

The Unbreakable Child

Readers Guide

1. Brutal child abuse stalks Kim Michele Richardson's, *The Unbreakable Child* like a flesh and blood monster. Try to imagine the constant beatings Kim endured from the nuns and priest for nearly a decade. What would a life of completely unexpected and dangerous blows, kicks, and slaps and molestations be like? After the newspaper photograph debacle, why did the nuns hide Kim away? How do you explain the various disappearances of the orphans, including Kim's sister, sometimes for lengthy periods? What kind of diet were the orphans routinely fed? Remember, for example, Kim's bewilderment with her first ice cream cone. Discuss, also, the terrifying use of drugs on the orphans.

2. Think about the art incident, when Sr. Daniel displayed Kim's "abstract" painting for two weeks, to Kim's utter mortification. What about Sr. Charlie locking her door to the young Kim experiencing witch nightmares?

3. Reflect on the spiritual abuse of the orphans. Think, for example, of the long-term effects of being told repeatedly, "Bad girls go to hell." What was Kim's typical experience at the obligatory Masses? Did the Catholic clergy do anything to foster the religious faith of the orphans? Did the nuns encourage racial justice at the orphanage?

4. What were the causes of profound silence exhibited by the orphans? Discuss Kim's continued habit of sitting on her hands to this day and sleeping on her abdomen?

5. When you reflect upon the issue of faith in Kim's life, are there clues in *The Unbreakable Child* as to the level of her belief? Thinking about her "birthday cake" prayers and also prayers buried in the playground; who wears the face of God in Kim's story?

6. As six-year-old Kim said she was "...nurturing the strength of my spirit with small rebellions. I could outlast them because time was on my side. They knew it and I knew it. And I knew that I'd never be completely broken." Did the certainty of survival that she had as a young child contribute to Kim's ability to rise above the abuse?

7. After Kim's First Holy Communion, she spent an afternoon with Diane and referred to her as "the mother" instead of "my mother" suggesting that she didn't understand her relationship to Diane. Why do you think she referred to her Diane this way? Why did she tell Diane that she and her sisters liked school? Did she think that Diane would not help her if she knew the truth?

8. When Kim was nine, after she had been sent away from Saint Thomas for a number of visits with prospective adoptive parents, she "started rebelling against the family visits away from Saint Thomas". She was "terrified to leave the orphanage's familiarity, no matter how ruthless, to be thrust into the unknown". What was the underlying cause of

Kim's behavior? How was her reaction similar or different from that of other abused children or abused women you have heard of?

9. *The Unbreakable Child* at times reads like a twisted fairy tale. Kim and the other orphans lead Cinderella's life of ashes as the forgotten step-children of the church, but there is no Prince Charming in their childhoods. There is a fairy godmother, Mrs. Lindauer, but she has no magic wand. At other times, the orphanage appears to be a nineteenth century workhouse lifted straight from a Dickens' novel, *Oliver Twist's* gruel included. Think, also, of the wringer washing machines inexplicably still in existence there in the 1960s. How is it that the spiritual reforms of Vatican Council II seem not to have touched the orphanage at all? How is it that the orphanage appears to have existed out of time?

10. Kim's reference to her "always-silent, never-sharing voice" suggests that she kept the details of her early abuse hidden and was reluctant to share details with others, and she confirms that in various places throughout the book. Given her desire to keep her early childhood a secret, how was Kim able to get past her "never-sharing voice" to go through with the lawsuit and write her story?

11. Did burying the mother's ashes bring further healing to the girls?

12. William F. McMurry had "given voice to many victims before". Those victims had family to support them but in this case the forty-five victims were orphans. Comment on

how the experience of the lawsuit for those with families to support them might differ from those who didn't.

13. In speaking in his Afterword about the children who had been placed in the Sisters of Charity Orphanage, William said that "With nowhere to turn for comfort, few children would survive their childhoods without major depression, drug addiction, dementia or imprisonment." Kim Michele Richardson is a wife, mother, and an active volunteer in her community. How was Kim able to rise above her horrific experiences as a child? Is it nature or nurture that is the biggest contributor to our character?

14. Traditional knights in armor are present in Kim's book. Both her attorney, William, and her husband Joe, do appear not so much as rescuers in the classic sense but as solid participants in Kim's quest. Discuss their roles as gallant knights.

15. Discuss the power of love as salvation. "I love you like salt loves meat" has great significance to Kim and her husband. Explain its meaning. Discuss the symbolism of the two objects they gave each other regarding this motto.

16. Has reading *The Unbreakable Child* changed the way you think about forgiveness? Is there anything that cannot or should not be forgiven? What does it take for someone to be able to forgive what seems to be the unforgiveable?

Developed exclusively for, *The Unbreakable Child*

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