

To Own a Dragon: Reflections on Growing up Without a Father Study Guide

To Own a Dragon: Reflections on Growing up Without a Father by Don Miller (author)

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Plot Summary

In the prologue to the story, Donald Miller admits that he specifically addresses men who grew up without a regular father figure. He aims to explain what that means and the effect it has on one's life. He also explores areas that a man without a father must learn on his own, such as women and sex.

Mentoring, according to Miller, fills some of the gaps left by a missing father. Though the idea of a father appeared as foreign to Miller as a fairytale dragon, he learns some of life's lessons through various men that mentored him.

A turning point in Miller's life comes when John MacMurray, the leader of the college-age bible study at his church in Oregon, invites him to live with his family. The invitation, more of a command than a question, offered Miller a glimpse into the daily workings of a family with two supportive parents. From the MacMurray family, Miller learns that everyone in a family has a job. Because of this job, everyone holds a place of importance. In Miller's life, he often felt unimportant, if not bothersome, to those around him.

Miller also learns the importance of honesty. John MacMurray explains that one must be careful in telling even small lies, as they callus one's heart over time. One's character depends much on one's honesty. Character also depends upon one's work ethic. MacMurray teaches Miller that no shame lies in an honest day's work. He explained that work offers one a glimpse into the mind of God. Just as God worked to create man, man works to worship God.

Spirituality also plays a role in Miller's development through this book. His sense of God develops mostly through his conversations with John MacMurray. Ultimately, he learns that God fathers all people who submit to his authority. Such an idea revolutionizes much of Miller's life. Whereas he spent much of his early life wandering aimlessly, because he had no father to validate his very existence, under the fatherhood of God, Miller gains self-worth.

Miller's book centers around the question, "Why does God allow bad things to happen?" In the end, he discovers that bad things happen to some people to develop their empathy toward others. When one can experience great hardship and overcome, and even forgive, that person possesses the ability to lead others in the same path of healing.

Not only does Miller learn this in the course of his book, he offers this advice to do that very thing. He directly addresses, through his book, men in the same predicament as himself. He offers his advice and encouragement to them. He admonishes them to take responsibility for their own lives, regardless of the actions of their fathers.

Prologue

Prologue Summary and Analysis

In the prologue, the author makes a direct plea for sympathy from the reader. He explains his methods and reasons for writing in the style that he chooses. Men, he explains, make up his intended audience. He admits to appealing to what he terms a male sense of humor.

The attitude of the prologue draws the reader to the book. It piques interest in the upcoming subject matter. In addition, it unapologetically gives the intent of the book, that being to encourage and relate to men who grew up or are growing up without fathers. It also appears as a cathartic experience for Donald Miller, the author.

Chapter 1, The Replacements

Chapter 1, The Replacements Summary and Analysis

The opening chapter of the book talks about lesser male figures in the life of Donald Miller. He sees his first impression of a successful father on television, in Bill Cosby. He admires the show for its lack of serious problems and for Cosby's ability to laugh at himself.

Though Miller admits to having a great mother who tried hard, even volunteered as a Boy Scout dad, he points out that none of her efforts fully made up for his lack of a father. In one instance, his Pine Wood Derby car fails to make it in the Boy Scouts Derby, largely because none of the boy's fathers bother to show Miller what he should do. His mother drops him off with the other boy scouts to make cars out of small blocks of wood with their fathers. Miller ignores the other men and, in turn, they pay no attention to him. Though the occurrence makes little impression on Miller, his mother hotly confronts the other fathers.

Once again, Miller's mother pairs him up with a male figure to make up for this lack in his life. She convinces her landlord's son, who Miller barely knew, to accompany Miller on a Boy Scout campout. The event proves unhelpful. The older boy fails to relate to the other fathers; moreover, he forgets Miller's first name.

In addition, a man from their church, Mr. Kilpin, invites Miller to watch him fly his remote control airplane. After a mishap with Miller at the controls, however, the meetings stop.

In early adolescence, Donald Miller finally meets a male figure that makes a significant impact on his life. His church's young minister, David Gentiles, put up with hours of Miller's pestering questions. Miller admits, looking back, he does not know why Gentiles did not tell him to get lost.

Instead, Gentiles encourages Miller to write. He carefully and encouragingly comments on Miller's attempts at articles for the youth newsletter. In writing an article about the school talent show, Miller even feels compelled to stand up for a girl who sang a gospel song rather badly.

Miller admits that the period under the influence of Gentiles proved to be a key one in his life. Life, he feels, was a trip down a river, in which many currents may catch one's path. Gentiles, Miller feels, threw a rope and saved him from a potentially dangerous path.

The opening chapter of the book grabs the reader's attention. The allusion to Bill Cosby relates well with a number of readers. Miller sees in Cosby what every boy wishes his father would be. Never does Miller seem to realize, in boyhood, that few fathers act like Cosby acts in the show. He becomes caught up in the dream. Each generation has a show that offers a picture of the perfect family life, however unattainable.



Likewise, the Pine Wood Derby car echoes the childhood of many boys. Miller claims that, psychologically, the Pine Wood Derby Race fails to influence him. However, the reader assumes otherwise, simply because Miller decides to include the example in this memoir. The experience stands out as an instance of loneliness and singleness, directly because Miller lacks a father. It serves as a symbol of all the childhood experiences a boy lacks, without a father in his everyday life.

The author fills this chapter with flashbacks to his youth. He shares personal and humorous stories with the reader. These experiences serve to validate his authority on the subject of a fatherless childhood.



Chapter 2, Our Problem

Chapter 2, Our Problem Summary and Analysis

Donald Miller opens chapter two by admitting that reading did not catch his attention until college. However, he vividly remembers library story hour. In particular, he remembers fairy tales about dwarves and dragons. He wondered in childhood what it would be like to own a dragon. The dragon was like a real father figure to Miller. He admits that, in a way, he fails to feel sad because he does not know what he is missing.

Another story that Miller relates to is that of orphaned elephants. He describes at length a documentary on orphaned elephants. When the elephants reach puberty, they become increasingly violent. Typically, when elephants reach puberty, or their first musth, they leave their mother and go into the wild to seek a male mentor, who shows them what it means to be a male elephant. Without this authority, the orphaned elephants live in a prolonged musth, hurting themselves and other animals in the process.

Miller surmises that people behave much in the same way. For instance, eighty-five percent of male prisoners grew up without a father. Personally, Miller admits to many confusing feelings. Without a father figure, he does not know how to deal them. In watching the elephants, he wonders if human males, too, could benefit from a mentor to explain the ways of being a man.

For the first time in this chapter, the reader glimpses at the author's inspiration for writing this book. The statistic about prisoners, which appears multiple times in the book, shows Miller's passion to use his experience to help others. In an epic way, Miller journeys through this book to find an explanation for his fatherlessness. He arrives at the realization that suffering sometimes occurs to allow one to help others with their sufferings.

Increasingly, the reader sees the episodic nature of the book. Though the story includes scenes from childhood to adulthood, it is difficult to gauge the actual passage of time. However, the author uses a variety of episodes to effectively illustrate his points and resonate with many potential readers.



Chapter 3, The Mentor

Chapter 3, The Mentor Summary and Analysis

In childhood and adolescent, Donald Miller felt resentment toward authority figures. Older men, in particular, drew his disdain. He felt put off by their apparent shows of power.

After high school, Miller sets off to travel the country. He runs out of money in Boring, Oregon and settles down. Feeling lonely, he joins a church, as had been his habit since childhood. There, he joins the college-aged class, which meets for Bible studies at the home of the teacher, John MacMurray.

MacMurray becomes a significant influence in Miller's life. MacMurray works part time as a teacher and full time as a traveling landscape photographer. He shares his work with the boys in the bible study; Miller admits that the pictures appear so vivid that they seemed to be alive.

After many visits to MacMurray's house for bible study, Miller feels comfortable around the family, including Terri, John MacMurray's wife. One day, while in the kitchen making a sandwich, MacMurray announces that, if Miller feels that comfortable, he should move in. Terri MacMurray produces a spare key and explains how to find the apartment over the garage. Miller feels that MacMurray leaves no room for argument.

For four years Miller lives in the apartment over John MacMurray's garage. For the first time in his life, he witnesses a real father interacting with his family. He sees arguments and intimacy. He finds a mentor in John MacMurray and learns what it is to be a man.



Chapter 4, Belonging

Chapter 4, Belonging Summary and Analysis

In observing the MacMurray family, Miller learns that families work together. Children hold as much importance as adults. Surprisingly, John MacMurray prefers time with his children to time in front of the television.

Another item of importance during this time in Miller's life is an autobiography of President Eisenhower. Eisenhower's self-confidence impresses Miller. He realizes that his existence makes an impact in the world. Parents, especially fathers, instill this idea in their children at a young age.

Miller, on the other hand, believed that his existence burdened the world. His mother, he believed, suffered from his existence. Upon reading Eisenhower's book, Miller sees that the lack of a parental partner exhausted his mother. Miller's existence was not the cause of her exhaustion.

Feelings of inferiority abound during this time. He fears that others avoid him because he fails to fit in. In addition, he feels jealous of Chris Mac Murray's relationship with his own father. Miller begins to question God. Probing the pain of his fatherlessness proves hard, but brings healing. He admits that he wishes for someone to take ownership of him, to call him "my son."

When he brings up such feelings to John MacMurray during a harrowing drive up the mountains to photograph a sunset, MacMurray points out that God fathers everyone. At first, Miller dismisses such a seemingly sentimental remark. When MacMurray elaborates, however, the idea takes hold with Miller.

God, MacMurray explains, fathers every person who allows him. A sunset serves as one example. God gives a sunset for his children to enjoy. MacMurray explains that, with his own children, activities that no longer hold entertainment value in themselves regain their excitement when viewed through the eyes of his children.

He turns this around to explain that, perhaps, a sunset holds the same significance for God. Finally, at a loss for more words, MacMurray admits the concept gains more perspective when one has children of one's own. Yet, the idea of God as a father figure appears likable to Miller, although far-fetched.

Viewing God as a father figure brings Miller some sense of belonging that he seeks. He remembers how John laments time away from his family. Miller also recalls a time when John scolded his son. The ensuing embrace epitomized the sense of belonging that Miller seeks. John points out that such an earthly relationship only stands as a shadow of the feelings possible for God.

Miller's journey to see God as a father figure serves as a turning point in the book. No longer does Miller flounder due to the lack of training from a father. Instead, he seeks other ways to learn what he needs to become productive in life and in society.

The reader may view the meeting of John MacMurray as fate, destiny or divine intervention. To Miller, it was lifesaving. Due to the influence of MacMurray, Miller's life gains meaning. He sees what he supposes other boys know from childhood, that a person's life carries meaning in the world.



Chapter 5, Spirituality

Chapter 5, Spirituality Summary and Analysis

The idea of God as a father, though, seems have a few shortcomings. First, Miller admits that viewing God as someone so close and personal is creepy. He prefers his previous view of God as a faraway being who only casually interacts with humans. Furthermore, God cannot give hugs, as John MacMurray does to his son. Miller desires that personal, intimate relationship with a father.

Finally, however, Miller accepts the concept. He sees that all interpersonal love really only alludes to the love of God. He grasps the God as father concept in a "baby way," as he puts it. He is relieved to know that God only holds the positive characteristics of a father, such as ownership, encouragements and love, and none of the negative attributes, such as criticism and abandonment.

In a very real and deliberate manner, Miller asks God to father him. When he submits to the idea, he realizes that God fathered him all along. Miller asserts that all people need submission to God to keep control of their lives. He likens one's relationship with God to a tomato plant. The plant grows only in the right soil conditions, with adequate light and water.

People require attention to similar conditions in order to grow to healthy, mature adults. Jesus Christ desires a personal, intimate relationship with people in order to lead in this way. God's way (God and Jesus being the same person) leads to the safest route for one's maturation.

After submitting his will to God, Miller realized that not getting his way leads him to safety as well. Just as John MacMurray sometimes forced his daughter, Cassy, to eat her vegetables, God lovingly parents those who submit to his authority. If for no other reason, Miller likes God as his father for his promise of provision and forgiveness.

Families that promote maturity must also promote unity. According to John MacMurray, parents must teach unity and responsibility to their children. These qualities do not come naturally. Likewise, Christians should show forgiveness. If they submit to God's fatherhood, they enjoy much forgiveness themselves. Miller ends his exploration of God's position as father with an admission to God's greatness.

Life to Miller always represented a hopeless journey without a father. With God as his father, however, life gains hope. The hardest need to realize for Miller is his need for a father. Miller sees in John MacMurray many of the attributes he only dreamed of in a father. MacMurray exhibits responsible parenting by apologizing to his children for yelling out of turn.

MacMurray explains that such an act protects his children from thinking that God acts so irresponsibly. Such a comment reinforces Miller's idea that God acts as the perfect

father. Obedience never manipulates God into acting in one's behalf. Rather, an awesome God of the universe desires to care for humans.

Chapter five represents a climax of the book. Miller moves from bemoaning his lack of a father to gaining some sense of belonging, when he recognizes God as his father. Despite the title of the chapter, Miller avoids putting his personal beliefs at the forefront. Instead, he introduces interesting metaphors for fathers and maturity.



Chapter 6, Authority

Chapter 6, Authority Summary and Analysis

After seeing examples of great fathers, Miller searches for a reason to explain the lack of men in his life. He admits that his immaturity drove off many potential male influences. His actions to prove his undeserving nature work that way. As a result, he grows up feeling insecure because he did not fit in a male society. It is natural, he points out, to fear those by whom one is intimidated.

Men, Miller envisioned, participate in a club. They meet secretly and share wisdom about women, cars and the like. Because of his sense of isolation, Miller grows up trying to prove his manhood by various acts of immaturity. Without a strong male authority in his life, Miller comes to suspect the motivations of all male authority. He fails to see a connection between authority and love.

John MacMurray, however, exhibits those characteristics that Miller sought. He regrets not trusting MacMurray sooner in their relationship. Finally, at some unspecified time, Miller trusts and respects MacMurray as a mentor. He lets go of his dream that some man may take the place of his missing father. No man holds blame for the shortcomings of Miller's real father and no other man could take on that role.

Once, while on a flight, Miller listens in on the radio transmissions of the pilots. He realizes that pilots ahead of his plane radio back about the weather. The pilots of Miller's plane, likewise, radio back to planes behind them.

Thus, each plane gains from those that went before and warns those that come behind. Life, Miller reasons, works much the same way. One's elders warn one to avoid certain errors; in turn, one should warn those younger than one self and, in doing so, pass on valuable information.

After this revelation, Miller realizes that resisting authority serves to make one useless in human society. When one fails to act as an information-sharing agent, one serves no purpose beyond one's self.

To make up for the lack of information from his father, Miller seeks other male authorities from whom he may gain valuable information. He advises men, though, to refrain from relying too much on men who enjoy authority without, themselves, submitting to someone. Such power often proves dangerous. The men from whom Miller seeks advice were often honored to share their lives with him.

As the book unfolds, Miller reveals more of himself. The facets of his struggle through life without a father slowly open up. The tone of the book grows more personal. It also addresses the reader more directly.

As he warned in the prologue, Miller addresses men without fathers almost exclusively. This tactic adds emphasis to his message to those men, but weakens it somewhat for other readers. However, the message of the book applies to various needs in a reader's life, as Miller illustrates in the final chapter. Though one may not need a father figure, each person suffers from a need in his/her life.



Chapter 7, Manhood

Chapter 7, Manhood Summary and Analysis

Miller's realization of his need for manhood takes shape during a Promise Keepers rally, which he describes as a large gathering of men acting manly. Miller realizes that males possess a uniquely male identity. He adopts the values of the Promise Keepers, in order to develop his own manhood.

Discouragingly, he fails at the major tenets of the movement. He resists joining a Bible study, because mostly women attended those in Miller's church. Furthermore, he failed to make friends with minorities. He remembers these points as important areas of the Promise Keepers belief system.

Yet, he continues seeking a definition for his manhood. Eventually, he finds and joins an all male Bible study. However, most of the metaphors they use for their beliefs, involving hunting and cars, make no sense to Miller. He worries he may be a "lesbian with a penis."

This lack of understanding leads him to resent the men in the Bible study. Mockingly, he pretends to understand them. He refers to their hobbies without any real wisdom on the subject. He eventually teaches the group, as they assume Miller shares their own beliefs and interests. For a while, Miller enjoys some popularity; but once his sarcasm shows through, the group ostracizes him.

After his experience with the Promise Keepers and the Bible study, Miller begins to see manhood in a more general sense. He admits that, at first, he hated the idea that something lacked in his life because he lacked a father. God, though, heals the wound left by the lack of a father. Miller recommends a book, *Wild at Heart*, for other men suffering from the "father wound."

For most of his early life, Miller believes that manhood fails to appear until a man reaches his fifties. However, while helping his mother pass out bubble gum in an underprivileged neighborhood, he meets a ten-year-old boy. The boy takes care of his mother and family with the dignity and respect lacking in many grown men. Then, Miller realizes that no certain formula, book, or religion makes one a man. Yet Miller still needs affirmation.

A key realization occurs in this chapter. Miller realizes that he holds no fault for the fact that his father failed to affirm his manhood. Throughout childhood and much of his young adult life, Miller felt that his very existence unduly burdened his mother. Through Bible study, he finds a definitive definition of manhood, which he shares in his motivation speeches.

Miller defines a man as any person with a penis. This fact shows that God believes that not every person should be a man. God, in Miller's opinion, always represents a



majority. Yet, the journey to manhood proves painful. The following chapters deal with specific aspects of becoming a man; they represent advice usually passed down by fathers.

The reader may notice, throughout this chapter, that even young women who grow up without a father suffer some of the same losses that Miller describes. Any child of a single parent often feels the burden he/she places on the remaining parent. A child's mind easily accepts the blame for the burden. An important change occurs in Miller's outlook on life when he sees that the burden in his mother's life occurred when his father left, and for that reason only.

Little else appears in the remaining parts of the book about Miller's mother. Although Miller never speaks negatively about his mother, the reader gleans that she, through the nature of being a single parent, fails to be there for Miller as well. In a final letdown, she passes away without revealing the identity of Miller's father. Miller's problems then escalate beyond lacking a father figure in daily life. He loses hope of ever meeting his father or attaching a name and a face to him.



Chapter 8, Making Decisions

Chapter 8, Making Decisions Summary and Analysis

Travis, a friend of Miller who also grew up without a father, fears going to prison. Neither man commits highly offensive acts. They simply fear making a stupid decision at the wrong time. Miller, however, realizes that one must take responsibility on purpose. The point of realization comes the day Miller discovers he owes a large sum of money to the IRS. His irresponsibility becomes a liability.

Through his observations of failure and success, Miller discovers that one learns to make good decisions. He repeats that eighty-five percent of men in prison grew up without a father. However, this lack offers no excuse for stupidity. Miller encourages men to take responsibility for their own decisions.

First, Miller tries to change his thinking through willpower alone. The plan fails quickly and miserably. Then Miller sees an interview with Salome Thomas-El, who taught chess to boys from the Philadelphia ghetto. His plan involved, not teaching chess, but teaching the boys to make good, informed decisions. The interview, and Miller's own time playing chess, shaped a new outlook for his life.

Miller first learns that chess and life require a strategy. He develops goals for his life. He writes down the steps needed to accomplish his goals. Once he lays out the steps, he feels more accountable for in seeing them to completion.

Second, Miller learns that chess and life require patience. He learns not to follow his instinct, which often leads to trouble. He practices thinking before speaking. In addition, he learns to stop being reactionary. People who act deliberately, without reacting to circumstance, earn more respect. Moreover, nonverbal cues that show how a person is reacting negate any wise words that person says. Patience allows one to follow his/her plan.

Wise moves pay off, though they do not always ensure victory. However, Miller learns to practice more patience, because life heals itself with time. To learn to make wise decisions, Miller suggests reading the Proverbs of the Bible, which hold a great deal of wisdom. Also, he ends the chapter with an admonishment not to give up.

To a person with a father figure, feeling afraid of going to jail sounds strange, as Miller admits. Yet this feeling illustrates the effect that the lack of a father figure has on one's logical reasoning. Throughout the book, Miller strives to show the deep and permanent effect the lack of a father leaves in one's mind. Only through such seemingly extreme examples can he accomplish this.

However, Miller writes about such feelings only partially to relieve them. The reader must remember that Miller writes the book to men growing up without a father. Such an

admission serves to validate their feelings. He assumes other men, who read the book and also lack a father, share these feelings as well.

To solve this problem, Miller encourages young men to make wise decisions. In order to do so, they must find a mentor and model their behavior from a man that makes wise decisions. In place of a father figure, a man must take a more active role in finding an appropriate example.



Chapter 9, Girls

Chapter 9, Girls Summary and Analysis

Much of chapter nine tells the story of a girl Miller observes in a coffee shop. After arriving, he watches the girl break up with her boyfriend. Following this, she enters the coffee shop, befriends a new boy and gives him her number. Before he leaves the store, she runs into a girlfriend and, forgetting the new boy, begins to chat.

Miller returns home, does several chores and goes out to a second coffee shop to write. While he works there, the same girl walks in, with a third boy. After they share a pastry, she breaks up with this boy also.

Miller admits he used to be attracted to the dating "game." He sought a girl for the validation she brought to his ego. Often, she lost her attraction once he attained the relationship. A married friend confesses to Miller that love really involves more humility than that. The friend explains how lucky he feels to share his life with his wife, how amazed he feels that she remains committed to him.

This short chapter on girls offers little advice, other than the one bit about humility in loving relationships. Mostly, Miller points out that, without a father to learn from, he feels that he knows very little about females. Such a realization may surprise readers not in the same situation as Miller. One may assume that, growing up in a predominantly female environment, one would gain a great deal of insight into the female gender.

This chapter and the following one serve as an example of the insight a man gains from seeking a proper mentor. Miller offers these two chapters as a motivation for a fatherless man to seek a mentor.



Chapter 10, Sex

Chapter 10, Sex Summary and Analysis

Miller explains sex in the context of a talk he gives at a fraternity house. The guys living in the house point out that moral high ground causes them to become social outcasts. Miller, seeming somewhat subjective on morals, tells the guys that some decisions depend upon the person's situation.

The men quickly question the moral wrongness of sex. Miller explains that God gives rules for protection. However, one's actions do not damn one's soul. God forgives one's actions; therefore, knowing God saves. Simply doing good is not enough.

Concerning sex, however, saying no to cheap sex strengthens families. Just as protecting the value of the American dollar saves the economy, protecting the value of sex as a part of commitment saves one's morality.

Several researchers, such as Kinsey, demonstrate that sex never exists apart from emotions. Though, objectively, the act of sex resembles the same reproductive act of animals, people also respond emotionally concerning sex, whether it is used for good or evil.

To encourage the young men of the fraternity who desired to practice good morals, but felt pressure to fit in with their peers, Miller promotes maturity. Living morally and responsibly in front of their peers, Miller says, encourages the peers to act responsibly as well. Most of all, Miller asserts that sex is never simply biological.

Chapter 11, Integrity

Chapter 11, Integrity Summary and Analysis

Miller learns a valuable lesson in the MacMurray household: always tell the truth. In one instance, Miller fails to tell the truth to a salesman about his broken cell phone. As a result, he receives a newer model at no cost.

When John MacMurray learns of this, he references a movie in which a woman fails to return incorrect change for her purchase. The clerk at the gas station observes that the woman sells her character for nine dollars. Sin, MacMurray explains, calluses one's heart. Over time, one fails to feel guilt for wrongdoing. The process begins with only the littlest of lies and half-truths.

After this conversation, Miller watches an old interview with Richard Nixon, taped just after Watergate. Miller notices that the president looks innocent, despite all evidence to the contrary. He seems to epitomize MacMurray's assertion of a callused heart toward sin. Miller desires to avoid such a character flaw. He returns to the cell phone dealer, making right on his deal.

This chapter, short and to the point, never mentions fathers. It stands out as an example of life's lessons that Miller learns, in spite of the absence of his father.



Chapter 12, Work Ethic

Chapter 12, Work Ethic Summary and Analysis

Another thing that Miller learns while living in the MacMurray house is that children produce a lot of noise. They also wake very early and, in turn, wake everyone else. Anyone living with a toddler, Miller claims, never sleeps in. Personally, Miller enjoys sleeping in and waking naturally.

MacMurray, however, sends the children to wake Miller whenever he sleeps past nine o'clock. If their chatter does not wake Miller, Elle (MacMurray's young daughter) gets him out of bed by begging to be carried down the stairs, which she will not do for fear of falling.

John MacMurray criticizes Miller's sleep and work habits. Miller describes MacMurray's work ethic. John MacMurray rises early, even after a long night. As a nature photographer, he takes many shots at sunrise or sunset. One day, after the two men hike up the hillside to photograph Mount Adams, MacMurray fails to find a satisfying shot. He simply repacks his equipment and heads home. Such an act discourages Miller.

MacMurray explains his own work ethic. He admits that only about ten percent of his work ever pays off. The cost for such high quality work lies in the failed trips and failed pictures. His success, however, required much work and lean years. In the end, MacMurray feels blessed to work at something he enjoys so much.

Miller assumes that work occurs as a punishment for the sinful nature of mankind. MacMurray disagrees. He points out that Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden, worked even before the original sin. MacMurray claims that God gives work as a reward. God works, MacMurray points out. Man, in turn, should work to please God, not himself.

Therefore, all work is honorable. No shame lies in an honest day's work. MacMurray explains his experience working in septic repair. He explains how his boss demanded the men repair the yard as if they had never been there. His boss believed work is spiritual, that a good job worships God. Problems in one's attitude toward work, therefore, signal problems in one's relationship with God.



Chapter 13, Education

Chapter 13, Education Summary and Analysis

In chapter thirteen, Miller admits that he grew up believing he was stupid. With no evening supervision, he neglected his schoolwork on a regular basis. The ensuing low grades served to prove his suspicions. He equates such actions to a large dog that submits to a small cat, not exercising his own muscle. School, Miller thought, only needed to be survived. Seventy percent of high school dropouts, Miller points out, come from fatherless homes.

A person left alone cannot grow, Miller asserts. Though a person owns responsibility for his/her own life and actions, the conditions in Miller's life supported his feelings of low worth.

However, in his senior year, Miller reaches a changing point. In order to share classes with an attractive girl, Miller seeks the help of the guidance counselor. She refuses to allow Miller into Honors Psychology, citing that the class is only available to students in the top ten percent of the class. Sarcastically, she says Miller's only hope at the class is a time machine, to try high school again.

Struck somehow by this thought, Miller seeks out Mr. Martindale, his principal. He expounds to the principal about the importance of education and claims a sudden epiphany of desire to work hard and change his life. In passing, he also mentions that he wishes to sit next to the attractive girl. Admiring his spunk, Mr. Martindale places Miller in the class.

The teacher runs Honors Psychology like a college lecture. He talks endlessly to the students and gives exams that really require them to think. Miller finds that, though his interest in the girl quickly fades, he gains a great desire to learn psychology. He ends the year with the second highest grade in the class, only topped by the class valedictorian.

Even with this change of heart, Miller feels that college life lies out of his reach. He watches his friends leave with some jealousy. Instead, Miller lives at home, works and attends classes locally. Then, at twenty years old, he reads his first book, cover to cover.

Seeking a birthday gift for a pen pal, he picks up a collection of poems by Emily Dickenson. Captivated by the power of her words, he reads the book repeatedly. Each time he attempts to mail it, he removes it to read once more. In literature, Miller sees beauty. He finds his passion.

Miller moves to Oregon, planning to finish college. He gains a job at a publishing company and quickly rises in leadership. Instead of traditional education, he begins to audit college classes in a variety of subjects. He views his brain as a muscle that requires regular exercise to stay sharp. Reading, Miller claims, breed excellence. He



points out that all leaders are readers. With so few people regularly reading, Miller points out the competition for excellence is slim.

However, to read simply for success alone, fails. Miller shares that success itself falls short of bringing happiness. One must, therefore, read and learn for its own sake. Learning allows one to experience some of what God experienced in creation. Miller wonders if chronically bored people are people who never discovered their own passions in life.

The preceding chapter offers examples of lessons that Miller learns from MacMurray and other mentors in his life. The pattern for this change lies in his journey from fatherlessness to his acceptance of God as a father figure. Miller suffers more than some men who have fathers, but who only appear infrequently. Miller lacks a father completely. He even fails to attach a name and face to his father.

In the following chapter, Miller returns to the spiritual aspect of his theories. Though he carefully avoids pushing his personal beliefs on the reader, he maintains that the spiritual aspect played a key role in his own development as a man.



Chapter 14, Spirituality

Chapter 14, Spirituality Summary and Analysis

Miller makes a conscious decision to end the book with a chapter about spirituality. He struggles, however, with the specifics. He explains that spiritual matters draw him because he believes people hold importance with God.

All people struggle, not only those without fathers. All of humanity shows this need, in writing, in music and in action. Sometimes, hardships in a person's life cause him to feel abandoned by God as well. However, Miller explains that God never leaves a person, though a person may flee God. In turn, God seeks out his children like a good father. To illustrate this, the Bible refers to God as a shepherd.

Since he had moved out on his own, Miller sees much less of the MacMurray family. However, John MacMurray and Donald Miller meet regularly to discuss the chapters of this book. In the last meeting, Miller admits the feelings he struggles with concerning abandonment by God.

Miller views God as he viewed the fathers of other children growing up,... as a mentor who also has his own family, which distracts him much of the time. As a result, sometimes Miller feels he burdens God with his lesser important problems.

MacMurray validates such concerns, but explains that they disagree with scripture. He encourages Miller to continue living and believing his faith. Such practice strengthens one's faith, making such doubts fade over time. In addition, MacMurray explains that one should obey God out of love. Obedience out of fear leaves a person feeling dejected, just as Miller described. Such obedience without love never lasts.

After their last meeting, MacMurray expressed a desire to continue meeting regularly, for the sake of their friendship alone. Such an admission encourages Miller. Still, he wonders about a large question: Why does God allow bad things to happen? Growing up without a father, to Miller, represents all the wrong in the world. In reading about South African apartheid, however, Miller gains understanding.

In the development of a council to aid in healing the country after apartheid, officials sought victims. They sought specific victims, however, those who suffered, yet continued to live. They desired victims that exhibited the ability to forgive. Such people received the title "wounded healers." Donald Miller theorizes that God allows bad things to happen to develop these "wounded healers." These people learn to empathize with the sufferings of others in a way that an outsider never could.

Though the book fails to conclude as a novel would, it ends with hope. The reader feels that he/she possesses the strength to overcome adversity. In addition, it explains, in part, the question of the reason for hardships. The ability to help others offers validity to one's sufferings.



Characters

Donald Miller

John MacMurray

Miller's Mother

David Gentiles

Terri MacMurray

Cassy MacMurray

Dean

Ray

John Eldridge

Travis

Salome Thomas-El

Curt

Dr Alfred Kinsey

Elle MacMurray

Mr. Martindale



Objects/Places

Pine Wood Car

In boyhood, Miller joins the Boy Scouts. Because he lacks a father to accompany him, his mother enlists the help of other men, especially the fathers of other Boy Scouts. She drops him off while the boys make their pine wood derby cars, a tradition in Boy Scouts. However, none of the men take the time to help Miller and his car flops in the competition. Miller remembers this as just one of the times when he felt the need for a father of his own.

Dragon

Miller remembers hearing stories of dragons in fairytales as a child. He wonders what owning a dragon would be like. He daydreams of riding a pet dragon through the sky. The, he admits that having a father appears much the same to him. He cannot fathom such a concept. He admits that Father's Day seems as foreign to him as aliens.

Boring, Oregon

Miller happens to land in Boring, Oregon one summer while travelling. There he meets John MacMurray and moves in with the MacMurray family. The area serves as Miller's home for the remainder of the book.

Photographs

John MacMurray's photographs capture Miller's attention right away. He admires the great talent MacMurray possesses. The dedication to his work impresses Miller, especially when MacMurray admits that only about ten percent of his work every pays off. MacMurray keeps work in perspective, however. He always places his family as a higher priority than his work.

Bible Study

Donald Miller attends various bible studies throughout the book. He talks more about bible studies than church services. The first one he talks about is the bible study he attends at John MacMurray's house. Eventually, he moves in with the MacMurray family

After attending the Promise Keeper's rally, Miller attends his church's bible study, but quits because the attendees are mostly women. He finally finds a predominantly male bible study, but feels left out of much of the talk about hunting and cars. When he fakes



interest, he gains temporary popularity, but eventually leaves feeling resentful toward the men with whom he shares so few interests.

Bible

Miller gains a great deal of knowledge and inspiration from the Bible. He recommends the wisdom it contains for anyone. He seems to think the writings of the Bible, beyond their Christian tenets, hold truths that stand the test of time.

Sunset

MacMurray and Miller drive and then hike up a mountain to photograph a sunset. MacMurray uses the sunset as a metaphor of God's father-like love for people. MacMurray describes how he does things just for the pleasure of his own children. God, he explains, does the same, such as a sunset. Evolution, MacMurray points out, fails to explain beauty. It exists only because God desires to give pleasure to his children.

Promise Keepers Rally

Miller attends a Promise Keepers rally to gain some definition of what it means to be a man. He attempts to uphold the goals of the organization, such as join a bible study and befriend minorities. He fails at these specific goals, however, and decides that the definition of manhood does not lie in such a prescription. Miller eventually concludes that, if God gave one a penis, God intends that person to be a man.

Cell Phone

One night, Miller explains to MacMurray that, because he withheld part of the truth about his broken cell phone, the company gave him a new cell phone free. MacMurray explains that such little lies callus one's heart over time. He explains that one must guard against selling one's character for such a low price. The conversation resonates with Miller. He returns to the store to make the purchase honestly.

Sports Center

Often in the MacMurray house, Miller and MacMurray watch Sports Center. Nothing more specific is ever said about the program. It seems to represent a manly thing that Miller does on a regular basis.

Tinker Creek

In a book by the same name, Miller discovers that learning involves finding what one is passionate about. The author wrote passionately about nature. Miller, though not passionate about biology, feels passionately about theology and psychology. He feels every person should strive to find that which he/she feels passionately about.



Themes

God as Father

Miller suffers in life because he lacks a father. A father validates one's existence and gives one self-worth. When one grows up with a father, one learns maturity and motivation. Without a father, a child feels like a burden to society. He feels that the opportunities offered to children with fathers do not apply to him.

When Miller meets John MacMurray, however, he sees all these qualities of a father. MacMurray explains that God possesses all the good qualities of a father, also. Moreover, God fails to exhibit the negative qualities of earthly fathers.

MacMurray encourages Miller to submit to the idea of God as a father. Such a concept is new to Miller. He feels that God lives too far away to interact in such an intimate way. Over time, Miller comes to embrace the idea. He realizes that God does the proper things a father does for his children, such as to provide for their needs; however, God never abandons his children, as many earthly fathers do.

Responsibility is a choice

Miller describes many of the challenges that face a boy who grows up without a father. A majority of the men in prison grew up without a father. Likewise, most of the children who drop out of school come from fatherless homes. Given such statistics, one feels a great sense of discouragement. In addition, Miller admits that no other person can take the place of one's father.

Yet Miller admonishes each man to take responsibility for himself. He repeats that no circumstance in one's life excuses stupidity. In fact, responsibility is not something to gain in one's late adult years. Miller encourages boys to make responsible decisions in adolescence. He observes that men who take responsibility for themselves enjoy more success. Men who speak maturely and objectively enjoy more luck with women.

Miller describes his practice to become less reactionary in his actions and his speech. Through his development of his chess tactics, he sees that having both a plan and the patience to stick to one's plan pays off in the end. He wonders if, just as such actions bring more success in chess, the same principles apply to life. He concludes that they do.

Why do Bad Things Happen

The final theme of Miller's book appears most clearly in the final chapter. He sees that, while not having a father affected him in very specific ways, everyone struggles in life. He sees people as fish, flopping out of water. Though he realizes that God seeks out

such suffering people to offer them aid, Miller wonders why God allows the hardships to happen in the first place.

After seeing a segment on apartheid in South Africa, Miller begins to see some reason for personal suffering. In developing committees to heal South Africa of the country's horrible acts against humanity, the officials sought out victims of apartheid that not only survived, but also forgave. Miller saw that such empathy provided much help to others.

Suffering brings empathy, which in turn allows one to help others suffering from the same struggles. An answer such as this fails to explain why hardships happen at all. It does, however, offer hope to those going through difficulties. One's own struggles may serve as a help to another suffering after.



Style

Perspective

Donald Miller writes about absent fathers from first hand experience. He describes much of his childhood without a father. Such an experience left him lacking maturity and self-worth. In his early adulthood, he sought out much of the wisdom that he lacked. He found a majority of this wisdom in mentors, such as John MacMurray. Now, Miller writes this book to encourage both men without fathers and the men who mentor them. He offers hope to anyone who struggles in life, because such struggles build one's empathy, which allows one to help others.

In the prologue, Miller says that he directs the book toward men, more specifically, men who grew up without fathers. He frequently addresses his audience directly, saying people "like you and me," meaning men without fathers in their childhood. He writes to offer hope to such men, holding his own life up as an example of overcoming the odds. He also encourages the men to act responsibly and stop placing blame on their absent fathers.

A few times, Miller addresses mentors of men. He stresses the importance of such people. In his own life, he learned much about responsibility and spirituality from his own mentor, John MacMurray. Once Miller admitted that no person could take the place of his own father, he gained much wisdom from observing the MacMurray family.

Tone

The author writes the whole book subjectively. He shares many personal experiences and flashbacks. The tone makes the book personal to the reader. If the reader shares Miller's lack of a father, the book reads as a letter or advice column. Miller writes that the tone may put off some women readers. In a few instances, the material applies uniquely to males. However, the book holds much wisdom that applies to any person, regardless of gender.

Miller remains mostly subjective in his views about religion, however. He stresses the importance of spirituality. He honestly shares his own personal journey in faith. However, he frequently points out that being a man is not about faith. He admonishes the reader to gain knowledge from the Bible, but does not force its doctrines. Other religions seem to be on par with his own.

Structure

The book includes fourteen chapters and a prologue. The prologue serves as a brief introduction to the author, the subject matter and the tone of the book.. Miller's sense of humor appears right away. The chapters, each fairly brief, operate independently from

one another. Miller repeats facts a few times, but rarely refers to subjects from previous chapters.

As a result, the book offers the reader many different subjects in a concise format. However, it gives the reader little sense of a plot. Each chapter has its own thesis, questions from which are not completely answered. Almost every chapter deals with a shortcoming that Miller faces due to his lack of a father. Some chapters describe the shortcomings in detail and some offer advice to men who face the same struggles.

In all, the book, 192 pages, reads much like a diary or letter. It seems personal and intimate, but without clear elements of plot.



Quotes

"So, the decision to target a male audience will explain the simple vocabulary, short chapters and bathroom humor." P. 12

"And because of Tom's father, and because I watched *The Cosby Show* with the devotion of a Muslim, I came to believe a man was supposed to be around the house to arm and disarm weapons, make sexual advances on the matriarch, perform long and colorful ad-libs with children about why they should clean their room and, above all, always face the camera, even if the entire family ahs to sit on one side of the table during dinner." P. 15

"And I remember wondering what it would be like to own a dragon, to lie across the monster's spine, inching toward its neck as the beast jolted into flight, thrusting through the milky pretext for heaven that glows over Houston, up and above the weather where my dragon and I could watch lightning fight itself into exhaustion." P. 30

"Life was a confusing series of emotions rubbing against events." P. 32

"Now, I don't know where you are spiritually, whether you are a Muslim or a Jew or an agnostic or jest prefer not to think about it, but there is something good about listening to somebody explain complicated ideas, especially when they have to do with ancient themes - meaning-of-life themes -because listening to that stuff gives you the feeling life is a great del more intricate, and perhaps more beautiful, that you thought." P. 38

"Dwight Eisenhower said his mother and father made an assumption that set the course of his life - *that the world could be fixed of its problems if every child understood the necessity of their existence.*" P. 47

"Perhaps it was because I was operating on so little sleep following a trip I had taken - or perhaps it was because Father's Day is a foreign concept to me, like celebrating relationship with aliens - but on a particular night, I felt my soul collapsing." P. 51

"By that I mean I wanted a father to take ownership of me, to care about me more than he cared about anything else in the world, or, for that matter, *anybody* else in the world." P. 52

""Is there a Darwinian explanation for beauty? Not really. It's a lover letter, that's all."" P. 57

"If I allow myself, I can see God holding up flashcards as I fall in love with a woman, card that say, *this is love, I am like this love, only better.*" P. 67

"So I wanted this, and even though God lived in a bubble, I wanted Him to step out of heaven and show me how to work a power saw." P. 68

"Relationships unlock certain parts of who we are supposed to be." P. 70



"Giving Cassy what she wanted rather than what she needed should not be confused with good parenting. If God was withholding something I wanted, it meant I could trust Him rather than cry out, *how could you do this to me?*" p. 77

"One of the issues I deal with having grown up without a father is a kind of resentment at the mention of actually needing a dad. I had to admit I needed one. I had to tell God I wanted Him to father me." P. 81

"Discipline is what a Father does, *because He loves.*" P. 82

"There is a part of me, and I think it is a growing part, that believes if I submit to God, read the Bible and obey His commands, and also talk to Him about stuff going on in my life, in His own way, he is fathering me toward maturity." P. 83

"I felt as though all the men in the world secretly met in some warehouse late at night to talk about man things, to have secret handshakes, to discuss how great it was to have a penis and what an easy thing it was to operate, how to throw a football or a baseball, hot to catch a fish and know what kind it was, and be able to grab it and stop its flapping around, doing this without jolting their heads back or squint their eyes." P. 87

"A father is a father is a father, and there isn't any substitute." P. 89

"We learn a trade by submitting to authority, we learn a work ethic by submitting to authority, we gain an academic life by submitting to authority, and more than any of this, we learn who we actually are by submitting to authority." P. 92

"Regardless, the Promise Keepers rally left me in a quandary: I was awakened to the idea there was such a thing as a real man, a God's man, a man's man, but since I hadn't kept any of the promises, a growing doubt was seeded that I might not be the real thing." P. 97

"To me it sounded wonderful, that good decisions, that success or whatever your want to call it, was simply about looking at everything like a chess game, that is, you could make good decision if you wanted - it wasn't about fate." P. 118

"The most difficult temptation, in chess and in life, is the temptation to react." P. 122

"You get to thinking about the girl who rejected you, the job you got fired form, the test you failed, and you lose sight of the big picture - the fact that life has a beautiful way or remaking itself every few weeks." P. 126

""Heaven and hell are about who you know, not what you do. *Who you know saves you form what you did and who you are inside.*"" P. 138

"I think men need women to be women, and we need to be made to jump though some hoops." P. 140



"It isn't about what you don't get done; it's about what you do get done. The price of one good shot is nine other hikes, nine other times I have to get out of bed. That's the cost of a great moment." P. 160

"What I mean is, if we aren't learning, we are forgetting, if we aren't getting smart, we are becoming dull." P. 178

"Instead, Tutu said softly, these should be people who have the authority of awful experiences, experiences that educate them toward empathy, and yet still have within themselves hearts willing to forgive." P. 192



Topics for Discussion

In what ways can you relate to Donald Miller?

Is Miller accurate in his estimation of the value of a father? Explain why or why not.

Do you agree with Miller's definition of a man? Explain.

How might Miller's life be different if he had never met John MacMurray?

Discuss the importance of spirituality in this book.

What importance lessons does one learn from a mother?

How do you think this book would make Miller's mother feel? Explain.

What events in your life shaped your character?

Do you have a mentor outside of your family? What do you learn, or would you like to learn from such a person?

If Miller spoke at your school, what would you ask him? What might his answer be?