

BOOK CLUB To Go!

Look Me in the Eye

By John Elder Robison

Introduction

John Elder Robison's story is one of alienation, desperate loneliness, and an intense desire to connect with others in spite of poor social skills. His clumsy attempts at relationship-building are chronicled throughout the memoir. As a toddler, he is taught to "make friends" with a dog by petting it. When he applies the same practice in his efforts to befriend a little girl on the playground, he is discouraged when she smacks him. Undaunted, he modifies his strategy by using a stick to pet her, and is crushed and confused when his efforts are rejected and a teacher scolds him.

John's struggle is compounded by an unstable, dysfunctional home environment. Growing up in the household described by his brother, Augusten Burroughs, in the bestselling *Running with Scissors*, John's difficulties are worsened by abuse and neglect.

John describes in vivid detail the "pranks" he engineered as a teenager, that were born from the anger that grew inside him from years of rejection and failure. Some of these, in fact, were serious crimes that could have resulted in devastating consequences. Just as Holden Caulfield yells, "Sleep tight, ya morons!" and abandons his dorm at Pencey Prep for the wild streets of New York, John's feelings of alienation and his misfit self image lead him to drop out of high school for an exciting and sometimes dangerous life in the music business, working for bands like KISS and Pink Floyd.

The rest of the story is an inspiring tale of self-discovery, as John learns through trial and error and misadventure to understand himself and others, and to begin to forge real friendships for the first time. By slowly identifying his strengths and weaknesses, he experiences both dismal failures and tremendous successes.

The author's salvation comes after a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome at the age of 40. With great joy, John discovers that his social awkwardness, inability to look people in the eye, and difficulty making and keeping friends were not because he was a failure or misfit, but are, instead, symptoms of this neurological difference on the autistic spectrum. Thus, he sheds years of guilt and shame, and is fueled by a new awareness and understanding that his way of thinking and relating are not bad or wrong, just different. With this new confidence, John builds a life that is successful and fulfilling.

(johnrobison.com)

About the Author

John Elder Robison was born in 1957 in Athens, Georgia to John G. Robison, a college professor, and Margaret Robison, an author and artist. John's brother, Chris, changed his name to Augusten Burroughs, and is the author of the best selling, *Running with Scissors*.

Look Me in the Eye: My Life with Asperger's is John Robison's first book. In addition to being an author, he owns and runs J E Robison Service Company, an automobile repair and restoration service.

John lives in Massachusetts with his wife and teenage son.

(johnrobison.com)

Reviews

"Deeply felt and often darkly funny, *Look Me in the Eye* is a delight." –*People*

"It's a fantastic life story (highlights include building guitars for KISS) told with grace, humor, and a bracing lack of sentimentality." –*Entertainment Weekly*

"Lean, powerful in its descriptive accuracy and engaging in its understated humor...Emotionally gripping." –*Chicago Tribune*

(randomhouse.com)

Further Reading

The Only Boy in the World: a Father Explores the Mysteries of Autism by Michael Blastland

Succeeding with Autism: Hear My Voice by Judith H. Cohen

Not Even Wrong: Adventures in Autism by Paul Collins

Thinking in Pictures: and Other Reports from My Life with Autism by Temple Grandin

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Possible Discussion Questions

1. How did John's father and others react when John didn't look them in the eye? Did John deserve this reaction? Explain.
2. What is Asperger's syndrome? What are some of the challenges of living with Asperger's? What are some of the possible benefits?
3. What are your earliest memories of playing with other children? Did you experience anything similar to what John experienced? Who were the adults whom you went to for guidance?
4. John got along better with adults than children. Why do think this is so? Several times, John shared a preference for inanimate objects (blocks, machines, etc.) over humans, because of their dependability and because they couldn't hurt him.
5. Can you understand why John felt this way? Have you ever had similar feelings?
6. John describes his "defective" self-image as a young boy. Now he sees himself as "different." Do you have characteristics that you once thought were defects that you now understand to be differences?
7. When John discovered his passion for automobiles, what impact did it have on his imagination, his happiness, and his relationships?
8. What effect does alcoholism have on relationships? How did John's father's alcoholism affect John?
9. How did John's electronics kit change his life? What characteristic of Asperger's did John show in his pursuit of knowledge of electronics?

(readinggroups.com)