

# Athletic Shorts Short Guide

## Athletic Shorts by Chris Crutcher

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# Contents

[Athletic Shorts Short Guide..... 1](#)

[Contents..... 2](#)

[Overview..... 3](#)

[About the Author..... 4](#)

[Setting..... 9](#)

[Social Sensitivity..... 10](#)

[Literary Qualities..... 11](#)

[Themes and Characters..... 12](#)

[Topics for Discussion..... 15](#)

[Ideas for Reports and Papers..... 16](#)

[For Further Reference..... 17](#)

[Related Titles/Adaptations..... 21](#)

[Related Web Sites..... 22](#)

[Copyright Information..... 23](#)

## Overview

Athletic Shorts is a collection of six short stories, five of them published for the first time in the collection. The common thread to those five stories is they all contain characters from Crutcher's novels. Petey, Johnny, and Telephone Man reappear from *The Crazy Horse Electric Game*. Lionel from *Stotan!* reemerges, as does Louis Banks from *Running Loose*. All the characters, except Telephone Man, are athletes. The stories about Lion and Louie do not directly involve sports, while the climatic scenes of the stories about Petey and Johnny both take place on the wrestling mat. Only Angus Bethune is a new character, although the story had appeared in a collection of young adult short stories. Crutcher writes an introduction to each story, as well as a foreword. In the foreword, he notes that readers ask him about the fate of his characters after the book ends, writing in the introduction to the volume that "my stories don't stop because I stop writing them, but my participation in them does. . . I present the characters to you, the reader. What happens next is up to you." Yet, he also admits some characters have lingered with him and the stories give him a chance to check in on them, in some cases providing stories after they have appeared, while in one case "Goin' Fishin'" featuring Lion from *Stotan!*, the fiction provides the "back story." The plots in each story all lead to a decision by the protagonist: Angus on how to handle a bully, Johnny and Telephone Man on how to confront their fathers, and Lion on how to confront his past. The stories are not about plot, or even characters, they are mostly about delivering Crutcher's message about kids doing their best in tough situations.



## About the Author

Chris Crutcher is one of the most honored young adult novelists, having won the prestigious Margaret A. Edwards Award for Lifetime Achievement from the Young Adult Services Library Association, an award from the Assembly on Adolescent Literature for significant contributions to young adult literature, and the Intellectual Freedom Award from the National Council of Teachers of English. Pretty amazing for a self-professed academic underachiever who often tells the story of how he read only one book—*To Kill a Mockingbird*—cover-to-cover during four years of high school.

Crutcher was born on July 17, 1946, in Dayton, Ohio; he is a middle child. He says that they all arrived in Cascade, Idaho, a small lumber and logging town of less than 1,000 people, while he was still an infant.

His father, John, had been a B-17 pilot in World War II. Crutcher described his father as "deliberate and extremely patient, though he could be a little hard to please." Like the father in the story "Goin' Fishin'" from *Athletic Shorts*, his father "always thought I was a little too frivolous and I always thought he was a little too serious." He grew up in a dysfunctional household where he often took the role of the caretaker—"my mother was a pretty significant alcoholic through my junior high, high school, and college years."

His family were all readers, although Crutcher preferred to play sports or watch television. Getting good grades was also not high on his list of priorities, which made him a direct opposite of his older brother, the valedictorian of his class. When assigned to do book reports, Crutcher, rather than reading the book, would borrow an old report of his brother's, misspelling a few words in order to make it appear to be his own work before he turning it in. Failing that, he would also complete book report assignments by inventing authors and stories, getting the names of characters from the Boise, Idaho phone book.

His other writing as a teenager normally came in the form of "punishment" writing, although one of these essays caught the eye of a teacher who invited him to write a column for the school newspaper called "Chris' Crumbs." Crutcher found high school a good place to be a stand-up comic, although his other passion, as would surface in all of his books, was sports. During an interview, Crutcher told Heather Vogel Frederick that in a small town like Cascade that "it didn't matter if you were a good athlete or not. You tried out for the football team with a stethoscope—if you could breathe you could play." Although Crutcher loved sports, he admitted that he was not a star and that "my characters are always much better athletes than I was."

It would be in college that Crutcher would excel as an athlete in swimming, reaching the small college nationals at Eastern Washington State College. Very much a product his times, Crutcher was "rebellious as hell—I mean rebellious with ideas—and I really enjoyed it." After graduating in 1968 with a bachelor's degree, majoring in psychology and minoring in sociology, Crutcher and a friend took a cross-country trip, landing them



eventually in Dallas, Texas, where he worked construction. He returned to Washington, earning a teaching credential. After another short stint as a manual laborer, Crutcher began his teaching career at Kennewick Dropout School in Kennewick, Washington. When funding for the school ended, Crutcher was moved to the regular high school as a social studies teacher.

After three and half years, Crutcher left Washington to work in the inner city of Oakland, California, where he worked in an alternative school. Crutcher notes that the school was "the toughest place I've ever been." He started as a teacher, but after taking his various concerns about the school to the top administrator of the school, he was named the director of the school. Despite success at the school, Crutcher, having grown up in a rural small town, wanted to escape the urban environment. Crutcher left the school in 1981, returning to the Northwest. Despite vowing not to get involved in another emotionally demanding profession, within six months he took the job as the coordinator of the Spokane Child Protection Team, a group handling tough child abuse cases.

While student teaching in 1970, Crutcher stayed with Terry Davis, a former classmate from Eastern Washington State College. They became reacquainted when both were living in the Bay Area, Crutcher working in the school at Oakland while Davis was on a fellowship at Stanford University, in the process of becoming a writer. They would run together and talk about writing.

A year later, Davis visited Crutcher and challenged him to work on a story for publication. During the time between leaving the job in Oakland and moving to Spokane, Crutcher started work on his first novel *Running Loose*. After finishing it, he sent a copy to Davis. Davis loved it and sent it on to his agent who accepted it within a week and shortly thereafter sold the book. The book was not written specifically as a young adult novel because Crutcher "didn't know there was such a thing." The editor at Greenwillow, Susan Hirshman, convinced Crutcher to clean up the language and the book was soon published receiving rave reviews.

That *Running Loose* was not written as a young adult novel is hard to believe. It tells the story of Louie Banks, a high school senior who plays on his school's championship football team. He quits the team, however, over a moral issue and finds little support outside of his girlfriend. He is devastated by her death in a car accident, but through the help of a caring Coach, he channels his emotions into running and starts his journey to winning back his life from grief. The title and message of "running loose" echoes Pony Boy's cry of "stay gold" from *The Outsiders* some twenty years previous. The book is rich in detail about the small town of Trout, Idaho, modeled after Crutcher's own Cascade. The book would introduce readers to Crutcher's world of small towns in the Northwest, introspective male athletes who are in the process of becoming heroes in every sense of the word, the dichotomy of caring adult characters along with those who border on pure evil, and big themes about trust, truth, and morality. *Running Loose*, like every other Crutcher book, was named a "Best Book" by the Young Adult Library Services Association.



Crutcher followed *Running Loose with Stotan!* Based on his experiences as a college swimmer. Stotan (someone who is a cross between a Stoic and a Spartan and able to face a task with steely eyed determination), tells the story of four high school swimmers. Less plot driven than *Running Loose*, *Stotan!*'s characters' damaged lives are the real story. The book's deeply scarred characters were an outgrowth of Crutcher's work as a child and family therapist, first for the Community Mental Health clinic in Spokane and then in private practice. Crutcher explains the connection between his work as a therapist who hears stories, and a novelist who writes them: "what I do as a therapist is listen to somebody's story and look for that thread, the pieces that run through his or her life that have meaning; [I try to] find the truth and the lies and bring them to the surface. As a writer, when I'm telling a story, I do it in reverse. Rather than taking it in, I'm writing it down, but I'm looking for the same truths and the same lies."

Similarly, Crutcher finds connections between his own life as an athlete and the sporting passions of his protagonists. He states, "one of the things I like about sports is that rules are clear. I use sports in young adult fiction to talk about the rules of life."

Sports would play a lesser role in Crutcher's next book *The Crazy Horse Electric Game*, as the focus is what happens to a great young athlete after he suffers an injury, which affects his ability to compete in sports, but also to communicate. This novel, set primarily in an alternative school, draws heavily from Crutcher's work at the Lakeside School.

The book's major theme is about dealing with expectations.

Crutcher's next career, as a therapist dealing with child abuse cases, would serve as the backbone of his next novel *Chinese Handcuffs*. Sports drama again takes a back seat to the real life trauma of the two main characters: Dillon, who witnesses his brother's suicide, and Laurie who is a victim of sexual abuse. The book's complex plot, heavy themes and relentless exposing of the pain in his characters led it to be his most controversial novel, although it was still named a Best Book for Young Adults.

Crutcher followed the intensity of *Chinese Handcuffs* with *Athletic Shorts*, a collection of stories. Only one story, "A Moment in the Life of Angus Bethune," had been previously published, while the others were new, although each focused on a character from a Crutcher book. Another departure followed as Crutcher published *The Deep End*, an adult mystery novel featuring a child therapist looking into the case of a missing child. Child abuse is once again the major subject of the book, which won rave reviews and, according to Heather Vogel Frederick, was one of the four books President Clinton purchased while Christmas shopping one year.

Swimming is the sport of choice for Eric, aka Moby, the main character in Crutcher's next novel, *Staying Fat for Sarah Brynes*. The book again focuses on familiar themes, such as child abuse, includes the "good" adult and "evil" adult dichotomy, and was yet another award winner. *Ironman*, his next young adult novel, also featured a vicious adult character, this time the father of the main male protagonist Bo Brewster. Unable to



communicate with his father, or other adults, Bo pens letters to TV personality Larry King which make up the bulk of the book describing his triathlon.

Around the time of Ironman, Crutcher made the difficult decision of leaving the mental health profession to become a fulltime writer. Ironically, after turning out a book a year, Crutcher took over five years in between Ironman and the novel *Whale Talk*. In between, Crutcher worked on a screenplay for *Staying Fat* for Sarah Brynes, several short stories for young adult collections, as well as a yet to be published novel that would be his "most autobiographical" book. He also had completed a novel about school shootings, but he says that after Columbine "there was no way in the world my story could come out and not look like exploitation." Some of the characters and a few scenes, however, would be used in *Whale Talk*. *Whale Talk* centers on multiracial main character (TJ) who is embattled on two fronts. At school, he runs afoul of the athletic department when he forms a swimming team, while his work in the community with abused children lead to a deadly conflict with an abusive father.

*Whale Talk* is very much a Chris Crutcher novel, in terms of style, tone, but mostly in the themes he is exploring. While the book entertains, it mostly teaches. The teaching comes, as in all Crutcher novels, not so much from an adult authority figure, but from the characters as they search for the truth in their own lives. He told the audience when accepting the Margaret Edwards Lifetime Achievement Award that "For me to know my characters, I needed to get out of their way and let them tell their own truths; respect them and present them for who they were. In the end my job was to celebrate it all, the ghastly with the glorious, because one could not exist without the other."

This getting out of the way, Crutcher notes, includes being true to the language the kids use, the hurt they feel in their lives, and sometimes by showing the harshness of the world, which he considers, however, to be a fair place. His view is "life is exactly fair; people are not fair and relationships are not predictable either. Life is fair, though."

Although sports is the outward element of every Crutcher novel, it is the conflict of real life that is his main concern with an intention of using his stories to allow readers to make connections in their own lives.

Crutcher's intent is to tell stories that allow readers to recognize themselves in his books.

"We are all connected," he says. From conflict comes connections, as characters from Louie Banks in *Running Loose* through T. J. in *Whale Talk*, are tested. More than simple books about identity, Crutcher is looking for heroes in his fiction. He states that "having a character stand-up for himself is one of the common themes in my writing. There is no act of heroism that does not include standing up for oneself."

From those acts of heroism come, what Terry Davis called Crutcher's "healing vision." Davis, Crutcher's friend and mentor, talks about the role of a therapist and that of a storyteller, Crutcher's preferred term for himself rather than writer or artist. After quoting Crutcher, talk about the horrors he has seen in therapy, and the limits of what can be

done to repair damaged lives, Davis ties the two strands together, and in doing so, gets to the very essence of Chris Crutcher as therapist, storyteller, and child advocate: "what does a storyteller do to correct the damage the therapist says he can't fix? He tries to get people to see in new ways. He presents a new vision of the world. A healing vision."

The healing vision in Crutcher's book has won over not only young adult readers, but also professionals working in the field of young adult literature, such as professors, English teachers, and librarians. As mentioned, Crutcher has received awards from the three largest professional associations for his body of work, while individual titles have all been awarded with honors.

Every Crutcher title has been named a Young Adult Library Services Association "Best Book" while five titles: *Athletic Shorts*, *Chinese Handcuffs*, *Ironman*, *Running Loose*, and *Staying Fat* for Sarah Byrnes were all named "The Best of the Best" during a preconference at the American Library Association's Annual Conference in 2000. Librarians selected the one hundred titles they consider to be the best books for young adults from the last half of the twentieth century; no other author had five books named.

Crutcher lives in Spokane, Washington and, according to all his book jackets, plays "old man basketball" as well as running in marathons, weight training, and running his dogs. His process for writing is also quite rigorous. He says that normally it takes him a year to write a book, but that the novel is "in good shape after about seven months into the process . . . I revise as I write, sort of chapter by chapter. I read what I have written out loud and make some changes." Crutcher reads a limited amount of young adult literature, particularly admiring the work of his friend Terry Davis, as well as that of another friend Will Weaver. He is impressed with relatively new authors, such as Christopher Paul Curtis and Rob Thomas, while also admiring the works of adult novelists Kurt Vonnegut, Pat Conroy, and Tim O'Brien. He told Carter that he tries to balance his life between writing, working with families, and traveling to speak at schools and conferences.





## Setting

The stories in *Athletic Shorts* primarily take place in small towns of Montana. The exceptions are "Telephone Man" which is set in Oakland and "Angus" which is set at Lake Michigan High School. The city and state are not given. The settings are important in all the stories, since many of them have to do with issues of honor, shame, and embarrassment. While these are key issues in young adult life, in small town life, they take on even more importance because "everyone" knows. Everyone would know if Petey loses his wrestling match to Chris Byers, if Johnny Rivers loses his match to his father, if Lion is unable to come to terms with Neal, but in particular the story about Louie Banks in "In the Time I Get" is where the sense of place is most important. Playing on stereotypes of small town bigots, Crutcher puts his character in conflict with that town's values when he befriends a young man dying of AIDS. The story might not have impact if it was set in Oakland, but Louie's decision, as well as the history everyone knows about him, means more in the small town atmosphere. Not that bigotry is limited to small towns as Crutcher demonstrates in "Telephone Man," a story set at Oakland, California's inner city One More Last Chance High School, the setting for most of *The Crazy Horse Electric Game*. The characters such as Hawk and Lam, are street kids in every sense of the word.

# Social Sensitivity

The themes in Crutcher's book always deal with social situations and moral dilemmas. The issues of racism and tolerance, born in the first pages of *Running Loose* from 1986 through every page of 2001's *Whale Talk*, play heavy in Crutcher's books.

What does it mean to hate? Why do people hate? But more importantly, how do people stand up to or against prejudice? Those are the questions many of these stories attempt to answer. In particular, Crutcher seems most concerned with racial prejudice and homophobia. "In the Time I Get" deals with the issue head on with if not anger, then with a hard-nosed look, while Angus takes a more humorous, although not less effective look, at the same theme.

Hate, anger, and resentment occur not just in society at large, but in families, as Crutcher demonstrates in "The Pin." The role of family, in particular of fathers, is crucial to every story, in particular "The Pin" and "Goin' Fishin'." That fathers are the issue is no surprise; while there are female characters in this book, the issues are often about what it means to be a man. In many ways, that is the only theme that runs through every story. Is Angus a man if his parents are gay? Is Johnny a man if he lets his father dominate him? Is Petey a man if he might lose to a girl in a wrestling match? Is Lion a man if he cannot move beyond his hate for the person who killed his father? Is Jack a real man, not just a Telephone Man, if he continues to believe his father's lies? Can Louis be a man if he befriends a gay man dying of AIDS? Sports is not Crutcher subject matter; masculinity is.

## Literary Qualities

Working in the short story format, Crutcher's style is very storytelling, very straightforward. Although there are illusions to the past, there are few flashbacks.

Diaries, letters, and other techniques are not used. All the stories are told in the first person, except "The Other Pin" which is the least dramatic and personal of the stories and is told in the third person. The characters are, as always in Crutcher's work, very introspective as they make their way through the moral and emotional minefield of adolescence. Yet, it is primarily through dialogue and interaction with other characters that readers learn most about the truth in each character. The dialogue is very sharp, often witty, and rings true. In some cases, such as "Telephone Man," this results in harsh language and racial slurs. The characterization is strong for all the main characters, but also in the new and secondary characters. In particular, the fathers in "Goin' Fishin'" and "The Pin" who seem, based on interviews, close in some ways to Crutcher's own father, loom very large. The adult characters do not take on the "good" or "evil" personas of the adults found in other novels, but rather, except for these two stories, stay in the background.

Humor is of course used with great effect. Angus makes fun of himself, before others do, while Johnny is a joke machine.

The Telephone Man's "incident" involving Bisquick and strawberry shampoo is recounted, and the ending of "The Other Pin" is quite funny, yet there is little humor in the two stories about death: "Goin' Fishin'" and "In the Time I Get."

The most outstanding literary quality here is Crutcher's own voice used in the foreword and introductions. In these short essays, Crutcher lays out his themes, reasons for writing, and even guides readers toward what they might (should?) think.

The messages emerge not only in Crutcher's voice, but also in the results of the confrontations that are pivotal within every story.

Every story builds to a moment of truth where the character needs to decide what is the "right thing" and, unlike his novels which often do not end happily, the characters here seem to make the right call.



## Themes and Characters

As usual, Crutcher has created, or in this case, often recreated a cast of well-developed characters. He provides them with motivation, an obstacle or decision, and then lets the characters work it out. In the short story format, there are fewer characters than in his popular novels. Each story features the main character (male) as the protagonist, a family member (a father) or peer (a bigot) as the antagonist, and a "moment of truth" in which the Crutcher character becomes a hero.

Angus Bethune is one of Crutcher's most unique creations: an overweight teenager with two sets of gay parents. Angus's story centers around his joke election as king of the senior ball which involves a dance with the queen, Melissa, a girl Angus has had a crush on for years. Told in first person, Angus's voice is one of almost constant bemusement, given the circumstances of his life. The main theme of this story, which runs through most of the other stories, is about prejudice and acceptance as Angus stands up for himself. Crutcher's hero theme is hard at work when Angus defends his family to a drunken fearful bigot. Being so different, in size and background, the theme of acceptance weighs heavy on Angus. Not so much about acceptance by another group or his classmates, although Melissa's kindness toward him is touching, the story is about Angus himself learning to accept his life as it is. Thus, the story is ultimately about pride. Angus simply wants his "moment," noting that "when you're different, on the down side, you learn to live from one scarce rich moment to the next, no matter the distance between. You become like a camel . . . storing those cool watery moments in your hump."

Those same themes about acceptance, pride, and a "heroic" moment are found in the next story featuring Johnny Rivers, the wise-cracking best friend of Willie Weaver from *The Crazy Horse Electric Game*. Tired of being beaten down by his father, both physically and emotionally, Johnny decides to confront him head-on by challenging him to an amateur-wrestling match. His father was a great student athlete in the town of Coho and a wrestler at the University of Oklahoma. Crutcher doesn't tell his reader, but next to Iowa State, the University of Oklahoma has a strong tradition of turning out championship NCAA grapplers. Johnny's emotions toward his father are mixed at best, and he has second and third thoughts about going through with the match. Yet, he does and he wins the match. His anger overcomes him and as he is turning towards his father to pin him, he thinks "screw you dad" but feels empty after the fact. At the story's end, the father and son reconcile as Johnny's father comes to the realization that he has treated his own son as his dad treated him. The story is about getting off the train of history.

Johnny provides the comic relief in "The Other Pin" which features Petey, also from *The Crazy Horse Electric Game*. Petey is almost a stereotypical underweight underdog who plays sports for fun and excitement, not knowing of the challenges to his character that he might encounter. In many ways, this story mirrors that of Angus as Petey is faced with a moment that could lead to utter public humiliation when he is assigned to tangle with a girl wrestler at the next wrestling meet. Crutcher announces the theme of story in



his introduction: "humiliation breeds character" and the story, like the other two, is about a moment of truth when he has to tangle with Byers. Yet, Crutcher is having fun here, throwing a light story in the middle of this collection as Chris and Petey, neither of whom want the match and find they do want to be with each other, conspire against their coaches to "work" the match.

The farce of "The Other Pin" is opposite in tone to the next story "Goin' Fishin'," perhaps deliberately. This could be why Crutcher placed them next to each other.

The character of Lion was well established in *Stotan!* as a bit of an oddball, both an athlete and artist. In this story, Lion recounts the death of his parents and younger brother in a boating accident, and comes face-to-face with the young man whom caused the accident. Lion is pulled in opposite directions: one side still so angry seeking if not vengeance than at least a reckoning, while the other side, wants closure, mercy and compassion. In writing the story, Crutcher says that the Lion character (who would show up in the novel *Ironman* as an adult), became "instantly richer . . . he had to go through all of that pain when his lost parents." The theme of "Goin' Fishin'" is dealing with the loss: the moment Lion decides not to forgive Neal, but then at least tries to help him.

In helping Neal, however, Lion is really helping himself overcome his grief and move on with his life. At one point in the story, he tells his friend Elaine, who also appears in *Stotan!* and is a friend of Neal in this story, that if he ever stops hating Neal, he thinks he will die. It is not his grief hanging onto him and weighing him down; it is his anger. The classic Crutcher choice scenes soon emerge as Elaine, more or less, tells Lion that he must decide: to stay friends with her or to continue hating Neal, but she won't be a party to his anger any longer. It is when she tells him to "think," the very same words Lion's dad would always say to him, that he realizes his dilemma. He values Elaine's friendship so much, for it has been her and his swimming buddies that have kept him alive since the death of his parents, that he is willing to pay any price to retain it. Like Louie Banks in *Running Loose*, Lion's life was changed dramatically in just a moment, by a random freak accident over which he had no control. Crutcher's message in both books is how young people deal with loss and pain, often by "letting it go" (the theme of *Chinese Handcuffs*) is the most important story of all.

Louie Banks reappears in "In the Time I Get," the final story of the book which seems, in some ways, almost like a continuation of *Running Loose*. Once again, Louie has to stand up against the prejudice of his small town, and once again, he will lose someone he cares for. Much like Lion battles a war within himself between mercy and anger, Louie is balancing between an old friend and his new one. Near the beginning of the story, Louie meets Darren, a young man who knows that Louie has endured the death of his girlfriend. Knowing this, Darren tells Louie that he has AIDS. At first repulsed by what he assumes is Darren's sexual preference, Louis comes to realize that what matters most is the possibility of death. Yet, as the story goes along, the real issue is not death, but as in the Angus story, is dignity.



Just as in *Running Loose*, Louis is faced with a choice between siding with bigots (in this case his lifelong friend Carter) or doing "the right thing," which is staying Darren's friend in the face of Carter's homophobia and taunting. The conflict of forces is dramatized in a scene where Darren, who has told Louie that no one has touched him once they learned he has AIDS, reaches his hand out. Louis hesitates, if only for a moment, and then clutches his hand. At that exact moment, Carter walks in the door and sees the two of them, seemingly holding hands.

The simple act of the human touch takes on tremendous importance.

In almost every Crutcher novel or story, his protagonist becomes a better, stronger, healthier, and more complete person not just by achieving something, but also by giving something up. In some books, what they must surrender is their pain; in "In the Time I Get," Louis must let go of his prejudice, knowing in doing so, he will be sacrificing a friendship of great value. Just as he stands up to his coach, Louie stands his ground against not just Carter, but against prejudice, fear, and hate.

"Telephone Man" is the odd story out here, set not in a small town, but in urban Oakland. Yet, the lessons about prejudice and the universality of father-son conflicts, fit in with the other tales. Picking up on the Telephone Man (Jack is his real name but no one calls him that) character, Crutcher recounts the fateful scene from *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* where he is beaten by the Asian gang, only to be saved by Hawk, an African-American student. Telephone Man has been taught by his father to hate minorities; African Americans in particular. Thus, when Hawk saves him, and as he reflects upon his daily encounters with Andre, the African-American principal of One More Last Chance High School, Telephone Man's views about race are challenged.

What a person believes, about themselves and about others, is the central theme running through all the stories in *Athletic Shorts*.

All of the young men in these stories face, more or less a moment of truth. What they believe will determine how they behave. In many cases, they need to reject what others believe, in particular the views of parents and peers, to "do the right thing." What the right thing is, as these stories indicate, is not always easy to see, and almost always hard to do. These stories are the best example of Crutcher's "heroic creed" as he explains: Having a character stand up for himself ... is usually the hardest thing to do because it is embarrassing for one thing ... Heroes stand up when it's easier to sit down. They are visible when it's easier to be invisible. Superman is not a hero; he is invulnerable. Since he cannot be hurt, he is not brave ... If you cannot be hurt, if you are not in danger, then you are not a hero.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Do Crutcher's introductions to the stories and foreword to the collection add or subtract from the experience of reading the book?
2. How believable is the ending of "The Other Pin?" What could have been some other alternate endings?
3. Most of these stories were written over a decade ago. Do the hateful attitudes, in particular about homosexuals and African Americans held by characters in these stories, still ring true? Has the United States made any progress in reducing racism and homophobia?
4. In "The Pin," Johnny wonders if he should have lost. Would he have been right in making that decision?
5. In "Goin' Fishin'," Lion must confront Neal, the person responsible for killing his parents. How believable is this scene? Does Lion seem ready to show mercy? Why or why not?
6. If Crutcher's main characters are the heroes of each story, then who are the villains? Why are they villains? Do you need a "bad guy" in order to have a "good guy"?
7. Although Petey and Chris work out a farce to end their match like one found on TV, most amateur wrestlers look upon professional wrestling with disdain? Why is this? Why has pro-wrestling gained so much popularity and why do so many people rip it apart?
8. How would the characters in the different stories interact with each other? What if Angus transferred to school in Coho? How would Johnny and Petey treat him? Would Lion and Louie be friends if they were the same age?
9. These stories all feature male protagonists with the issue of masculinity serving as an over-riding theme. Are there any strong female characters? How are they portrayed? Do any of these stories speak to the concerns of adolescent girls?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Rent the video *Angus*, then compare and contrast it with the short story. How is it different? Better? Worse?
2. There are two allusions to the WWF (World Wrestling Federation). Research the history of professional wrestling in the United States, focusing in particular on the role of the WWF in the past twenty years in dominating the industry.
3. *Angus* is the child of two sets of gay parents. Research gay parents, in particular focusing on the effects on children. What are some of your findings?
4. AIDS is mentioned in two stories.

Research the recent advances made in AIDS medical research. How has society's attitude towards people with AIDS changed over time?

5. There is an allusion in "The Pin" to the book *Vision Quest* by Crutcher's friend Terry Davis. Read *Vision Quest*, then compare and contrast Davis's and Crutcher's style, themes, plots, and characters.
6. Both *Angus* and *Louie* confront homophobia. Research homophobia, in particular how it has been manifested in "gay bashing" incidents.
7. *Chris* is a female athlete competing in a male sport. Research the rise of female sports, in particular looking at high school and college women who have played on all male teams.
8. A street gang plays an important role in the story "Telephone Man." Research youth gangs, looking both at the history of young gangs and the various measures used in communities to combat youth violence caused by gangs.
9. The collection was criticized for "reeking of political correctness." What does that term mean? Research the debate about political correctness, focusing in particular on political correctness in relation to media.
10. Choose one of the characters in these stories, and then go back and read the novel in which they originally appeared.

Has Crutcher been consistent? Does the character seem the same as when they first appeared? How are they similar? How are they different?





## For Further Reference

Brown, Jennifer. "PW Talks with Chris Crutcher." *Publishers Weekly* (March 12, 2001): 92. Short interview focusing on novel *Whale Talk* and Crutcher's reactions to rash of school shootings.

Bushman, John. "Coping with Harsh Realities: The Novels of Chris Crutcher." *English Journal* (March 1992): 82-84. Brief plot summaries of each novel, but also, a focus on themes and characters in each book make up the majority of the essay. Quotes from the novels are used to illustrate the themes of each novel.

Carpenter, Marilyn. "A Conversation with Chris Crutcher." *New Advocate* (Summer 2000): 201-12. Long interview where Crutcher discusses his novels, his themes, and his passion for truth-telling, and focuses on the novel *Whale Talk*.

Carter, Betty. "Eyes Wide Open." *School Library Journal* (June 2000): 42-45. In the wake of winning the Margaret Edwards Award, Crutcher answers questions about the themes in his books, his goal in writing for teenagers, and his life growing up.

"Chris Crutcher." *Children's Literature Review*, Volume 28. Detroit: Gale, 1992. Long sketch contains a short summary of Crutcher's themes and reprints excerpt for a long article based on an interview with Crutcher. Sketch also provides excerpts for general critical works and re-prints parts of reviews for each novel.

"Chris Crutcher." *Contemporary Authors Online*. Detroit: Gale Group, 2000. Based on the print source *Contemporary Authors*, an excellent compilation of information about Crutcher including list of writings, further readings about the authors, as well as quotes from the author.

Crutcher, Chris. "Healing Through Literature." In *Authors Insights*. Edited by Don Gallo. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1992. A thoughtful essay where Crutcher lays out his vision of writing, in particular its role in helping young people's lives.

Crutcher, Chris. In *Journal of Youth Services in Libraries* (Summer 2000): 17-19. Crutcher talks about his own childhood, the importance of story, and the role of novelists in the official version of his award acceptance speech.

Crutcher, Chris. "R\*E\*S\*P\*E\*S\*T: For Kids, for Adolescence, for Story." *Voices from the Middle* (December 1999): 17-19. Essay by Crutcher arguing for more respect by teachers for literature for young adults. Bulk of essay concerns Columbine High School as Crutcher reflects upon that incident as it reflects upon his writing and his beliefs about respecting teenagers.

Davis, Ann-Marie. "Chris Crutcher" in *Children's Books and Their Creators*. Edited by Anita Silvey. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995. Short essay relating Crutcher's novels to his life experience.



Davis, Terry. "A Healing Vision." *English Journal* (March 1996): 36-41. Almost a summary of his book on Crutcher, Davis examines the themes in Crutcher's novels. Looking at the connection between Crutcher's work as a therapist and his career as a novelist, Davis examines the "connectedness" of characters in his the novels.

Davis, Terry. *Presenting Chris Crutcher*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997. Part of the *Presenting Young Adult Authors* series, this is a critical and biographical look at the Crutcher from his friend, mentor, and fellow young adult author Terry Davis. Davis examines each Crutcher title, including an entire chapter on *Athletic Shorts*, focusing on the characterization and themes. Essential reading for a fuller understanding of Crutcher's work.

Ericson, Bonnie O. "Chris Crutcher" in *Twentieth-Century Young Adult Writers*, first edition. Detroit: St. James Press, 1994.

Short essay focusing on the role of sport in the works of Crutcher. Beginning with a quote from the author, the article provides short descriptions of each work, as well as discussing themes, literary techniques, and possible reader responses to his work.

Frederick, Heather Vogel. "Chris Crutcher: 'What's Known Can't Be Unknown.'"

*Publishers Weekly* (February 20, 1995): 183-184. Describing Crutcher as a "ferocious child advocate," Frederick discusses Crutcher's works based on an interview.

Crutcher describes his writing process and also discusses his own teen years.

Gallo, Don. Review of *Athletic Shorts*. *ALAN Review* (Fall 1991): 34. Very strong review pointing out Crutcher's skills in creating attractive, sensitive characters and development through provoking situations.

Gallo, Donald R., editor. *Speaking for Ourselves: Autobiographical Sketches by Notable Authors of Books for Young Adults*. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English (1990). Crutcher reflects on his books, characters, but mostly on his intentions as a writer for young people.

Greenway, Betty. "Chris Crutcher: Hero or Villain?" *ALAN Review* (Fall 1994): 25-28. Describes the negative response to Crutcher's books from attendees at the young adult literature conference, includes student parodies of Crutcher's writings.

Jenkinson, Dave. "Presenting Chris Crutcher."

*Emergency Librarian* (January-February 1991): 67-71. Based on an interview, this article examines Crutcher's works and in particular the writing process. Crutcher discusses the characters from his novels, as well as comments on the themes and autobiographical elements in each book.

Kozikowski, Thomas. "Chris Crutcher" in *Authors & Artists for Young Adults, Volume 9*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1992.



Lengthy profile based on secondary materials and an interview with Crutcher.

Krumbein, Sue. Review of Athletic Shorts.

Voice of Youth Advocates (April 1992): 26.

Long review which briefly recounts the plot of each story, but focuses mostly on the story "Telephone Man." The reviewer notes that the book lives up to the "high standards" people have come to expect of Crutcher.

Lesesne, Teri S. "Banned in Berlin: An Interview with Chris Crutcher." Emergency Librarian (May-June 1996): 61-63. Interview with Crutcher by a young adult literature professor focusing on themes, such as the role of heroes, and on characters.

McDonnell, Christine. "New Voices, New Visions: Chris Crutcher." HornBook (May 1988): 332-335. Short essay focusing on the connections between Crutcher's background and the situations in his works.

Also, examines the role of sports in his works.

Morning, Todd. Review of Athletic Shorts.

School Library Journal (September, 1991): 278. Very strong review calling the book a "winning collection" which will touch teens deeply and make them want to read Crutcher's novels.

Nilsen, Allen Pace and Ken Donelson.

Review of Athletic Shorts. English Journal (November 1992). Mixed review calling the collection "three definite winners, one close-call, and two well-fought losses."

Review of Athletic Shorts. English Journal (April 1992): 85. Long unsigned review which dubs the book a "great collection" for high school students. The only review to call "Goin' Fishin'" the strongest story in the book.

Review of Athletic Shorts. Journal of Reading (October 1993): 152. Short very positive unsigned review focusing on the messages in the stories, as well as Crutcher's strong writing.

Review of Athletic Shorts. Publishers Weekly (August 23, 1991): 63. Short positive unsigned review discusses the themes found in the stories, and notes how Crutcher is fighting against the stereotypical image of uncaring and unthinking athletes.

Senick, Gerald. "Chris Crutcher" in Something about the Author, Volume 99. Detroit: Gale Research, 1999. Updates earlier profile in Volume 52 of the series. This sketch provides information on Crutcher's career, awards and honors, adaptations, and a long essay focusing on each title, augmented with quotes from the author.



Sheffer, Susannah. "An Adult Reads Chris Crutcher." *The ALAN Review* (Spring 1997): 10-11. An adult reader responds to the novels of Crutcher, recommended to her by her twelve-year-old daughter, in particular focusing on *Chinese Handcuffs* and *Staying Fat* for Sarah Byrnes.

Smith, Louisa. "Limitations on Young Adult Fiction: An Interview with Chris Crutcher."

*The Lion and the Unicorn*. (Spring 1992): 66-74. Interview with Crutcher discussing all aspects of his careers, but with particular attention to his writing process.

Spencer, Pam. "YA Novels in the AP Classroom: Crutcher Meets Camus." *English Journal* (November 1989): 44-6. Compares the themes in the works of Crutcher with those found in "classics" and advocates for teachers to use more YA literature in the classroom.

Sutton, Roger. Review of *Athletic Shorts*.

*Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*.

(December 1991): 87. Mixed review which is critical of Crutcher's didactic tone in not only the stories, but also in his foreword and introduction to each story.

Vasilakis, Nancy. Review of *Athletic Shorts*.

*Horn Book* (September 1991): 602. Very strong view noting the powerful characterization, realistic dialogue, and handling of major themes in young adult literature/young adult life. Special attention is paid to the stories featuring Angus Bethune, the Telephone Man, and Louie Banks.

Weaver, Matthew. "Chris Crutcher's Balancing Act: Cool Old Guy Meets Brash Young Writer." *Voice of Youth Advocates* (August 2001): 182-185.

Zvirin, Stephanie. Review of *Athletic Shorts*.

*Booklist* (October 15, 1991): 428. Strong review focusing in particular on the Angus Bethune and Telephone Man stories. The reviewer notes that Crutcher's themes have great young adult appeal, his plots are straightforward and easy to follow, and his writing achieves a great balance between humor and poignancy.

## Related Titles/Adaptations

Athletic Shorts was adapted as an audio book by Recorded Books in 1995. Narrated by Frank Muller, this is an unabridged version of the book, running over four hours.

The short story "A Brief Moment in the Life of Angus Bethune" was adapted in 1994 by Jill Gordon as a screenplay. The film from the screenplay was released as *Angus* to mixed reviews in 1995. Despite an appealing tagline ("For everyone on the outside looking in . . . your moment has arrived!"), a popular soundtrack featuring "hot" bands at the time such as Goo Goo Dolls, Weezer, and Green Day, plus Academy Award winners George S. Scott and Kathy Bates in major roles, the film lost money, grossing less than five million dollars. Readers of *Athletic Shorts* who like the short story format have lots of choices, but most popular would be *Ultimate Sports: Short Stories by Outstanding Writers for Young Adults* edited by Don Gallo (Delacorte, 1996). The Angus story appears in the collection *Prejudice: Stories about Hate, Ignorance, Revelation, and Transformation* edited by Daphne Muse (Hyperion, 1995). "Angus" first appeared in the Donald Gallo edited story collection *Connections: Short Stories By Outstanding Writers for Young Adults* (Delacorte 1989).

Other Gallo collections, such as *Time Capsule: Short Stories about Teenagers Throughout The Twentieth Century* (Delacorte, 2000) and *On the Fringe* (Dial Books, 2001) also contain stories by Crutcher. Readers of the Louie Banks story ("In the Time I Get") would be interested in novels dealing with AIDS such as *Until Whatever* by Martha Humphreys (Clarion, 1992), *Night Kites* by M. E. Kerr (HarperCollins, 1987) and Theresa Nelson's *Earthshine* (Orchard, 1994). Those fascinated by the wrestling stories would be interested in *Wrestling Sturbridge* by Rick Wallace (Random House, 1997), and, of course, *Vision Quest* by Terry Davis (Viking, 1979). A novel about another female wrestler like in "The Athletic Shorts 21 Other Pin" is the focus of *There's A Girl in My Hammerlock* by Jerry Spinelli (Aladdin, 1994). Jacqueline Woodson's *Wonder Boys* (Bantam, 2000) and Harry Mazer's *When the Phone Rang* (Scholastic, 1985) would appeal to readers moved by "Goin' Fishin'," a tale of a teenage orphan. Out of the *Ordinary: Essays on Growing Up with Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Parents* edited by Noelle Howey (St Martin's, 2000) as well as the novels *Jack* by A. M. Holmes (Vintage, 1990) and *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* by Jacqueline Woodson (Point, 1997) are related to the Angus story.

## Related Web Sites

"Author Feature-Chris Crutcher." Carmel Clay Public Library Young Adult Department. <http://www.carmel.lib.in.us/ya/crutcher.htm> Short summaries of each Crutcher novel including a discussion of themes and subjects.

"Author Profile: Chris Crutcher." TeenReads.Com <http://www.teenreads.com/authors/au-crutcher-chris.asp> Good in-depth interview with Crutcher, focusing on the connection between his work as a therapist and as a storyteller.

Also includes Crutcher's views about how teachers can better connect with students, and about the use of classics in the classroom.

Chris Crutcher Web Site. <http://www.aboutcrutcher.com> Author's official website contains biographical information, links to more resources, and essays by Crutcher regarding school violence.

Crutcher, Chris. "On Writing Sports Fiction." In Literature for Today's Young Adult Online [http://occ.awlonline.com/bookbind/pubbooks/nilsen\\_awl/chapter5/customl/deluxe-content.html](http://occ.awlonline.com/bookbind/pubbooks/nilsen_awl/chapter5/customl/deluxe-content.html) Crutcher talks about the role of sports in his novel, and the reason his main characters engage in athletic pursuits.

Cunfer, Sue. "Learning about Chris Crutcher."

School of Communication, Information, and Library Studies at Rutgers University <http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/special/kay/crutcher.html> Nice overview of Crutcher's works with excerpts from reviews, lists of awards, and links.



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