

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY®

r. b. mitchell
Castaway Kid



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois

“Wow. The moment I read the first page, I was crying. I couldn’t put the book down. I have a little boy who just turned four, and can’t imagine ever leaving him for longer than I have to. All I wanted to do was grab my little boy out of his bed and hold him. I am deeply humbled by this story. I hope it will change the lives of millions of people. It has mine.”

—BRIAN LITTRELL

Recording artist

Member of the Backstreet Boys

“*Castaway Kid* is an awesome story of the power of Jesus to redeem every facet of our lives. This is a great book that reminds me personally of God’s love. I cried real tears reading this; it is a must read.”

—DAVE RAMSEY

New York Times bestselling author

The Total Money Makeover

“Before you sit down to read *Castaway Kid* by Rob Mitchell, I would suggest that you obtain a box of tissues. This compelling story grabs from the first page and helps you to understand what real loneliness and rejection feel like. More importantly, it puts into perspective the most important things in life, such as a relationship with God. This is a splendid example of how the hand of God can heal all wounds and boost us toward the goal of realizing our innate potential. When you finish this book, you will be ready to put down the tissue and pick up your conqueror’s helmet.”

—BENJAMIN S. CARSON, SR., M.D.

Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions

Author, *Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story*

“A powerful, compelling message that points to the unimaginable grace of our heavenly Father.”

—DAN T. CATHY

President and chief operating officer
Chick-fil-A, Inc.

“In an era espousing ‘self-esteem,’ Rob Mitchell points out with actual experience how badly all of us need God’s help in our lives and endeavors. An important read!”

—BEN EDWARDS

Retired chairman
A.G. Edwards & Sons, Inc.

“This is a remarkable work of contemporary literature that quickly gets inside the reader’s head, then heart. The book starts out as a little boy’s struggle with abandonment but quickly becomes the reader’s own struggle with universal themes of loneliness, fear, rejection, anger, bitterness, and how to forgive others and ourselves.”

—DOTTY HOOTS

English educator, Wesleyan Academy
High Point, North Carolina

Castaway Kid

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*To the lonely who have wounded themselves or
been wounded by the abuse or apathy of others—
and
to those who pray without ceasing,
trying to bring hope.*



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Paul: Once only a sojourner, now a brother.

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Ronda, Ruth, and Vivien, who keep things running.

Nanci and John, my guides at Focus.

And Barbara Winslow Robidoux, my writing coach who became my friend.

Is This Story True?

THIS IS A BOOK OF HOPE. Even so, with recent furors over memoirs that have contained questionable “facts,” it’s valid to ask whether this really is a true story.

Speaking at a fundraiser for the Covenant Children’s Home in the early 1990s, I learned from the director that having never been a ward of the state, I had full access to my caseworker files. I tagged a number of documents for my records, often thinking, *If you ever wrote a book, people would think you made this up.*

But all the events occurred. They’ve been recalled not only as faithfully as I can remember, but also as other adults involved have remembered and documented in caseworker notes, recorded interviews, and my grandmother Gigi’s journal.

So they can tell their own stories when and if they choose, other kids from the orphanage are not named—except one, and with permission. No names in the book are made up, though a few are nicknames.

I’ve been told I have an unusually accurate memory. No one’s recollection is perfect, of course, but the dialogue in this book is in keeping with the essence of each situation and as close to word-for-word as possible. All the living adults who are quoted and whom I’ve been able to reach have confirmed my memories of the events in which they were involved.

Yes, this story of hope is true. You can find further details on the Web at www.amillionlittleproofs.com.

*“Character,
not circumstances,
makes the man.”*

—BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

Slave turned educator



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Cast Away

DIM, FUZZY IMAGES FORM MOST of my early childhood memories. But one is clear and sharp.

Fear burned it permanently on my three-year-old brain.

Mother and I are standing in front of a large building. Piles of snow line the sidewalk.

“C’mon, Robby,” Mother says as she drags me up the steps to the front door. “They’re waiting for us.”

Soon we’re staying in a strange bedroom. I don’t know why. Eerie sounds and shadows keep me whimpering when I wake during the night. Mother shushes me.

A loud bell rings and wakes us up. The sun is shining and the scary shadows have disappeared. Unfamiliar sounds from last night change to running feet and laughter.

We eat breakfast in a big room with lots of kids, but they don’t seem to see us. When we finish, Mother takes me upstairs. A nameless lady in a long, dark dress meets us.

“Why don’t you go over there and play?” she says, pointing to a corner where a boy stacks building blocks.

I don’t move.

“Do what she says, Robby!” Mother orders.

Clinging to Mother’s leg, I hesitate. She brushes my hand away, grabs my arm, and drags me to the play area. She plops me on the floor, facing the boy with my back to her.

I reach for a block, but the kid grabs it. When he begins to scoop the other toys away from me, I turn to complain.

Only the strange lady is standing there.

Mother is gone.

“Mommy had to go to the hospital, Robby,” the woman tells me. “She took the train back to Chicago. She’ll come to see you again when she gets better.”

Her mouth keeps moving, but I don’t hear the words. When it finally sinks in that Mother has left me, I begin to whimper.

“Stop that, Robby,” the woman commands. “Play with the toys.”

“I want Mommy!” I scream. “I want Daddy. I want Grandma Gigi. I wanna go home!” The screams turn to loud sobs as I run toward the door. I try to open it, but can’t turn the handle.

“Stop that crying, Robby, or I’m going to spank you!” the woman warns.

“I wanna go home! I wanna go home!” I cry, throwing myself on the floor and kicking my feet.

The tantrum pushes her to the end of her patience. Yanking me off the floor, she spansks me again and again. Finally I clamp my teeth together to keep the cries inside.

She stops, but I can’t quit sniffing.

That night, the other kids ignore me.

When morning comes, I wake up in a wet bed. The woman scolds me.

After breakfast she puts a brown rubber cover over the mattress and a brown rubber sheet on top. She makes me lie between them all morning.

The rubber sheets are hot. They squeak when I move.

“Pee-pee baby,” some of the boys chant. “New kid is a pee-pee baby.” I’m ashamed, but too afraid to say anything.

The squeak of brown rubber sheets has tagged me as being bad, different.

Different from the other boys at the place where Mother has abandoned me.



In the weeks and months that followed, I heard nothing from Mother. But I did hear from Grandma Gigi.

I don’t know how or when she found out where I was. But once she did, she took the train from Chicago every Saturday to visit me in the little farming town of Princeton, Illinois.

Gigi was in her 60s, divorced, and poor. Living alone in a tiny apartment, she worked as a clerk at the big Marshall Field’s department store downtown. My mother, Joyce Mitchell, was her only child; I was Gigi’s only grandchild.

Visiting me wasn’t easy for Gigi. It meant leaving her apartment on the north side of the city early in the morning, walking four blocks on Ridge Boulevard to Howard Street, and catching a bus to the Howard station—then taking the Red Line elevated train to Belmont, changing to the Purple Line to Adams and Quincy, and

walking several long blocks to Union Station. There she caught the train known as the California Zephyr and rode for two hours to Princeton. Arriving about 10 A.M., she'd face five more blocks to the Covenant Children's Home.

When she finally saw me, Gigi would kneel and wait for me to run to her. Somehow she stayed on her feet as I threw myself into her arms. Hugging me close, she smelled good. She always looked like a lady—a modest but flattering dress covering her medium build, along with earrings, a necklace, nylon stockings, heels, and a hat with short, dark curls peeking out from under the brim.

"What new things have you learned since last I was here?" she'd always ask. I'd tell her all I could think of, then proudly tug her to the playground to show her my latest trick.

I was proud, too, when she said "Hi" to some of the other boys and called them by name. Kids like us felt special when someone remembered who we were.

Toward noon Gigi and I would walk to a small restaurant nearby. She ordered coffee, but rarely ate a meal. She let me look at the menu, then said, "How about a hamburger and a nice glass of milk? We'll have ice cream for dessert." That always sounded good to me.

But 2:00 P.M. would come much too soon. Gigi had to say good-bye and leave to catch the 3:00 train back to the city.

"Gigi, take me with you," I would beg. "Please, Gigi, please take me with you!"

That's when she would kneel again, tears in her eyes, saying the same thing she always said. "Robby, darling, you're my precious grandson. I'm sorry I can't keep you with me. I'm sorry your parents are too sick to keep you. Keep my love in your heart. It will always be there."

I didn't understand what she meant. All I knew was that love seemed to fill me up each Saturday when she was with me. When she left, I felt empty and alone.

Time after time, standing outside the front door of the Children's Home, I watched her walk away. Arms crossed and hands tucked into armpits, I rocked slightly left to right.

Why won't you take me home with you? I cried silently. *I'll be a good boy, Gigi. I promise. I won't eat much! Please, please don't leave me here.*

Finally she would disappear from my tear-blurred sight.

And the only one left to hug me was . . . me.



In the dining room at the Home, Robby sits at foreground right.



Nola, houseparent in the Little Boys dormitory, arrives a year after Robby did.



Twelve residents of the Little Boys dorm gather for a snack. The author, age four, sits at the far left.

A Note to Educators

Teachers are often encouraged to make sure other voices and cultures are part of the curriculum. The true voice of an abandoned kid who was one of the last “lifers” in an American orphanage might qualify as a different voice and culture.

Here’s what a 25-year veteran high school English teacher had to say about this story after her seven twelfth-grade classes read a draft copy of *Castaway Kid*:

“This is an amazing work of contemporary literature that explores universal themes of loneliness, rejection, anger, bitterness, and the need for forgiveness. I was surprised by the wide range of different responses and especially how honestly the boys responded and became fully engaged.”

Equally telling are these high school students’ responses to the manuscript:

“Couldn’t put it down. Your open-ended questions really made me think.”

“Many chapter endings were dramatic cliff-hangers. I experienced the struggles with you, loved the romantic stuff with your future wife, laughed out loud as I related to being a dork with girls.”

“This wasn’t just hope for kids like you but for all of us.”

“It is an incredible story, amazing adventures.”

“Fresh.”

“Really liked how you got me inside your head, appreciated

being with you in the struggle to forgive—and the fact that you didn't make what is really hard seem as if it's easy.”

If you're an educator in English, literature, sociology, psychology, or juvenile justice, I hope you'll consider using this true story as an optional reading assignment. I stand side by side with you in trying to help students become all they can be.

—*R.B. Mitchell*

For Further Reading

This book contains many references to other literary works, including the Bible. If you'd like to explore them further, here's a list of these references and the sources from which they're drawn.

Chapter 4

"It was my turn to cry out with groanings too deep for words." See the Bible, Romans 8:26.

Chapter 8

"I'll try to do and be anything you want, if you'll only keep me." *Anne of Green Gables* by L. M. Montgomery (Bantam Books, 1998), p. 47.

Chapter 9

"This reminds me of *Oliver Twist*." See *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens (Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003), p. 38.

Chapter 12

"Around that time I read *Up from Slavery* by Booker T. Washington, the slave turned educator." See *Up from Slavery* by Booker T. Washington (Signet Classics, 2000).

Chapter 14

“One day I asked him, ‘How can someone believe in a hope they can’t see?’” See the Bible, Hebrews 11:1.

Chapter 18

“This guy got hungry, thirsty, and tired. He even got His feet dirty.” See the Bible, Mark 11:12; John 19:28; Mark 6:31; John 13:3-17.

“He was let down by those He trusted.” See the Bible, Mark 14:43-46.

“Then I read a verse that knocked my socks off. *This man said He is God. . . .*

“Apparently that claim was so offensive to the religious leaders of the day that they set up a plan to have Him killed.” See the Bible, John 8:51-59.

“Either Jesus was a lunatic or lied about being God—or was really who He claimed to be.” See *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis (Touchstone, 1996), p. 56.

“It surprised me that Jesus got angry.” See the Bible, Mark 3:5.

“We both got angry at hypocrisy; I liked that.” See the Bible, Matthew 23:13-33.

“He got frustrated at people; so did I.” See the Bible, Mark 3:5.

“I saw that Jesus talked often about eternal life. I was more worried about living past 20.” See the Bible, John 3:16-17.

“Jesus said the Spirit of God could come into my heart and change me. *How can something like the Spirit of God fit into my body, into my heart? How can I believe in something I can’t see or touch?*” See the Bible, John 3:1-15.

“I kept reading, noting that Jesus said thieves come to steal, kill, and destroy—while He came so we can have ‘abundant’ life.” See the Bible, John 10:10.

“When I got to Bible sections about Jesus healing the crippled, blind, and deaf, I usually passed them over.” See the Bible, Matthew 11:1-6.

“Tell me, Robby, how do you explain the guys who ran closest to Jesus and then watched Him die on the cross? They buried His body and then claimed to have seen Him rise from that grave, just like He promised.” See the Bible, Matthew 27–28; John 19–21; Hebrews 11:35–12:2.

“Did you read about the more than 500 who claimed they saw Him after He rose from the grave?” See the Bible, 1 Corinthians 15:1-8.

“I know if a kid disobeys his parent, that kid should apologize and ask for forgiveness.” See the Bible, Ephesians 6:1.

“Something was trying to open the locked doors of my heart.” See the Bible, Revelation 3:20.

“What am I going to decide about this Jesus? Am I going to reject Him as a lunatic like my mother, or risk reaching out one more time for hope and accept Him as who He says He is?” See the Bible, Matthew 16:13-17.

Chapter 19

“As with Ralph and Jack at Castle Rock in *Lord of the Flies*, someone was gonna get hurt.” See *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding (Perigee, 1976), p. 169.

“Suddenly, though, I remembered the words of Jesus: ‘Turn the other cheek.’” See the Bible, Matthew 5:39.

“I flipped the book over. Then I read a verse: ‘A gentle answer turns away wrath.’” The Bible, Proverbs 15:1.

“Looking for encouragement, I returned to reading Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery*. One of the statements I saw there was, ‘The Negro youth starts out with the presumption against him.’” *Up from Slavery* by Booker T. Washington (Signet Classics, 2000), p. 25.

Chapter 21

“And now, ‘Just as I Am,’ the God of the universe was offering to adopt me.” See the Bible, Romans 8:14-17.

Chapter 23

“Suddenly . . . I found my right fist closing, tensing. I heard the sound of flies buzzing. The ‘old me’ rose like a lion who’d been lying camouflaged in the grass.

“A familiar voice that only I could hear seemed to be laughing at me, coming from just inside the jungle that lined the soccer field. *Smash his face in! Hit, hit, hit, and he’ll be down before he knows it and hurting for a week!*

“You can’t escape your past. Do it! Do it now!”

See *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding (Perigee, 1976), pp. 136, 143-144.

“Turn the other cheek and walk away.” See the Bible, Matthew 5:39.

Chapter 24

“But then I heard the story of Corrie ten Boom.” See *The Hiding Place* by Corrie ten Boom, Elizabeth Sherrill, and John Sherrill (Chosen Books, 2006).

Chapter 26

“The two of them must have seemed like the tormenting harpies I’d read about in Dante’s *Inferno*; my father couldn’t find a way to free himself from their claws and constant pecking.” See *Inferno* by Dante Alighieri (Signet Classics, 2001), pp. 118, 124), believed first published around 1341. In Canto XIII, Dante is led into what is referred to as the Second Ring of the Seventh Circle of Hell, a place for those who were violent against themselves. There they are constantly tormented by harpies.

Chapter 27

“The fifth of the Ten Commandments, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ kept bothering me.” The Bible, Exodus 20:12.

“There I read, ‘Casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.’” The Bible, 1 Peter 5:7.

“For the next week, a calm guarded my heart and mind.” See the Bible, Philippians 4:7.

“Having chosen not to be a victim crippled by childhood trauma, I felt free—as if heavy chains had been removed from my legs.” See the Bible, Galatians 5:1.

Epilogue

“When I reached out to God for the hope offered everyone regardless of race, language, or culture, I learned that nothing I do to myself or is done to me by others, no abuse or apathy, nothing that has happened or ever will happen—including death—can separate me from the love of God.” See the Bible, Romans 8:38-39.



r.b. mitchell

author, speaker

encourager

Authentic and dynamic, r.b. mitchell is an encourager who shares from the heart—offering practical solutions that touch and encourage businesses, youth, and ministries.

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