

The Lost Boy Study Guide

The Lost Boy by Dave Pelzer

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Plot Summary

David Pelzer is a child taken into the foster care system at age twelve, though he had spent years being tortured and tormented by his mother. David is one of five sons and there's no real indication why he was singled out for his mother's attention. David's father is present during his early years, though he wants peace in his household at any cost—even if it means David is being beaten and tormented.

David's torment ranges from emotional to physical. David says that his mother is "playing a game," and that the key to his survival is to play by her rules. For example, she pulls on his ear but he isn't allowed to flinch. Jerking away from her earns David another slap. As is typical of many abused children, David seeks his mother's approval despite the abuse. When he's nine, his mother kicks him out of the house. The police pick him up and David has the opportunity to tell of the abuse, but doesn't. David's teachers finally take action. It seems likely that David's mother has severely burned his arm on a gas stove, and that's the reason the teachers alert the authorities. As David is taken into the foster child system, he doesn't know what to expect and spends much of his time worrying that his mother will return for him. Conversely, he desperately misses his mother and wants his mother's love. He takes an opportunity to go by his mother's house and is both disappointed and confused when he's told he isn't allowed to contact her.

David moves through a series of foster homes over the years until he turns eighteen. He isn't always happy in the foster homes, but is always better off than he had been with his mother. At one point, when David is in trouble with a foster mother, he says that it's an "interesting" situation. He knows he's in serious trouble, but knows that his foster parents won't beat him. He wonders what they could possibly do to him. When he's grounded, he isn't certain what the term means and figures that it's not a bad deal.

David goes through a rebellious phase and gets into trouble several times. The most serious legal scrapes include a plan with another boy to set a school on fire and a series of thefts. He spends some time in a juvenile lock-up facility and says he feels that the routine of that place is easier to manage than life "outside" the facility.

David finally finds his way, though the road is not without a series of bumps. David does bond with several of his foster parents as well as social workers and friends. It's those bonds that finally help David find his way. David eventually gets his G.E.D. then joins the Air Force where he apparently distinguishes himself. The final notation of the book is that David is with his son, Stephen, and that he has a family of his own.



The Runaway

The Runaway Summary and Analysis

David Pelzer is a child taken into the foster care system at age twelve, though he had spent years being tortured and tormented by his mother. David is one of five sons and there's no real indication why he was singled out for his mother's attention. David's father is present during his early years, though he wants peace in his household at any cost—even if it means David is being beaten and tormented.

The first chapter begins when David is nine years old, in 1970. David describes the misery of his life in some detail and says he is "Mother's prisoner". David sleeps on an old army cot without sufficient blankets. He lives for the hours he can be away from home at school, where he at least has the occasional opportunity to steal food. David says that when he returns home, his mother makes him throw up to prove that he hasn't stolen any food. He says that he finds solace in his dreams. David says that he has always been in trouble, and that he deserves the punishments he receives because he is bad.

David hears his parents yelling and knows they will eventually get around to talking about him. Alcohol is a normal part of the evening routine and his parents will be well on their way to full drunkenness by the time David is summoned. David's father, Stephen, seems to be standing up for David. But he never completes the process and backs down to Roerva's complaints that David is bad and deserves his punishments. On a particular day in 1970, Roerva grabs David's ear and he flinches. He calls their actions "a game", and knows that his flinch will earn him another punishment. His mother will yell for him to "look at me", but he isn't actually to look into her face—all part of her "game". On this particular day, his mother asks if David wants to leave. She tells him that he's free to go. David says he isn't "sure of this game", but he seizes on the fact that she's told him he can leave. While David's father says it's wrong, his mother says she doesn't care what happens to "the boy", and holds the door open, inviting David to leave. He is still unsure until his mother says, "It hasn't the guts to go". Without conscious thought of the consequences, David walks out the door.

His mother refuses to go after him, saying that he'll be back. David runs through the neighborhood, fearing that she'll catch up with him at every turn. He first thinks that he'll steal French bread and salami from the Safeway supermarket and live on the beach of the Russian River in Guerneville. However, he knows he can't actually live there. He's cold and hungry and starts to think he should just go home, that perhaps his mother will feed him some scraps of food. Then he thinks that his mother will surely beat him when he returns home. He says that he often sits at the bottom of the basement stairs, dreading the moment a commercial comes on the television because his mother will then have time and opportunity to beat him mercilessly. David continues through the neighborhood, constantly on the lookout for his mother. He stops in a church, but is afraid and leaves before he's caught. Then he stops in a pizza bar. He steals a quarter



from a pool table but an employee catches him. The employee, Mark, makes David give the quarter back, then asks why he stole it. David says that he wanted to buy something to eat—perhaps a piece of pizza. Mark then gives David a soda and asks his name and address. David says he is ashamed and doesn't immediately answer. Mark leaves for a few minutes and when he returns, he asks David what's wrong. David says he and his mother don't get along and Mark suggests that she might be worried.

It turns out that Mark has called a police officer. As the officer is about to take David to the police station, Mark gives David a pizza. David and the officer share the pizza at the station. The officer tells David that he's there to help and David finally tells his address and phone number. David's father comes to pick him up. He tells the police that David and his mother had an argument because she wouldn't allow David to ride his bicycle, David can't believe the lies and says he doesn't even have a bike. He briefly hopes that perhaps his mother was worried about him, that she's sorry, and that things will now be different. He soon realizes that's not the case. As David's father takes him home, he scolds David, telling him that his mother is very angry and that he was bad to run away. David agrees to be a good boy. As they arrive at "the House", David thinks to himself that he doesn't have a home and that things will never change for him.

It's noteworthy that the first chapter is written in present tense as David apparently takes himself back in time to the year he was nine years old. The remainder of the book is written in past tense, as David recalls the details of his life in foster care. David is forced to endure physical torture and is subjected to the emotional abuse of his mother. Of those things, the fact that his mother doesn't acknowledge David as a person is perhaps the hardest for him to bear. He is called "It", or "the Boy", by both his parents. He talks at length about those titles and that fact that his mother talks over him when she later visits him in foster homes. When David runs away, he tells Mark that his mother told him to leave the house. Mark doesn't catch onto the full meaning of David's words. The reader should keep in mind that David's story happened in the 1970s when there had not yet been a serious focus on abuse in the home. It's reasonable to believe that people like Mark simply didn't recognize the signs of child abuse. Even the police may have fully believed David's father without suspecting that anything was seriously wrong in the house. David still believed that the problems were his fault, that he was bad, and that he deserved his punishments. More than that, David desperately wanted the love of his mother and father and was afraid to leave them.



An Angel Named Ms. Gold

An Angel Named Ms. Gold Summary and Analysis

It's March 5, 1973, three years after David ran away, and one of David's teachers alerts authorities of David's abuse. One of David's recollections is that he cried because he knew that teachers would now know the truth—that David had smelled bad, dressed in rags, and scrounged in the trash cans for food because he was abused at home. Mr. Zeigler, one of David's teachers, says that he will inform David's classmates as well. While David is happy that someone has noticed his plight, he is frightened because he knows how angry his mother will be when she finds out. When a police officer talks to David's mother on the telephone, David is anxious to know what she said. While the officer doesn't say, he does tell David that his mother is never going to hurt him again—a statement that will be made to David many times before he begins to believe it.

David is taken to a hospital where he goes through a battery of tests. He became convinced that his mother would be waiting around the next corner and the police officer began checking each room before David entered. The nurse cried when she saw the extent of David's injuries. The doctor gives David cream for his arms and says that it's "too late to cover them", seeming to indicate that the injury was not new. The doctor says David needs plenty of food and that he hopes David would not go back to his mother's care. The police officer repeats his earlier promise, that David's mother will never hurt him again. The officer then takes David to "Aunt Mary", an elderly foster mother. In his new freedom, David becomes wild. He runs from room to room, bouncing off the furniture. Then David meets Ms. Gold, his social worker, who quickly becomes David's "best friend". She questions David about his life with his mother. When David discovers that she's going to use the information in court against his mother, David begs her not to tell.

A few days later, David's mother arrives for a visit. The moment Roerva enters the room, David became the child his mother called "It". Roerva doesn't acknowledge David and talks about him to Aunt Mary, warning her that he's a bad boy. Aunt Mary stands up to Roerva and David is amazed. When Aunt Mary has to answer the telephone, Roerva grabs David by the arm, telling him that he's caused the family enormous trouble. David says it seems that his brothers also hate it, and that he knows it's because he exposed the "family secret". The next day, David tells Ms. Gold that he made everything up, that he was clumsy and caused all his injuries himself, that he was bad and deserved punishment, and that his mother wasn't abusive. Ms. Gold begs him to talk to her, but David stoically refuses. At one point, Ms. Gold tells him that unless he tells the truth, his mother will get him back. David tells her that no one can prevent that from happening anyway.

David recalls the exact date of his "rescue". David has never had the courage to tell anyone what his home life is like, but is happy when the truth is finally going to come out. It's notable that David has been ashamed of what people thought of him over the



years when he was dirty, ragged, and hungry. Though David doesn't spell out the exact form of abuse that prompted the report, it seems likely from later chapters that his mother has severely burned his arm. It seems likely that at least some time has passed and that the injury is not new—a statement of how long those who should have seen the situation have allowed it to go on.

David says he had hoped they were taking him to a jail for bad children. It's noteworthy that David would rather have gone to jail than back to his mother, and that he felt he deserved to be in jail.

At first, David seems anxious to share stories about his home life. He apparently tells Ms. Gold many details. As David frantically recants his statements about his mother, he is undoubtedly confused about what's happening to him and what to do about it. He believes that he'll eventually be returned to his mother. In his life, David's mother has always been in control of everything. He begins to think about what will happen to him when he's returned to her—as he knows he eventually will be. He seems to want to hasten the process, but it's important for the reader to remember that David truly wants his mother's love. He has also been programmed to believe that he's bad and deserves what she's handed out. David will later say that he thought he was alone in his decision to recant, but later discovered that many children do the same.



The Trial

The Trial Summary and Analysis

As David heads to court with Ms. Gold, he wonders if he'll be returning with her or be returned to his mother. Despite the fact that he's recanted his story of abuse, he's afraid of being returned home. Ms. Gold tells David that he didn't deserve the treatment his mother dished out, and that he has to decide what he'll do today. David admits to feeling like a traitor to his family and asks what will happen to his brothers. Ms. Gold tells him that he is her only concern at the moment and that they must take the situation "one step at a time". David cries because he knows that Ms. Gold loves him and that he's about to betray that love. At the courtroom, David writes his mother a note that says he's sorry. When he gives it to Roerva, she tears it up. Ms. Gold tells the judge that she recommends David not be returned to his home ever. Roerva doesn't say anything in court. The judge then asks David if he wants to return to his mother or to become a ward of the court. David is torn. He loves his mother but fears her. Suddenly, he yells out that he wants to live with the judge, prompting the judge to turn David over to state custody. David tells Ms. Gold that he's sorry for recanting and that he'd lied. Ms. Gold then tells him that it's time to say good-bye to his mother. Roerva hugs David, "as if I were a baby". David says he believes her emotions at that moment were sincere.

They walk out of the courtroom and his mother loads him down with new toys and clothes. David says that he cherished his mother's hug more than all the gifts. Roerva tells him that it's alright, that it's not his fault, and that "this is a new beginning for you". She warns him to be "a good boy! A better boy!" David says he believes she truly wanted the best for him. As they part, Roerva tells David to have a "happy life". David says he desperately wants to hold onto the joy he felt at that moment.

David is torn about what he wants—the love of his mother or freedom from her control. The fact that David takes his mother a note prior to the court hearing is significant. It seems that he's asking for her approval, and the fact that she tears the note in half is a message to David that he's not going to get it. It's also important to remember that David doesn't ask for his mother's love in that note, but for her forgiveness. David continues to believe—despite what everyone tells him—that he is bad and deserves punishment. David will continue to struggle with that for years. It could be that Roerva is feeling guilt or some degree of love for David when she gives him all the gifts after the court hearing. It is important to remember that this is a mother and son. It seems reasonable that Roerva, for whatever reason, couldn't stop beating and torturing David and has taken the only step she knows that might help him have a better life—turning him over to the state without a fight.

It's noteworthy that David's father doesn't appear at any of the pre-arranged visits or the court appearances. There's no real explanation for it and it's also important to remember that David eventually seeks out his father. David will also eventually name his son Stephen, apparently for his father.



New Beginnings

New Beginnings Summary and Analysis

David quickly fits in to life at Aunt Mary's house, but still has trouble making friends. David recalls that he had once looked forward to time at school because it took him from the horrors of his home, but now hates school because it takes him from playtime at Aunt Mary's house. David watches as his new friends at Aunt Mary's steal candy bars from nearby grocery stores. David, already accustomed to stealing food, followed their lead. He soon begins stealing food from Aunt Mary as well. When she finds out, Aunt Mary keeps a closer eye on David, restricting his time away from home. David has learned by watching that anything he leaves behind will be lost to him forever, so he packs and holds onto everything as he prepares to be moved to his first "permanent" foster home.

Lilian and Rudy Catanze take David in next. David hears Ms. Gold say to Lilian that he's to have no contact with his mother or brothers unless David's mother initiates it. David is amazed at his freedom. He's allowed to go to a nearby park and attends movies with another of the foster children, Big Larry. David is soon taken to a picnic and discovers hundreds of former foster children who called the Catanze house "home". David is happy there, but there are problems. Another foster child called Larry Junior torments David, calling him a wimp for not fighting his mother. David asks Lilian if he should have fought back. Lilian assures him that it was not his fault, then tells David that she has a check for \$127 to buy clothes for him. They spend a couple of hours shopping and David spends hours at home rearranging the clothing in his drawers.

A few days later, Roerva visits. She brings David his bicycle, a gift from his grandmother. It now has two flats and other problems. David is hurt by his mother's lack of acknowledgment while she's there, and says he wants to tell her about his life. David waves as his mother leaves and asks Lilian, "She doesn't love me, does she?". Then David spills details he's never told about his abuse. He says that his mother would deny him a blanket and that he'd try to stay warm. He says she once ordered him to eat dog poop. David says he could have put it down the garbage disposal and that she couldn't have stopped him until it was too late, but that he ate it because she'd told him to. He says he knew he would get beaten for the action, but that it should have been preferable to actually eating the poop. David says he's ashamed because he let her treat him that way. He says that she once stabbed him because he didn't finish the dishes quickly enough and that he knew it was an accident. Lilian realizes that David needs professional counseling.

The bicycle becomes David's obsession. David and Big Larry come up with a plan he calls "Operation: Bug the Parent". He begins begging for household chores to earn money to fix the bicycle. A month later, Lilian's son Tony takes David to the bicycle shop, helps him purchase the things he needs to fix the bike, and then helps him get it road-ready. On August 21, 1973, David gets a taste of the freedom of a "normal kid" on a



bicycle. That day, he rides until well after dark, when Lilian makes him come inside. When he wakes the next morning with stiff legs from the pedaling, he is delighted.

David immediately begins to feel that he is in the foster care system because he isn't worthy to live with his own family. He is sometimes ashamed of his situation and other times proud to say he's a foster child. While David overhears Ms. Gold say that he's to have no contact with his mother or brothers unless his mother initiates it, he doesn't realize that it means his mother has required that David not contact her. David recalls a time when his family was happy and wonders if his mother ever loved him, and what went wrong. When Larry Junior calls David a wimp for not fighting back against his mother's abuse, David asks Lilian if he should have fought back. David never thinks to question Larry Junior's circumstances or whether he was also a product of an abusive parent. David hasn't yet learned that he's not totally alone.

David is seeking anything that makes him "normal", and the bicycle is a symbol of that. David loves his time on the bicycle, but the reader should not overlook how David came to have the bicycle. He says it was a gift from his grandmother, and that he'd ridden it only briefly. When David was picked up by the police at age nine after running away from his mother, he notes that he doesn't have a bicycle. Therefore, it must have been a gift from his grandmother between his ninth and twelfth birthdays. That adds one more person to the list of people who might have helped David escape his mother's abuse. Again, it's believable that people simply didn't realize the potential for abuse, and therefore didn't make any report of the situation. It's interesting to note that David never talks again of his grandmother, nor of any other family members who might have intervened or taken him in after the state removed him from his home. David later meets with an uncle, though there was apparently no closeness in the family.



Adrift

Adrift Summary and Analysis

The bicycle becomes an important part of David's life. He rides up and down the street and to the nearby play park. David says that he often saw younger children there but was never able to work up the courage to talk to them. It's during this time that Larry Junior is picking on another of the foster children, Chris. David stands up to him and the two begin to wrestle. Though Larry is bigger and quickly gets David down, David refuses to give in, earning at least some measure of respect. Chris has cerebral palsy and says being different is sufficient reason for someone to pick on him. David sees a fear in Chris's eyes and wants to know why it's there. He discovers that Chris, at age seventeen, has less than a year remaining in foster care before he'll be kicked out of the system to live on his own. When Lilian returns home, David says he doesn't know why he feels so bad.

David then is taken to a psychiatrist. The room is dark; the man never introduces himself and doesn't allow David to ask questions. David is worried that he doesn't know how this particular game is played and that he'll fail. The doctor continues to call David, "Daniel", and says he believes the first session to be a success. David is confused but afraid to tell Lilian. During the second session, David becomes angry and yells that his name is David. The doctor asks if the David hates his mother. David slams the door of the office, prompting the doctor to enter a report that David has anger issues. David says he doesn't want to return to the doctor and spends several days alone in his room before Big Larry invites him along for bowling. They ride their bikes through David's old neighborhood. David asks Larry to ride past his mother's house where he sees one of his brothers. When the two arrive at Lilian's she's waiting and she's angry. It's then that David discovers that he is not allowed to have any contact with his mother. David laughs as Lilian gets on to Big Larry, then asks David if he convinced "the paramecium" to help him with that plot. Later that evening, David wants to talk to his mother. He doesn't have the nerve to make the call, but his foster sister Connie dials for him. David discovers that his mother's phone number has been disconnected. He says he doesn't know how he should feel and equates it with another of his mother's "games", this one being that he's not allowed access to her by phone.

David is then told that his father is planning to visit the next day. He wakes early and anxiously waits for his dad. When Stephen doesn't show up at the appointed time, seven a.m., David assumes that he's remembering wrong and that his father was to visit at eight. When his father doesn't show up at all, David is devastated. He says that he wonders how he could have allowed his life to come to this point. David overhears Rudy whisper to Lilian, "I think we have a serious problem".

David says that he's in an interesting situation when he arrives home after he drives past his mother's house. He knows that he's in trouble from Lilian, but that she won't beat him. He's anxious to see what will happen. David is heartbroken when he



discovers that he is not allowed to see his mother and that he will be in trouble if he initiates it. David later discovers that his mother threatens to ask for David to be moved to another foster home if Lilian can't control him. It's not until later that David will realize that Rudy seems angry at David, but is really angry because they're on the verge of losing David. David's childhood has been very different from other children; for example, he doesn't know what the term "grounded" means.

David's relationship with his father is also complicated. When his father is scheduled to visit, David waits for hours. He is excited at the thought of his father's visit and is desperately disappointed when Stephen doesn't show up. David continues to blame himself, saying that he doesn't know what he's done to allow the situation to get to that point. David wants to talk to Lilian, but is ultimately both afraid and ashamed.

It should be noted that David titles this chapter, "Adrift". It's likely that he feels adrift when he is prohibited contact with his mother and when his father fails to make planned visits.



The Defiant One

The Defiant One Summary and Analysis

As David prepares to enter sixth grade, he acknowledges that he's changing. He's becoming cold in an effort to protect himself from further hurt. He begins to steal as a way to gain acceptance of his peers. As other children discover his daring as a thief of candy from the local stores, David becomes more out of control. When a boy named Johnny Jones dares David to steal a model plane from a Walgreen store, David walks in, takes the plane, and walks out. He's hoping to gain the approval of Johnny and his friends, but discovers that Johnny's father is the store manager and has been told that David was going to steal the toy. He knows he's in trouble but has quickly become immune to Lilian's scolding. When Rudy begins to gripe at David, he points out the "potty mouth", the tendency to slam doors, and the calls from David's mother. It is then that Rudy says he'll take David to "the Hill" if his attitude doesn't change. David discovers that "the Hill" is a juvenile detention facility. After their talk, David says he isn't angry at Lilian and Rudy for grounding him or even at Johnny Jones for setting him up, but at himself for allowing it to happen. On impulse the next Saturday, David grabbed his meager savings and runs away. He watches movies for hours and is gone two days before the manager of a Denny's restaurant talks him into going home.

As David meets with Ms. Gold, he tells her that he's constantly afraid. He says that he wants to understand his situation and what's going to happen next. Ms. Gold tries to tell him that he may never find his answers and urges him to find a way to be at peace with himself. For awhile, David returns to his "old joyous self". Then school started and David again found himself as the outcast with no friends. That's when he meets John, another outcast who "befriends" David. John first tells David to let the air out of a teacher's tires. David begins the task but stops mid-way. David and John have a fight, but David is soon remorseful and wants to renew the friendship—the only one he has. John tells David that he has a plan to burn down the classroom of Mr. Smith—the teacher John hates. David goes along with the plan, never expecting it to come to pass. He discovers that he's popular because of his boisterous support of the plan, and becomes even more vocal. Then he arrives at the school to discover that John has set a fire. As David tries to put out the fire, John runs away. David does extinguish the blaze but is blamed for setting the fire. He tries to get John to tell the truth, but John refuses. David runs away for one night, but returns to Lilian and Rudy's home. When he arrives, Rudy yells about all the wrongs David has committed, ending by telling David that he's most angry because David will now be taken away and there's nothing they can do to change it. Rudy cries as he tells David that he's being taken to "the Hill" the following day.

David's reaction is actually a normal, human emotion. He's been put through torture that most people can't even imagine, and then is denied the love of the two people he still clings to—his parents. It's easy to say that he should be grateful for those people who love and care for him now, but he is just a child struggling to find his way in a situation over which he has not control and little understanding. There's no indication that David

has prompted additional calls from his mother, but it is noteworthy that she has apparently continued to contact David's foster parents. While David may have come to believe that his mother gives him no thought, he'll soon find out that she thinks of him a lot and is plotting ways to deflect the negative impact of her abuse on David.

David's quest for acceptance among his peers leads him into trouble on several occasions. His quest brings him into contact with Johnny Jones, who seems to want to be a friend but only wants to make fun of David. The same is true of John, who wants to be the leader at any cost, even if it means David is in trouble. When Rudy is yelling at David about all the trouble he's in, the one thing that David grabs onto is that his father called. Despite everything, David still wants his mother and father. It could be that the passage of time has altered David's own recollections and that he feels the loss of his family more than the fortunate escape from his mother's abuse.

Mother's Love

Mother's Love Summary and Analysis

David is taken to the juvenile detention center where he is further degraded by the strip search during processing. David watches the fights and works hard to stay away from any problems. Then David is moved to the C-Wing, which is the section set aside for the "smaller, more hyperactive kids". David says he soon feels safe in that environment. One afternoon, David is told he has a visitor and discovers that his father is waiting for him in the visiting room. David begins to explain about the fire, but his father interrupts, telling him to shut up. David's father is a firefighter and he says it will hurt his career if his co-workers discover his son started a fire. Then Stephen says that David's mother is asking him to sign "papers". Stephen rants that he's given up a lot for David, and that he can forgive him for all the trouble he's caused the family. His parting shot is that he can't forgive David "for this", referring to the fire. David says he knows he's been bad and that it's his fault that his parents no longer live together. When he's told he has another visitor, he prays it's not his mother.

David's visitor is Lilian, and she tells him that she's not supposed to know the details, but that his mother is seeking to have David committed to a mental hospital. Roerva has told officials that David intentionally set fires as a child in her home. David says he's talked to someone from mental health who wanted David to give his consent for the transfer. Lilian explains that they actually want to put David in a mental institution. When David realizes the truth, he asks what he should do. Lilian tells him he must be a model resident. Lilian pledges that she and Rudy will do whatever it takes to help him. Then Lilian shows David a candy box with his pet, a red-eared turtle, inside. She assured David that she's changing his water and that the turtle is eating.

David does become a model student, quickly achieving perfect behavior scores and earning the praise of C-Wing Superintendent Carl Miguel. Then David meets with his probation officers, and Gordon Hutcheson helps him prepare for court. In court, a lawyer stands up for David, saying that David wasn't responsible for the fire but was attempting to put it out. Then Gordon assures the judge that the Catanzes will accept David back into their home. The judge sentences David to 100 days, meaning he has thirty-four days left to serve. The judge warns David that he's been "skating on thin ice for quite some time", but that he appears to have some good qualities. Roerva stands up and shouts that the court is wrong, that David is evil, and that he will eventually hurt someone.

When David is released, he admits to feeling anxious. He's done well in juvenile lock-up because he knows exactly what's expected and accepts the routine. He worries that he'll be drawn back into trouble in the outside world. As David rejoins Lilian, he asks about his turtle and Lilian jokingly tells him the turtle is now "soup". David laughs and asks to "go home", the first time he's referred to the Catanze house as "home".



David's time at "the Hill" was actually a positive experience in some ways. He seems to finally realize that his quest for the acceptance of other kids is destructive. That quest is actually a very natural human emotion. Most people need friends and the fact that David is a child makes his need even more important. Though he's never had friends, there's little doubt that David feels isolated by his circumstances and wants to change that isolation. David admits that he did well in the juvenile lock-up facility because there are strict routines and he knows what is expected. No matter how routine his life could be outside the facility, there will always be the need to interact with others—fellow students, teachers, and foster families. David realizes that interaction is difficult for him and fears that he'll again fail once he's away from the juvenile facility's routine. It's a valid fear.

It's important to note that David refers to the Catanze house as "home" once he's released. It seems that he's finally beginning to find peace with his situation and it's unfortunate that it happens at a time when he's about to be moved again. David didn't realize what he had to lose by getting into trouble with John and he's bound to be disappointed by the fact that things aren't the same when he returns to the Catanze household. This is an important lesson—that David is responsible for his actions. It's also likely that the lesson will reinforce David's belief that he's responsible for his mother's abuse.



Estranged

Estranged Summary and Analysis

When David arrives at the Catanze house, he discovers that the other foster children look at him differently. Even Big Larry, who had been considered a friend, is reserved before he moves out to be on his own. Gordon arrives in July of 1974. David is first excited, then realizes that Gordon isn't smiling and that there's a purpose to the visit. Gordon tells David that it's time to move. As it turns out, there's "a bigger kid" who's been assigned to the Catanze house, meaning that David has to be moved. Gordon begins the search for a new foster home and physically removes David from Lilian's arms as the two leave. David says that it's as he's leaving that he realizes that Lilian and Rudy treated him better than his own parents had.

It's only after they've left that David realizes he left his bike and his turtle. It's a hard lesson and one David never forgets. In future homes, he works to stay prepared for the next move, carefully tracking his belongings at all times. As Gordon spends time on the phone searching for a place for David, he eventually makes arrangements to take David back to "the Hill" while he tries to find a home. Then he says that he's been going about it wrong, and that the foster parents won't be able to resist if he simply shows up with David.

David is taken to Harold and Alice Turnbough, who aren't licensed for boys but agree to accept David anyway. The house is filled with girls and David sleeps on the couch. He remains only a few days before being taken to a newly-licensed foster home. Joanne and Michael Nulls are not prepared for the duties. Joanne can't have children and only wants a doll to play with. She treats David like a baby, pinching his cheeks and restricting his movements outside. When David goes to school, a boy named Stephen tells David to call a girl a "horror". Not realizing the joke, David does, and her brother beats David up for calling his sister a "whore". When David arrives at the Nulls home that day, he discovers that the couple are getting a divorce. He comforts Joanne as she explains that Michael has had an affair. She then cries herself to sleep. David begins to believe that he's somehow responsible for their divorce. Two days later, Gordon picks him up and explains to David that the only foster home placement available is less than a mile from his mother's house. Cautioning David not to have contact with his mother, Gordon leaves David at the home of Vera and Jody Jones, a black couple who provide a stable but crowded living environment for David. It's while living there that David makes friends with Carlos, a Hispanic boy who isn't interested in using David. One afternoon, the two go to the nearby elementary school and bump into David's brother, Russell. David realizes that Russell is now the one being abused. Russell agrees to meet David the following day. David spends the night trying to decide what to do but when he goes to the school the next afternoon, his mother is with Russell. David feared that his mother was going to stab him and frantically runs away with Carlos. The two boys run to Carlos's home where they hide as Roerva drives slowly by, peering into houses. When David arrives at the Joneses, he discovers that Rudy has been accused



of raping a foster daughter and the house has been closed. When the social worker picks David up the next day, she drops him at the Turnboughs. Though Alice is concerned about having David in a houseful of girls, she agrees to take him in.

Gordon never says that the Catanze family requested David's move. It seems likely that it wasn't Lilian, unless she made the request with the hope that David would find a place where he fit in better. While David is supposed to be in the custody of the state for his own well-being, he becomes part of the equation as he watches Gordon search for a new home for him. It's also noteworthy that Gordon tells David that he's been fortunate to be with one family for so long and that he shouldn't complain about the move. Despite the fact that David hasn't yet moved often, he's seen the moves and knows that Gordon is correct. It still seems inconceivable that Gordon would express that attitude to David. It is possible that being given that knowledge in that manner might have sent David further into his shell. Gordon is immediately contrite and apologizes for "dumping" on David. It's important to note that Lilian is crying as David leaves, but the grief of separation shouldn't have been new to Lilian—an experienced foster mom. It apparently also wasn't enough to prompt her to quit the system.

The incident at school when David calls the girl a "horror" is another example of his naiveté. David doesn't know what the word "whore" means and has no one to ask. It's another of his attempts at friendship that prompts him to follow the boy's instructions without stopping to consider that there might be ramifications. When David arrives home that day and discovers that the Nulls are getting a divorce, he becomes the comforter—a new role for David.

When David accidentally meets his brother Russell at school, he's immediately certain that his brother is now the target of their mother's abuse. But David finds himself making excuses. He thinks that Russell might have gotten the bruises playing sports. It's interesting to note that David is still looking for excuses for his mother's behavior. He doesn't tell anyone about his brother's plight. It's likely that David doesn't want to tangle with his mother again, but also that he is simply too busy worrying about his own fate. When David is removed from the Jones home, he doesn't know where he'll end up. Though he had spent only a few days in the Turnbough household previously, he's excited to return to a familiar environment.



Coming Around

Coming Around Summary and Analysis

David's stay with the Turnbough's was to be temporary and he only washed his clothing on Saturday afternoon or Sunday, when he knew that the social workers wouldn't unexpectedly appear to move him to another home. Then one day Alice announces that David is to see another psychiatrist. David objects, but Alice says it won't be like the previous doctor, and then she tells David to be patient because she's seeking to have her license changed so that she can foster boys. She says that she and Harold have decided that they want David to remain with them. It's only then that David learns that Harold, though quiet, likes David. David immediately hopes that he can stay with Harold long enough for the older man to "teach me a few things".

David then begins to work with psychiatrist Donald Roberson, who is the complete opposite of the first doctor. It's Dr. Roberson who suggests that David could benefit from reading some psychology books, and David finds a common bond with Harold. The two argue over a living room lamp as they sat reading each evening. It was through his reading that David begins to understand that his life hadn't been normal, and that he was stronger than those kids who had a normal life. On Saturdays, Alice dances to American Bandstand—a popular television show—then she and David go to a movie. They become close and David slowly learns that it's okay to accept gifts from Alice, though they're bought with Harold's hard-earned money. It's during that time that David tears up a list he's kept of all his previous foster families. David is now fifteen and feels that "the countdown has begun" to his eighteenth birthday and the time he'll be on his own. He begins working at odd jobs, putting in all the time he can. Then a new foster boy, Bruce, is taken into Alice's home. David begins to find money missing and believes Bruce is "conning" Alice. He demands that Bruce leave and winds up being taken to "the Hill" while awaiting a new placement.

He then moves in with John and Linda Walsh, a couple in their twenties with three children. They allow David more freedom than he's accustomed to, including the purchase of a minibike and a BB gun. When the Walshes tell David that they're getting ready to move, David rushes to his room and packs his meager belongings into a pillow case. When he returns, John tells him that they intended for David to move with them. There's a light moment as David says that he's already packed and is waiting for them. The move to Duinsmoore Drive, which David describes as a "Leave it to Beaver" neighborhood. David makes friends with Paul Brazell and Dave Howard and the three quickly become known as slightly wild around the neighborhood. David approaches a girl and her mother calls him the "f-child," ordering David to stay away from her children.

It's during the time on Duinsmoore Drive that David meets Michael Marsh. As Michael is walking by David working on his minibike, Michael says, "So you're the neighborhood threat?" Later Michael says, "Good on you, boy. Get some". David doesn't know what to think, but the two continue in that vein until Michael invites David to his home. He



demands respect and introduces David to the world of aviation. David is taken with Michael's collection of books and devours them. David also spends hours at Paul's father's garage, peering over Dan Brazell's shoulder and asking questions. After a while, the fighting at the Walsh house becomes so bad that David asks to be removed. He's taken to the Turnboughs where he tells Alice that he now knows that's where he belongs.

Just before he turns sixteen, David suddenly realizes that he can't cook and that he'll soon be on his own. He begs Alice to teach him and is frantic to learn immediately. It's a statement of her understanding of David's insecurities that Alice stops what she's doing and allows David to wreck her kitchen as he learns to make pancakes. It's likely that David's emotions were stretched tight as he was faced with other boys at the Turnbough house. David finally had someone who treated him as a mother should and she was suddenly splitting her time with other foster boys. When David returns to their home, he says that he's home.

The time with the Walshes would be described by David as the happiest of his teenage years. While there were problems, David was a "normal" kid, running around with friends and enjoying himself. The downside was that the Walshes were fighting. David sometimes took the Walsh children outside before the fighting got severe. He doesn't say that he was ever afraid for himself, but there's little doubt that he would remember the fights between his own parents and the beatings that inevitably followed. David also has developed some role models—men who have earned his respect. Michael Marsh will later say that it took courage for David to ask to be moved from the Walsh home, but that he respected the fact that David wanted something better for himself. It's a statement of how far David's come that he's willing to take that chance and that he believes he doesn't deserve to live in the house where all the fighting is happening. It is also a strong statement about himself that he does not believe that he probably caused the marital strife.



Break Away

Break Away Summary and Analysis

As David moves into his sophomore year in high school, he's placed in a program for slow learners. David says that he was bored with his studies and more interested in working to earn money. David says he was already seventeen and had less than a year left in foster care. As soon as school dismissed, he'd dash home and then off to one of his jobs. David is again isolated from his peers. He is working while others are dropping by his job at the fast food restaurant with their dates. Then David becomes obsessed with finding his father. He can't get a straight answer from the fire department and finally travels to the San Francisco fire station where his father was assigned since David was young. It's there that David meets up with his Uncle Lee, his father's brother. Lee tells David that his father has been forced into retirement and that he's become a full-fledged alcoholic. Lee says that it was his marriage to Roerva that destroyed Stephen, and that he now only sees his brother when he needs money. He suggests that David might find his father in the Mission District of the city and David tracks him down. His father is in bad health and is drunk when David finds him. David briefly fantasizes that he could buy a home and save his father, but leaves knowing that he'll probably never see his dad again.

A few months later, David lands a job selling cars and quits school. He faces the anger of several, including Alice. He's on top of the world briefly and says that he and his friends from Duinsmoore Drive get into minor scrapes with the law. David continues to visit the Marshes but finally realizes that it's time for him to truly face his future. David visits the Russian River, buys himself a loaf of French bread and a salami, and comes to peaceful terms with his future plans, which includes someday returning to live on that river. He then gets his G.E.D. and joins the Air Force. Roerva calls David the day before he's to leave for basic training and they talk for more than an hour. David says he wants to visit her, but Alice talks him out of it. He says that he knows his mother is only toying with him and he reluctantly gives up the idea. As he's preparing to leave, he acknowledges that Harold and Alice are his father and mother, and they are the ones he wants to make proud.

David is aboard a 727 heading for his new life when he thinks of Michael Marsh saying, "Well, Airman Pelzer, any thoughts?" David says he's afraid, but feels he can use that to his advantage. He then imagines Michael saying, "Good on you, Pelz-man. Get you some!" Finally, David sets the scene for the next book in the series.

David is torn as an older teenager as he faces the uncertainties of his own future. Like most teens, he is working toward figuring out what to do with his life. Unlike teens who live with their natural parents, he knows that the family raising him when he turns eighteen has no further legal obligations, and that he may be truly on his own as he begins his life as an adult. It's probably that pressure that prompts David to drop out of school with the hope of starting a career as a car salesman. He's so anxious about his

future that he wants to lock it down as soon as possible. It's important to remember that David has spent his entire childhood trying to stay one step ahead of his abusive mother. That bleeds over into the rest of his life as he tries always to know what's going to happen next. The sheer uncertainty of his position has probably always fed that fear, making David more susceptible to it as he approaches his eighteenth birthday.

It's important to note that David has had foster families through the years who provided him with love and support, but it's while he's with the Walshes that he finds himself living a fairly normal life. There's no real explanation except that the Walshes are very relaxed and laid back, affording David freedom he likely didn't get elsewhere. While the stricter environments were necessary in their ways, this lifestyle was probably a relief for David.



Epilogue and Perspectives

Epilogue and Perspectives Summary and Analysis

The final section is rather less explained than the previous sections of the book. David says that in 1983, he is visiting friends Ric and Don. He has a son named Stephen and says the two of them are a family, but makes no mention of Stephen's mother or if she is part of that family unit. David says there were times he wondered if he'd survive, but that today he lives in a utopia.

The epilogue offers a brief look at what David's life became, but is truly a teaser for the third book of the series.

The final section of the book is a series of articles of various perspectives on the foster care system. David calls himself an "adult survivor". He says the foster care system gets too much negative press when there's a problem and not enough when there are successes. David says he knows that he gave his foster parents plenty of problems and that he's grateful. He says that there should be better screening processes for foster parents and offers praise for those who work so diligently within the system. David points out that "Superman", as presented in the comics and on television, had foster parents.

Alice Turnbough says that she still considers herself David's foster mom. She says she always knew David would make it and that she was proud when he joined the Air Force. Teacher Dennis Tapley says that he remembers David's inquisitive nature. Tapley says that poor parenting is the hardest thing for a child to overcome, but that David did it. Carl Miguel, the C-Wing Supervisor at "the Hill", said that David thrived on individual attention and called David a model to others. Michael Marsh admits that he was first repelled by the rebellious kid who moved into their exclusive neighborhood. He says he later realized that David wasn't a troublemaker, but was only thick-headed. He gives a look into David's Air Force career and says the two stayed in touch over those years.



Characters

David Pelzer

David Pelzer is author and subject of the book, "The Lost Boy". Pelzer's childhood was miserable and dangerous as he dealt with his mother's physical and mental abuse. The book covers David's life from age twelve through eighteen. David is taken from his mother's house after teachers reported signs of abuse. Apparently a serious burn to David's arm prompts the report. David, like most children of abuse, is ashamed. As he's examined in the hospital, he's embarrassed by the bruises and by his skinny body. David spends the following years in foster care, going through several foster parents as he searches for answers about himself. David's biggest problem is that he wants to know why his mother abused him. He battles with the idea that he was a bad child and that he'd deserved the miserable treatment. It will take the love of several of those foster parents, years of therapy, and David's own indomitable spirit to help him find himself. David is dealing with complex situations. If he were an adult, it would doubtless have been easier for him to know how to react. As a child, he struggles to figure out how to fit in with others, how to cope with the tenuous situation, and how to become comfortable with himself. Those are all tasks that David eventually completes, though the answers and outcomes may not have been exactly what he planned.

Roerva Pelzer

David's mother. The relationship between Roerva and David is complex. David is only one of Roerva's five sons and is neither the oldest nor the youngest. David never explains what it is that begins her reign of terror over him. David describes early interactions with his family in which everyone was happy. The reader should remember that there is a previous book in this series, and that the explanation could lie in that book. Roerva takes great pride in dominating those around her. She rules her husband in the same way she rules everyone else, though she seems to be physically abusive only to David. David doesn't describe any abuse to the other children of the household as occurring until after he's been taken away from the house. It's then that Roerva turns her rage on David's brother, though there's never an indication of whether the other children are also abused.

Stephen Pelzer

David's father. Stephen is beaten down by his wife and allows the abuse of David to continue. Stephen does occasionally make a feeble attempt to intervene but never has the will to follow through. It seems that Stephen only wants peace in his household. He isn't willing to put himself out in order to protect his son. It's unclear why Stephen continues to change his own attitude, though it's likely that his wife simply browbeats him into submission. Eventually, Stephen also blames David for being "bad", and



bringing the wrath of Roerva down on the family. It's noteworthy that David later has a child of his own, and that he names the child Stephen.

Alice and Harold Turnbough

The foster parents David stays with soon after his release from juvenile detention. Though there would be several foster parents over the next few years, the Turnboughs would also be David's final foster parents and the ones he eventually considered to be his true parents.

Ron, Stan, Kevin and Russell Pelzer

David's brothers. Kevin is younger, just a toddler when David is taken from his mother's custody. It's Russell who David meets several years after he was taken into the foster care system. Russell is apparently being abused by their mother.

Mark

The man at the pool hall who gives David a soda and pizza, then calls the police after David has first run away from home at age seven. Mark is one of David's first contacts with kindness.

Mr. Zeigler

David's homeroom teacher when he's taken from his mother's custody. It seems likely that Zeigler is one of those who told the police about David's home situation. As they say good-bye, Mr. Zeigler tells David that he will tell the other children. David says it means a lot to him—that the other children will know why he wore ragged clothes and was always scrounging in the trash for food.

Aunt Mary

The elderly woman who ran the temporary foster home where David was taken after he was removed from his mother's house.

Ms. Pam Gold

David's social worker. David sees Ms. Gold as "an angel." Ms. Gold becomes one of those people who helps David find his way in the early days of the foster care program. She slowly wins David's trust as she talks to him in those early days. As Ms. Gold prepares David for his first court appearance, he discovers that he'll be facing his mother in the courtroom and that she'll know what he said against her. David



immediately recants, thinking that his mother will eventually get him back and will punish him for saying those things. Ms. Gold continues to stand by David and works with him for years to come.

Lilian Catanze and Rudy Catanze

David's first "permanent" foster mother after he is placed into the permanent custody of the state. Lilian and David truly bond and he loves her dearly. When David is taken into juvenile custody, it's Lilian who tells him that his mother is seeking to have him placed in a mental institution. Lilian believes in David, and the social worker literally pulls the two apart when circumstances put David into a new foster home. Rudy is Lilian's husband. Though Rudy also bonds with David, it's Rudy who is more strict and tries to make David straighten up. It's also Rudy who says that he loves David and is so angry because David is being placed in a juvenile lockup facility and Rudy can't do anything to stop the process.

Larry Junior

Another foster child who lives in the house with the Catanze's during David's stay. Larry Junior is difficult, and constantly picks on David and the other younger children.

Big Larry

Another foster child in the Catanze household during David's stay. He immediately takes a liking to David and often takes him to movies and on other outings. Big Larry is with David when he gets in trouble for riding his bicycle past his mother's house.

Chris

Another of the foster children in the Catanze household. Chris has cerebral palsy and Larry Junior is picking on him one day when David comes to his rescue. David realizes that Chris is angry with him for intervening, and that he shouldn't have because Chris wants to fight his own battles. It's from Chris that David learns that he'll be leaving the foster child program at age eighteen. Chris, at seventeen, is terrified by the prospect and instills that fear in David.

Johnny Jones

The boy who dared David to steal a model plane from a store for him. Johnny had warned his father, the store manager, that David was going to steal the toy. David stole it because he wanted to be accepted by Johnny and his friends.



John

A rough boy from David's class. As David seeks acceptance, he helps John create a plan to burn down their teacher's classroom. Though David has no intention of following through, John follows through and David is blamed for it.

Gordon Hutchenson

David's probation officer during his stay at The Hill. Gordon also becomes the person who places David in new foster homes after he is released from The Hill.

Joanne and Michael Nulls

Another of David's foster parents. Joanne Nulls wants to be a foster parent because she is lonely and can't have children of her own. David is their first foster child. Joanne smothers David, holding him very close to home and restricting his actions.

Vera and Jody Jones

The foster parents following the Nulls. David is very happy with the Jones, who are black, but the home is closed when a foster girl accuses Jody of rape.

Carlos

The Hispanic boy who befriends David while he's living with the Jones family. It's Carlos who is with David the day he happens to meet his brother and discovers that his mother is now abusing another of her children.

John and Linda Walsh

The young couple David is placed with after leaving the Turnboughs. It's their laid-back lifestyle that David likes. John allows David to have a minibike and a BB gun. They have three children and David finds himself taking care of the three when John and Linda fight. When the Walshes tell David they're moving, he immediately goes and packs his belongings. Then John tells them they want him to move with them. It's one of the lighter moments when David informs them that he's already packed for the move.

Paul Brazell and Dave Howard

Two teenagers in the neighborhood where David moves with the Walsh family. Paul, Dave, and David get into trouble together, largely associated with their minibikes, BB gun, and later, cars.



Michael Marsh

The man who lives next door to the Walshes and who eventually takes a huge liking to David. David spends hours at the Marsh home with Michael and his wife, Sandra, and is taken with their young children, William and Eric. It's Michael's books on aviation that spark David's interest in the subject.

Dan Brazzel

Paul's father and the "Mr. Goodwrench" of the community. Dan has a great impact on David, who spends hours in Dan's garage, watching him work and questioning everything he does.



Objects/Places

The House appears in non-fiction

David's childhood home. David is tormented in that house as a child. The House became a prison to David. Once he has the opportunity to run away and does so. He is quickly returned and his life of torture is continued.

Daly City, California appears in non-fiction

Where David lives with his family as a child.

Thomas Edison Elementary School appears in non-fiction

The school David was attending when he was taken from his mother's custody.

The Hill appears in non-fiction

The nickname for Hillcrest, the San Mateo County Juvenile Hall. David is taken to the Hill after he is in trouble for being part of a plan to burn down a school. When David learns that his mother is working to have him committed to a mental hospital, he becomes a model student at the Hill. Though he's released after 100 days, he says that he is almost reluctant to leave. He knows what's expected of him and how to survive, but worries that he'll get drawn into a bad situation again on the "outside".

Parkside Junior High School appears in non-fiction

The school David attends while living with the Nulls.

Fernando Riviera Junior High appears in non-fiction

The school David attends while living with the Jones family. It's also where David is when he discovers that his brother is now being abused by his mother.

Monte Cristo Elementary appears in non-fiction

The school David attends while living with the Catanze family. It's also the school that John sets on fire, prompting David's move to juvenile detention.



Duinsmoore Drive appears in non-fiction

The neighborhood where David moves with the Walsh family. David says it looks like the "Leave it to Beaver" neighborhood. It's here that David fits in, finds friends, and discovers role models in the men of the community. There are still problems—some who call him an "f-child" and refuse to accept him—but David calls that period the happiest time of his teen years.

1067 Post Street appears in non-fiction

The address of the fire station where David's father worked since David was a child. It's where David goes to discover that his father has drunk himself into poor health and has been forced into early retirement.

Mission District of San Francisco appears in non-fiction

Where David reunites with his father. David is seventeen and briefly has dreams of saving his dad from his destructive path, but faces the reality that it could very well be the final time he sees his father alive.

Russian River appears in non-fiction

The river where David spent happy times with his family as a child. When David runs away at age seven, he wants to live at the river but knows he's not able to do that. As an adult, it becomes an ideal place to David.

The Redear Turtle appears in non-fiction

David's pet when he lives at the Catanze house. When David is unexpectedly moved from the family, he forgets his turtle. It's a lesson he never forgets and he lives for the next few years with a constant eye on the location of every possession he owns—just in case he's quickly moved again.



Themes

Self Discovery

David is on a path of self-discovery from the moment he begins to endure his mother's abuse. There's no doubt that he is anxious to please his mother and father, but he is also searching to find himself. He desperately wants to be "good", but doesn't know how. His bigger path toward self-discovery begins once he's taken from his mother's custody. It will take years for David to learn how to deal with his feelings toward his mother and father. David's path of self-discovery is helped along by his series of foster parents, social workers, teachers, and friends. Some of them know a lot about David, while others know only the bare facts.

David will have to work through many of his issues himself but he desperately wants answers. For example, he asks if he will someday be like his mother. That thought terrifies him and he seems to want to know that he'll escape that fate. Meanwhile, he can't let go of his desire to be loved by his parents. On the night before he goes for basic training with the Air Force, David has a long conversation with his mother. He doesn't give an indication of what they could have talked about for that length of time, but the fact that he includes it in his book is significant. It seems that David is reaching a point of peace with his mother and their relationship.

Meanwhile, David briefly has dreams of rescuing his father from his own path of self-destruction. It's also significant that David later names his son after his father.

Quest for Companionship

David is an example of a human being's desire for companionship above all else. When David is first taken from his home, he is delighted to learn that one of his teachers plans to tell his classmates about his circumstances. David believes that those children will then know that he was ragged, dirty, and hungry for a reason, that it wasn't his fault, and that he had been worthy of their friendship. David will again and again exhibit his desire for friendship over the years in foster care. When David is living with Aunt Mary, he finds that he can play with the other foster children. There is an instant bond that exists that makes them able to play together, even if they aren't destined to become true friends. David had always been anxious to go to school, but discovered that school took him away from his playmates and resented school for that reason. Later, David will restrain himself from trying to fit in at the various schools, but will always take an offer of friendship even when he doubts that it was offered without some ulterior motive. He's willing to continue stealing because of the attention it gains him. He's even willing to steal a particular item for the approval of a particular boy. It's that same desire that makes David seek John's approval, thereby getting David in trouble for his involvement with a fire that was actually set by John. Regardless of the fact that David knows John is



trouble, he wants friendship so desperately that he's willing to do whatever is necessary to attain it.

David isn't the only one in that position. The woman, Joanne Nulls, was totally unprepared for foster parenting. She was unable to have children of her own and only wanted foster children so that she'd have someone to baby.

Fear

Fear is a theme seen throughout the book by a number of the characters, though David's fear is arguably the most tangible. David is first and foremost afraid of his mother. The years of torture and abuse have made him wary of every encounter with his mother. He's learned that he should be afraid when there's a commercial on television, because that's when his mother has time away from her shows to turn her wrath on David. When David is removed from his mother's custody, the fear remains though it is soon joined by additional fears. Once the immediate threat of his mother's torture is removed, David becomes afraid that he'll never have her love. That fear becomes so powerful that he's angry when his mother refuses to acknowledge him. Though David is being cared for through the foster parent program, he's constantly afraid of not being part of his original family.

Another fear of David's is that of being hurt, a fear that seems to be common among the foster children David describes. David says that he learned at his very first foster home that he should never make friends, but that he allows himself to be suckered into caring about someone all too often. The danger is that the foster children are moved so often, they'll likely be torn from any friends they do make.

While David's fear is evident, others also show fear. Rudy Catanze yells at David for getting into trouble but then says that he's really angry because he fears that David will be taken away from the Catanze household. Even the foster parents have little or no control over the situations and fear the worst for the children they come to love.

Even David's mother, who seems to have so much control, fears that her abuse will be proven beyond a doubt. While she says that she hates David and doesn't object when the court takes him from her custody, she works to try to prove that David is mentally unstable and that he deserved the punishments she handed out. She seems to fear that people will believe she's a bad mother.



Style

Perspective

The story is written in first person by David Pelzer. The point of view is actually the only way the story would work since it was David's story and therefore only David could have told his thoughts, fears, and experiences. The story takes place in and around Daly City, California, where David lives as a child. David's life with his mother happens at "the House", then David lives in a series of foster homes in the area. David describes a series of homes, neighborhoods, and schools where David finds himself over that time. The time is the 1970s during which David grows into a teenager. During that time, there's a stigma associated with foster children, their parents, and the foster families who take in those children. That stigma becomes evident though David doesn't put it into words. As David faces the prejudice and hatred of other children and even adults who know that he's a foster child, he's subjected to criticism that might not have made sense to him at the time, but is aptly described in the text of the book. David has only a child's perspective of the events that happen. Though David writes the story after he is an adult, he tells the story from his perspective as a child.

Tone

Though David is an adult when he writes the book, the tone is that of a teenager. The language, dialog, and descriptions are typical of a child of that age. The book is easy to read, flows well, and moves quickly through the stages of David's life. The fast pace means that the reader is constantly caught up in what will happen next. The dialog is well written and believable, offering a necessary look into the lives of the characters involved. There are brief passages that contain expletives and foul language, which is in keeping with how the characters would have talked. The dialog is entirely believable and takes the reader into the lives of those people who share time with David. No long descriptions or other lengthy passages slow down the progress of the book. The book is well written and easy to read, quickly drawing the reader in with the easy tone that continues throughout.

Structure

The book is divided into ten chapters and an epilogue. There's also a section that includes notes from several of the people who were part of David's life during those years. The book is dedicated to six years of David's life—from the time he was twelve until he was eighteen. It also includes a story from his life at age seven when his mother literally kicked him out of the house, prompting David to run away. The book is not divided by time, but by periods of David's life. The first chapter is The Runaway, which includes the period when he was seven. The remainder of the book is devoted to David's life after he is removed from his mother's custody. That first chapter is



necessary to give the reader the extend of the abuse David suffered before being taken into state custody. An Angel Named Ms. Gold tells of David's first social worker who David greatly depended on during those early years. The Trial, New Beginnings, Adrift, The Defiant One, Mother's Love, Estranged, Coming Around, and Break Away each describe phases of David's life as he grows, learns, and finds his way in his new life.

The book is the second of a three-part series. The first, "A Child Called It", is the story of David's life as a tormented and tortured child in his mother's house. The final is David's life as an adult. While the book does stand alone, the reader will find that there are details that become clearer if they have the information from the first book.



Quotes

"Once my superhero and known for his courageous efforts in rescuing children from burning buildings, Father is now a beaten man." Chap. 1, p. 7

"I don't dare make a sound as I cry deep inside. I know I'm wrong. And as always, it's all my fault." Chap. 1, p. 31

"After filling out some forms at the police station, the officer called Mother to inform her that I was not coming home that afternoon, and that she could call the county's juvenile authorities if she had any questions. I sat like a statue, feeling both horror and excitement as the officer spoke on the phone." Chap. 2, p. 37

"I had hoped he was taking me to some kind of jail, with all the other bad children - as Mother had programmed into me for so many years." Chap. 2, p. 38

"Everything was too good to be true - the freedom, the new clothes, the toys. But the thing I cherished most was the warmth of Mother's hug. 'I'm so sorry about everything,' I sobbed. 'I really am. I didn't mean to tell.'" Chap. 3, p. 75

"As I heard the sounds of children running from the swing set, I closed my eyes, wishing I had the answers to why everything had gone so wrong with Mother and me." Chap. 4, p. 93

"In an instant I sprang up and ran into the kitchen. I knew AI was in an interesting position. Even though I was in trouble, it wasn't as though Mrs. Catanze was going to beat me. As I entered the kitchen, I became anxious to see what exactly Lilian had in store for me." Chap. 5, p. 139

"I just could not accept the realities of my life. How in God's name did I let it come to this? I asked myself." Chap. 5, p. 147

"I felt so degraded as I stripped in front of the counselor during my in-processing, spread my butt cheeks before I showered, then put on the stale-smelling 'county clothes.'" Chap. 7, p. 191

"The first two ultimate rules of being a foster child that I had learned while at Aunt Mary's were never to become too attached to anyone and never to take someone's home for granted. And I had foolishly broken both rules." Chap. 8, p. 221

"Russell's head dipped to his worn-out sneakers. I realized how withdrawn he looked. His shirt was paper-thin and his arms were spotted with small, dark purple marks. My head snapped up to his face. I knew." Chap. 8, p. 241



"In time, I learned to accept presents. It was a hard lesson to swallow." Chap. 9, p. 261

"I know that on the outside I was a walking geek, but on the inside I felt better about myself than ever before. I tried so hard to do things that normal kids took for granted. I just wanted to fit in. I wanted to be like a normal kid." Chap. 9, p. 272

"For over 18 years, I wanted something I knew I would never receive - mom's love. Without a word, Alice opened her arms. And as she held me, I suddenly realized that my lifelong search for love and acceptance had finally ended in the arms of a foster parent." Chap. 10, p. 297

"Aboard my first plane ride, I opened my eyes for the first time as a man named Dave. I chuckled to myself. 'Now the adventure begins!'" Chap. 10, p. 298

"Years ago, I truly doubted whether I'd make it out alive. In my former life I had very little. Today, as I stand in my utopia, I have what any person could wish for - a life and the love of my son. Stephen and I are a family." Epilogue, p. 303



Topics for Discussion

Describe the abuse David suffers at the hands of his mother. What is David's father's reaction?

As David finds himself in foster care, he is torn between happiness of his new life and fear of his old. How does David come to terms with the two?

Describe David's interaction with three of his foster families. Why does David say he is reluctant to bond with those families?

Why does David continue to wait for his father to visit? Why does he want his mother's attention when she comes to visit? Is David's desire for the love of his own mother unusual?

Before David goes to court the first time, he tells Ms. Gold that he made up all the details of abuse. Why does he change his story?

When David lives with the Nulls, they plan to move. What's David's first reaction? What does Mrs. Nulls say about that? What does David think of the new neighborhood? Why does he ask to be moved?

As David is in "the Hill," he is frightened, then works hard to be a model child. Why does he change? When it's time to leave, he says he is worried about life "outside". Why?

Why does David follow John and get into trouble? Does he expect John to tell authorities the truth of what happened? What is David's reaction when that doesn't happen?

When David meets his brother Russell and believes Russell is being abused, he doesn't know what to do. He says that the bruises he saw on his brother could have been sports injuries. Why does he make that assumption? What is David's reaction to seeing his brother? His mother?

David spends some of his time working at as many odd jobs as possible. Why? He later spends all his time playing. Why?