

Beautiful boy: A father's journey through his son's addiction
David Sheff (2008). Houghton Mifflin. \$24.00



“He [Nic] became unrecognizable, he went from being this light filled, extraordinary person to being a ghost, . . . he became someone else.”

That’s the way David Sheff described his son when he was using drugs in an interview with Terry Gross on NPR’s radio show, “Fresh Air.” In that same radio interview Nic describes the reason he used drugs because it allowed him not to care about anyone or anything. But, meth, his drug of choice, made him feel focused and all his fears, self-doubts and insecurities disappeared; meth gave him strength. David Sheff chronicles his son’s experience with drugs, his addiction and his recovery in his book, “Beautiful Boy.” The memoir is told from the experience of a father who unconditionally loves his son and tries to do everything possible for his son to thrive and experience life in its fullest. He talks about his relationship with his son, the games they play, the walks they take, the dinners they share, the talks they have. As a young boy, Nic is described as charming and joyous and as a high school student, a varsity athlete and honor student. He is adored by his younger siblings, Jasper and Daisy. He enjoys life, music, movies and in involved in plays and writing. The whole scenario changes for Nic when he enters middle school Nic begins to drink alcohol and smoke pot which then leads to more drugs used more often, and finally Nic tries methamphetamine and becomes addicted. What happened to Nic? How did this joyous, light filled young man become ghostly, stealing from his parents, David’s second wife Karen, their friends, and Jasper and Daisy? How did he become so unrecognizable to family and friends?

David Sheff continues to write about his son but now in terms of his addiction to drugs and especially, methamphetamine, Nic's drug of choice. It is a long, endless, arduous battle, filled with moments of doubt and terror as David wonders endlessly about his son. Questions that swirled through David's head: Where is he, was he alive, was he using again, would he stop before it was too late? David writes about the many times he wondered if he would get a phone call telling him his son is in an emergency room, that Nic was dead or that he has overdosed on drugs. Those are the really tough questions but there are others that involve recovery. If Nic continues in recovery, will he ever really return to his former state of being? Will his brain recover or will it be too late? What will be left of Nic if he makes the choice to admit himself into a rehabilitation center, detox and commit to recovery? Throughout the book and throughout Nic's addiction and recovery process, many other issues surface: what is addiction, who is to blame for Nic's addiction, what helps an addict recover and how to support a person suffering from an addiction?

Throughout the book, David wrestles with models of addiction and information about addiction. What is addiction? Several models are placed before him from doctors, psychiatrists, nurses and rehab facility directors. He studies these models as well as models of treatment; is addiction a brain disease, it is a biological predisposition set off by a switch in the brain after the first drink or drug that is ingested? Is there a genetic component to addiction, if there is can blame be assigned to parents or grandparents? In Nic's case, was it the trauma associated with the divorce of his parents, David and Vicki, followed by their joint custody agreement? At one point, Nic describes custody as always missing someone. Is that the pain that threw the switch to addiction? David tries to understand but very often through Nic's battle with addiction the information only raises more questions and gives very little answers. The information only

serves to help David understand Nic's addiction and relapse; however, it does not dissolve the pain and suffering in watching his son's downward spiral. In addition, many friends and family offer David advice on dealing with Nic's addiction. Sometimes it helps; sometimes it seems to confuse David even more.

Several times throughout the book Nic relapses, one time after nearly two years of sobriety and recovery. With each time that Nic relapses into addiction, David is filled with hurts and pains that never seem to end. His hope turns to bitter disappointment and he begins to learn that there is little hope left for his son. He begins to recognize the relapse: first the failure to make or return phone calls, the change in Nic's demeanor followed by lies, breaking into the family home or the homes of friends and stealing. A doctor once told him that addicts relapse several times before finally committing to recovery. Although this reminder does not lessen the pain, David begins to realize that he needs to let go of Nic in order for Nic to heal. David becomes less obsessed with Nic's recovery and more accepting of the many contradictions of life. In a sense, I found that the book begins to deal less with Nic's addiction and recovery process and more with his family's journey in accepting Nic and life, each on their own terms. All the members of the family need to recover from their addiction to Nic's addiction and begin to heal, each in their own way.

In his search for attaching meaning to this experience, David discovers that Nic is not Nic when using drugs, there is a stranger in his body. It is the addict, not Nic, who makes bad choices, decides to use meth, steals from the people he loves and hurts the people who care the most for him. By coming to this understanding of the addiction to meth, David begins to come to terms with how to let go of Nic so that he could heal and begin his own recovery process. He still worries and has symptoms similar to those associated with post-traumatic stress disorder;

however, he understands that there are other aspects of life that need his attention. In the process, David suffers a cerebral hemorrhage. In a sense, this physical illness becomes the image that David holds onto for a new meaning to his life. As he begins to heal, he realizes that healing needs to happen not just physically and not just for himself but emotionally for all his family members, including Nic.

Yet, David also discovers that although drugs have taken away Nic's physical appearance, no one, not even meth could steal Nic, his spirit, his essence. After reading some of those pages, I thought about any illness that ravages a person's body, such as cancer. Friends and relatives may begin to see the physical changes, the scars and bruises, and weight loss; however, the person's spirit, their soul does not change; the spirit remains untouched. David finds great comfort in this and yet there is a sadness that he cannot change or help his son, other than offering the hope of a rehabilitation center. As the book concludes, there is hope that somehow life, with all its challenges, will get better for all the member of the Scheff family. I found that there is hope offered for anyone who suffers from an addiction and their families. The greatest hope is the opportunity to change which happens for Nic and David and anyone who might be suffering from any pain—physical, spiritual or emotional.

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