Term paper: Finding Fish
A human development analysis on the novel

Introductory thoughts on the novel

What a life affirming book - a true testimonial to just how much a person can endure! So much so, in fact, that I found myself wondering how much of it may have been exaggerated by artistic license! Really, I was so impressed by it. All right, enough of my gushing about the will of the human spirit. Let's get on to some of the topics that I immediately noticed.

Antwone Fisher is an amazing person who, in many ways, is the personal contradiction - or atypical case study - of a lot of the topics we covered over the course of our Human Growth & Development class. He, despite a constant barrage of terrible things coming at him from all different areas of his life, was seemingly able to become well balanced, successful, loving, and happy. That said, there is no shortage of good case-in-points in the book that highlight a ton of the various aspects of development that we covered in class.

Themes that stood out

This book covers the gamut of of topics covered in class. Everything from genetic influences (his biological father was violent), those ever-so important first 2 years (he was initially given a secure, loving, safe environment provided by Mrs. Strange), environmental influences (Antwone was born in jail, raised in an industrial part of the world), socio-economic status (though it seemed to me like the Picketts were doing fairly average-to-well, Antwone was raised experiencing poverty), sibling
and friend relations (Antwone had some levels of bonding here), physical and psychological abuses (frequent and regular beatings, molestations, and verbal assaults by primary and secondary care givers), race (bigotry in school and, in my opinion, to some extent by Social Services), puberty (fear of the unknown [also a time that shows a potential shift in the parenting style of Mizz Pickett]), sexuality (his confusion and fear of it), death and dying (manifested in a few different ways throughout the book). The list could go on forever. I think it’s also worth mentioning that the book also covers such influences/variables as religion (and its potential dark side. How it can be used as a negative influence), education (the lack of it in so many ways in the early years, then the benefits of it as he got older), fear (fear of everything - fear of success and failure, fear of authority figures, etc), isolation (he had no one he could rely on, no one to trust in), resilience (Antwone’s overwhelming ability to be self-sufficient and to endure so much!), penal/correctional system (relating to nature/nurture concepts), and a slew of other things that are more sub-categories of our Human Growth & Development class, but highly interesting and valuable from my perspective. The only things that the book didn’t cover - in a first hand account - were the “later years” topics and that is only because the author had not yet reached them. It did cover these topics to a lesser degree though, through the passing account of his meeting his biological mother. Also, to some extent, through the aging Picketts.

**SOME of the specifics**
I’m not going to try to cover every topic in detail that I think the book touched on. Attempting to do so would take months, because there are so many. That said, I will just cover a few that I found most interesting. I hope you find them interesting, too.

In the following section, I will be referencing the two books relevant to this paper, “Finding Fish” by Antwone Fisher and “Invitation to the Life Span” by Kathleen Stassen Berger. When referencing either book, for page reference, I’ve abbreviated their respective titles to “FF” and “ILS.” When citing the book references, I also use the abbreviations “p” for page numbers and “ch” for chapters.

First 2 years:

I think it is of pivotal importance that Antwone had the first 2 years of his life under the care of Mrs. Strange (FF: p 24-26, 367 & ILS: ch 3-4). Our class discussions spent a lot of time on the importance of the early years of development on the brain and the neural pathways - and I believe this wholeheartedly. I believe that, without those first 2 years with Mrs. Strange, Antwone would have had a path much more in line with the fate of Dwight or some of the others characters that were described as being in jail/prison for not getting a fair shake. People described as, “...naturally brilliant, naturally endowed to make something great of themselves, lacking only in love to fuel them...” (FF: p 329).

Abuses:

This is a particularly heavy and prominent aspect of Antwone’s life. He was physically beaten regularly. “The next thing I remember was being in my bedroom naked, tied by my arms to the end of the cot, and she was whipping me with a switch made from a thin green branch from a bush in the backyard. The whipping continued
until welts popped up on my skin and began to open. This was the day Mizz Pickett would brag about for years to come, the day when I was eight years old that she beat me unconscious.” (FF: p 80). That quote is one of many examples of the multiple types of abuses that Antwone had to deal with from very early on, all the way through his adolescent life.

He also had to endure sexual molestations (ILS: p 323-324) from his babysitter Wilenda (FF: p 46-48), which scarred him in even deeper and different ways. I won’t disturb either of us by quoting any of that.

There is also an inordinate amount of emotional abuse and maltreatment (ILS: p 190-192, ch 5) that Antwone and his foster siblings are subject to. Pretty much every page of the first two-thirds of the novel is covered with accounts of how they were under a constant torrent of it.

We spent a fair amount of time on the many different types of abuses in class, for which I am very grateful. Personally, I got a lot out of it and I hope that others did as well. I think that we, as a class did. There were a lot of conversations in class where it felt like people were able to add personal experiences and ask questions that gave the instruction an additional texture and allowed for the topics to be “taken home” to their/our personal lives.

**Puberty (and education of it):**

All throughout the first half of the book, I was constantly amazed and outraged by so many things that were done to these kids. One thing that really stung was just how little they were taught or told about anything. Anything from not even knowing their situation in the household to what puberty was all about. When Dwight went through
puberty, neither he nor Antwone knew what was going on with his body. Dwight thought he was getting really sick and when he asked about it, he was only chided and berated with some crazy pseudo-religious garbage. I guess it was too much to say something like, “Ahh chile, that jes’ yo body growin’ up” or something? Puberty was clearly a very traumatizing part of their development and with that, comes a ton of insecurities, fears, anxieties, feelings of inadequacies, and so on (ILS: ch 9, p 310-324).

As I recall from our in-class lectures, normal social development - at this stage of life - is heavily dependent upon a healthy understanding, acceptance, and appreciation that these changes are natural and that everyone in your age group is going through it as well. I remember reading in our textbook that adolescent that go through puberty later than average are more, “…anxious, depressed, and afraid of sex…” (ILS p 316). Imagine coupling that with an absolute ignorance of what puberty is all about!

Going back to the previous topic of abuse for a minute, another aspect to Dwight and Antwone hitting puberty is that seemed, to me, to mark a distinct change in the way Mizz. Pickett abused them. She seemed a bit more cautious about getting physically abusive, probably because she was fearful that they would try to stop her physical assaults, now that they were more physically able. Worse even, she might have been concerned that they would retaliate. So, if I got the nuances of the book right, puberty ushered in a heightened era of verbal and psychological abuses. I can see a benefit here as it opens the door to their understanding that they might be able to have something of a power balance with Mizz Pickett, at least on the physical level. Sadly this doesn’t every really bear out. As discussed in class, and covered in the textbook, psychological abuse is powerful. Really powerful. So powerful that, despite Antwone
being physically able to defend himself, he didn't, because of the amount of fear and lack of self-worth that the psychological abuse had engendered.

**Nature-Nurture:**

The nature-nurture is, personally, a huge one for me. The topic was covered greatly in class and is covered in various sections in the textbook. It is also, a very present theme in Finding Fish. Again, I'll reference Antwone’s first 2 years with Mrs. Strange. This was not, that I could tell, something that Dwight had the benefit of - those all-important 2 hyper-formative years that involve teratogens and brain mapping and all that sort of thing. I think that, along with various - few and far between - positive influences help Antwone to be able to cope.

Some of his positive respites, or nurturers to varying degrees, were, amongst others: Mrs. Strange, Mrs. Profit, Missy, Bill Ward, etc. They were all pivotal in his being able to guide his path in a healthy and positive direction. I'll close out by quoting Antwone’s words on this. He calls these nurturers “teachers and guides” (FF p367) and really does a good summary. Here it is:

“I'm grateful to all the teachers and guides who were there im my life at the necessary time -- to my social workers, like Ms. Edwards, Ms. Nees, and Bill Ward; to the great state of Ohio and its taxpayers; to everyone at George Junior Republic; to Chief Lott, Chief Akiona, Commander Williams, Captain Anderson, and the United States Navy; and to my good friend Todd Black. I am most grateful to a woman named Mrs. Strange, my first foster mother, whom I have never had the chance to meet and thank, in whose home, in the first two years of my life, I learned to love pancakes.”