

Castaway Kid

Discussion Guide

Chapter 1: Cast Away

Overwhelming events and unchosen circumstances were imposed on three-year-old Robby. What events and circumstances have been imposed on people you know?

At what time, other than being abandoned at an orphanage, might someone feel so desperately lonely that he or she could say, “The only one left to hug me was me”?

Chapter 2: Little Boys

American orphanage life of the 1950s and 1960s is depicted in this chapter. What aspects of it were new to you?

What kinds of care did the church in Princeton provide? What roles do you think a church should play in helping orphans?

How did you feel about Nola? What possible effects do you think she had on the futures of “her boys”?

Chapter 3: The Tornado

Why did Robby stop calling Joyce “Mommy” and start calling her “Mother”?

How do you feel about that?

Chapter 4: Different

The author says that kids he knew in the Home “preferred poverty if they were loved, rags if they were cared for, and homelessness if someone they loved wanted them.” Do you think this is typical of children? Why or why not?

Younger kids at the Home believed their lives would get better if they could just return to their families. If you were counseling them, what would you say?

Why did Robby cry out with groanings too deep for words, giving up hope? How would you encourage someone who felt that kind of despair?

Chapter 5: Kidnapped

If a niece or nephew you were close to had been abducted as Robby was, how would you try to help him or her understand why it happened? How would you help him or her recover?

How would you describe Robby's relationship with God at the end of this chapter?

Chapter 6: The Doctors

How would you respond to Robby's observation that "boys must be easier to throw away than girls"?

On the train ride back from visiting the doctors, Robby asked a question he'd never asked before, one that haunted him. What was it? What other kinds of experiences (divorce or death, for example) might cause someone to raise that question?

Robby also asked, "Am I going to be crazy, too, like my parents?" How would you answer a child who struggles with these questions?

Chapter 7: Gigi's Gift

Why did Robby reject foster care? How did a quote from *Anne of Green Gables* affect his decision?

If you'd been in the author's place, what decision might you have made about foster care? Why?

Chapter 8: The Choice

What does Gigi mean when she says, "Class ain't about cash, but character"? How would you define class? How would you define character?

If you were drawing a picture of the dynamics among Robby's mother, father, and Pauline, what would it look like?

Chapter 9: Atlanta

What are your impressions of Pauline and the rest of Robby's Atlanta family?

Nola hoped and prayed that Robby would be rescued like the fictional character, Oliver Twist. What did she want to happen? How would you have prayed for Robby at this point?

Chapter 10: Is There Room?

How did you feel when, “like a mama bear who knows it’s time to leave her cub behind to fend for itself, [Nola] turned and walked away”? Has anything like that happened to you, either as a child or a parent? If so, what was the result?

How did “the loud silence [that] said everything I didn’t want to hear” apply to Robby? Have you ever experienced such a silence? If so, how did you respond?

Chapter 11: Why?

The chapter ends with, “the fire of my rage burned hotter than ever.” Without considering the rest of the book, where would you predict the author would end up as a teenager and an adult? Why?

Chapter 12: Earning Power

Robby decided that “money was going to save [him].” Do you think this attitude is common in our culture?

What do you think of the author’s investment choices? What do they tell you about his values at that point?

What aspects of Booker T. Washington’s point of view did Robby accept? What did he reject?

Chapter 13: Reunion

How did you feel about Mother in the restaurant scene?

What moved Robby to hold his mother’s hand? How did you react to that moment? Why?

The author writes, “the lion of my anger shredded the lamb of my sympathy.” Have you ever experienced a similar struggle? Has your “lamb” ever overcome your “lion”? What have you learned from these battles?

Chapter 14: A Few Good Men

What did you think of the men who tried to positively influence Robby? In what ways were they ordinary? How were they special?

Why do fatherless boys and motherless girls need mentors? What mentoring opportunities exist in your community?

Robby asked Marv a question, but refused to believe the answer. What was the question, and why couldn't Robby accept the answer?

Chapter 15: The Rebel

What was going on inside Robby that the "ordinary" or "regular" kids didn't understand?

What hurts might be felt by the people around you in your neighborhood, in church, on the job, or in school that you wouldn't know about? What first step could you take toward understanding?

Chapter 16: A Losing Season

Why did Robby dislike Christmas?

What was Dave's first response to the teenage boys at the Home? How did they treat him? How do you think Dave managed to stick with it?

"If I have to hurt like this, then other people are going to have to hurt as well." What does this tell you about the causes of some violence in our society, especially among teens?

Chapter 17: The Lifeguard

What was Robby's agenda at church camp?

Judging from what Robby told the girl in the canoe, how did he feel about God? How do you relate to that viewpoint?

Chapter 18: Are You Real?

Have you asked or heard others ask some of the spiritual questions Robby struggled with in this chapter? If so, what was the result?

How did Robby's view of his biological father influence his spiritual struggle?

What was the one issue Robby decided everything boiled down to?

What *didn't* Robby experience after he prayed? Nevertheless, what did he know had happened?

Chapter 19: A New Beginning

Robby was concerned that he'd be isolated if anyone discovered he was from an orphanage. How are people sometimes "set apart" because of their race, social class, or economic level? What other factors can lead to isolation?

In her parting words, what did Nola remind her "little Robby" of?

What part of Booker T. Washington's example did Robby want to follow at this point?

Chapter 20: The Freshman

Why did Robby introduce himself on campus as Rob?

What experiences and resources did "normal" kids from "real" homes and families have that were missing during Rob's college days?

Have you ever found it difficult to slow your mind down in order to listen to God? How have you dealt with this?

Chapter 21: Home

During the bus ride, in what way was Rob "invisible"?

"Home is where you are not a guest." Where are you most at home?

"Call Me Father, Rob. Call Me home." When the author reacted angrily to this offer, how did you feel? How did you respond to his eventual acceptance of God's adoption?

Chapter 22: Revelation

By this point in the story, had you guessed why Rob wasn't raised in Atlanta? How do you feel about the reason?

If you'd known—but couldn't have done anything about—the reason, what would you have told Rob? Why?

Chapter 23: Into Africa

Do you agree with the definitions of judgment, mercy, and grace? Why or why not?

How was eating the termites a major step in Rob's learning to trust?

How were Rob and Dapala different? How were they similar? What does it mean to you that they were able to pray to the same God?

Chapter 24: Forgive?

Who and what did Corrie ten Boom need to forgive?

Why did Rob doubt he could forgive some of his relatives?

If you were Rob, would you have found it easy to forgive? Why or why not?

Chapter 25: Pauline

Would you have started the journey of forgiveness with Pauline, Mother, or Father? Why?

Have you ever had to forgive someone when you felt you couldn't? Did the process resemble the one Rob describes? Explain.

Chapter 26: Father

"How could you leave me?" is not a question asked only by kids in orphanages. In what other circumstances might one ask that?

How did the attempted suicide of Rob's father affect other family members?

"You can't save someone who won't let you save them." What does this mean?

Chapter 27: Mother

How would you explain the chapter's opening sentence to someone who'd never heard of Dali or Kafka?

What is hardest for some people about giving up bitterness, rage, resentments, or hatred?

Forgiving freed Rob from a victim mentality. Why is that important?

How would you advise someone who's emotionally wounded to begin the process of healing?

Chapter 28: The Lost Boys

How did Rob's volunteer work with the church youth group and the "castaway kids" in a group home show that he was rising above his childhood? What do you think enabled him to do that?

Why did Rob cry at his college graduation?

Read the prayer Rob prayed at graduation. Is it one you could pray? Why or why not?

Chapter 29: Seeking Susan

Rob struggled over his initial attraction to Susan. Have you ever experienced an inner battle in which you seemed to be getting conflicting advice from opposing "sides"? What happened?

Can you identify with the awkwardness of Susan and Rob's first date? If so, how?

How do you feel about the author's reaction to his mother's death? How might you have reacted under similar circumstances?

Chapter 30: The Relationship

Do you agree with the author that the inner beauty of a good woman can inspire a male to become a better man? Why or why not?

Why might some girls have stopped dating Rob because of his childhood? Would that have made sense to you?

How did Susan respond when Rob told her about his past? How would you have responded?

Chapter 31: Separated

Why do you suppose Rob was clueless about Susan's feelings regarding his "American Safari"?

If you were counseling Susan and Rob at this stage of their relationship, what would you tell Susan about her "need to be needed"? What would you advise Rob?

Chapter 32: Fear of Family

What childhood fear resurfaced as Rob struggled with the thought of asking Susan to marry him?

How were their conflicts like those of many couples considering marriage?

The author lists several people who influenced his vision of what it means to be a man and father. What three people have most shaped your view of what a “real” man or woman is? How did they do that?

Chapter 33: Full Circle

How did you feel about Susan and Rob’s visit with Gigi in the nursing home? What did it tell you about the relationship between the author and his grandmother?

What two things did Gigi share that she consistently prayed for?

Why did Rob wrap his arms around himself and rock side-to-side at the end of the chapter? How had things changed since he’d done that as a little boy?

What were your feelings at the end of the story? How would you describe God’s role in helping the author to finally “go home”?

Epilogue

The book opens with this quote from Booker T. Washington: “Character, not circumstances, makes the man.” The epilogue contains Rob’s comment that “The mark of a person . . . is not just in how one acts but also in how one reacts.” How are these statements similar? Do you agree or disagree with them? Why?

Based on this story, what do you think is the best road to healing for someone who’s been wounded by his or her past? What principle from this book would you most like to practice during the coming year?