

When Jeff Comes Home Short Guide

When Jeff Comes Home by Catherine Atkins

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Contents

When Jeff Comes Home Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	12
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	13
For Further Reference.....	14
Related Titles/Adaptations.....	15
Copyright Information.....	17



Overview

This novel, about the kidnapping and sexual abuse of a young teenage boy, is reputedly based on the true story of Steven Stayner, a California teen who was kidnapped in 1972 and returned to his parents in 1980. In Atkins's book, thirteen-year-old Jeff Hart and his family are at a roadside rest stop when a disturbed man named Ray kidnaps the boy at knife-point and then abuses him both physically and psychologically for the next two and a half years. The story begins after Jeff has returned home, but Atkins reveals the feelings of anguish, terror, and humiliation he continues to experience as he remembers what happened during his time with Ray.

The book not only focuses on Jeff's struggle to find himself, but it focuses on the struggle of Jeff's father, who becomes so driven to heal his son that he creates serious rifts in his family. Atkins's descriptions of the painful emotions people feel in situations as dire as this one makes this book a heart wrenching portrait of child abduction and sexual abuse and their lasting effects. Though Jeff was returned to his family, Atkins describes the boy's attempts to readjust to a "normal" life, to deal with the questions and assumptions of others, and to come to terms with what happened to him during the terrifying ordeal that robbed his innocence and changed him forever.

About the Author

Catherine Atkins has enjoyed a career as a news reporter, a talk show host, a teacher, and a writer. She taught alternative education programs and worked with people on improving their writing skills. Atkins has worked with students of all ages, from very young children to adults. During the course of her career, she learned that she especially likes working with teenagers, and *When Jeff Comes Home* attests to her ability to empathize with teenage problems and concerns. Atkins says that she enjoys working with teenagers because they have empathy, as well as childlike curiosity mixed with an intellect that amazes her. She says that teenagers can be mature one minute and naive the next, qualities that help define the teen characters in *When Jeff Comes Home*. *When Jeff Comes Home* is Atkins's first novel and it reveals to readers the insights she has gained into teenage emotional trauma.

Setting

The primary action of the book takes place in Jeff's California hometown after he is returned to his family. Atkins underscores the foreignness of this setting to Jeff, although this "normal" home, "normal" school and "normal" community once felt very comfortable and familiar to him. When Jeff first enters his home he is immediately sensitive to light and sound. We soon learn that he was locked in a dark basement for years and frequently blindfolded. The light and noise inside Jeff's old home immediately overloads his senses.

When Jeff first enters his old room, he gets glimpses of the boy he once was. He was thirteen years old at the time of his abduction, and he returns to a thirteen-year-old's room. Everything is the same as it was when he disappeared. His homework and eighth grade school books are still sitting on his desk. Again, all of this feels strange and Jeff feels out of place.

Atkins uses descriptions of the setting to help convey Jeff's feelings of isolation. Later on in the novel, Jeff's father, Ken, shows some sensitivity to Jeff's needs by changing things in his environment and agrees to get rid of his eighth-grade room. Perhaps Ken Hart is beginning to get the picture, but he seems to be reducing Jeff's problem down to the fact that he's grown up and feels out of place in the room of a younger boy. What truly makes Jeff want to change his room is not that he's no longer a young boy, but that he's no longer the same boy. Nothing feels familiar to him, in part because he lives within his own mind. His tortured memories of his home with Ray seem more real to him than his family home, and it will take a long time before Jeff can feel comfortable in the strange, "normal" world where he once belonged.

Social Sensitivity

Jeff says that his primary fear is that people will think that he engaged in sex with Ray willingly. He also fears that they will label him a "fag". Given the coercion he suffered and the mind-bending that occurred, his fears certainly seem legitimate.

But the homophobia that plagues Jeff's father, Vinny, and the boys at school seem way off the mark. If Atkins were indeed recounting the actual experiences of the boy kidnapped in 1972, this would be simply a sign of the times. But she sets her story in California in the 1990s, making the extreme homophobic attitudes of Jeff's peers seem unrealistic. Furthermore, sensitizing children and teenagers to the feelings of peers who have experienced severe trauma seems to be rather commonplace in school counseling practice in recent years, and the boys at school should have some awareness of what they are dealing with.

The reactions of everyone in Jeff's life make it painfully clear that counseling should be made available to everyone affected by situations as critical as this one.

Yet Atkins does not address the necessity for therapy. Jeff should have seen a therapist immediately, for instance, someone who could have prepared him for the probing questions of the FBI and the press, not to mention someone who could help him through his psychological distress. Perhaps the high school students should have received counseling before Jeff returned to school, and perhaps Brian and Charlie should have been sent to a therapist who could help them relate to the Jeff they now see who no longer feels like the Jeff they remember. Given that much of her book is a kind of psychological analysis, it seems logical that therapy should have been made readily available to Jeff and to everyone else affected by what happened.



Literary Qualities

Through Atkins' use of the first person narrative, *When Jeff Comes Home* achieves a chilling reality. The fact that Atkins leaves most of the grim details unstated does nothing to undermine the impact of what we understand was Jeff's terror. We do not know exactly what happened to him, but we can imagine. Jeff tells bits and pieces of his story throughout the novel, and he reverts to flashbacks when the terror in his past becomes too real to ignore. Atkins puts words in italics when Jeff thinks deep, unspoken thoughts that he is not yet ready to come to terms with or voice out loud. These italicized phrases are particularly insightful, and we quickly begin to understand the devastating effect Ray had on Jeff's psyche.

The book can essentially be broken down into two parts. In the first part, Atkins builds suspense as to how and when Ray will appear and how and when he will be caught and arrested. She peppers the novel with tense scenes as Ray stalks Jeff to sustain his control over him. Early on in the novel we find out that Ray had been at Jeff's house the night before, after Jeff's arrival home, and that he set the bag of clothes Jeff was wearing when he disappeared on the porch steps of the boy's house. There are several instances when Jeff thinks he sees Ray. Then Ray truly resurfaces in Jeff's life in person. In the scene when Jeff and his father leave the barber shop and go to his father's office, Ray is there, dressed in a suit rather than his usual jeans and T-shirt, but this time Jeff knows it is him. Ray turns around, walks over to them, and asks Jeff's father for directions. This incident, as well as the incident with the clothes on the front porch, serves as a chilling reminder of the psychological games Ray played with Jeff for years.

It is just after Ray's conversation with Jeff's dad when Jeff begins to break down.

Though Jeff was too paralyzed with fear to identify Ray when he was talking with his father, he does identify him later that day in the FBI office. He reveals Ray's last name.

During the first part of the novel, Jeff remains paralyzed with fear and unable to turn his back on Ray. He remains in denial about the sexual abuse that occurred and he refuses to give the authorities much information at all. In the second part of the novel, once Jeff begins to talk, Ray is caught and the tension eases. Then Atkins concentrates largely on Jeff's psychological development. Once Ray begins to talk, Jeff must move from denial to acceptance. He begins to do so, but we understand that there is a long road ahead.



Themes and Characters

Atkins' story of Jeff Hart is a portrait of a teenage boy living a nightmare. Jeff's life changed abruptly and permanently the day at the rest stop when a man named Ray held a knife to his throat, forced him into a van, and took him away to be his personal sex slave. On that day, the life Jeff had as a normal young boy ceased to exist. His innocence ended and his perception of self disintegrated. Atkins's book focuses on Jeff's struggle to find himself after Ray returns him to his family. The primary themes that arise during the course of the novel are the power of mental conditioning, the stigma of sexual abuse, and the corruption of the innocent.

During the course of the book, Atkins reveals some chilling insights into the nature of mental conditioning. She begins in Chapter One in describing Jeff's drive back to his home, when Jeff tells Ray not only that he loves him, but that he does not have to go home. "Are you sure you want me to?" Jeff asks Ray. "It's what you want, kid.

You can stay, I told you that," Ray replies.

This gives us a taste of the brainwashing that occurred during the time he lived with Ray. Jeff has a twisted view of love and loyalty, as does an abused child who has been battered and broken and conditioned to love his parents despite their cruelty. Ray is, in essence, a parental figure to Jeff, albeit a sick and twisted one. Jeff confuses his feelings for Ray. Ray becomes Jeff's lover, protector, provider, and abuser. By the time Jeff returns home, he can no longer distinguish between love and hatred, pain and pleasure, weakness and strength. He no longer had any idea how to think for himself.

Jeff is returned home and left to face a world in which he no longer feels connected. His father is determined to integrate Jeff back into the world and obsessed with removing any vestiges of his son's other life. We find out right away that Jeff's father treats Jeff differently than his brother and sister; he's warmer with Jeff and much more attentive. In narrating his story, Jeff says that Connie, his stepmother, "spent most of her energy trying to keep [her husband] happy." So she failed to notice their children's neglect. The two and half years Jeff is missing take a deadly toll on his family, one that can never be fully repaired.

Healing will take a lifetime. The physical scars Jeff carries on his back are only a brutal reminder of the emotional scars that he and everyone close to him will carry with them forever.

In narrating his feelings about returning to normal life, Jeff remains constantly haunted by the life he feels he can never reveal. To make things worse, Jeff is inundated with questions from the police and the FBI. The press fire extremely personal questions at him, then his friends and family begin to question him as well. The questions from his family and friends are not intentionally insensitive; they're simply indicative of the fact that no one can comprehend the extent of Jeff's psychological trauma. For a long time Jeff defends Ray and denies any sexual relationship with him. He remains



uncooperative and emotionally distant, frozen by the fear and guilt that molded his conscience.

Jeff constructs a wall around himself that keeps him forever imprisoned within his own mind. The fact that everyone wonders what happened to him is too painful for Jeff to deal with. He is living with shame and guilt most of us can never imagine. We understand that Jeff was beaten, and that he was forced to perform sexual acts with Ray in order to eat. In narrating his story and in a few haunting flashbacks, Jeff reveals just enough to help us imagine. We understand that he was raped on the night of his abduction and that he was raped repeatedly after that. We also understand that after a while Jeff engaged in sex with Ray willingly because he had no other choice. He had to play Ray's games in order to survive.

Jeff has so many mental obstacles to overcome, but his overwhelming feelings of guilt and shame rule his life. Jeff's father's guilt rules his life too. Ken seems unable to deal with the fact that he could not protect his son. Atkins begins her prologue with Jeff's unspoken thought: "Dad never believed me later, when I told him there was nothing he could have done."

This lets us know right away that the thoughts and feelings of Jeff's father are central to the plot. Ken Hart is a powerful character in the book, and he and Ray, like no one else, are the two people who have the ability to control Jeff's emotions.

Jeff has to fight unconscious comparisons between his father and Ray. For two years Ray served as Jeff's father, though he became a "father" who gave Jeff a lethal mixture of abuse and love. Aside from Ray, no one can ruffle Jeff's feathers like Ken can.

Jeff worries about what everyone thinks of his "relationship" with Ray, but he worries most about what his father thinks happened and how his father views him because of it. Because he has been trained to please his father figure yet beaten to let him know he never can, Jeff struggles with feelings that tell him he can never please his own father. He thinks that his father finds him effeminate and repulsive. At one point, Jeff mentions the "unimaginable picture" of his father and Ray in the same room. On more than one occasion Jeff becomes painfully aware of similarities in the mannerisms of his father and Ray; parental gestures, for instance, such as putting a hand under Jeff's chin and raising his head to meet his eyes. Any outburst of emotion, anger, or excitement from his father makes Jeff flinch.

Jeff speaks once or twice about the mixture of pleasure and pain he felt with Ray, and we understand where his guilt is coming from. He is confused about his views of himself and unable to intellectualize the fact that he gave in to Ray's demands and acted as a willing participant because he had no other choice. Later in the novel, after Jeff reveals his sexual willingness to his father, his father understands what Jeff has yet to understand himself. Ray won the mind games he played with him and Jeff lost the ability to control his thoughts.



In one particularly disturbing scene from the novel, we get a glimpse of the kind of mind games Ray played. In a story Jeff tells to Brian and Charlie one day when they question him about life with Ray, we learn about Staredown, a game that Brian was familiar with but to which Ray added a sick twist. "Hey, Brian. You remember 'Staredown'?" Jeff asks. "Sure," Brian replies. "Well, Ray used to play that with me a lot. He played it different than we used to, though. You want me to show you?" Jeff backs Brian up against a wall and tells him to look him in the eye. "The first one to break the stare gets slapped," Jeff explains.

". . . That's how Ray plays . . . You get slapped every time you look away from him, so the only way to win is to never look away." Brian, by this time, is crying, and Jeff feels disgusted with himself. Here again, Jeff's father obsession surfaces. Charlie asks him if there is anything they can do to help.

"One thing," Jeff responds. "Don't tell Dad."

Ken Hart is driven, intelligent, and fiercely determined to heal his son. Though he is well intentioned, he has no idea what he is dealing with, and he fails to recognize Jeff's desperate desire to please him. Yet the bond between father and son shouts out from every page. Ken spent two and a half years obsessed with finding Jeff and his obsession affects everyone in the family. Aside from Ken and Jeff, Brian suffers most of all.

Brian became mentally absent to his father from the minute Jeff became physically absent. Both of these boys will have father issues to deal with for the rest of their lives.

Ken's loyalty to his son is fierce and unbending, but because Jeff feels so much shame about what he knows happened with Ray, he is repulsed by himself and believes that his father must be repulsed by him too.

When his father demands that Jeff take his earring off, Jeff immediately thinks that his father must have been looking at him with repugnance. Jeff looks at himself in the mirror and feels sick. Jeff is an attractive boy, but he hates the way he looks because Ray loved it. He hates who he is, because Ray loved him. He defines himself only in relation to Ray, because for two and a half years, that was all he knew how to do. Jeff lost himself during that time; he lost his identity, his self-respect, and his ability to love and be loved by others. Anything remotely related to sex embarrasses him, for instance, a poster of a pin-up girl in his room, the attention from a sales clerk at the Gap, a wink from a waiter in a restaurant, and he shudders from any kind of physical contact, especially any kind of physical affection from his father.

For a long time, Jeff vehemently denies that anything sexual happened with Ray.

He is overwhelmed with shame. Jeff even defends Ray, saying that he is not "a sick rapist pervert." When the FBI agent tells Jeff that in law enforcement it is generally assumed that missing kids over 14 years old have run away, Jeff lets us know that this is his "fear made flesh." Jeff assumes that everyone will think that what happened was by choice, because he eventually consented to the sex. Jeff is momentarily relieved



when they finally arrest Ray and learn that he had a record for assault, not for sexual abuse or rape. Then the FBI agent tells Jeff and his parents that they often reduce the crime of sexual assault against children down to assault presumably to protect the victim. Yet, when the FBI, the press, and his friends and family ask him about the sexual abuse, he continues to deny that any occurred. This causes him to remain imprisoned by Ray. Then when Vinny, Jeff's best friend, finds out that Jeff has been lying to him he lashes out, and Jeff retreats further into his own isolated world.

The novel changes focus when Ray is caught and arrested. At this point, Jeff can no longer deny his sexual molestation and he must gain the strength to tell his story because Ray is telling a story of Jeff as a willing sex partner. Ray knows that Jeff will not talk, in fact, he is counting on it. So he readily admits that he had a sexual relationship with the boy but that Jeff was an eager participant. "Are you going to let Ray Slaight do your talking for you?" the FBI officer asks Jeff, and Jeff knows that he has to tell his story. Furthermore, the FBI agent lays guilt on Jeff when he will not talk by saying that Jeff will be responsible if Ray abducts another child.

Though the novel ends with Jeff moving out of his denial, we feel less than optimistic that his problems will be resolved.

Throughout the book Atkins stresses Jeff's loss of identity. When he first arrives at the door of his old house, a man opens the door and asks him if he is Jeff Hart. Jeff tells us that he wanted to say "not exactly," but he just nodded. He did not feel like Jeff Hart anymore and can never be the same boy again. To further stress this loss of identity, Jeff says that during his first conversation with Vinny, he does not recognize his friend's deep voice. "He grew up, stupid." Jeff tells himself. ". . . Just like you would have."

Except for the chilling image we get of Ray, Jeff and his father are the only characters we gain a true understanding of in the novel, though we get the idea that everyone in Jeff's life has suffered psychological damage from Ray's abuse. Vinny has some problems with Jeff's dishonesty, but he appears more ignorant than callous. Brian and Charlie try to be supportive, but they are naturally curious, as is everyone else, and they cannot possibly understand what Jeff needs from them at this time. They want the old Jeff back again, but no one has a clue as to how they can help Jeff through his psychological distress. Connie, Jeff's stepmother, tries to be understanding but she remains a passive character throughout the story.

Atkins gives her no true voice, nor does she give us much insight into her thoughts and feelings. Where is Jeff's biological mother?

We never find out what happened to her, but we get the impression that Connie has mothered these children since they were little. Were Brian and Charlie her children or her stepchildren? These questions are never answered because Atkins is so intent on making Jeff's personal anguish the focus of her story. What emerges is a chilling portrait of a sick man's penchant for psychological torture and corruption of the innocent.



Topics for Discussion

1. Do you think the reactions of the kids at school were realistic? Would they truly be so callous and uncaring?
2. Do you think Vinny acted as a good friend to Jeff? Why do you suppose he acted the way he did when he realized that Jeff lied to him about the sexual abuse?
3. Did you get a clear picture of what life was like for Jeff during the time he was with Ray even though Atkins relates very few details? Why or why not?
4. What was it in the end that led Jeff to make the decision to talk?
5. Does Atkins give readers a clear understanding of what emotions Brian and Charlie were experiencing after their brother returned? Explain.
6. What would you say would be Jeff's greatest challenge as he moves on with his life?
7. Do you think Dave Stephens, the FBI officer, treated Jeff appropriately? Why or why not?
8. Do you have a clear understanding of Ray Slaight's motives for kidnapping Jeff?
9. What do you think Jeff means when he refers to "the unimaginable picture" of Ray and his father in the same room?
10. What kind of issues do you think Jeff's brother Brian might have in the future?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Do some research on the characteristics of child molesters, then using your research and what information Atkins reveals about Ray, write a character analysis of this man.
2. Write a character analysis of Jeff's father, using his reactions to Jeff to explain the emotions he feels. Find examples from the story that illustrate how guilty Ken feels about being unable to protect his son.
3. In *When Jeff Comes Home*, Atkins concentrates primarily on Jeff's emotions and she touches on Jeff's father's emotions after his son's return. Read Sue Beth Pfeffer's *The Year Without Michael*, which concentrates on the emotions experienced during the time their son is missing. Compare the emotional experience of this family to the emotional experience Jeff's family must have had during the time they knew nothing of their son's whereabouts.
4. Do some research on the trials faced by victims of childhood sexual abuse. How does Jeff fit the mold of the "abused child?"
5. Explain some of the fears Jeff has as he attempts to re-adjust to normal teenage life and explain some of the things you think will help him combat those fears.
6. Give your analysis of the relationship Jeff has with his father. Discuss what binds them together and what keeps a distance between them.
7. Write a paper outlining what kinds of psychological support exists for people like Jeff. This may include personal therapists, support groups, school counseling sessions, etc.

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Related Titles/Adaptations

It has been surmised that Atkins based her fictional story of Jeff Hart on the true story of Steven Stayner, the California teen who was kidnapped in 1972. This heartwrenching story prompted NBC to air a miniseries about the boy, entitled "I Know My First Name is Steven," which aired on May 22 and 23, 1989, and lengthy stories about Steven have appeared in numerous magazines and newspapers over the years.

Time magazine of August 9, 1999 briefly recounts the story in relation to what happened to Steven's brother Cary. Cary was sentenced to life later that year for the brutal killing of a naturalist in Yosemite National Park and has been accused of killing three other women as well. The story of Cary Stayner helps explain the extent of the trauma Brian in Atkins's novel suffers, and has been recounted in a book by Dennis McDougal entitled *The Yosemite Murders* (Ballantine Books 2000). The television movie "I Know My First Name is Steven" was remade into a book of the same name, written by Mike Nichols (Pinnacle Books 1999).

Quite a few young adult novels have been published about child abduction. Elaine Marie Alphin's *Counterfeit Son* tells the story of Cameron Miller, a fifteen-year-old boy whose father kidnaps, abuses, then kills young boys. Cameron himself is a victim of his father's abuse, and while imprisoned in the basement of his home reads his father's files on the lives and deaths of his victims.

After his father dies, Cameron assumes the identity of one of these victims and joins the victims family as their missing son. Like Atkins, Alphin writes a terrifying tale of the psychological trauma experienced by victims of child abduction.

Caroline Cooney presents a different angle on child abduction in *The Face on the Milk Carton*, which like Atkins's book, was also made into a TV movie. In this story, fifteen-year-old Janie recognizes herself as a missing child on a milk carton and comes to find out that she was kidnapped from her biological parents when she was three years old. Cooney's book concentrates on Janie's inner turmoil and describes her struggle to discover her past and learn the truth about what happened.

Harry Mazer's book *Who Is Eddie Leonard?* focuses on a fifteen-year-old boy who believes he is the missing child he sees on the TV news. He has lived with his grandmother for years, and after she dies, he returns to the family he believes was once his and struggles to feel at home there.

Mazer's book details the emotions of Eddie, who longs to be a part of this family, and of the other family members who long to have their son back but are not sure that Eddie is their true son.

In another heartbreaking tale of child abduction, Sue Beth Pfeffer's *The Year Without Michael* is told primarily from the perspective of sixteen-year-old Jody, and it details her family's pain and frustration after Jody's brother Michael mysteriously disappeared.

While *When Jeff Comes Home* focuses on the family's feelings after their son returns, *The Year Without Michael* focuses on the family's feelings during their son's absence. Then, presenting another angle to the incident of child abduction, Pfeffer's *Twice Taken* focuses on the feelings of a young boy who believes he was kidnapped by his father.



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