

# Lessons in Misery and the American way -- Review

**The Age**

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Claire Scobie

## **SURVIVAL**

*A Teenager's Journey: Surviving Adolescence*

By Richard B. Pelzer

*Help Yourself for Teens*

By Dave Pelzer

THE beaten, the abused, the tormented: these have become the new heroes. When Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called "It"* was published over a decade ago, (now part of a trilogy with *The Lost Boy* and *A Man Named Dave*), publishers thought the genre of the "misery memoir" would be short-lived.

Soon after came Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, about the grim lot of an Irish Catholic childhood and still the titles keep coming - Andrew Madden's *Altar Boy: A Story of Life After Abuse*, *The Little Prisoner* by Jane Elliott about a girl ritually abused by her stepfather.

It would seem we have an insatiable appetite to devour other people's pain. A by-product, perhaps, of the reality TV shows and the voyeuristic soul-baring of Oprah. The "misery market" follows a particular theme - after the chronicles of cruelty, there is redemption. The vanquished becomes the victor.

Dave Pelzer, a New York Times bestselling author for more than five years, is now a publishing phenomenon with his sixth book, *Help Yourself for Teens*, out this month. One of five brothers, Pelzer was viciously treated and on several occasions nearly killed by his mother until at the age of 12, when he was rescued by teachers and taken into various foster homes. Pelzer's ordeal was later considered one of the worst child-abuse cases in California that year.

In this self-help guide, Pelzer combines no-nonsense advice on how to survive as a teenager - "be honest with yourself; you alone decide your fate" - with graphic excerpts from *A Child Called "It"*. Taking the scene where his mother, "a hateful, psychologically sick alcoholic" holds his arm over a gas stove, he describes how this taught him "to maintain an intense focus". As a teenager, he says, you must "use your head, stay focused, and stay out of trouble".

Interspersed are Pelzer's patriotic eulogies about America: he served in the air force for more than a decade. The glee when he describes Saddam Hussein, "hiding like the coward he was in a spider hole, so scared that he peed on himself" sits uneasily alongside Pelzer's self-styled role as mentor.

Considering that in the past 20 years Pelzer has worked with young adults in jails, juvenile halls and foster care across America, I was left wondering why he needed to draw so extensively on his first book, rather than write something original. When Pelzer encourages young people not fall into the trap of thinking everything is their fault, which is what he says he did when he "lived with Mother as her 'basement slave' ", it rings hollow. This isn't to discount his horrendous childhood, but constantly using his extreme personal experience as a device fails when giving counsel for everyday problems faced by the majority of teenagers.

Dave Pelzer's work is vivid and he does evoke a sense of himself: a boy who wears "Coke-bottle glasses with thick black frames, long, straggly, matted hair".

The writing in *A Teenager's Journey*, the second book by his brother, Richard B. Pelzer, is often so poor it is hard to truly empathise. Richard's first book, *A Brother's Journey*, covers his early years when he went from being "Mom's little Nazi", colluding with her mistreatment of Dave, to

being mother's new victim when Dave was taken away by the authorities. Richard was kicked, beaten and treated worse than a dog, forced to eat out of a dish under the kitchen table.

In his sequel he recounts his teenage years. By the age of 16, close to six feet tall (1.8 metres) and weighing almost 180 pounds (81 kilograms), Richard was "spared" from "further physical abuse".

Nevertheless, the neglect and emotional cruelty continued. On several occasions he attempted suicide and to cope, ingested a heady cocktail of drugs. About \$300 a week goes "up in smoke, up my nose or down my throat".

Caught in this hell between both wanting his mother's love and her protection, and loathing her for the years of systemic abuse, Richard desperately looks outside for help. He finds it through the Nichols family, who "never once put me down or reminded me of how . . . bad I smelled". During his 20s, Richard lived with them and by example, the Nichols teach him what a normal, loving family resembles.

In a similar vein to *A Child Called "It"*, Richard writes from an internal perspective with an over-use of the first person. Often the narrative is disjointed, as if written in a personal vacuum. There is little description of place and I was left knowing too much about the sensation of crack cocaine and heroin, yet not enough of Richard himself.

This could be a reflection of the trauma he's endured, but the style is heavily laced with psychobabble and empty platitudes. When he describes how he learned from the Nichols' twins, that "even the most seemingly out-of-reach dreams can come true, if you truly want them to", it is hard not to groan.

Ultimately, both books left me frustrated, falling between memoir and inspirational self-help. Both follow a similar vein - that with some help from above, any teenager can survive and that ultimately good prevails. God Bless America.

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