Beautiful Boy by David Sheff

Discussion Guide

Part One: stay up late

1) David Sheff shares the following regarding his divorce and the impact it has on Nic: “No child benefits from the bitterness and savagery of a divorce like ours. Like fallout from a dirty bomb, the collateral damage is widespread and enduring. Nic is hit hard.” (P.22)
Discuss the custody arrangements regarding Nic. What were the pros and cons of the arrangement? How might Nic describe those early years?

2) Nic is nine years old when his father remarries. Discuss Nic’s early relationship with his stepmother, Karen.

3) David Sheff states “These days there are reasons more troubling than preteen awkwardness for parents to worry” (p.46). Do you agree? What are some of the signs of addiction that cause Nic’s parents to worry?

4) Discuss Sheff’s description of his own drug involvement in part one. Was he right in sharing his own prior drug use with Nic?

5) When Nic, age 12, is caught with marijuana at school, his teacher states, “It’s normal. Most kids try it.” (p. 57) Do you agree with this perspective?

6) Both Jasper and Daisy are born in Part One of the book. How might Nic describe the impact his siblings arrival had on his life.

7) Nic and his Dad exchange good byes at an airport before Nic boards the plane to visit his mother, Vicki. Nic and his Dad each say “Everything” instead of the conventional “I love you” or “good bye”. What is the meaning of this exchange?
8) When Nic is suspended for buying marijuana on campus at his new high school, what type of rationalization does Sheff engage in regarding Nic’s behavior? Is this typical of most parents? Why?

9) Nic is forced to visit extended family in Arizona. While there father and son go for a walk and Sheff tries desperately to get Nic to open up and talk. Nic is uncooperative, however, and challenges his father to smoke a joint with him. Sheff agrees, rationalizing that it is no different than a father and son having a beer together. What might you have said to Nic’s suggestion to share a joint? What might you say to attempt to get Nic to open up instead of smoking with him?

10) At the end of part one, Nic has been missing for some time. Nic finally calls his Dad, who picks up his bruised son in an alleyway. Nic is thin and can barely walk. What does Nic reveal to his Dad about his drug use? How does Sheff react?

11) At the end of part one, Nic at first readily agrees to go to a Rehab. A few days later, on the morning of the appointment, Sheff reminds Nic that it is time to go. Nic abruptly replies “No f------way” (p.103) What rationalization does Nic offer? Are you surprised by his reaction? Why or why not?
Chapter 9

1. How does David’s experience with meth differ from his son’s?

2. David traces the history of meth from its creation in 1887, to its use by the military in WWII, to the general use by the Japanese population, as a diet pill and bronchodilator, to the illegal usage we are more familiar with today. Do you think people will always experiment and “discover” new drugs for recreational use, or do you think there will be less of this with more regulations and laws?

3. Do you think the government could contain or better control the meth problem in the US? How?

Chapter 10

1. 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?

2. Why do you think more rehab centers haven’t specialized in treating meth when it seems to have more addicts than any other drug in the US?
**Beautiful Boy:**

**Part III: whatever**

**Chapter 11**

1. Talk about Nic’s anger toward his father, as he is confronted about being high again on the way to the rehab in Oakland. (His father said, “What are you on today, Nic?” Response, “Fuck you”.)

2. What do you think about David’s quest to understand the science of meth addiction? What fuels this quest? A desire to explain what is happening to his son, or feeling hopeless with the current state of the recovery process?

3. Have you ever been involved in an intervention of a family member or a friend? Explain.

4. David’s reaction to Nick saying he wasn’t going back to college, “I don’t look at Nic the way I look at the other addicts in the room. Nic is a smart kid who has gone way out of control. Ignoring the warning from our friend, I have felt that rehab will, in these four weeks, sober him up and scare him enough so that he’ll understand that he has been on the verge of destroying his life.” p 140. Why does Nic’s dad look at him differently than the other addicts in the room?

**Chapter 12**

5. David finds a police officer to leads him to a group of meth addicts in the park. The young woman says, “You won’t find him unless he wants to be found.” Do you think this is true?

6. “Worry and guilt and regret may serve a function- as a turbo-charger of conscience- but in excess they are useless and incapacitating. Yet I cannot silence them.” How to do you silence guilt and worry? What do you do to escape the stresses of life?

7. How far would you go to help someone? Would you go farther if it were a family member? Why? Explain.
Chapter 13

8. Nic talks about his atheism as a challenge to his recovery. Do you think a sense of faith is necessary?

9. Nic tells his dad how and when his addiction began, during his time in Paris when he was 16. Do you think he was too young to have that much independence? Or do you think he would have sought out chances to explore drugs and alcohol anywhere?

Chapter 14

10. The author continually repeats his son’s counselors when they say “relapse is a part of recovery.” Who do you think he is trying to convince and why?

11. Has a family member disappointed you by stealing from you? Explain.

Part IV: If Only

Chapter 15

12. David keeps Nic’s addiction a secret for a long time, in an effort to protect his reputation. Have you kept a family secret? What? Why? When and how did you finally release it?

13. “You didn’t cause it, you can’t control it, and you can’t cure it” is shared at the Al-anon meeting, however, David still feels responsible for his son’s addiction. How do meetings like Al-anon help parents and family of addicts?

14. Why do you think we always need to have someone to blame when things go wrong?

Chapter 16

15. Nic’s parents find a canceled check with his signature, and end up in a fight. David is at his young children’s graduation ceremonies and is thinking about Nic. What effect does Nic’s addition have on the rest of the family’s dynamics with one another?

16. Who or what do you worry about? How can you alleviate this worry?
Chapter 17

17. David writes “that each new betrayal brings with it a new eruption of emotion. Being robbed is a visceral, traumatizing experience anyway. To have it be my son...First Karen and now me.” p 199. Do you think the continual betrayal and lack of trust changes the way David feels for his son?

18. “He’ll have another chance.” Do you think Nic is aware of how close he came to dying?

Chapter 18

19. When the Hazelden program closes, and Nic relocates to a program in LA, he seems to flourish, sounding like “the old Nic” David once knew. What do you think about his new sponsor Randy? What is it about him that allows Nic to connect with him?

20. Despite celebrating one year of recovery, Nic’s dad immediately feels something is off when he doesn’t hear back from him. What makes him realize something is off?

Chapter 19

21. Were you surprised when Karen confesses that she was not so much trying to chase down Nic to catch him, but rather to drive him away from Jasper and Daisy in order to protect them? Do you think her experience in this has been different because she’s his stepmother? How so?

22. “Don’t confront me with my failures. I have not forgotten them”, are lyrics from a Jackson Brown song. How does Nic’s recovery force everyone to be present in the moment?

23. Nic writes an apology letter to Jasper and includes the money that he stole from him. How did you react when reading this apology?
Discussion Questions

Part 5 and Epilogue

1. 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 God.

2. 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 good comes out of it?
3. What toll does Nic’s addiction take on Jasper and Daisy? How do David and Karen help them to understand their brother’s behavior?

4. 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?

5. 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, is it 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.

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

Chapter 20

7. Can you say you love life? Why or why not?
8. Have you ever had to call 911? Why? What transpired?
9. Have you or your family ever experienced a life threatening experience? Describe. Explain. What have you learned from it?

Chapter 21

10. Daisy is not afraid to die. She says it’s like “the end of a vacation when you are ready to go home.” What do you think?

Chapter 22

11. Describe the most beautiful sunrise/sunset you have ever seen?
12. How do you know a person has a good soul?
13. Who or what do you miss in your life?

Chapter 24
14. What do you consider wasted money? Why?

15. How do you help someone who does not want to be helped?

Chapter 25

16. What is sacred to you? As a child? As a teen? As an adult?

17. How do you heal from emotional trauma?

18. The author says “Parents are suckers.” Are we/they?

19. Have you mapped out your future? How do you plan to get there?

20. What is the hardest decision you have had to make?