagnosed with a condition that impairs communication, this work demonstrates that Robison can do a great job in communicating with the written word. His effort dispels many myths about the condition. These individuals feel and think and care. It's just very difficult for them to convey their thoughts and feelings to others.

Tone

"Look Me in the Eye" by John Elder Robison, is an autobiographical account of Robison's lifelong struggle with Asperger's Syndrome. Asperger's is a sub-category of autism and inherent in that overall condition is the difficulty for its victims to communicate. Through therapy, Aspergians can learn ways in which to cope with their condition but there is no cure-all and communication remains a challenge for those with the syndrome throughout their lives.

In this account, Robison does an outstanding job in communicating through the written word. His descriptions of the difficulties and struggles that he faced in school and in social situations are made vivid and dramatic. He aptly conveys the confusion and frustration that he felt when he wasn't chosen for a sports team and when the other kids in general just steered clear of him. The reader can certainly empathize with the loneliness he felt and recognize how his self-worth must have taken a battering during those times.

There is no bitterness detected in Robison's words. He tells his story in an open manner and demonstrates his maturity and subsequent healthy development as he reflects on the most difficult days with understanding and a proper perspective.

Structure

"Look Me in the Eye," by John Elder Robison is separated into twenty-nine medium-sized chapters. The story is presented in a generally chronological order with some flashback sequences in used to bring clarity to the story. The book is an autobiographical account of the struggles of a young man with Asperger's Syndrome before it was recognized as a condition of autism. The account begins from the time of Robison's first memories, probably when he was around three years of age. The succeeding chapters relate his school years, his struggles to fit in and his frustration in not understanding why he was an outcast. The early chapters chronicle the abuse and neglect that he and his brother were subjected to in their formative years.

After Robison quits school, the book moves on to his career and his savant-like genius in electronics and design engineering. The last portion of the book explains how Robison was able to learn how to act to appear normal—although he knew he would never be normal. The book ends on a happy note after he becomes very successful and finally is able to enjoy a happy family life.

There is a foreward by John's brother and a prologue that discusses Asperger's Syndrome. The last chapter is followed by an Epilogue that contains an update and some clarifications to the main book. The epilogue is followed by a postscript to the paperback edition which contains the most recent updates in Robison's story. An Acknowledgments section, a Reading and Resources section, and a Reading Group Guide are the concluding sections of the book.



Quotes

"Looking back, maybe my friendship with Doug wasn't the best omen. But at least I stopped whacking other kids. Somehow I figured out that whacking does not foster lasting friendship." (Chapter 1, p. 8).

"I was so used to living inside my own world that I answered with whatever I had been thinking." (Chapter 2, p. 20).

"As I got older, I found myself in trouble more and more for saying things that were true, but that people didn't want to hear. I did not understand tact." (Chapter 3, p. 33).

"There is a dark side to Asperger's, and it comes from our childhood dealings with people who do not treat us the way they would like to be treated." (Chapter 8, p. 69).

"Interacting about technical things had become comfortable, and the more I did it, the more I knew and the easier it got. I wouldn't hesitate at all to walk up to a sound man at a concert. But I was still terrified of walking up to a girl." (Chapter 12, p. 123).

"The creative people in the music scene all seemed to be misfits, so I blended right in." (Chapter 14, p. 137).

"Many people with Asperger's have an affinity for machines. Sometimes I think I can relate better to a good machine than any kind of person." (Chapter 16, p. 151).

"I knew everything there was to know about lighting the dance floor and lighting the people, but the people themselves remained a mystery to me. I could not figure them out." (Chapter 18, p. 75).

"How could a six-pound baby with misshapen features and a head the size of an apple look 'just like me?'" (Chapter 23, p. 221).

"Recent articles suggest that a touch of Asperger's is an essential part of much creative genius." (Chapter 24, p. 240).

"I do like my mate. . .and to a lesser extent, I like my car and I like my chain saw. But I also like to feel that I came to be associated with each as a result of intelligent consideration and choice, and not just chance." (Chapter 26, p. 251).

"I never did well at sports as a kid, and I was never a sports fan. A childhood of being the

last one picked and the first one tossed hadn't left me with very fond feelings about school sports." (Chapter 28, p. 259).



Topics for Discussion

What is Asperger's Syndrome? How does it differ from a diagnosis of autism?

What conditions did John's parents suffer from? How was John and his brother mistreated by their parents? How might their abuse have impacted John's condition?

What socially unacceptable behaviors did John display? Why was it difficult for him to understand why people didn't react well to him?

What helped John become more socially adept? How did that help him in his career?

Why didn't John feel comfortable as a manager? In what type of role did John feel most comfortable and why? Why did he leave a lucrative career?

Why was John fearful about his son when he was first born? What behavior did he exhibit about his infant that was abnormal?

What does the phrase "savant-like" mean? What kept John from becoming a savant? How is being savant-like associated with genius?