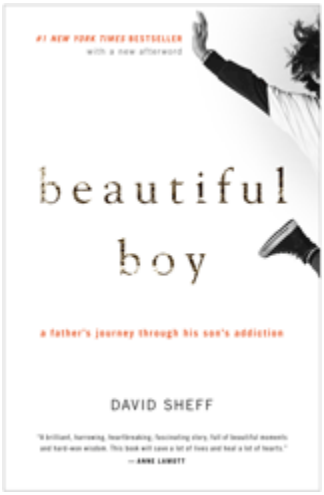
HMH Book Clubs

Find great new books for your reading group!

Beautiful Boy by David Sheff

2 February 2009, 2:54 pm



Download Jacket

About the Author

David Sheff's books include Game Over, China Dawn, and All We Are Saying. His many articles and interviews have appeared in the New York Times, Rolling Stone, Playboy, Wired, Fortune, and elsewhere. His piece for the New York Times Magazine, "My Addicted Son," won an award from the American Psychological Association for "Outstanding Contribution to Advancing the Understanding of Addiction." Sheff and his family live in Inverness, California.

For Discussion

1. In the New York Times Book Review, Janet Maslin wrote, "Addiction is a compulsion to do the same thing over and over, despite knowing that the outcome will almost certainly be the same. Addiction memoirs often illustrate this same definition of insanity…Yet the genre itself remains so addictive that readers keep hoping to discover something new." Why are addiction memoirs so addictive? Why were you drawn to this one?

2. David Sheff writes that "drug stories are sinister" (p. 87). What does he mean by that? How are drug stories different than addiction memoirs, if at all?

3. In the introduction, Sheff writes, "I have felt and thought and done almost everything an addict's parent can feel and think and do" (p. 13). Which of his experiences, thoughts, and actions were most affecting to you? Which could you relate to and which were totally foreign?

4. Sheff begins his story with the statement, "We are among the first generation of self-conscious parents. Before us, people had kids. We parent" (p. 20). What does it mean to parent, as opposed to just having kids? At the end, Sheff writes, "I wish I had gotten here quicker, but I couldn't. If only parenting were easier" (p. 310). What does he learn about "parenting" over the course of the book?

5. Discuss Nic's upbringing. What privileges did he have? What disadvantages? Did Sheff seem to you a "good parent"?

6. How does the integration of pop culture references—quotes from literature, song lyrics, movie dialogue—contribute to the book? Look particularly at what Sheff used as the epilogues to each section of the book: John Lennon, Kurt Cobain for Part I, Shakespeare for Part II, etc. Why might Sheff have chosen these particular passages? How do they help your understanding of events, and of Sheff's mindset?

7. What is the extent of David Sheff's own drug use? What is your philosophy of discussing drugs with kids? Would you be—or have you been—honest about your past with your own kids?

8. Discuss Nic's descent. At what point do you think you would have noticed Nic had a serious problem and needed help? Were there times you disagreed with David Sheff's course of action? What might you have done differently?

9. When David smoked pot with Nic, what was your reaction?

10. A friend of David's expresses surprise at Nic's addiction and says the Sheffs don't seem like a dysfunctional family. Sheff responds, "We are dysfunctional…I'm not sure I know any 'functional' families" (p. 14) How would you define a functional family? Which are the Sheffs? How you would describe your own family?

11. On page 195, Sheff explores the idea of what it means to have a "normal life," concluding, "Now I live with the knowledge that, never mind the most modest definition of a normal or healthy life, my son may not make it to twenty-one." How would you define a "normal life"? How do these socially-accepted definitions—a normal life, a functional family—contribute to, or hinder, Sheff's ability to understand and accept his son's situation? How have these definitions affected some of the decisions you've made about your own life?

12. In his suicide note, Kurt Cobain quoted Neil Young and wrote "It's better to burn out than to fade away." When Sheff interview John Lennon, Lennon said, "I worship the people who survive. I'll take the living and the healthy" (p. 118). Who do you agree with, Cobain or Lennon? Why does society glamorize those rock stars and other artists who burn out? Nic Sheff's glamorization of alcoholics and drug-addicted artists ostensibly contributed to his own downfall. How should we counsel children and young adults on the dangers of idolizing such people?

13. As a journalist and someone with the means to do so, Sheff consults a wide variety of experts on the causes, effects, and treatment of addiction. What did you find most helpful? What else might be behind Sheff's impulse to do more and more research?

14. Much of chapter 15 is devoted to the exploration of the disease of addiction. What is your understanding of addiction as a disease? Do you think of it as a behavioral or a brain disorder?

15. Many of the counselors and family members of addicts tell David and Karen, “Be allies. Remember, take care of yourselves. You’ll be good for no one—for each other, for your children—if you don’t” (p. 132). Do Karen and David take care of one another? Does David take care of himself?

16. A recovering addict tells Sheff, “You will believe in God before this over” (p. 133). Later, Sheff quotes John Lennon, “God is a concept by which we measure our pain” (p. 256). What does this last statement mean? How do David and Nic each come to believe in a higher power? Discuss their struggle with faith and their ultimate understanding of God.

17. After David Sheff suffers a cerebral hemorrhage, he can’t remember his own name, but he cannot forget Nic and his worry over his son. What is the extent of the damage of the hemorrhage? What good comes out of it?

18. What toll does Nic’s addiction take on Jasper and Daisy? How do David and Karen help them to understand their brother’s behavior?

19. At the end of his memoir, Sheff writes, “Now I am in my own program to recover from my addiction to [Nic’s addiction]” (p. 305). How is Sheff addicted to Nic’s addiction? How does David’s addiction affect his family, his job, and his life? What is his program for recovery?

20, Nic Sheff’s own memoir, Tweak, was published simultaneously with Beautiful Boy. Having only read the latter, would it surprise you to learn that Nic, during the height of his drug abuse, dealt drugs? That he prostituted himself for drug money? As a parent, do you think it would be worse knowing or not knowing such details? Think about what’s missing in David Sheff’s memoir and how that might have colored your interpretation of events.

21. When the book ends, Nic is once again in recovery. Are you left hopeful he will stay that way?

Tagged addiction, father-son, Memoir, memoir/biography, Nonfiction
| Permalink