

Chartbreaker Short Guide

Chartbreaker by Gillian Cross

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Overview

Chartbreaker examines serious issues of identity, manipulation, and family tension through a compelling look at a teenage runaway's rise to fame with a rock band. The band's name is "Kelp" and the runaway is its only female member, the seventeen-year-old singer known professionally as Finch. The ideas are channeled through Finch, who tells the story believably with exciting intensity. Within the framework of a star's memoir, she describes her unhappy schoolgirl life as Janis Mary Finch, and her escape at sixteen into a cutthroat world of agents, performers, music producers, and critics.

Finch describes memorable characters, vivid encounters, and pivotal moments of battling to survive in the highly competitive climate of popular music.

The biggest challenge for Finch is singer Christie Joyce, Kelp's mercilessly manipulative leader. While Finch struggles increasingly with a complex, enslaving attraction to Christie, he uses every means at his disposal to keep her emotionally charged for their performances. He does not hesitate to refashion her for the band's advantage and to intrude on her most private family moments.

Through her relationship with Christie and other show business types, Finch reveals what it takes to grow up, become hardened and aggressive, and finally succeed both as an individual and as a recording artist. Her memoir distinguishes between the glamour of hitting the top of the charts and the harsh reality of personal pain and grueling effort that make success possible in the entertainment business.

About the Author

Gillian Cross was born in London, England on December 24, 1945, and she grew up in a household rich in books and storytelling. Her father, a scientist and musician, read and recorded stories on tape. Her mother, an English teacher, made up stories to tell her children. Cross invented stories as a child, and begged for birthday presents of paper to write them down.

Besides amusing her younger brother and sister, she invented serialized, "fast fiction" to entertain friends during their long train ride to school.

Cross always thought of her stories as "private writing"; she later felt inhibited by their clumsiness in comparison to the "official writing" she studied in literature classes.

Cross received her B.A. in English with first-class honors from Somerville College, Oxford, and completed her M.A. in 1972 and her doctorate in 1974 at the University of Sussex. The completion of her formal education brought Cross a sense of freedom and control over her fictional efforts. Married by this time and making up stories for her own children, she started a children's book group, began to write in earnest, and seriously tried to publish her fiction.

After writing five completed stories and receiving numerous rejections for publication, Cross had two manuscripts accepted simultaneously. Since then she has written over twenty books, and a number have received 4512 Chartbreaker awards or other recognition. These include *The Dark Behind the Curtain*, *On the Edge*, *Chartbreaker*, and *Roscoe's Leap*. Cross has noted that, although writing became her major interest and activity, it is not all she has done. Her work experiences include assisting a village baker, aiding a member of Parliament, teaching, and serving as a clerical assistant.

As a writer, Cross perceives children and young adults as a distinctive group. She argues that children read differently from adults. They identify more easily with characters, respond readily to a writer's excited imagination and should be allowed the privacy to do it. Cross believes that targeting this younger audience brings her freedom from the cynical approach required to write adult fiction. She can underscore the importance and power of ordinary people and explore significant themes of human emotions, virtues, and vices. Cross advocates writing that illumines life's darker aspects, including those dramatic events and difficult choices that cruelly stir the emotions. Reviewers especially praise her suspenseful, positive treatments of disturbing situations and moral questions.

Setting

Janis Mary Finch begins her story in contemporary Birmingham, England, at the motorway cafe where she often flees from the arguments at home. Her father deserted the family, and her depressed mother found a live-in boyfriend some months ago. Finch could cope with the situation before the boyfriend came, but now she cannot live with what she interprets as his interference in her caring relationship with her mother. Finch meets the band one night when she storms out after another argument, one in which the boyfriend supports her mother's rebuke for Finch's skipping school.

Finch is consoling herself with black coffee and a rainy view of passing truck traffic when the four male musicians who comprise the band "Kelp" burst into the cafe. When her angry mood causes her to match Christie stare for stare, and to taunt and sing for him right there, he invites her to come along with the band. Finch has an embarrassing first try singing with Kelp at a local eighteenth birthday party and goes home in disgrace.

Nonetheless, Christie sees talent in her, and Finch steals from her mother's savings for train fare to join Kelp in London.

Life with Kelp and Christie takes Finch first to the band's filthy, stinking two-room flat "on top of a cheap chow mein joint." Soon Christie relocates Finch to a room in his widowed mother's "mean-looking house round the back of the shops." Finch learns to sing with Kelp in makeshift rehearsal halls, tough pubs, and smelly basement clubs on off nights. Soon she is the pivotal figure in achieving "the true, tough, ironic Kelp sound." She gives emotion-charged performances that bring the band better bookings in England and the attention of major producers and studios.



Social Sensitivity

Cross commendably shatters the traditional, stereotypical female image for Chartbreaker's major character. She depicts young Janis Mary Finch learning how to hold her own among male band members and other self-serving music-business types. As a lead singer, Finch is the pivotal figure in her band's success. Cross shows the tough singer not only surviving a complex attraction to her male counterpart but eventually even equalizing her strengths with his. Lesser female characters invite thoughtful discussion of the role of women, like manager Mae who dominates her husband, Finch's mother who needs a man, and Christie's widowed mother Ida Joyce who emerges into a mild degree of feminist awareness.

On the other hand, Chartbreaker does present sensitive issues. Finch is a rebellious teenager, uncooperative at home and uninterested in education.

Finch steals from her mother and repays in a way that causes hurt. The mother's death occurs without reconciliation, and Finch is violent toward her hated, grieving stepfather at the funeral. The act is as ugly as the rockmusic scene Finch represents. Many characters are tough, talk in street slang, use profanity, and drink alcoholic beverages—including members of Finch's band. A rival band has a member who is on heroin. A fight breaks out in a smoky pub where Finch performs, and six arrests are made.

Cross handles these elements with tact and appreciation for the sensitivity of the situation she creates. Because the music business depicted in Chartbreaker demands unusual toughness and hard choices, Finch is devised accordingly. She is as muscular and big as many men, and the ability to take care of herself is noted to be a factor in her decision to join the band.

Although Finch runs from home to the cramped living quarters of four young men, lovemaking is never an issue. In fact, Cross carefully constructs an attraction for Finch to a singer whose psychological manipulations require him to stay untouchable. He soon takes Finch to live at his mother's house because it would be "bad for the band" if she becomes "frustrated or pregnant."

In addition, although Finch gets drunk her first time out with the band and later makes empty beer cans part of her stage act, Cross establishes on the novel's first page that the character's favorite drink is water; also there established is the fact that Finch does not share her room. Cross believes that children's fiction cannot ignore tough issues or violent events, but they can be wisely handled. "Death and danger and injury are hard, definite, dramatic things," according to Cross. They happen, and young readers should be warned. Cross's purpose in Chartbreaker is to expose young readers to the harsh reality of the rock music scene they are too inclined to glamorize and admire.



Literary Qualities

Among her many techniques in *Chartbreaker*, Cross employs flashback to striking effect. The narrative consists primarily of the first-person reflections of a lead rock singer who describes the rise of her stunning career. The tale is told in a vivid, trueconfession style that invites immediate reader identification. There is an edgy tone in the narrative as well, suitable to the highly charged, rockmusic subject matter. Major characters are intriguing, sharply drawn, and clearly differentiated. A one-page personal statement by the star opens the novel in an intriguing way, as it quickly introduces the major character in the context of her success. The subsequent narrative which explains the history of that success is both paced and plotted well.

The device of breaking up narrative is employed every several chapters to convey a show-business atmosphere and supply different perspectives. A newspaper clipping, for example, is headed "A Day in the Life of Finch." A one-sided phone conversation by manager Mae Grierson reveals that Finch has energy, originality, and "power that slams you in the ribs." Mae also importantly defines her own character. She "has been on the edge of the music business for thirty years," drinks heavily, and always gets what she wants. Later an advice column lets the reader know information Finch does not, that her mother is remarried and very ill. A simple death notice inserted further along grips the reader with a power Finch's own narration could not achieve. A set of reviews reveals the band's impact and style, including information the reader needs to know about Finch's on-stage threatening manner toward Christie.

Song lyrics are threaded effectively through the narrative, lending atmosphere as well as enhancing believability and excitement. Lines from the biographical song "Face It" frame the narrative. They add great power to the opening chapter, when Finch refers to the video version to describe her first meeting with Kelp. In the video, striking descriptive images blend ingeniously with lyrics to support the thematic concept of identity in the making. For example, as Finch sings such lyrics as "strange reflections by the motorway," she looks up from her coffee cup to show a blank where her face should be. From within the cup her face stares up shifting and changing, in black and white. The band's appearance is introduced with color and words that convey percussive sounds: "Splash!" Finch's reflection shatters, and she stands in a shower of colored drops.

The devices continue after Finch abandons the glamorized video to take up her "real-life" story. She recalls sitting in the cafe with the reflection of her face "floating huge and ghostly" in the window. Bright lights from traffic race by until everything goes "smash," and the band erupts into the cafe "vibrating" with color. When Christie joins in her singing, it is "like a blurred picture coming suddenly sharp into focus." The tough relationship to come is foreshadowed: "my voice and Christie's singing scat at each other, like glittering scribble, beyond sense, driving each other on."



The beginning split between old and new identities is conveyed by a similar image as Janis Mary proceeds to the train for London. She feels insulated from normal noises "behind a wall of glass."

Images relating to reflection recur to link Finch with Christie. The pair appear reflected together in water, in a mirror, as defiant or brutal images.

During a performance, Finch sees her face "reflected very small in Christie's eyes." When Finch arrives at the realization that she is a single identity, mature and complete, the moment is underscored by her stare into a hall mirror: "Square head, heavy black greatcoat, clenched fist. Finch's reflection." Figurative language also enlivens the narrative. Finch cannot take Rollo seriously: "Not with Christie soaked like a dark stain into my mind." When the band discusses the strategy of danger, Rollo's words slide into place "like hot rivets, pulling everything together."

The use of symbolism is important in the novel. The model locomotive called North Star is a recurring symbol of the perfectionism that marks Christie's character. The North Star represents Christie's desire for control as well. As Finch remarks, in business deals as with his "super-perfect train set" Christie wants to act "the Great Controller in the Sky." In his role as a "Christ" figure, Christie is as aptly named as Dave, Job, and Rollo are in their own ways. The North Star also represents the weak spot in Christie that Finch can exploit, his past with the father he has lost. Finch takes the controls of the North Star as she contemplates her revenge for Christie's engineered intrusion into the privacy of her mother's funeral. The nunchaku becomes an important symbol then as well. It was given to Finch as a prize for her toughness, and she offers it to Christie in a sudden, final symbolic gesture of compassionate understanding and realized equality.



Themes and Characters

Chartbreaker features flawed family members and a variety of tough-talking characters from the entertainment business. Finch is the narrator and the focus of major themes of identity, maturation, and manipulation. She is a unique creation and certainly no stereotype. Her most life-changing relationship is with Kelp's leader and singer, Christie Joyce. Before she meets Christie, sixteen-year-old Janis Mary Finch is tough, independent, and very negative about herself. She does not identify with the term "good girl," thinks school is a waste of time, believes herself socially inferior, and feels left out at home. Janis Mary is almost six feet tall and heavily built, and she considers her long, blowdried hair her only attraction.

The band Kelp brings Janis Mary her first feelings of self-confidence. When she sings with Christie and his three musicians in the cafe, she realizes happily: "I can do this!" At the same time Christie stirs her for reasons she cannot understand. Kelp's Job, Dave, and Rollo are all tall and look "sensational," while Christie is angry, deliberate, a "pale, skinny boy" shorter than she. Finch finds Christie "impossible to ignore" even as she taunts him. His approach leaves her breathless from fear and a terrible fascination. Attraction to Christie becomes the pivotal factor in her relationship with Kelp, and a cause of great personal torment to her.

Christie is an unyielding perfectionist, godlike in his assertion of control.

He riles Janis Mary as he refashions her to fit his image of the band. He shortens her name to Finch and has her hair done in a thuglike block cut.

He provides lessons in the martial arts to aid her movements and prescribes an on-stage ninja suit she hates. Finch is torn by the tensions between her old "Janis Mary" self and the defiant, brutal identity Christie demands. In time, however, she wears her ninja suit as armor, a disguise she wraps around herself. She feels that it turns Janis Mary into "Finch, the shadow warrior, capable of anything" except resolving her complex relationship with Christie. He uses her private emotions, her feelings for him above all, as a means to energize the band and electrify an audience.

Dave, Job, and Rollo accept Christie's ways, but Finch relates readily with each of them because they do not threaten her. She is impressed by the instrumental versatility of Dave, but his personality least engages her.

Dave, almost a namesake of Michelangelo's David for reason of public display, is a show-off "golden beach-boy" who craves applause. He cultivates his biceps and the adulation of women.

Keyboard artist and songwriter Job is more private, unimpressed by people and things, and the "cleverest" of the group. He understands Finch's feelings, and he encapsulates and glamorizes her runaway experience with Kelp in his chart-breaking song entitled "Face It."



With Job, Finch feels comfortable enough to admit that Christie's capacity to expose her private emotions on stage tears her apart: "I can't use my feelings as a stage act." Finch's situation and Job's reply address an underlying thematic question in the novel, whether art is identical to life. According to Job, "It's not possible to keep things separate like that." Vaguely similar to the biblical figure whose name he shares, Job says that he abandoned a wife and children for his music. He counsels Finch about her private love-hate feelings toward Christie that cause her to behave so aggressively on stage: "Violence can speak in whispers as well." He also advises "getting off the see-saw."

Kelp's drummer Rollo is the nicest of the group and, but for Christie, "Janis Mary's dream." Rollo reminds Finch of "a lovely, clumsy Labrador" who, as his name might suggest, "rolls over" for people. Finch declares Rollo "pathetically friendly," easily hurt, and incapable of lying. Finch learns from Rollo early in her relationship with Kelp that Christie stirs her up on purpose, and that no one in the band wants "a pallid, watery Janis Mary sort of person." What attracted them all to her at first was the way she "spat back at Christie." The understanding Rollo brings is important in motivating Janis Mary increasingly to "play it Finch," strong and hard. Gentle Rollo is also responsible for suggesting the onstage strategy of "danger" or "risk," which rests upon real-life aggressive displays from Finch.

The toughness the band sees in Finch has much to do with the presence in her mother's home of Himmler. The German name reflects Finch's perception that he is a hated, foreign influence in her life. "I hated him from the second Mum told me he was moving in with us," Finch says. As live-in boyfriend, fiance, and husband to Barbie Finch, he is the reason Janis Mary flees to Kelp. She is never convinced that Himmler is anything but a meddler bent on ruining her closeness to her mother. Christie does not hesitate to exploit the problem, even arranging for Himmler's presence at a performance. That day Kelp lands a top manager because Finch is seen singing her real-life rage and pain at Christie over his manipulations and the thought of her "Mum" lying in Himmler's arms.

Although Himmler and Barbie Finch appear seldom in the narrative, they are powerful contributors to the tug-of-war between Finch's private and public identities. Barbie Finch represents the ties to home and personal concerns that cause turmoil in professional life. As a woman who needs a man to fend off her depression, Barbie Finch raises the thematic issue of feminism. Another character who addresses feminist and family themes is Ida Joyce, Christie's widowed mother.

Initially Ida too is depressed, and for that reason Finch resists any attempt at a relationship. Gradually, however, she warms to Ida and talks about Kelp over cups of cocoa. Ida perks up as a result, gains a "daughter," and gathers strength to challenge her past and the son who callously ignores her.

Finch finds through Ida the means to avenge herself when Christie goes too far and manipulates her grief at her mother's death. In an act that is a triumph of progress for Ida, she lets Finch take away Christie's beloved, perfect model locomotive named the



North Star. Ida also counsels Finch, and in that role she contributes to the thematic question of whether art is identical to life. Ida disagrees when Finch tells her that the people who comprise Kelp and their music are the same. "The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra is people as well," Ida says, but "they don't play their life stories."

Ida warns Finch against Christie's onstage exploitation of her real feelings: "Take care of yourself, Janis. Because Chris won't do it for you."

Manager Mae Grierson, by contrast, wants precisely that "real-life angle" to help her bring Kelp's performing artistry to the attention of top producers.

"Nothing of the mother-figure about Mae," Finch says. "She wanted me up and battling, or she couldn't care less about me." Mae likes the energy and "concentrated danger" Finch represents on stage, and she, like Christie, manipulates it to strike business deals as well. "Without her," Mae interprets Finch to the band, "you're about as exciting as a day-trip to Woolworth's."

Mae, as a tough, alcoholic show-business type, is a scheming manipulator who thoroughly dominates Stanley, her husband and business partner.

Among the minor characters who address similar thematic points is "jetsetting pop poetess" Annabee Briggs, girlfriend of playboy Lionel Fram. Annabee resonates like Job with the question of whether art can be separated from life: "You must know that they're the same thing." Terry Donovan, A & R man for Zombie Records, parades the Himmler-like, patronizing attitude that causes Finch to react with a hostility that unwittingly cements her relationship with Christie. Christie gives her his prized martial-arts weapon, a nunchaku, after she smears pastry in Donovan's face.

Philip Tissiman, Zombie's up-andcoming new record producer, is a type who serves to expose the fallacy of perfectionism. He too has a "niggling, exact determination to be perfect," and he and perfectionist Christie disagree over what that is.

"The Rat" Saunders is a type of compulsory-listening disk jockey who can make or break a new release. The Rat's disapproval of Kelp's recording "Face It" provokes the shaken Christie to flee with Finch for a few days at Bournemouth, where he reveals to her key information for her later vengeful scheme against him. She learns about the place in his life of the perfect model locomotive, North Star, which his deceased father made. It enabled Christie to understand "quality." Finch receives further important information from karate teacher Bernard, who becomes a brief confidant to the now-indictive Finch. Like Job, Bernard discusses the strong love-hate link between the singers and gives her the clue to Christie's undoing: "He's very insecure."

Another character, although hardly seen, is highly significant in Finch's life and the thematic concepts it illustrates. Chloe holds the eighteenth birthday party that brings Finch her first chance to sing publicly with Kelp.

The large Janis Mary Finch hates the type of "small and slim and glossy" girl that Chloe and her "richer and snottier" friends or "Chloe-clones" represent. The party guests



address ideas of social inferiority and female competition, which cease to trouble Finch when Christie forces her to perform barefoot and dripping wet. For the first time Finch feels the joy of escaping from the game of trying to compete: "Looking your absolute worst is a sort of liberation." Finch also gains here another boost in confidence when she feels for the first time the huge uplift of knowing she can sway an audience.



Topics for Discussion

1. The novel was titled *Chartbreaker* when it was first published in England. Should that title have been kept?

Are there any advantages to the title *Chartbreaker*?

2. Finch is a tough, even violent, female. Is she a disturbing character?

A likable character? A believable character? As a narrator who necessarily tells a one-sided story, does Finch reveal any flaws in herself?

4519 3. What is accomplished by having Finch narrate the story? Would it have been improved by having another narrator, or several different ones to represent different points of view?

4. Finch describes Dave, Job, and Rollo as tall and fair, but not identical (Chapter 1). Are these characters sufficiently differentiated? Do they pale in comparison to Christie?

5. How does Finch feel when she first sees Chloe and her "Chloe-clones" (Chapter 2)? How does Finch's perception of herself change as a result of Chloe's party?

6. Finch describes Rollo as "Janis Mary's dream" (Chapter 6) and rejects his obvious interest in her. Besides the reason of attraction to Christie, does this signify a change in her?

7. What does Mae Grierson see in Finch that makes her want to manage Kelp?

8. During a business meeting Finch squashes a cream bun into the mouth of a record company executive (Chapter 10) and says "We're not a tame band." How do Christie and Kelp develop the idea (Chapter 12)? What does this mean for Finch on stage and in private?

9. What is the symbolism of the nunchaku given to Finch by Christie at the end of Chapter 10?

10. What is the symbolism of the North Star model locomotive? What does the North Star mean to Christie (Chapter 18, for example)?

11. What changes Ida Joyce from a depressed woman to an interested, caring one? What does it mean when she steps aside to let Finch take away the North Star?

12. Why does Rat Saunders disapprove of Kelp's chart-breaking song "Face It"? Do you agree with the reason given by the karate teacher Bernard (Chapter 18), or is the event merely an unrealistic touch on Cross's part?



13. Chartbreaker begins with lyrics from "Face It," and another version of the song appears at the novel's end.

Are these lyrics an effective device to aid the reader's understanding of Janis Mary Finch and her relationships?

14. Would it be bad for the band if Finch makes peace with Christie?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Is Cross informed enough about the rock music scene to make *Chartbreaker* thoroughly believable, or do you find lapses from needed realism? Discuss with examples from the novel. Supply, if you can, examples from the experiences of actual rock groups you know about.

2. *On the Edge* and *A Map of Nowhere* are two novels by Cross. Read one of them and compare it with *Chartbreaker* in terms of themes.

3. Trace the changes in Finch that take place because of knowing Christie. What effect does he have initially, and how much is Janis Mary really altered? Be sure to include an interpretation of the novel's ending (Chapter 18), when the two appear "joined by the short, strong chain." Does this development mean that Finch and Christie have made peace with each other?

4. Cross employs devices of an interpolated "personal file," an interview with Finch, the content of a one-sided phone conversation, a letter to an advice columnist, reviews of Kelp's performances, and a death notice.

Discuss the purpose of each. Are these devices merely "gimmicky"? Could the novel be as effective without them?

5. Discuss Himmler's role in both the professional life of Finch and in her relationship with her mother. Does Himmler truly deserve the degree of hostility displayed toward him by Finch? Does he really prevent her reconciliation with her mother, or is Finch not as close to her mother as it seems?

6. Four female characters are significant in *Chartbreaker*: Finch herself, her mother Barbie Finch, Christie's mother Ida Joyce, and Kelp's manager Mae Grierson. Describe and compare these characters. Are any two alike? How would you judge each as a feminist?

7. Cross establishes a complex network of relationships to treat her theme of manipulation. Who are the manipulators in *Chartbreaker*? Certain characters? Every character? Discuss the interrelationships.



For Further Reference

Cross, Gillian. [Autobiographical sketch.] In *Sixth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*. Edited by Sally Holmes Holtze. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1989, pp. 66-67. Cross tells of growing up in a bookish household, her childhood efforts to create "fast fiction," and her adult grasp on elements of a story. "I realized—at last—that structure, imagery, and characterization were simply necessary tools in the struggle to tell that story properly."

———. "Twenty Things I Don't Believe About Children's Books."

School Librarian 39 (May 1991): 44-46.

Cross provides an important statement of her approach to children's fiction. Among her many points, she distinguishes between adult and children's fiction and comments on vocabulary, social effects of literature, violence, and the handling of realism. Cross indicates that the reader she keeps in mind when writing is "the practical, unliterary one who doesn't usually read, but who might—just might—pick up one of my books."

"Gillian (Clare) Cross." In *Contemporary Authors*. New Revision Series.

Volume 38. Edited by James G. Lesniak and Susan M. Trosky. Detroit: Gale Research, 1993: 107-109.

Cross speaks for herself in this interview entry, which includes a brief biography and list of her publications. She discusses the "great divide" she always felt between "official" writing for school classes and the "private" writing she liked to do. "What really made me into a writer was finishing my doctoral thesis." Cross comments as well on her reasons for writing young people's fiction.

"Gillian (Clare) Cross." In *Something about the Author*. Volume 71. Edited by Diane Telgen. Detroit: Gale Research, 1993: 53-55. Biographical details, lists of publications, honors, and awards are provided with a brief summary of critical commentary.

"Reviewers have noted that Cross's willingness to deal with the harsh, even malevolent, side of life in her fiction accounts for much of her success."

"Gillian (Clare, nee Arnold) Cross." In *Twentieth-Century Children's Writers*.

3d ed. Edited by Tracy Chevalier.

Chicago: St. James, 1989, pp. 247-248. The entry includes biographical details, list of publications, and a critical overview of major novels by Cross.

Related Titles

Cross is known for novels that involve tough situations. Her awardwinning novel *On the Edge* treats themes of identity and family relations through a kidnaping by a terrorist couple determined to destroy the family unit. The victim, a teenager named Tug, must preserve his identity while meeting demands to call the couple his parents. In the novel *A Map of Nowhere*, young Nick Miller must choose whether he will betray a new, close friend for the adventure of riding with his older brother's thieving gang of bikers. Failed family relationships figure prominently in this novel, as they do in *Chartbreaker*.



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