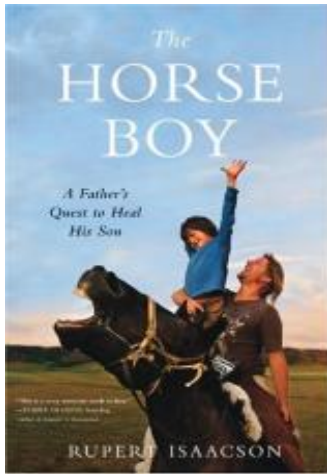

The Horse Boy: A Father's Quest to Heal His Son

by Rupert Isaacson



About the Book

When his son Rowan was diagnosed with autism, Rupert Isaacson was devastated, afraid he might never be able to communicate with his child. But when Isaacson, a lifelong horseman, rode their neighbor's horse with Rowan, Rowan improved immeasurably. He was struck with a crazy idea: why not take Rowan to Mongolia, the one place in the world where horses and shamanic healing intersected?

The Horse Boy is the dramatic and heartwarming story of that impossible adventure. In Mongolia, the family found undreamed of landscapes and people, unbearable setbacks, and advances beyond their wildest dreams. This is a deeply moving, truly one-of-a-kind story --- of a family willing to go to the ends of the earth to help their son, and of a boy learning to connect with the world for the first time.

Discussion Guide

1. When Rowan Isaacson was diagnosed with autism, his father felt an "irrational shame." What do you make of Rupert's shame? Have you ever felt similarly responsible for something beyond your control?
2. Rupert Isaacson worried that Rowan, Kristin, and he had become a special-needs family. What challenges do the Isaacsons face that do not affect families without a specialneeds child? In what ways are they an "ordinary" family?
3. Rupert and Kristin received many conflicting diagnoses and recommendations from experts with regard to Rowan's autism. What would you have done in their situation?
4. What do you think the connection was between Betsy and Rowan? Why do you think autistic children often demonstrate an affinity for animals and nature?

5. Rupert and Kristin decided to take Rowan out of regular school and to seek an alternative. Do you think that public schools should accommodate children like Rowan, or are children with special needs better off in a separate setting designed specifically for them?
6. What do you think has contributed to the rise in autism diagnosis?
7. Rupert remarks that Rowan is "Like a normal kid. Almost." In what ways is Rowan "normal" or not?
8. Rupert made a radical decision in taking his family to Mongolia. Was it a crazy idea? Was it sensible for the Isaacsons? What is the most drastic thing you'd do for the sake of your family?
9. Rupert and Kristin's marriage was tested not only by their son's autism but also by Rupert's insistence on going to Mongolia. Was he right to push her to go on the Mongolia trip? How does Rupert and Kristin's relationship grow or change in the course of the journey?
10. The journey held many unpleasant surprises in store for the Isaacsons, among them being whipped by shamans and drinking fermented mare's milk. They experienced emotional hardships as well. Which aspects of the journey would have been most difficult for you to undergo?
11. What did you make of the shamans and their ceremonies? Would you be willing to participate in such a ritual if you thought it might help your child?
12. Discuss Rowan's burgeoning friendship with Tomoo. How might things have been different had there been no one close to Rowan's age on the journey?
13. The author distinguishes between being cured and being healed. What is the difference between the two with respect to Rowan's autism?
14. Can Western and traditional medicine systems coexist and complement each other? How about faith and science, when it comes to healing?
15. Late in the trip, Rupert took his family to Hustai National Park, where the original wild horses of Mongolia still graze. A stranger there scolded Rupert for letting his son run around and yell, and even after learning that Rowan is autistic the man maintained that Rowan shouldn't be allowed to run around. Do you sympathize at all with this man's point of view? What will the challenges be for Rowan as he grows up?
16. After the journey, Rowan seemed to be a changed boy. Discuss some of the ways in which he has been healed. To your mind, was there a specific moment when Rowan was healed, or was it a combination of influences and experiences?
17. In what ways might autism be considered a gift?

Author Bio

Rupert Isaacson was born in London to a South African mother and a Zimbabwean father. Isaacson's first book, *The Healing Land*, was a 2004 *New York Times Notable Book*. He has travelled extensively in Africa, Asia, and North America for the British press and now lives in Austin, Texas with his wife, Kristin, and their son, Rowan.

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