

The Devil in Pew Number Seven

Rebecca never felt safe as a child. In 1969, her father, Robert Nichols, moved to Sellerstown, North Carolina, to serve as a pastor. There he found a small community eager to welcome him—with one exception.



Rebecca Nichols Alonzo Becky Alonzo never felt safe as a child. Although she lived next door to the church her father pas-

tored, the devil lived across the street. This tormented man terrorized her family with rifle shots and ten bombings. When these violent acts didn't scare them away, he went even further. During dinner one evening, seven-yearold Becky and her younger brother watched as their parents were gunned down. Today Becky speaks about betrayal and the power of forgiveness.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Chapter I: Walking, Crawling, Dead or Alive

I. What emotions seemed to be racing through Rebecca's mind as she ran to get help? What was your response as you read what she was experiencing?

2. Though he was in pain, Rebecca's father struggled to appear brave. Can you recall a time your own parents had to appear brave for you? If so, explain.

3. Based on the few details given in this chapter, how would you describe what had happened in the Nichols' home?

Chapter 2: Once upon a Dream

I. What was so unique about the way Ramona met her future husband, Robert?

2. Describe a time in your life where you had to wait patiently for the Lord to answer your prayers. What was the outcome? What did you learn from the experience?

3. In what ways were Robert and Ramona similar to one another? Why do you think they were drawn to each other?

4. When Ramona suffered a fall during her first pregnancy, one of the first feelings running through her was shame. Why do you think she felt this way?

Chapter 3: Shotgun Justice in Sellerstown

I. After moving into a new home in the country, Robert and Ramona took walks every evening and surrounded themselves in an "oasis of reflection." How did this daily ritual help them heal?

2. Rebecca writes how Robert and Ramona each had different ways of coping and healing after the loss of their child. What were these differences? Do you think men and women respond to loss differently? Why or why not?

3. When he was in his midtwenties, Robert spent his time starting bar fights, drinking, and chasing women. However, his life was radically transformed after hearing God's word at a revival service, and he turned his back on the things of his past. Do you know anyone who has been transformed by God in a remarkable way? If so, how would you describe them "before" and "after"?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

4. Why did Rebecca include a history of Sellerstown in this chapter? Why do you think this information is significant?

Chapter 4: The Devil's in Pew Number Seven

I. What do you think was at the root of Mr. Watts's hatred for the Nichols?

2. If you were Robert, what would you have done after receiving the first telephone threat? Explain your answer.

3. Describe how Mr. Watts had amassed so much influence in his community.

4. How do you think you would react if you returned home to find that it had been broken into and that there was no heat, no water, and no phone? What would be your first thoughts?

Chapter 5: Under Siege

I. Despite Mr. Watts's incessant rage against the Nichols family, Rebecca writes that she still had a charmed childhood. Why do you think this is?

2. How would you describe Robert and Ramona Nichols's response to Mr. Watts's efforts to agitate and harass the Nichols family?

3. In what ways did the Nichols's experiences resemble life on a mission field?

4. Despite the fear of future attacks on his family, Robert was determined to stick it out and overcome the persecution. Why do you think he decided to stay in Sellerstown? If you were in his shoes, what do you think you would do?

5. Pastor Nichols relied heavily on Scripture for strength after Mr. Watts's attack on his home. How might Acts 20:24 have encouraged Pastor Nichols to continue his ministry in Sellerstown? How has Scripture helped you during difficult times? What verses have provided you with the strength you needed?

6. Ironically, attendance at the Free Welcome Holiness Church soared, almost as a by-product of the persecution the family faced. How might you explain this? Why do you think the growing church attendance infuriated Mr. Watts so much?

Chapter 6: Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep

I. What does Robert's reaction to the second bombing say about the Christian mandate to love your enemies? Describe a time when you struggled to respond to an enemy with love.

2. Why did Ramona want to publish an article in the town newspaper? How do you think her article was received by the Sellerstown community?

3. Why was it so important that Ramona explained the value of forgiving one's enemies to Rebecca, even though she was only four years old? Were you surprised that Ramona prayed for Mr. Watts?

4. In what ways did Daniel's birth return joy into the Nichols' home?

Chapter 7: The Toughest Guy in Town

I. How did Rebecca's nightmares affect her?

2. In what ways were Robert and Ramona able to keep family life "normal" despite living

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

through unprovoked attacks?

3. In this chapter, Rebecca recalls the third time Mr. Watts and his men bombed her family's home. Why do you think Mr. Watts was never questioned when all of the evidence pointed to him?

4. Describe what you think might have happened if Robert had let his momentary lapse of judgment after two years of pent-up frustration take hold of him?

Chapter 8: Holding On to Hope

1. How did studying Matthew 10: 22, 26 encourage Robert when he was contemplating how he should react to Mr. Watts?

2. Why do you think the assignment of ATF Agent Charles Mercer to their case gave Robert Nichols renewed hope?

3. In what ways did the church demonstrate their support to the Nichols family? Do you think most congregations today would stand by their pastor as they did, or do you think members would be more likely to leave?

4. What does Pastor Nichols's relationship with James Tyree say about the genuine connection he had with the members of the community?

Chapter 9: Hearing Voices

I. Discuss the effect the attacks seemed to be having on each member of the Nichols's family at this point in the story.

2. If you were a member of Pastor Nichols's congregation, would you have wanted him to put safety first and leave town, or would you have yearned for him to stay, as many members did?

3. Do you think it was difficult for Ramona to support her husband's decision to remain in Sellerstown? Why or why not? If you had been in her position, do you think you would have responded differently?

4. Why do you think Mr. Watts always enlisted the help of his friends to carry out the threatening phone calls and bombings? Why didn't he act alone?

Chapter 10: Black Thursday

I. Did it surprise you that the Ku Klux Klan condemned the acts of terror and persecution faced by the Nichols's family? Why or why not?

2. Being reminded of the temptation of Jesus by Satan, Pastor Nichols turned down the Klan's offer. What can we learn from Pastor Nichols' wisdom in this situation and his dependence on God alone?

3. Ramona read Psalm 91 to the church congregation on what would be her last time at church. Discuss the significance of this passage for the Nichols family. How is this passage significant in your own life?

4. Discuss your reactions to the horrific scene that unfolded when Harris Williams entered the Nichols's home.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

Chapter 11: Unanswered Prayers

I. Discuss a time you saw your church community come together to support a family in need. How do you think it impacted the family?

2. How might Becky's story have been different had it not been for the help of Aunt Pat, Robert's sisters, church members, and the rest of the Sellerstown community?

3. At Ramona's funeral, assistant pastor Mitchell Smith said, "It would appear that we're here in defeat, but we're not; we're here in victory! (page 186)." Do you agree with this perspective? Why or why not?

Chapter 12: Eight Men and Four Women

I. Talk about the adjustments Rebecca and Daniel had to make after the shooting in their home.

2. Describe Rebecca's experiences just before, during, and after she testified in court. What made this experience bearable for her?

3. Imagine you were a member of the jury. What would you think when Harris's attorneys tried to make the case that Harris was intoxicated during the time of the shootings?

4. In what way did the jury's decision offer Robert a sense of closure? Do you think it had the same effect on Rebecca?

Chapter 13: Putting the Devil on Trial

I. Explain what the verses from Revelation 21:3-5 mean to you. What other verses offer an eternal perspective that give believers something to look forward to despite the pain and suffering we experience here on earth?

2. In spite of his ongoing physical and mental anguish, Robert never gave up on this faith in God. What can we learn from this?

3. Even though Mr. Watts was sent to prison, his sentence was seen as a hand slap on the wrist. What punishment do you think would have been appropriate for the crimes he committed against the Nichols?

Chapter 14: Life Is Hard, but God Is Good

I. Discuss what Rebecca meant when she said that after her father's funeral, she did not experience the same peace she had felt when her mother was laid to rest.

2. Was there ever a time you blamed God for a difficult, unexpected situation in your life? Explain. What are some ways to keep anger at God from making a permanent home in your heart?

3. What did Rebecca mean when she wrote, "I needed God more than I needed to blame God" (page 235)?

4. What can one learn from Aunt Dot's selfless love and dedication for Rebecca and Danny and her insistence that they depend on God?

5. Why do you think it took so long for Mr. Watts to express remorse for everything he put

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED

the Nichols through?

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6. If you were in Rebecca's situation, how do you think you would have responded to Mr. Watts's plea for forgiveness?

Chapter 15: No Apologies in Heaven

I. Rebecca lists four negative things that happen when we choose rage and retaliation over forgiveness. Which ones speak to you the most? Have you experienced any of these as consequences of withholding forgiveness? If so, explain.

2. Rebecca writes, "Forgiveness is the language of heaven." After reading this chapter, discuss what the statement means.

3. How does forgiving a person who has wronged us demonstrate God's love to an unforgiving world?

4. Lewis Smedes offers the perspective, "When you forgive a person who wronged you, you set a prisoner free, and then you discover that the prisoner you set free is you." Explain how the act of forgiving can set you free.

5. Do you agree that forgiveness is a choice, not a feeling? Why or why not?

6. Discuss how you might view forgiveness differently after reading Rebecca's story.

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