

Reading Group Guide

JOHN ELDER ROBISON always knew he was different, but it wasn't until he was forty years old that he discovered a name for those differences: Asperger's syndrome, a form of autism. In *Look Me in the Eye*, Robison shares the story of his life as an undiagnosed, "free-range" Aspergian, and of the ten years since his diagnosis, during which he has come to take pride in his gifts and work around his idiosyncrasies. He walks us logically, yet hilariously, through his life—from an unhappy childhood at the mercy of parents who lived on the edge of sanity, to his new life as a husband, father, and successful small-business owner. This guide is intended as a starting point for your conversation about *Look Me in the Eye*.

1. Recent studies indicate that autism affects 1 of every 150 people, or 1 of every 50 families. Do you know people who exhibit any of the traits Robison describes in his book? What do you notice about the way they interact with the world?

2. As a child growing up without a diagnosis, Robison was sometimes called names or labeled "deviant." Knowing why he was different than others might have helped smooth his way.

Today, more children are being diagnosed with Asperger's than ever before. Discuss the advantages of early diagnosis. Might there also be disadvantages? How does a label affect how we treat someone? How does it affect the way we see ourselves?

3. "Different" kids like Robison are often teased or bullied at school. Does Robison's story give you any ideas for preventing or stopping that behavior?

4. How would you describe Robison's childhood? How did his parents contribute to the feelings of loneliness he suffered? How did the birth of his brother change his life?

5. Describe logical empathy. Does it differ from the kind of empathy that most people who don't have Asperger's syndrome feel? In Chapter 3, on page 32, Robison writes, "I cannot help thinking, based on the evidence, that many people who exhibit dramatic reactions to bad news involving strangers are hypocrites." Do you think that's true?

6. Robison describes the way his Asperger's sometimes causes him to display inappropriate expressions. For example, he might smile when many people would frown. Have you known people whose facial expressions struck you as odd or overly blank? How did it make you feel, and how did you interpret their behavior?

7. In Chapter 6, "The Nightmare Years," Robison writes about the new names he chooses for his parents with Dr. Finch's help. What do they reveal about the family dynamic?

8. Robison describes his struggles in school, which culminated in his being invited to drop out. How might the school system have accommodated him?

9. As a teenager, Robison listened to older people ridicule his dreams of joining a band, yet he did it anyway and became very successful. What might have caused Robison to follow his heart despite contrary advice from friends and family? Did he know something they didn't, or was it just luck that he succeeded?

10. Why does Robison pull what he calls "pranks"? Did any of them make you uncomfortable? In general, do you think pranks are a legitimate way for children or teenagers to express excess energy or frustration?

11. In Chapter 16, "One with the Machine," Robison says, "Sometimes I think I can relate better to a good machine than any kind of person." Discuss the reasons he gives for his affinity. Why might a person find comfort in machinery but not in people?

12. In the same chapter, Robison describes being "the brain of the lighting system" at a rock concert, which requires intense focus and concentration. "You must develop a sixth sense for your system, to feel how it's doing, to be really great," he writes. When you engage in an activity you love or at which you excel, are there times when you feel the almost magical sense of focus Robison describes? How is that state of mind different from ordinary consciousness?

13. Despite career advice from music industry insiders, Robison doesn't want to move to a city. Compare the life he experiences when he's on tour with KISS to his life back in Shutesbury. Why might the idea of living in a city be intimidating to someone with Asperger's?

14. Robison describes life on the road with bands in the 1970s. Do you think the experience of traveling with a band would be

the same today? Would the experience of traveling with a band be similar to that of traveling with another performing group like a theater company or circus?

15. Robison writes that he can't smile on command. How often do you smile "on command" whether you want to or not? How would not being able to automatically produce the expected facial expression make your work life more difficult? Your personal life?

16. As he explains in Chapter 20, "Logic vs. Small Talk," Robison is also unable to perform the little verbal niceties that often pass for conversation. Questions like "How's your wife?" or "Have you lost weight?" don't occur to him when speaking with friends or acquaintances. Do you remember how you first learned to make small talk? Have you ever struggled with it? Are there any conventions of small talk that strike you as peculiar?

17. Robison describes himself as being very direct, and indeed that is a trait of people with Asperger's. He says that's both good and bad because some people appreciate directness while others are offended. What are some situations where directness would be of benefit, and where might it be a disadvantage? Why?

18. After his time with KISS and other rock 'n' roll bands, Robison moved into the corporate world. What did he like about his job with Milton Bradley? What didn't he like? How did he feel about his position in management? What made him decide to leave a financially comfortable life as an executive for the uncertainty of starting his own business?

19. Robison has described a number of ways in which he differs from other people. In Chapter 22, "Becoming Normal," he

writes about his transition from “Aspergian misfit” to “seeming almost normal.” How did his differences help him in operating his car business? How might they have hampered him?

20. What kind of father is Robison? How is he different from his own parents? Did anything in Chapter 23, “I Get a Bear Cub,” strike you as funny? How is “Cubby” like his father? How is he different?

21. In Chapter 24, “A Diagnosis at Forty,” Robison meets an insightful therapist who helps him realize that he has Asperger’s syndrome. What effect does this discovery have on Robison?

22. At times Robison calls his little brother Varmint and his wife Unit Two. Discuss Robison’s habit of renaming people. Why do you think he sometimes avoids people’s given names?

23. Discuss Robison’s relationship with his wife, Martha. What special challenges might exist in a marriage to someone with Asperger’s? What benefits?

24. In Chapter 26, “Units One Through Three,” Robison writes about choosing Martha over her two sisters, and about the impossibility of being certain that one has made the best possible choice in life. Do *you* think there is such a thing as a “best sister”? In the book, Martha answers with “depends what you want her for.” How would you answer that question?

25. When choosing a mate, we confront many pieces of folk wisdom, one of which is: *Marry someone who’s similar to you; your shared interests will keep you together.* An equally popular piece of advice is: *Marry someone who’s different from you. Variety is the spice of life and opposites attract.* Do you think a person with Asperger’s

would do well to find a spouse who has Asperger's too? Or would that person fare better with a spouse who doesn't have Asperger's? What might be the advantages and disadvantages of each?

26. What do you think of Robison's writing style? Do you notice any quirks in the way he expresses himself that might have to do with Asperger's syndrome?

27. If you met someone tomorrow who acted a bit strange or eccentric, how might the insights from this story affect how you responded to that person?