

# A CHILD CALLED "IT"

## LIVING LITERATURE SERIES

DAVID PELZER

A PERMA-BOUND PRODUCTION

TEACHER'S GUIDE

GUIDE WRITTEN BY MARY ELLEN SNODGRASS

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### SYNOPSIS

**Chapter One: The Rescue** on Friday, March 5, 1973, twelve-year-old David Pelzer suffers a slap in the face from his mother for being late washing the breakfast dishes. He sneaks leftovers from his brother's cereal bowl and runs to Thomas Edison Elementary School in Daly City, California, while his mother drives the other four boys in the family station wagon. At the school office, the nurse examines him and notes his ragged, filthy clothes and outgrown shoes.

The principal, Mr. Hansen, and two teachers, Miss Woods and Mr. Ziegler, know of Dave's years of stealing food. His grades suffer because he has given up. He returns to the office to answer a police officer's questions about his mother. From the police station, Dave goes to the San Mateo Juvenile Department, never again to return to his parents' custody. He finds it hard to believe that he is free of abuse.

**Chapter Two: Good Times** In the early 1960s, Dave and his brothers Ron and Stan enjoy happy times. His home is clean and meals well cooked. His parents take him to Chinatown and the aquarium in Golden Gate Park and on picnics at Junipero Serra Park. His favorite family time is spent at Russian River and Johnson Beach.

**Chapter Three: Bad Boy** As Roerva's behavior begins to alter, she punishes four-year-old Dave and singles him out as a bad child. In mid-afternoon, his parents drink to excess. A few months later, Roerva breaks Dave's arm and sets up a scenario to blame a fall from a bunk bed. At the hospital, Dave doesn't tell the truth about her abuse.

Roerva holds Dave back from first grade and denies him television and dinner with the family. She remands him to the garage. That summer, he tries to run away from his Aunt Josie's house. His mother punishes him by making him swallow soap. Several months later, she becomes a den mother for the Cub Scouts, but limits Dave's participation. She tries to burn him on the gas range. He saves himself by holding out until Ron returns home and retreats to the garage to lick his burns.

**Chapter Four: The Fight for Food** The first month of second grade, Dave has to wear the same clothes daily and is served little food. He steals from his classmates' lunches and receives table scraps sneaked by his father. His teacher, Miss Moss, becomes suspicious of his home situation. His mother bloodies his nose and knocks out a tooth in retaliation for school interference from a "hippie" teacher. That summer, during a family vacation on the Russian River, Roerva forces him to eat excrement from the diaper of his baby brother Russell.

By September of the third grade, David is an outcast for his filthy attire and theft of food. The staff watches him carefully. He sneaks into a grocery store to steal food. The manager apprehends him and calls Roerva, who thrashes him.

She feeds him spoiled meat and drops ammonia on scraps in the trash. After he steals frozen food from the cafeteria, she forces him to vomit up what he has eaten each day, then makes him eat his vomit.

Dave hates his parents and prays for strength. Before school, he begs food from neighbors. To punish him, she forces him to drink ammonia. The next night, Roerva tells her husband how she makes Dave stop stealing food. Dave's father sees the indignities his son suffers, but does nothing to help him. Dave begins stealing from the family freezer.

**Chapter Five: The Accident** In summer 1971, ten-year-old Dave must assume a prisoner-of-war position for long periods. When Roerva threatens him with a knife, his little brother causes her to stumble, pitch forward, and stab Dave above the stomach with a knife she has held out as a threat. She binds the wound and forces him to wash dishes despite his agony and bleeding. She watches over him for three days. When he develops a fever, he forces infected matter from the wound and collapses on his army cot in the garage.

**Chapter Six: While Father Is Away** Dave's father begins staying late at bars. Roerva extends the periods Dave goes without food. She shuts him in the bathroom with buckets of ammonia and clorox, which emit lethal gas. At Easter vacation and summer's end, she sends him to mow lawns and give her his earnings. Dave doubts God. Roerva begins forcing Dave to lie in a bathtub with his head in cold water. In fourth grade that fall, he loves his teacher. In October, bullies beat him. Roerva hits him with a dog chain and refuses to let his father see him.

At school, the nurse receives disturbing reports about Dave from a substitute teacher. In October, Dave begins sleeping in his father's bed. After receiving roller skates at Christmas, David is forced to skate up and down in front of the house in winter weather. At the end of March, Roerva gives birth to Kevin. That spring, she becomes a den mother for Cub Scouts and tells Shirley, another parent volunteer, that Dave can't participate because he is a bad boy.

At the end of summer, Roerva makes up with Dave. He eats with the family. The next day, a social worker comes to interview Roerva and Dave. He is forced to lie about his home treatment. Roerva perpetuates the charade of a normal home when Dave's grandmother visits. He begins to weep each time his father leaves for work.

**Chapter Seven: The Lord's Prayer** In 1972 in the first month of fifth grade, Dave believes there is no God. He loses the will to live and becomes an automaton. His brothers Ron and Stan join in the sadism at home; Clifford menaces Dave in the school yard. In winter 1972-1973, Dave leaves class screaming and collapses on the floor. On a field trip to a clipper ship, a classmate named Aggie tries to force Dave to leap into the sea. In Mr. Ziegler's class, Dave wins a commendation for naming the school newspaper. Roerva destroys the letter and calls Dave an "it," a bastard, and wishes him dead.

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Dave begins rebelling. Roerva makes the ammonia and chlorox treatment deadlier and tries to choke him. A month later, she blames him for kicking her in the stomach before the birth of Kevin, her fifth son. Dave's father returns home staggering drunk and packs his bag. Dave fears that, without his father at home, no one will stop Roerva from killing Dave.

**Epilogue: Sonoma County, California** Free from abuse in adulthood, Dave looks out to sea at driftwood and thinks of his former life. He enlists in the U. S. Air Force and vacations with his family near Guerneville at the Russian River. His affectionate son Stephen shares his love for the place.

**Perspectives on Child Abuse: Dave Pelzer, Survivor** Dave notes that one in five American children suffers abuse and predicts that abused children grow up to endanger society. Some run away, become prostitutes, or join gangs. He writes his story to explain how good parents go bad and how abused children can survive. After thirteen years in the military, Pelzer retires to write self-help books and conduct workshops and seminars. He believes that the American family is under serious stress from social and economic changes.

**Steven E. Ziegler, Teacher** One of Dave's rescuers reports in September 1992 that Dave contacts him. Ziegler recalls that Dave's case of domestic suffering was the third worst in the state.

**Valerie Bivens, Social Worker** Bivens reports that child abuse too often goes unacknowledged.

**Glenn A. Goldberg** The former executive director for a council on child abuse believes that Dave's story can help people get involved in child rescue.

### TIME LINE

- 1960 Dec. 29** Dave Pelzer is born in Daly City, California.
- 1964** Roerva Pelzer begins targeting Dave as a bad child. **a few months later** She breaks his arm. **autumn** He is held back from first grade and denied television and dinner with the family. He sleeps in the garage.
- 1965 summer** Dave tries to run away from his Aunt Josie's house. **several months later** Roerva tries to burn Dave on the gas range.
- 1969** Because his teacher, Miss Moss, becomes suspicious, Roerva bloodies Dave's nose and knocks out a tooth.
- 1970 September** In the third grade, Dave is caught stealing from a grocery store. Roerva forces him to drink ammonia.
- 1971 summer** Roerva stabs Dave. in the chest.
- 1971 October** Bullies beat Dave at school. The nurse becomes suspicious of reports about him from a substitute teacher.
- 1972 end of summer** Roerva makes Dave lie to a social worker and to his grandmother about his home treatment. **fall** Dave loses the will to live. **winter** Dave begins rebelling. His father leaves home.
- 1973 spring** Dave enters foster care.
- 1978** Dave quits school, earns a G.E.D., and enlists in the Air Force.
- 1989** Dave settles in Guerneville, California, with his son Stephen.
- 1990** He earns a J. C. Penney Golden Rule award.
- 1993** "A Child Called It" is published.

**1995** The Lost Boy is published

**1996** In the Olympics Torch Relay, Dave carries the centennial flame.

**1999** *A Man Called Dave: A Story of Triumphs and Forgiveness* is published.

**2003** Dave receives the Points of Light award.

### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

David J. Pelzer lived one of the most harrowing childhoods in California state history. Born on December 29, 1960, in Daly City, he was the second of five sons of Catherine Roerva and firefighter Stephen Joseph Pelzer. Dave enjoyed a normal, happy childhood until age four, when his mother began punishing him and broke his arm. After her plunge into alcoholism and insanity triggered by her own dismal childhood, he suffered as her punching bag and family slave. He gradually lost weight and strength from starvation, despair, and indecencies and endangerment from sadistic games.

After a serious bashing his last morning at home, on March 5, 1973, twelve-year-old Pelzer was rescued at Thomas Edison Elementary School by a nurse who kept track of his burn scars, contusions, chipped teeth, and a knife wound to the abdomen. With the aid of the principal, two teachers, and police, he was spirited away forever from his birth parents into foster care. At one point, his vindictive mother urged authorities to have her son committed to a mental institution. After her husband died from alcoholism when Dave was in his twenties, she tried to strike him at the funeral. She later died from alcohol abuse.

Six years after his rescue, out of fear of homelessness, Pelzer quit high school to work in a factory, later earning a G.E.D. He began a distinguished combat career in the U. S. Air Force as a sergeant conducting mid-air refueling of Stealth fighter jets and Blackbird reconnaissance planes in the Middle East during Operation Just Cause, Operation Desert Shield, and Operation Desert Storm. In his free time, he volunteered at a juvenile hall to aid at-risk youth.

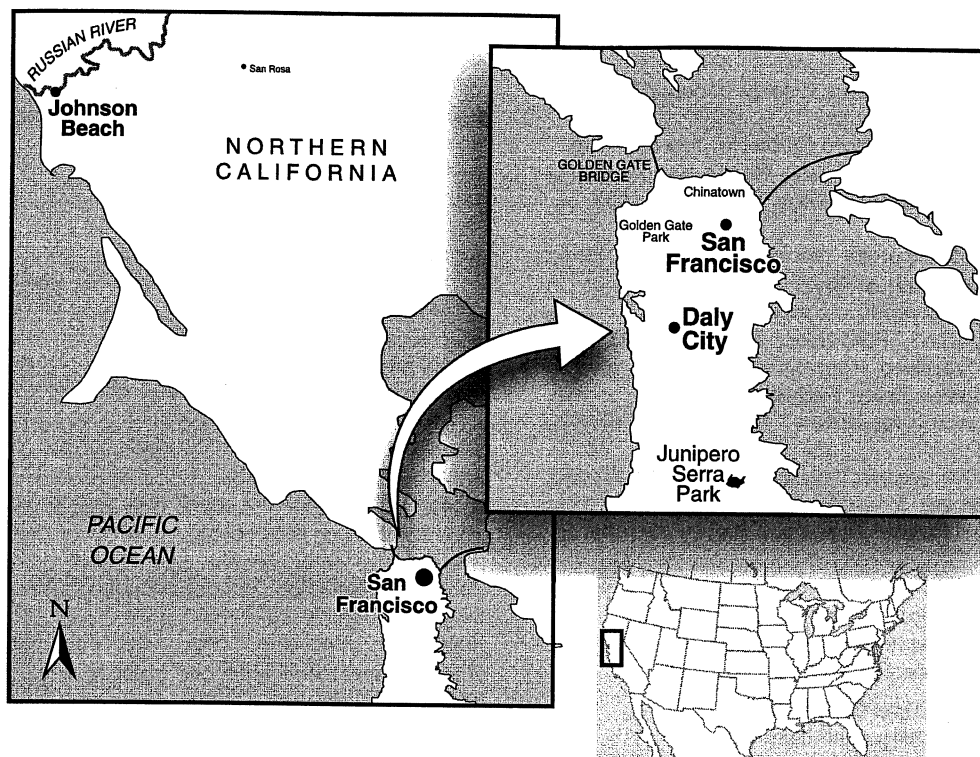
In early retirement, Pelzer settled near the Russian River in Guerneville, California, with his son Stephen. After Dave's emergence as a self-help expert, writer, and inspirational speaker, he began honoring the people who daily salvage young abuse victims--teachers and principals, social workers, police, foster parents, and volunteers. He knows the value of their concern from his own days as a counselor and youth agent at Troy State University, a director of the Missing Youth Foundation, and a programmer for foster care and correctional custody.

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### CRITIC'S CORNER

An award-winning author with four bestsellers at one time, Pelzer is the only writer to produce four international bestsellers. In 1990, he earned a J. C. Penney Golden Rule award as California volunteer of the year. In 1993, his memoir *A Child Called "It"* quickly reached the bestseller list and remained there for over 200 weeks. Although some critics questioned the extent of Dave's sufferings and questioned

his earning a living by telling his story, the book was an international hit and earned a nomination for a Pulitzer Prize. He was named one of the Jaycees' Ten Outstanding Young Americans; a year later, he was the only American named to the Outstanding Young Persons of the World, a citation conferred in Kobe, Japan.

Pelzer dedicated his career to motivational speaking. He followed his first book with *The Lost Boy* (1995), a story of his foster care in several settings from ages twelve to eighteen. The book remained on the bestseller list for 168 weeks. In October 1999, he launched a fifteen-city book tour for *A Man Called Dave: A Story of Triumphs and Forgiveness* on the Montel Williams television program. His self-help work, *Help Yourself*, earned him a second Pulitzer Prize nomination. A sequel, *Life Lessons*, is a pocket text on surviving challenges. In addition to his books, his lectures are available on video.

Pelzer's awards continued over a decade after his first book. At the 1996 Olympics Torch Relay, he carried the centennial flame. In 2001, he signed with Dutton for the next stage of his autobiography, *The Privilege of Youth*. He appeared on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* in 2002 and received presidential honors from Ronald Reagan, George Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. In 2003, Dave received the Points of Light award, a high honor for volunteerism.

### OTHER WORKS BY THE AUTHOR

*A Child Called "It"* (1993)  
*Help Yourself* (2000)  
*The Lost Boy* (1994)  
*A Man Called Dave* (1999)  
*The Privilege of Youth* (2004)

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### GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. To discuss the meaning of altruism
2. To list and contrast the responsibilities of birth parents, foster parents, teachers, police, and social workers
3. To define the best home environment for children
4. To examine the importance of self-esteem
5. To discuss the implications of malnutrition on physical and mental health
6. To list self-defensive and survival techniques
7. To chart events that victimize a child in need
8. To discuss the inborn will to survive
9. To contrast home and school as refuges for children
10. To account for repercussions against a child who seeks food outside the home

### SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To describe how and why the police accept responsibility for Dave
2. To note the loss of respect for Stephen Joseph, Ron, and Stan
3. To evaluate the decision to remove Dave from his home
4. To account for Roerva's drunkenness, hatred, and bitterness
5. To analyze scenes in which Stephen Joseph protects and feeds Dave
6. To comprehend how Dave protects himself from cold and strangulation
7. To analyze the motives of Stan and Ron in ignoring Dave's plight
8. To discuss the negative traits of alcohol on the Pelzers
9. To evaluate Dave's advice on survival
10. To project how readers will apply lessons from the book to other children

### LITERARY TERMS AND APPLICATIONS

For a better understanding of Dave Pelzer's style, present

the following terms and applications to his book:

**first person narrative** a story or a series of actions told from the vantage point of a single observer. *A Child Called "It"* examines the relationship between a boy and his parents from the child's point of view. When the relationship sours, at age four, Dave explains in simple language how he tries to make sense of his mother's anger and why he attempts to protect himself from harm and from punishments for being a "bad boy." From Dave's experiences with a disintegrating family, he displays the will to survive and to live normally.

**historic milieu** the setting of fictional events in a real period of history. Dave comes of age before society shows much interest in domestic and spousal abuse and child neglect. There were few agencies to intervene in Dave's behalf and to assess his mother's insanity and alcoholism and his father's drunkenness and apathy. Because of the publication of Dave's memoirs, he has encouraged greater vigilance among adults concerning children who need protection.

**symbol** a concrete object that stands for a complex or abstract idea or relationship. In *A Child Called "It"* food in any form becomes Dave's ultimate goal to help him survive deliberate starvation and intense mental and physical stress. Driven constantly by hunger, he focuses on many forms of food stolen from school lunch bags, the cafeteria, a grocery store, or the home freezer or trash or begged door to door from neighbors. Mr. Hansen realizes the boy's obsession with hunger and offers him a lunchroom tray after removing him from class.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF SETTING

The milieu of *A Child Called "It"* is crucial to the story. The story opens in a nondescript suburb of San Francisco, where seemingly normal activities occupy the school, neighbors, Cub Scout troop, and Pelzer family. In an ordinary middle-class home, Dave and his brothers Ron and Stan receive quality care, which includes trips to Chinatown, Junipero Sera Park, and the Golden Gate Park and a vacation to the Russian River and Johnson Beach. However, the aura of normality is misleading.

When Roerva begins to lose contact with reality, she turns her home into a torture chamber. From simple discipline--putting Dave in the corner, making him face the mirror--she advances to breaking his arm and forcing a bar of soap into his mouth. The separation of brothers allows Ron and Stan to play outdoors and watch television while Dave becomes the family drudge. To further distance him from normality, his mother makes him sleep in a cot in the garage and sit in the yard in the cold. She creates a false sense of exercise by forcing Dave to mow lawns and skate outside the house in cold weather.

Glimpses of Dave outside the home allow the reader to see how thoroughly insidious Roerva's evil become. The fire department ceases to accept Roerva's calls; Dave's grandmother remains oblivious to the boy's misery. The school, police, and social welfare agency are the only sources of authority that can challenge Roerva's control and torture of Dave.

### CROSS-CURRICULAR SOURCES

The following sources offer additional classroom information on child abuse, foster care, family life, Russian River vacationing, rescue agencies, and emotional health:

#### Books

William Armstrong, *Souder*

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Hal Borland, *When the Legends Die*  
Joseph Bruchac, *Bowman's Store: A Journey to Myself*  
Forrest Carter, *The Education of Little Tree*  
Caroline B. Cooney, *The Face on the Milk Carton*  
Robert Cormier, *I Am the Cheese*  
Kaye Gibbons, *Ellen Foster*  
Bette Green, *Summer of My German Soldier*  
Irene Hunt, *No Promises in the Wind*  
Barbara Kingsolver, *The Bean Trees*  
Theodora Kroeber, *Ishi*  
Lois Lowry, *The Giver*  
Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*  
Gordon Parks, *The Learning Tree*  
Catherine Paterson, *The Great Gilly Hopkins*  
Robert Newton Peck, *A Day No Pigs Would Die*  
Susan Beth Pfeffer, *The Year Without Michael*  
Conrad Richter, *The Light in the Forest*  
Lauren Roche, *Bent Not Broken*  
Mildred Taylor, *Homecoming and Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*  
Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*  
Jackie Torrence, *The Importance of Pot Liquor*  
Cynthia Voigt, *Missing May*  
Yoko Kamashima Watkins, *So Far from the Bamboo Grove*  
Ruth White, *Belle Prater's Boy*

### Plays

Jane Wagner, *J. T.*  
Carson McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*

### Internet

"Children and Grief," <[www.psych.med.umich.edu/web/aacap/factsFam/grief.htm](http://www.psych.med.umich.edu/web/aacap/factsFam/grief.htm)>  
"Crisis, Grief, and Healing," <[www.webhealing.com](http://www.webhealing.com)>  
"Foster Parent Home Page," <[fostercare.org/FPHP/](http://fostercare.org/FPHP/)>  
"Preventing Teen Suicide," <[www.aap.org/advoccy/childhealth/month/kill2.htm](http://www.aap.org/advoccy/childhealth/month/kill2.htm)>  
"Russian River Getaways," <[www.rrgetaways.com/](http://www.rrgetaways.com/)>

### nonfiction

Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*  
Anthony Godby Johnson, *A Rock and a Hard Place*  
Richard Wright, *Black Boy*

### videos/films/DVDs

*Ellen Foster*  
*Fried Green Tomatoes*  
*I Am the Cheese*  
*Ordinary People*  
*Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*  
*Where the Lilies Bloom*

## THEMES AND MOTIFS

A study of the central issues and situations in Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called "It"* should include these aspects:

### Themes

- loss
- acceptance
- family
- hardship
- pain
- hunger
- terror
- displacement
- despair
- rescue
- maturity

### Motifs

- coping with harsh parents
- learning to survive
- avoiding murder
- fighting for food
- accepting permanent placement outside the home

## MEANING STUDY

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have a particular meaning in this work. Explain each. Chapter, section, and page numbers pinpoint the context in which the item appears.

1. I wish to take a moment and pay homage to those who truly believed in this crusade. (Acknowledgments, p. ix)  
(*To Dave Pelzer, his life story has become a crusade, a complicated and lengthy fight to better conditions for abused children. In his work as a volunteer and inspirational speaker, he praises the everyday heroes--educators, social workers, police, and nurses--who intervene on behalf of children who have nowhere else to turn for help. For people in the helping professions, the misery of a child is uppermost in their concerns for the good of the individual, family, and society.*)
2. I knew we were going to my favorite place in the world--the Russian River. (Chapter One, p. 25)  
(*The Russian River area in Sonoma County, California, is known for natural beauty. Since the late nineteenth century, families have enjoyed the forest now known as Armstrong Redwood State Reserve and have toured vineyards and wineries and camped and hiked the wilds of Austin Creek State Recreation Area. Johnson's Beach is a suitable family site for picnicking, photography, fishing, biking, and swimming.*)
3. Father stayed away most of the time, and I continued to be the scapegoat upon which Mother vented her frustrations. (Chapter Six, p.122)  
(*The author offers some explanation for his position as family whipping boy. Because of the tensions between parents, Roerva chooses Dave as the source of all her anguish and disappointments. The selection of a scapegoat focuses her hostility and allows her to feel some control over elements of motherhood and housekeeping that dismay her.*)
4. I didn't take Aggie very seriously; not until a fifth-grade field trip to one of San Francisco's Clipper Ships. (Chapter Seven, p. 138)  
(*Traffic between San Francisco and the rest of the world once focused on tall masted ships, the fast carriers of passengers and cargo that shortened the distance around South America's Cape Horn. As demands increased on transportation, some companies carried goods and people as far south as Panama, portaged across the isthmus, and reloaded goods and people on relay ships on the east coast. The method cut days off the journey and lessened fears of capsizing on the treacherous pass from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic, but caused journeyers to encounter mosquito-borne disease and other dangers in slogging through the Panama jungle.*)
5. His innocence was hypnotic as I followed him around the house; I wiped the drool from his mouth and stayed one step behind him so he wouldn't get hurt. (Chapter Seven, pp. 144-145)

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*(After the treachery of mother, father, and brothers, Dave is drawn to the innocence of Kevin, a baby too young to perceive the family's dangerous dysfunction. Because of his own sufferings, Dave is demonstrably careful of the baby's safety. Interaction with Kevin gives Dave an opportunity to relax and a reason to laugh, qualities missing from his miserable daily existence.)*

6. I had never seen him so drunk. (Chapter Seven, p. 148)  
*(At a young age, Dave becomes somewhat of an expert on the effects of alcohol on family relationships. He has witnessed afternoons of drinking and dancing and heard through the walls at night the worsening arguments between Roerva and Stephen Joseph. Dave recognizes that his father retreats into extreme drunkenness to gather the courage to make a break with home and move into a seedy hotel. The departure causes the boy to weep inside, where he has harbored hopes of his father's eventual triumph over Roerva.)*
7. The more grisly my situation became, the more I felt as if some immense power were sucking me into some giant undertow. (Epilogue, p. 156)  
*(To Dave, the Pacific Ocean becomes a symbol of constant battery and the out-of-sight threat of a power capable of pulling him under and ending his life. In his analogy, self-rescue was like swimming against the cycle to freedom.)*
8. I knew the black hole was out there, waiting to suck me in and forever control my destiny--but only if I let it. (Epilogue, p. 157)  
*(Advancing into another symbol, Dave sees his past life as a black hole in his memory, a bottomless abyss where he can lose consciousness and purpose by brooding over the past. His will to take control over his life allows him to advance beyond his pathetic childhood to an era of positive thoughts and actions.)*
9. On any given day, some adult who is the victim of a dark past of child abuse may vent his or her pent-up frustrations on society or on those he or she may love. (Perspectives on Child Abuse, p. 162)  
*(Dave alerts the reader to the fact that abuse is cyclical. People who are harmed in childhood tend to redirect their rage against some outside victim through crime, gang violence, or child abuse in the home. Thus, parents who were abused take out spite on their own children, who are too young and powerless to fight back.)*
10. David Pelzer's story must be told so that we can mobilize Americans to create a country where it won't hurt to be a child. (Glenn A. Goldberg, p. 173)  
*(One of Dave's most generous methods of preventing other child tragedies is his sharing of deeply personal information about his parents and siblings. By turning his experiences into a series of memoirs, he communicates to readers the need for all Americans to be vigilant for troubled families and abused children.)*

### COMPREHENSION STUDY

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages from the book.

#### Characters

1. Who are Dave's family?

*(Dave is born to Catherine Roerva and Stephen Joseph Pelzer, a San Francisco firefighter. At first, Dave shares a happy home with his brothers Ron and Stan. After his mother turns evil, she gives birth to Russell. Late in Dave's time at home, she produces a fifth son, Kevin, whom Dave loves for his innocence. Dave's grandmother visits on holidays, but she is not there long enough to see the dysfunction in the family. Years after Dave's flight and maturity, he marries and sires his own son, Stephen, whom he takes to Russian River, where the Pelzers once vacationed. Dave later divorces his first wife and remarries.)*

#### Motivation

2. Why does Roerva change?

*(By the time that Dave is four years old, his mother and father have begun drinking heavily. Their drunkenness advances to arguments and yelling matches that keep Dave awake at night. Roerva, who was abused in childhood, begins to single Dave out as a scapegoat for her frustrations. From more normal punishments of standing in the corner and facing the mirror, she advances to physical abuse and starvation, including pummeling, breaking Dave's arm, and threatening to burn him on the gas range.*

*Roerva begins playing sadistic games of offering, then removing food from Dave and putting it down the garbage disposal. She makes up a web of lies and deceptions to keep outsiders from knowing about his sufferings. For psychological torment, she tells Dave that his rebellion and kicking her in the abdomen during her pregnancy harmed his baby brother Kevin. By the end of Dave's time at home, his father has abandoned the family and left the five boys in Roerva's care. Dave fears that his mother is insane enough to kill him.)*

#### Setting

3. How does home become a prison?

*(As Roerva becomes mentally unstable, she limits where Dave can interact with the family. He is not allowed to play on the grass, play games with his brothers, or watch television. He no longer eats at the table with his brothers and spends long hours at chores, including washing dishes. His mother confines him to the stairs in a prisoner-of-war pose. He sleeps in the garage on an army cot. After spending long periods in the bathtub submerged in cold water, he must sit outdoors in the shade in a restrictive pose and shiver with cold. After his father leaves, Dave sleeps in his father's bed and worries about the diabolical plans his mother concocts for more torment.)*

#### Plot

4. Why does the nurse suspect Dave is abused?

*(From a substitute teacher's observations, the nurse at Thomas Edison Elementary School learns that Dave is dirty, his clothes are worn and his shoes too small, and his body bears bruises, swelling, and other marks suggesting abuse. The nurse begins recording scars, injuries, and chipped teeth. From his clumsy made-up stories for how he hurt himself, she recognizes repeated explanations and deduces that the excuses are lies. As his behavior grows more erratic and dysfunctional, she secures enough documentation to request that the principal, teachers, police, and social services intervene and rescue Dave from an abusive home.)*

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### Tone

5. How does the author reduce reader anxiety?  
(To present a hopeful story, Dave Pelzer begins on March 5, 1973, the day he was rescued from his cruel mother. He espouses an upbeat personal philosophy of letting go of the past and reaching for happiness. By preparing the reader for a cheerful ending, he plunges into the early years by narrating his mother's decline into alcoholism, madness, and brutality. As she worsens, Dave implies that she is vicious enough to murder him, but the introductory chapter discounts reader fears for his safety.)

### Narrator

6. How does Dave express his story?  
(Telling about seven years of misery requires control of diction and careful pacing of events. Dave reduces hysteria and pathos by speaking in a calm, straightforward manner about the changes in him as he grows up in terror. He tells of mentally escaping by fantasizing that he is the main character in *The Prince and the Pauper* and by seeing himself wearing the red cape of Superman. He becomes so hungry he steals from a piggy bank. In Chapter Seven, Dave describes a significant shift in his attitude—a decline from a hopeful child into an automaton. While holding fear and anger inside, he moves robotically and loses energy and stamina. As he suppresses normal emotions, he "no longer dreamed, nor did I let my imagination work during the day." He stops envisioning himself flying like Superman and gives up on God, whom Dave believes has abandoned him. In his words, "Inside, my soul became so cold I hated everything. I even despised the sun, for I knew I would never be able to play in its warm presence.")

### Aftermath

7. How does Dave honor rescuers?  
(After stabilizing his life, completing his education, and joining the U. S. Air Force, Dave Pelzer begins volunteering to help at-risk children. Following early retirement from the military, he becomes an author and inspirational speaker to school groups, social workers, and businesses. He also sells videos of his lectures and self-help books. Through personal contact with audiences and through his writing, he lauds the efforts of volunteers, police, educators, nurses, and social workers to save children from fearful home situations. He reminds his listeners and readers that everyday heroism is a common element in rescuers' professions.)

### Theme

8. How does Dave express the dangers of abuse to other children?  
(In "Perspectives on Child Abuse," Dave stresses to the reader that terrified children feel alone and powerless. He characterizes the difference between normal parental discipline methods and tragic instances of torment. He cites cases of abused children as adults and the mayhem they wreak on society to free themselves of anger and frustration. He blames child abuse for killings, run-aways, child prostitution, and gang violence.)

### Purpose

9. How has Dave turned his experiences into worthwhile endeavors?  
(Dave began his adult life as a soldier, advancing to a

sergeant in the U. S. Air Force and a warrior in three combat engagements in the Middle East. After early retirement, he shaped volunteer activities into a career. He writes and speaks on the subject of child abuse and furthers the aims of *D-esprit*, a California agency that supports good parenting and the rescue of victimized children. Each time he receives an award for volunteering, he raises public consciousness of the need to observe and listen to children to determine their level of safety at home.)

### Response

10. What do students gain from reading *A Child Called "It"*?  
(By reading about the sufferings of a powerless young child, students develop sympathies for children like Dave. At the same time, they may consider the actions of Clifford, John, and Aggie and realize that sneering at unclean, ragged peers compounds the misery of classmates and neighbors who have no choice in how they live. By reading and discussing the book, students can develop humanity and learn that compassion is a necessary virtue in a civilized society. By contemplating the demise of Roerva and Stephen Joseph into alcoholism, readers may also ponder how they will behave in adulthood, how they will control their intake of alcohol, and what kind of parents they will become.)

### HOW LANGUAGE WORKS

Dave is adept at expressing himself. He uses a variety of language skills to tell his story:

1. **cause and effect** Because I am so late, I have to report to the administration office.
2. **direct address** "David Pelzer," he says, "you're free."
3. **simple sentence** Her punches seemed to last forever.
4. **compound sentence** No one told me about this and I could not understand why.
5. **emphasis** Mother raged on and on, saying that I had embarrassed the family again.
6. **exclamation** The more Mother slugged me, the more I began to realize I won!
7. **rhetorical question** Are my days living in the basement finally over?
8. **listing** She despised me as much as ever, but she began to alienate her friends, husband, brother and even her own mother.
9. **speech variances** Before he closed the bedroom door I could barely hear him mutter, "I . . . I'm . . . I'm sorry."
10. **dialogue** "Love you, Dad."  
"Love you, too, son."

### ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

#### Art

1. Draw contrasting murals or posters to demonstrate these pairs: life in a foster home and in the garage, frozen pumpkin pie from the freezer and sandwiches stolen from school lunch bags, bandaging a stab wound to the abdomen and treating a broken arm, receiving roller skates and eating leftover breakfast from the dog's dish, the drive to Russian River and transportation in a police cruiser to the San Mateo Juvenile Department, stealing graham crackers from a grocery store and coins from a piggy bank, and praying for Roerva's illness and looking down at the sea from a San Francisco clipper ship.
2. With a group, design a logo and reception area for the San Mateo juvenile hall. Stress welcome to a place of

## A CHILD CALLED "IT"

peace and acceptance. Add symbols of opportunities, such as team sports, cooking and music lessons, art and nature classes, scouting, and field trips.

3. Create a bulletin board illustrating the types of agencies that help troubled children. Include medical, state, religious, and educational facilities as well as scout troops, shelters for runaways, and private counselors.

### Geography

1. Draw a map of the parts of San Francisco and the Russian River that Dave remembers from childhood and that his own son enjoys. Annotate tourist guides to Chinatown, Junipero Sera Park, Johnson Beach, and the Golden Gate Park and aquarium.
2. Provide war maps of Operation Just Cause, Operation Desert Shield, and Operation Desert Storm. Note air bases supplying fighter jets and reconnaissance planes for each engagement.

### History and Social Studies

1. Suggest ways that schools and local and state governments can help people recover from devastating pain, malnutrition, missed opportunities, and disrupted families. For example, suggest a form of group therapy for abused children or children of alcoholics.
2. Outline an interview with Mr. Hansen. Determine the clues that convinced the faculty of Thomas Edison Elementary School that Dave's life was in danger. Suggest a list of symptoms for teachers and nurses to look for, such as accident-prone behavior, poor hygiene, worn clothes, bruises and scars, poor concentration in class, targeting by bullies, and constant hunger.
3. Research the cost of foster care per child in your county. Note on a sliding scale the difference between care for an infant and for a teen. State the number of home visits that social workers make to each child placed in a foster home.
4. Lead a discussion of these historical events mentioned in the novel: Operation Just Cause, Operation Desert Shield, and Operation Desert Storm. Explain why Dave was successful in the military and how the Air Force may have helped him mature into manhood.
5. Make an oral report on differing political opinions concerning foster children. Determine whether unmarried people in your area can care for neglected or abused children. Explain what happens to people like Dave who are unwanted and may face death threats from their birth parents.

### Language Arts

1. Explain in a paragraph how you would assist a foster child to recover from abuse and neglect and to feel secure and loved. Suggest hobbies and organizations, especially scouting, church choir, music lessons, handicrafts, hiking and bicycling, bird watching, folk dance, children's theater, library reading groups, and cooking.
2. Join a library research team to determine the legalities of parental rights. Express the social worker's point of view in insisting on the best environment for an abused child. Explain why a lawyer must legitimize permanent custody.
3. Explain in a paragraph the loss when a child becomes an "it" rather than a human member of the family. Account for Dave's growing despair, retreat from dreams

and emotions, hatred of family and self, and thoughts of death.

4. Outline the effects of loss on young children. Contrast how much Dave loses from malnutrition, injury, rejection, bullying, unclean surroundings, outgrown shoes and clothes, and emotional damage.
5. Compose an extended definition of parent. Explain why educators seem to care more for Dave than his parents, siblings, grandmother, or neighbors. Characterize his reception of freedom March 5, 1973.
6. Select models of wisdom to explain. For example, "Even in its darkest passages, the heart is unconquerable," "At no time in the history of our country has the family been under more stress," and "It is more meaningful that the human spirit prevails." Discuss Dave's warning that "some adult who is the victim of a dark past of child abuse may vent his or her pent-up frustrations on society or on those he or she may love."
7. Contrast Dave's experiences with those of the protagonists in *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, *Ellen Foster*, or *The Education of Little Tree*. Comment on assertiveness as an essential to survival.
8. Write a scene in which Dave returns to Thomas Edison Elementary School after years in the military. Determine how he can honor the faculty for rescuing him.
9. Work with a partner to act out an interview with foster children who have left their birth parents and siblings. List questions in advance, especially information about hardships from making the move, despair over past sufferings, and the reception from new families on their arrival in temporary homes and shelters.
10. Outline a series of illustrated newspaper or TV news features on the effects of malnutrition on the developing child. Use Dave as a model and project possible weaknesses in his bones, organs, and mental development. Draw diagrams to characterize abnormalities.
11. Compose a pronouncing gazetteer to accompany this book. Include words such as perverted, marathon, tactic, saturated, monotone, consecutive, crusade, homage, sarcastically, quota, solitude, ultimate, deteriorated, grisly, undertow, utopia, continuum, hectic, idealistic, frequency, sensationalized, consortium, virtual reality, tempo, cycle, badgered, haven, undermined, outcast, tremor, fantasize, kimono, meticulously, fazed, fiend, custody, stupor, macho, visualize, ruthless, hypnotic, defecation, and esophagus.

### Music

1. Analyze the lyrics of Stevie Wonder's "Love's in Need of Love Today." Determine how his injunction to a radio audience pertains to people like Dave and other abused children and abusive parents.

### Science

1. Describe aloud first aid for a stab wound to the torso. Suggest why wearing dirty clothes and sleeping in an unheated garage on an old army cot may have contributed to Dave's infection and fever.
2. Explain in a chalk talk how a mix of ammonia and bleach can kill.
3. Describe with a human anatomy chart how alcohol affects the body and mind. Add details of continued alcohol abuse as the drinker declines mentally and physically toward delirium tremens and death.



## **A CHILD CALLED "IT"**

### ***Psychology***

1. Discuss suitable discipline for unruly or difficult children in foster care. Comment on Dave's transfer to a series of families and his decision to quit school and support himself with factory work.
2. Summarize chapters in psychology books that describe fear, insecurity, longing, trauma, stress, abuse, or neglect in children. Explain how social workers determine when a child is in danger.
3. Discuss compensation, an emotional mechanism that allows people to replace negative influences in their lives with something good and worthwhile. Use as a model Dave's volunteer efforts for at-risk children and his devotion to his son Stephen.

### **ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT**

1. List examples of cooperation, fun, appreciation of nature, nurturing, compassion, loneliness, abuse, torture, disappointment, rescue, belittling, lethal threat, and character in Dave's life.
2. List scenes that reflect Dave's ability to outsmart Roerva.
3. Compose a scene in which Dave encounters Ron and Stan in adulthood.
4. Make a character list and explain the relationship of each to Dave.
5. Using Dave's survival as a model, explain the adage "Hatred erodes the vessel that stores it."

### **TEACHER'S NOTES**

## A CHILD CALLED "IT"

### VOCABULARY

Using the terms that follow, complete each sentence below with a detail from the novel. You will have answers left over.

anticipation	custody	homage	outcast	stupor
badgered	dispassionately	justify	perverted	tactic
barrier	duration	marathon	remorse	tempo
charade	fantasize	monotone	saturated	undermined
consortium	fiend	morale	spirit	utopia
crusade	haven	Nazi	stability	volley

1. She still has a hangover from last night's \_\_\_\_\_.
2. He will be in the \_\_\_\_\_ of the San Mateo Juvenile Department.
3. When it came to housekeeping, Mom was an absolute clean \_\_\_\_\_.
4. I once became frightened, as I thought about slipping through the \_\_\_\_\_ and falling into the pond.
5. I began to \_\_\_\_\_ that I had found her missing item.
6. As she jerked violently to regain her \_\_\_\_\_, I heard something pop, and felt an intense pain in my shoulder and arm.
7. School was a \_\_\_\_\_ for me.
8. I felt like an \_\_\_\_\_ as the station wagon drove away, leaving me behind.
9. I stood in a daze as Mother \_\_\_\_\_ me relentlessly.
10. Mother told Father that she was in charge of disciplining "the boy" and that he had \_\_\_\_\_ her authority by buying the gifts.
11. Except for the short \_\_\_\_\_ of a fishing trip, things with Mother were touch and go, or smash and dash.
12. My stomach coiled with a combination of fear and \_\_\_\_\_.
13. From bed I could hear the \_\_\_\_\_ build to an ear-shattering climax.
14. Mother said that she would meet with the principal the next day to \_\_\_\_\_ all the false accusations.
15. I tensed myself for the \_\_\_\_\_ of blows that I knew was coming, but nothing happened.

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**COMPREHENSION TEST A**

**Part I: Matching (30 points)**

Match the following descriptions with characters. Choose your answers from the list of characters below. You may

- |  |                       |
|--|-----------------------|
| _____ 1. tries to get Dave to drown himself                        | A. Stephen            |
| _____ 2. packs a blue bag and departs                              | B. Stephen Joseph     |
| _____ 3. alerts the nurse to child neglect                         | C. Mr. Ziegler        |
| _____ 4. plays patty cake with Dave                                | D. Shirley            |
| _____ 5. brings Dave a cafeteria tray                              | E. Dave               |
| _____ 6. becomes Dave's "precious cargo"                           | F. nurse              |
| _____ 7. squeezes infection from a wound                           | G. Stan and Ron       |
| _____ 8. fears that abused children's stories are sensationalized  | H. substitute teacher |
| _____ 9. records chipped teeth                                     | I. Kevin              |
| _____ 10. visits on holidays, but doesn't realize Dave's situation | J. neighbor           |
| _____ 11. helps Roerva with the Cub Scouts                         | K. Aggie              |
| _____ 12. bullies Dave at school                                   | L. Valerie Bivens     |
| _____ 13. is a new teacher unaware of child abuse                  | M. Clifford           |
| _____ 14. join Roerva in brutalizing Dave                          | N. Grandmother        |
| _____ 15. recognizes the boy begging door to door                  | O. Mr. Hansen         |

**Part II: Cause and Effect (30 points)**

Justify each of these statements

1. Ammonia mixed with clorox is dangerous because  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Dave feels guilty at Kevin's birth because  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Dave enjoys taking Stephen to Russian River because  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Roerva makes Dave vomit because  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. The roller skates become another torment because  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. The police officer tells Dave he is free because  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Dave lies to the social worker because  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. Fire station staff refuse calls because  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. Dave tries to see the clock because  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. Dave becomes a school outcast because  
\_\_\_\_\_

## **A CHILD CALLED "IT"**

### **Part III: Identification (10 points)**

Explain the significance of the following details:

1. cherries and sliced fruit
2. garbage disposer
3. lock
4. diaper
5. mirror

### **Part IV: Essay Questions (30 points)**

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Account for Roerva's distrust of "hippie" teachers.
2. Discuss arguments for removal of children from abusive parents.
3. Describe the nurse's role in rescuing Dave.
4. Summarize significant scenes of Pelzer family life.
5. Account for Dave's refusal to be bitter.

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**COMPREHENSION TEST B**

**Part I: Setting Identification (20 points)**

Identify the settings that fit the following descriptions. Select your answers from the list that follows.

- |              |               |               |                    |               |
|--------------|---------------|---------------|--------------------|---------------|
| army cot     | Cub Scouts    | fire station  | hospital           | Russian River |
| basement     | dingy motel   | freezer       | police cruiser     | school-yard   |
| clipper ship | English class | grocery store | principal's office | station wagon |

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Dave takes Stephen for outings.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Aggie encourages Dave to jump.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Dave steals pumpkin pie.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Clifford bullies Dave.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Dave rides to the San Mateo Juvenile Department.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Ron and Stan ride to school.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Dave does poorly at states and capitals.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Roerva and Shirley share duties.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Dave steals graham crackers.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Miss Woods embraces Dave.

**Part II: Fill-in (20 points)**

Fill in the paired blanks with answers that complete each statement.

- 1. In the early 1960s, Dave and his brothers Ron and \_\_\_\_\_ enjoy good times when his parents take him to the \_\_\_\_\_ in Golden Gate Park and on picnics at Junipero Serra Park.
- 2. Roerva breaks Dave's \_\_\_\_\_ and sets up a scenario to blame a fall from a \_\_\_\_\_.
- 3. After he tries to run away from \_\_\_\_\_'s house, his mother punishes him by making him swallow \_\_\_\_\_.
- 4. After Roerva tries to burn him on the \_\_\_\_\_, he retreats to the \_\_\_\_\_ to lick his burns.
- 5. Because \_\_\_\_\_ questions Dave's home situation, Roerva bloodies his nose and knocks out a \_\_\_\_\_.

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### Part III: Identification (30 points)

Place an X by statements that refer to Dave:

- 1. opens all his presents on Christmas Eve
- 2. stops believing in God
- 3. knows Russell will become just like his other brothers
- 4. drinks clorox and becomes feverish
- 5. wants to be a firm disciplinarian of Stephen
- 6. thinks of the past as a black hole and an undertow
- 7. realizes that his father is powerless to help
- 8. tells Grandma about abuse, but does not convince her
- 9. mows lawns to earn money
- 10. roller skates in wintry weather
- 11. eats breakfast from the dog's dish
- 12. prays to God to kill his mother with ammonia fumes
- 13. fears the police officer will summon Roerva
- 14. suffers seven years of abuse
- 15. needs reassurance from Mr. Hansen that he never has to return home

### Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

- 1. Describe episodes when Roerva pretends to love Dave.
- 2. Explain the significance of the title.
- 3. Contrast Dave before and after his mother's decline.
- 4. Characterize the value of rescuers.
- 5. Contrast Roerva and Stephen Joseph as parents.

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### ANSWER KEY

#### VOCABULARY TEST

- |              |                |                  |
|--------------|----------------|------------------|
| 1. stupor    | 6. stability   | 11. duration     |
| 2. custody   | 7. haven       | 12. anticipation |
| 3. fiend     | 8. outcast     | 13. tempo        |
| 4. barrier   | 9. badgered    | 14. justify      |
| 5. fantasize | 10. undermined | 15. volley       |

#### COMPREHENSION TEST A

##### Part I: Matching (30 points)

- |      |       |       |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. K | 6. A  | 11. D |
| 2. B | 7. E  | 12. M |
| 3. H | 8. L  | 13. C |
| 4. I | 9. F  | 14. G |
| 5. O | 10. N | 15. J |

##### Part II: Cause and Effect (20 points)

1. it emits toxic fumes
2. Roerva accuses him of harming the baby by kicking her
3. it is their favorite place
4. she wants to stop him from eating at school
5. Roerva makes Dave skate in wintry weather
6. Dave never has to return to his mother's care
7. she questions him in his mother's presence
8. Roerva constantly nags her husband by phone
9. he hangs on until his brother interrupts his mother's torture methods
10. he is dirty, poorly dressed, and hungry

##### Part III: Identification (10 points)

1. part of the Pelzers' afternoon drinking
2. place where Roerva puts leftovers to keep Dave from eating them
3. Roerva's method of closing the freezer to keep Dave from stealing food
4. source of feces that Roerva makes Dave eat
5. early discipline site where Roerva makes Dave stand

##### Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.

#### COMPREHENSION TEST B

##### Part I: Setting Identification (20 points)

- |                   |                        |
|-------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Russian River  | 6. station wagon       |
| 2. clipper ship   | 7. English class       |
| 3. freezer        | 8. Cub Scouts          |
| 4. school-yard    | 9. grocery store       |
| 5. police cruiser | 10. principal's office |

##### Part II: Fill-in (20 points)

1. Stan, aquarium
2. arm, bunk bed
3. Aunt Josie, soap
4. gas range, garage
5. Miss Woods, tooth

##### Part III: Multiple Choice (30 points)

- |      |       |       |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1.   | 6. X  | 11. X |
| 2. X | 7.    | 12.   |
| 3. X | 8.    | 13. X |
| 4.   | 9. X  | 14. X |
| 5.   | 10. X | 15.   |

##### Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

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