

Liz Murray, Breaking Night: A Memoir of Forgiveness, Survival, and my Journey from Homeless to Harvard

In her memoir, Breaking Night, Liz Murray tells her life story. In a compelling and lively account, she writes about going from living a hand to mouth existence with loving, but drug-addicted and alcoholic parents in The Bronx, New York to speaking with His Holiness, The Dalai Lama in a conference in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Murray shows the reader gritty details about habitual drug use, poverty, AIDS, and mental illness, along with the emotional and social resources necessary to overcome difficult conditions. She does so from the perspective of a child, teenager, and young adult who witnesses these situations. She writes about these experiences with tenderness and genuine love for her subjects. Murray describes taking care of her drug-addicted mother, staying with friends who would put her up for a night or two, stealing food to survive, pumping gas as a child for tips, lying about her living situation to get into high school, giving her father money, applying for the New York Times scholarship, and waiting for her acceptance letter from Harvard University.

[Click here to read an excerpt of Breaking Night.](#)

Read all three excerpts.

Vocabulary

Read the three excerpts of Liz Murray's Breaking Night from [BookReporter.com](#). After a quick read, define these terms. Define each word as it is used in the book. The word in parentheses is the form actually used in Breaking Night.

- prop (propped)
- reflect (reflecting)
- stenographer
- fleeting
- harbor [verb] (harbored)
- latchkey kid
- rigorous
- elite
- springboard
- peddle (peddling)
- slack [verb] (slacked)
- naïve
- lucrative
- hospice
- meticulous (meticulously)
- scenario
- relentless
- unceremoniously
- muddle ("muddled voices")
- gingerly

Videos of Liz Murray

Before answering the “Thinking Critically” questions and completing the writing assignment, please view the following videos.

[Liz Murray talks about her book and how she went from homeless to Harvard.](#)

[Liz Murray speaks at a Chick-Fil-A leadership conference about making empowering choices.](#)

Thinking Critically

Answer each questions as completely as you can, using well-formed sentences. Although there is no "correct" answer, please be sure to support your answer with evidence from the text.

1. At what age did Liz Murray’s mother “take to the streets”? Why did she do so?
2. How does Murray’s father characterize his own father (Liz Murray’s grandfather)?
3. What was the nature of the “lucrative drug scam” that Murray’s parents initiated? Describe how the scam worked.
4. Murray describes how, when she was only three years old, she saw her parents use drugs in their apartment. What effect does Murray’s quoting herself as a child, saying “Al-l do-ne” when her parents were done, have on you?
5. In the video where she discusses her book, Murray says, “I grew up like most people did, with a family surrounding me, in a home filled with love.” In the three excerpts, how does Murray convey the love that existed in her home?
6. In the Chick-Fil-A leadership video, Murray speaks about being tempted to make what she calls the “disempowered” choice when she was going to high school as a homeless teenager. What was the source and nature of these temptations?
7. According to Murray, what transforms a life? How can you apply her principles in making “empowered choices” in your own life?

Writing Assignment

On pages 241 – 242 of Breaking Night, Liz Murray writes about how she survived as a homeless person. “My friends fed me, or sometimes I panhandled just enough money to get a plate of fries drenched in mozzarella cheese and gravy at Tony’s diner.... But when there was no one to reach to, I’d shoplift at C-Town, stealing whatever I could get my hands on.” According to [Joanna Walters](#), “[Liz Murray] doesn’t want her appearance now and her Harvard degree to fool anyone: ‘I was one of those people on the streets you walk away from.’” In a 500 – 750 word essay, examine and describe stereotypes or common perceptions of homeless people. To what extent does Murray’s story and achievement help to dispel or reinforce the stereotypes?