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# ***A Child Called "It"***

*One Child's Courage to Survive*

by

**David Pelzer**

**1995**



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Laurie Lahey

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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

**Daly City, CA** - This is the town, located in San Mateo County, where David grows up. The majority of the action takes place within David's home. He lives in a middle class neighborhood in an average house. The city stretches to the Pacific Ocean on the West and almost to the San Francisco Bay on the East. It shares a border with San Francisco.

**Chinatown, San Francisco**- Where Mom took the boys on a day trip during the "good days." She taught them about the Chinese people and their culture. After returning home, she played Oriental music and decorated the home with Chinese lanterns. For dinner she prepared Chinese food and gave the.....

### LIST OF CHARACTERS

#### Major Characters

**David Pelzer** - Main character and narrator. David suffers severe child abuse at the hands of Mother. The story details his harrowing existence in a small California suburb. He overcomes remarkable odds and survives unthinkable torture. At the beginning of the story he is a very small child; he is rescued as a fifth grader; in the Epilogue he is a grown man.

**Catherine Roerva Pelzer** - David's mother. When he is a small child she is referred to as "Mom"- she is beautiful, sweet, and nurturing. As she starts to become abusive, he refers to her as "Mother." At this point she takes no interest in her appearance and is overweight. David can never recall the color of her eyes or hair.

**Stephan Joseph Pelzer** - David's father. He is a fireman in San Francisco. Initially, he is David's hero and protector. Eventually, as he sinks into alcoholism and depression he.....

#### Minor Characters

**Mr. Hansen** - David's principle who finally reports his case to the police.

**Mr. Ziegler** - David's fifth grade homeroom teacher who talks with the police about what he has seen.

**Miss Moss** - David's fifth grade math teacher; she speaks with police. In second grade she became concerned about David and reported to the principal, who requested a meeting with Mother, during.....  
Additional characters are outlined in the full study guide.

### CONFLICT

The major conflict of this story is between David and Mother. There are the obvious physical conflicts between them, which consist of Mother hurting David and David trying to survive. There is also the more subtle underlying psychological conflict between the two in which Mother is trying to reduce David to as little as possible and David is trying to maintain and shred of dignity. There is also a.....

**Protagonist** - David

**Antagonist** - Mother

**Climax** - Interestingly, the climax of this story occurs in the first chapter where the school nurse once again examines David and the teachers confer about the situation. When they finally bring in the officer there is an uncertainty of whether David will be saved or returned to another.....

**Outcome** - Officer Smith takes David to the police station where the officer phones Mother to.....

## **SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)**

The story opens at the end of the horrific journey of fifth grader, David Pelzer, through one of the most severe documented cases of child abuse. At school after a morning of washing dishes in scalding water, being beaten, and being "rewarded" with his brother's leftover cereal, David is examined by the school nurse for signs of abuse-yet again. On this morning the school officials decide this has gone on for too long and must be reported to the police.

The police take David into the custody of the San Mateo Juvenile Department; he is freed of Mother's torment. From here David remembers the rollercoaster ride that has brought him thus far. His earliest memories are very happy. His mom was nurturing and beautiful. She made every effort to make life magical for him and his two brothers. Mom, David, his brothers, and their fire-fighter father, Stephan lived in a modest home in Daly City, CA. It was filled with pets, joyful holiday celebrations, and family fun; it was a wonderful place to be. However, this home soon turned into a hellish nightmare for little David.

David's mom soon began spending her days not taking her sons on exciting day trips, but lying on the couch. She stopped wearing makeup and getting dressed. Light-hearted happy hours twisted into a .....

## **THEMES**

### **Major Theme**

The major theme of *A Child Called "It"* is the **ability of the human spirit to overcome remarkable odds**. Mother progressively treats David worse- yet he becomes stronger despite an escalating sense of isolation. He survives.

### **Minor Themes**

There are many minor themes in this story. They include the themes of:

**Deterioration**- this can be seen with Mother, Father, the general relationships with in the family, and places such as the Russian River. This theme also supports the major theme of the ability of the human spirit. This is accomplished by juxtaposing David with Mother and Father. Mother succumbs to her "odds." Because David narrates the story, we do not know what the motive is for her treacherous behavior; however, it is fair to assume she is acting in response to ill forces working in her life. This is hinted at in the.....

**Hero figures** - This can be seen with Mom, Father, God, and David when he calls himself Superman. Mom is the hero of David's childhood; she abruptly becomes the villain of his youth. Father is David's hero during the days of Mother's torture because while he is home, David is safe. He also promises David that.....

Additional themes are discussed in the complete study guide.

## **MOOD**

The mood of this piece is somber but inspirational. It is somber merely because the nature of the topic. It is inspirational because the author has already alerted the reader of the outcome from the onset. Therefore, the reader knows David will survive and every battle wound he suffers.....

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY**

David James Pelzer was born December 29, 1960 in Daly City, California. He was the second oldest of five male children. This is an entirely true story written by the author himself. David was rescued from the torment of his mother, Catherine Roerva at age twelve and then lived in foster care until of legal age. When he turned eighteen he joined the U.S. Air force. During his years of service he played a pertinent role in Operation Just Cause in Desert Storm and Desert Shield. Ever since Dave has continued to lead an inspiring and amazing life

for which he has been recognized by the last three Presidents of the United States: Reagan, Bush, and Clinton. 1990 named him the California Volunteer of the year. In 1993 Dave was named one of the Ten Outstanding Young Americans. In 1994, he became the only American to be named one of Outstanding Young Persons of the World. In 1996 he was honored at the Olympic games in Atlanta by being selected to carry the Centennial torch.

As an author, David has received literary acclaim. *A Child Called "It"* (published in 1995) and his most recent *Help Yourself*, have both been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. All of his.....

## LITERARY / HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

This is the true story of David Pelzer's tormented childhood, as told by the survivor himself. The people, places, and events are not fictitious creations- though they are hardly believable. This case is the third worst to be reported in the history of California State. While appalling to read how so many people were aware of this atrocity and so little was done for so long, it is important to bear in.....

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

### CHAPTER 1 "The Rescue"

#### Summary

In Chapter One we meet main character and narrator, David. He begins by telling us about the morning of his rescue from the terrible conditions in which he lives with his abusive mother. This morning he is forced to wash the family's dishes in scalding water and is beaten for removing his hands from the sink. He is fed only as a reward for doing these "chores."

When David arrives at school the school nurse who has apparently caught on to his mother's behavior, puts him through a routine inspection. He describes his badly tattered outfit that he has been forced to wear to school every day for two years; he also details how the other children tease him about his stench. The principle, Mr. Ziegler, and other faculty call the authorities to report David's mother. David is taken by a police officer to the police station. David is under the impression that is will be going to jail because he believes he is bad. The officer calls David's mother to tell her David is under the protection of the San Mateo Juvenile Department. He then assures David that he is now free.

#### Notes

Pelzer begins his story with its denouement, or resolution. He achieves this by describing his last morning living under the abusive control of his mother – March 5, 1973. The actual beginning of the horrid tale occurs in the next chapter, in the 1960s. This technique accomplishes a few things including catching the reader's attention immediately and making the rest of the story all the more unbelievable because the reader knows that David survives. Most importantly, it creates a story of survival not one of demise. It introduces the major theme of the power of the human spirit to overcome remarkable odds. This chapter also establishes two of the main characters, David and Mother. David has seemingly sustained his tormented way of life for many years because he has become cunning and able to anticipate Mother's games. This is evident in the opening scene where he cleverly pretends to be fearful of Mother, when in reality he doesn't care if he is beaten- he is playing along so he will be allowed to eat. However, the torture has left him weak, tattered, apprehensive, and essentially brain washed.

An example of this is his encounter with the officials at school. With the school nurse, he tries to use a variety of Mother's lies to explain his injuries; he feels guilty when he admits the truth. When hugged by the nurse and later by Miss Woods his description of their warmth and scent is an antithesis of the cold Mother; he revels in

their nurture. Finally, when the officer takes him to the station, David thinks he is being placed in jail because he is a "bad boy."

Mother is portrayed as ugly both physically and emotionally. She is over-weight and takes no interest in her appearance. Far worse, she is vicious and physically abusive of David. The opening scene depicts what seems to be a typical "chore" of hers - making David wash dishes in scalding water, unable to remove his hands. David also recounts what seems to be a very typical beating. Later when the nurse examines him, there is evidence of many beatings, and most shocking – a stab wound scar. By the end of the chapter we have met David and Mother, experienced the elements of their treacherous relationship, and witnessed his miraculous rescue. The following chapters will prove just how miraculous this rescue is.

## CHAPTER 2 "The Good Times"

### Summary

David describes a time when his family was like the "Brady Bunch." We find out that the beginning of his childhood was surprisingly wonderful. His home was filled with a variety of pets. His mother went to great lengths to make the holidays for her husband and three sons extra special with decorations, stories, and presents. She took the children on many day trips and picnics. Every summer she planned an exciting vacation for her family. She took every opportunity to create adventures for her children, and made life magical for them.

### Notes

In this chapter we are brought to the beginning of the story, which begins almost like a fairy-tale. David is the oldest of three boys. He lives in an average middle class home in Daly City, California. His father, Stephen Joseph, is a fire fighter. His mother, now identified as Catherine Roerva, is a devoted mother and housewife. Chapter 2 is written in the past tense, which will continue until the Epilogue, and indicates the true beginning of the story. Most importantly, it establishes an ironic foundation for the rest of the twisted tale in that it makes David's torment (about which we already know) all the more heart breaking.

This chapter also establishes the two separate entities, "Mother" and "Mom/ Mommy." Mother, as we have seen, is vindictive and tormenting. Mom is sweet and loving. There is a foreshadowing of what his mother will become. David describes a time when Mom said she was sick and madly painted the steps, tacking mats onto them before they were dry. However, Mom is not yet abusive – she said she merely wanted to surprise his father. David also describes a particular outing when Mom took them to Chinatown. After learning all about the Chinese people Mom created a magical evening at home with Oriental music and food. She gave the children fortune cookies. David's ironically stated: "Love and honor thy Mother, for she is the fruit that gives thou life.".....

## OVERALL ANALYSES

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**David Pelzer** - David is the main character, narrator, and protagonist of this story. Through out the course of his abuse at the hands of Mother, approximately seven years, he undergoes drastic change physically and psychologically. At the onset he is a seemingly normal child in normal family. However, as his mother slowly sinks into a demented alcoholic frenzy, David, deteriorating physically from.....

**Catherine Roerva Pelzer** - Catherine or Mother is the antagonist of the story and David's foil. In the beginning of the story she is a sweet and nurturing woman who lives for her family. She does everything she can to make her family's life blissful. However, she then slips into a psychotic state in which she lives only to.....

**Stephan Pelzer** - Like Mother, Father also experiences a spiraling deterioration throughout this story. His most important deterioration, though, is his fall from hero status. This is also a source of irony. Father is a firefighter and trained to save lives- to be a hero. However, his half-hearted attempts to help David at.....

## **PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS**

This plot is unique and interesting because it is a series of true events. Therefore, it is of particular importance to pay attention to the each event that is detailed because they are not simply creations of the author's mind, but chosen from many memories for a specific purpose.

David himself tells the story in the first person. This is effective because this essentially an account of his internal struggle to survive. Besides his physical survival, the author places a great emphasis on his emotional/psychological survival- of which we would not know if this were told in the third person. Pelzer begins his story in the present tense, from which later chapters will depart. It can be inferred that this.....

## **THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS**

***The ability of the human spirit to overcome remarkable odds*** - This is the major theme of the story. This theme is integral to plot, characters, and is essentially Pelzer's main message.

With regard to plot, Pelzer begins his story at the end. This is vital to this theme because it makes this a story of survival, since we know David has survived. From here the plot is directed in such a manner so as to show the reader *how*; therefore, communicating the theme of the spirit's *ability*.

Regarding characters, this story affects all three of its main characters – David, Mother, and Father. It also is furthered by foiling Mother and David, and David and Father to an extent as well. David is obviously the example of this message. This is most conspicuous in that the entire story is one of David's surviving remarkable odd. That this survival was the ability of his spirit, his will, is more subtle. The reader's first clue that this is just as importantly a psychological survival is in Chapter 1. Davis states: "...but I haven't let her take away my will to somehow survive" (p 4).

As the story continues David increasingly grows wise to Mother's actions and finds ways to survive despite her (e.g. stealing food, asking women to make him lunch, pretending to be afraid of her in order to get what he wants.) Also important to this theme is how Pelzer highlights the psychological elements of Mother's debauchery. This is especially evident in Chapter 4 where Mother follows David .....

## **POINT OF VIEW**

*A Child Called It* is a first person narrative. This means that this is a story that is told through the experience of one person commenting on what is going on around him. It is marked by the use of "I". This story is recounted through the eyes of David Pelzer, a victim and survivor of.....

## **IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS AND ANALYSIS - QUOTES**

1. ***"I never felt as safe and as warm as that moment in time, at the Russian River."*** (David, p.26)

This is important because it describes a perfect time in David's childhood and helps to explain what the Russian River will symbolize for David for his entire life. Although as he will later return (twice in this story) to find the dynamics of his family have changed, or the buildings have changed, the river itself does not. This reinforces the theme of the ability of the human spirit- like the river, no matter what has happened to David he has survived.....

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Q: From what point of view is the story told?  
A: First person
2. Q: Who is the protagonist?  
A: David
3. Q: Who is the antagonist?  
A: Mother.....

## ESSAY TOPICS - BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. Discuss Mother and David as foil characters. How does their relationship help further the theme of the ability to overcome?
2. Consider the ethical issue of David stealing food. Does this detract from his character? By backing him into a corner where he commits crime, is Mother winning?.....?

### *END OF SAMPLE MONKEYNOTES EXCERPTS*

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