

Chinese Handcuffs Short Guide

Chinese Handcuffs by Chris Crutcher

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Overview

In *Chinese Handcuffs*, high school junior Dillon Hemingway, a fantastic athlete, refuses to participate in any school sports. He believes that too many coaches "have somehow confused athletic commitment with patriotism and human spiritual values, among other things." Dillon instead trains for triathlons because "it's so mental" and "you do it all for yourself." As the story unfolds, Dillon encounters much pain in his own life and in that of his girlfriend Jennifer. He tries to process his pain by trying to understand his brother's decision to kill himself. Dillon becomes deeply involved with Stacy, his ex-brother's girlfriend, and with Jennifer, only to discover that both women are hiding something from him and everyone else. Along the way, Dillon finds himself in conflict with the principal of his school and members of his brother's old motorcycle gang. Dillon's greatest conflict, however, is internal. Unable to "save" his brother, Dillon sets out to save Jennifer from her stepfather who is sexually abusing her.



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 ALAN (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 July 17, 1946, in Dayton, Ohio, the middle child of parents he claims were just passing through the city.

He told Dave Jenkinson in an interview in *Emergency Librarian* that they all arrived "before I got dry" in Cascade, Idaho, a small lumber and logging town of less than 1,000 people. His father, John, had been a B17 pilot in World War II. Crutcher described his father to Betty Carter in an interview for *School Library Journal* 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*, he told Carter that 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, telling Carter that "my mother was a pretty significant alcoholic through my junior high, high school, and college years."

His family were 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 directly the opposite of his older brother, who was valedictorian of his class. Crutcher told Jenkinson that "I got a good picture of what that was like and decided I didn't want anything to do with it." When assigned to do book reports, Crutcher, rather than reading the book, would either borrow an old report of his brother's, although, as he told Jenkinson, he would need to "misspell a few words, take it down a notch" before he turned it in. Failing at that, he would also complete book report assignments by inventing authors and stories, getting the names of characters from the Boise, Idaho, telephone 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." In an interview with Thomas Kozikowski for *Authors & Artists for Young Adults*, Crutcher said the column "was a kind of smartass thing—I would take shots at people—and I really liked it."

Crutcher found high school a good place to be a stand-up comic, although his other passion, which surfaces in all his books, was sports. During an interview with *Publishers Weekly*, Crutcher told Heather Vogel Frederick that, in a small town like Cascade, "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 to Kozikowski that he was not a star and that "my characters are always much better athletes than I was. I really didn't become proficient in basketball until after the twelfth grade—I was a bench sitter of gross proportion."

In college Crutcher excelled as an athlete in swimming, reaching the small college nationals at Eastern Washington State College. Very much a product of his times, Crutcher told Kozikowski that he was "rebellious as hell—I mean rebellious with ideas—and I really enjoyed it." After graduating in 1968 with a bachelor of arts, a major in psychology and minor in sociology, Crutcher and a friend took a cross-country trip which landed them eventually in Dallas, Texas, where he worked in 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 a half years, Crutcher left Washington to work in the inner city of Oakland, California, at an alternative school.

Crutcher told Jenkinson that the school was "the toughest place I've ever been . . . a place for kids who absolutely couldn't make it in the Oakland Public Schools." 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 told Kozikowski that living in an urban environment was difficult after having grown up in a rural small town. He noted: "I really don't like crowds and I think that growing up in the mountains really got to me." Crutcher left the school in 1981, returning to the Northwest.

Crutcher told Jenkinson that, despite vowing not to get involved in another emotionally demanding profession, he immediately had one: "I wasn't in Spokane for six months before I took a job as the coordinator of the Spokane Child Protection Team, a group of people who work on the toughest 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 and Davis pursuing 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.

Crutcher told Jenkinson that the book was not written specifically as a young adult novel: "I 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 and received rave reviews.

That *Running Loose* was not written as a young adult novel is hard to believe since it is such a perfect book for young adults. 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 beyond 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 win back his life from grief.

The phrase "running loose" echoes Pony Boy's cry of "stay gold" from *The Outsiders* some twenty years earlier. *Running Loose* is rich in detail about the small town of Trout, Idaho, modeled after Crutcher's own Cascade. The book introduces readers to the Crutcher world: small towns in the Northwest, introspective male athletes who are in the process of becoming heroes in every sense of the word, the contrast between caring adult characters and 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 swimmer in college, "stotan" (meaning someone who is a cross between a Stoic and a Spartan and able to face a task with steely-eyed determination) is a story about four high school swimmers. Less plot-driven than *Running Loose*, *Stotan!* contains characters whose damaged lives are the real story. The book's deeply scarred characters are 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 explained to Carter 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 sport passions of his protagonists. Crutcher told Kozikowski that "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." Crutcher elaborated on the role of sports in his books in an author statement for the online version of *Literature for Today's Young Adult*, noting that "athletics provides a rich background for fiction because all the elements of good storytelling exist in a given contest." Sports would play a lesser role in Crutcher's next book, *The Crazy Horse Electric Game*, in which the focus is on what happens to a great young athlete after he suffers an injury which affects his ability not only 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 dealing with expectations.



Crutcher's career as a therapist dealing with child abuse cases supported the writing of his next novel, *Chinese Handcuffs*.

Here, sports drama is the backdrop for the traumas faced by the main characters: Dillon, who witnesses his brother's suicide, and, Jennifer, who is the victim of sexual abuse. The book's complex plot, serious themes, and relentless exposure of the characters' pain made it Crutcher's most controversial novel. *Booklist* magazine, which has a policy of only reviewing books it recommends for purchase by libraries, took the unprecedented step of publishing a negative review of *Chinese Handcuffs*, which demonstrates the book's power and the respect Crutcher commands in the field of young adult literature.

Crutcher followed the intensity of *Chinese Handcuffs* with *Athletic Shorts*, a collection of stories. Only one story, "A Brief Life 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 when Crutcher published *The Deep End*, an adult mystery novel featuring a child therapist who looks into the case of a missing child. Child abuse is once again the subject; this book won rave reviews and, according to Heather Vogel Frederick, was a presidential pick, one of the four books President Clinton purchased one year while Christmas shopping.

Swimming is the sport of choice for Eric, a.k.a. Moby, the main character in Crutcher's next novel, *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*.

After this award-winning story about child abuse, Crutcher wrote *Ironman*, an adult novel in which the male protagonist, Bo Brewster, who cannot communicate with his father, writes letters about his triathlon to television personality Larry King.

Around the time *Ironman* was published, Crutcher left the mental health profession to become a full-time writer. Ironically, after turning out a book a year, Crutcher took over five years to complete his next novel, *Whale Talk*. During this time Crutcher worked on a screenplay for *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*, several short stories for young adult collections, and a yet-to-be published novel he told Frederick would be his "most autobiographical" book. He also completed a novel about a school shooting, but, as he told Jennifer Brown at *Publishers Weekly*, 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 is about a multi-racial character, T. J., who runs afoul of the school's athletic department when he forms a swimming team and is drawn by his community work with abused children into a deadly conflict with an abusive father. *Whale Talk* is very much a Chris Crutcher novel in terms of style, tone, and theme. While the book entertains, it also teaches. The teaching comes, as in all Crutcher novels, not from an adult authority figure but from the characters as they search for the truth in their own lives. He told the audience when he accepted the Margaret Edwards Lifetime achievement award: "For me to know my characters, I needed to get out of their way and let them tell their own



truths; respect 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."

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. Crutcher told Teri Lesesne in an interview for *Emergency Librarian*: "life is exactly fair; people are not fair and relationships are not predictable either. Life is fair, though." Protecting kids from reading about these subjects, Crutcher believes, serves no purpose. In the introduction to *Athletic Shorts*, Crutcher states that there are plenty of people who think kids should not be exposed in print to what they are exposed to in their lives. But he believes differently.

Although sports constitute an important part of his fiction, Crutcher's main concern is to create stories that allow readers to make connections in their own lives. Connection making, Crutcher told Horn Book's Christine McDonnell, is his real purpose: "I want to tell stories that seem real so that people will recognize something in their own lives and see the connections. We are all connected." From conflict comes connection, as characters from Louie Banks in *Running Loose* to T. J. in *Whale Talk* are tested. In his books about identity, Crutcher looks for heroes. He told Lesesne 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 in an essay in *English Journal*, 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 as a writer. After quoting Crutcher's comments 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 books has won over both young adult readers and professionals in the field of young adult literature. As mentioned, Crutcher has received awards from the three largest professional associations for the body of his work, while individual titles have all been awarded 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 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 is single, 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 rigorous. Crutcher told Lesesne 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." Crutcher says, "I revise as a I write, sort of chapter by chapter. I read what I have written out loud and make some changes." In addition to reading his own work in the writing process, Crutcher reads a limited amount of young adult literature, particularly the work of his friends, Terry Davis and Will Weaver.

He is impressed with relatively new authors, including Christopher Paul Curtis and Rob Thomas, and admires the works of established adult novelists Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., 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

Chinese Handcuffs is set at Chief Joseph High School in Tree Folks, Washington.

Unlike Crutcher's other novels in which setting is important, setting is less important here perhaps because the tragic events in Chinese Handcuffs could happen anywhere.

The town is not so small or so isolated as there is an office of Child Protective Services, and Dillon is able to drive to a college to meet with Professor Newcomb.

In a way, the setting here seems psychological; the characters in this book are edging their way into the adult world. Dillon and Jennifer are, in many ways, teenagers only by the age on their driver's licenses.

The world they experience, full of pain, longing, and sorrow, is created by the actions of adults. Crutcher believes his role is to tell the truth. In Chinese Handcuffs, he does more than that: he explores the damage from the collision between the natural optimism of youth and the sometimes brutal reality of adult life. The test these characters face has nothing to do with high school classes; the test concerns young people learning how to confront and release the pain which surrounds them. Metaphorically, Chinese Handcuffs takes place on "the road of life" where there's been a terrible collision.

Dillon and Jenny are crawling from the wreckage and helping each other along the way because it is through relationships, Crutcher tells his readers, that what is broken can be mended, if not entirely fixed.



Social Sensitivity

Chinese Handcuffs concerns the serious issues which trouble teens: pregnancy, suicide, depression, and sexual abuse. Of these, sexual matters seem particularly important.

Dillon writes: "I can't tell the difference between being horny and being in love."

The book also explores how sexual drive can be an agent of destruction. Unchecked sexual desire is directly responsible for almost every tragic outcome in the book.

Preston's suicide seems directly related to his shame over watching and then participating in a graphically described gang rape.

Later, readers learn that Stacy's pregnancy was a contributing factor in his death. The other attempted suicide in the book is related to pregnancy, when Jennifer learns her mother is pregnant and she fears, no doubt, that her stepfather may terrorize her yet-to-be-born sister.

Dillon, Jennifer, and Dr. Newcomb discuss the effects of sexual abuse. Early in the book Dillon questions why Jennifer does not respond to him sexually, noting that they should be attracted to each other. She says: "I need you to be in my life but I can't let us be in love . . . At least not like most people think of it. Not physically anyway.

Not now. I can let you touch my heart, you've done that from the first day; but I can't let you touch my body, and I guess that what 'dates' are all about." Later in the book, Dr. Newcomb explains to Dillon the difficulties that Jennifer will have with sexual intimacy and Dillon accepts that he needs to back "way off anything romantic."

Because it deals with these issues, Chinese Handcuffs works on another, almost therapeutic level. By dealing with an issue which teens are not likely to talk about, the book becomes the connection point. Crutcher told Frederick about one particular meeting with a teenager after a writing workshop: "one girl waited until all the other kids were gone, and then she said, 'I don't have a question or anything, but I just want you to know that when I read Chinese Handcuffs I thought you knew me.'"

Crutcher defended the book against its critics by sharing stories like these of how the book affected young people. By not shying away from tough social issues, Crutcher is setting up connections. He told the interviewer for Teenread.com: The bottom line for me is to tell the truth. If a kid finds out it's true for me and true for others, there's the connection. There are kids out there who have been molested, who feel like it's their fault. There are kids who have engaged in something horrendous, because it was less painful than any alternative they could imagine. They know the very details of what it's like to be treated badly; and when they see themselves in a book, they know they're not so isolated . . . maybe there are other people out there who know this, too. "Maybe if I find someone that likes Chris's books, they'll understand this too." That's the piece that's



therapeutic. If a kid comes to me and says, "God, read this," we can start talking about that story, but we are just one step away from talking about what's real. It gives kids and adults a place to begin.

Literary Qualities

Chinese Handcuffs is one half third-person narrative and one half first-person, with letters written by the main character Dillon.

This technique allows Crutcher to get Dillon to "open up " in a way he might not in conversation. Set in italics, there is at least one letter per chapter. The letters present Dillon's thoughts, and they record dialogue in scenes featuring Dillon.

The third-person point of view allows Crutcher to "get into the minds" of his teen characters and provide information about the adult characters. In a chilling short paragraph near the end of the book, Crutcher reveals the history of Jennifer's stepfather which helps to explain his evil nature.

The third-person technique, however, primarily allows Crutcher to take readers into scenes involving different characters over time. Unlike many young adult novels which seem only concerned with the present, the characters in Chinese Handcuffs are characters haunted by the past. The story is not told in chronological order. In this way, the novel resembles traditional therapy, in which information leads circuitously to more information. With few huge revelations, the book shows how characters learn gradually.

The revelations come in the form of dramatic, or as Crutcher's critics would argue, melodramatic scenes. Very little is alluded to in Chinese Handcuffs, perhaps in part because the book, as Crutcher told Jenkinson, "was going to be my first adult book."

There are graphic scenes of animals being killed, a gang rape, and sexual abuse. Yet even those scenes are not as powerful as Preston's suicide.

For its graphic scenes and truth-telling, Chinese Handcuffs became controversial.

While almost all reviewers commented on the number of themes in the book, many looked beyond them to understand Crutcher's core message about the human spirit being able to rise above even pain this severe.

Some reviewers, including Margaret Bush, caught on to Crutcher's motives, noting, "Crutcher has constructed a tangled web of intelligent insight, creating a powerful, painful story . . . the story is compelling, fastpaced, and even a humorous one of human failing, survival and hope." Randy Brough wrote that, while "there may be too many harrowing incidents crammed into it, Chinese Handcuffs is rewarding topical[ly], and well written." A reviewer for School Library Journal dismissed it as "contrived": while "there's a place in fiction for teenage problems . . . surely not all in one novel." Yet Stephanie Zvirin's review, or rather nonreview, in Booklist magazine challenged Crutcher for writing a novel which "reads more like exploitative melodrama than gritty realism or coming-of-age." Noting problems she perceives in the graphic nature of some scenes, Zvirin concludes that the novel is "a disappointment—not because it deals straight with difficult issues, not because it is violent or controversial... rather it is an



unsuccessful book—and a disappointment— because the overloaded plot strains the novel's structure and diminishes the vital message that Crutcher is trying to convey."

Ironically, the best vehicle for delivering his message is the title. Chinese handcuffs provide a powerful metaphor for the themes which Crutcher is relating here. While there is only one scene, between Stacy and Dillon at a carnival, which involves characters "using" the Chinese handcuffs party favor, the image is repeated several times. Stacy relates that the way to escape them, as told to her by "the gypsy lady," is also "the secret of life." Once Dillon understands how "they" work—it is only by making connection and letting go that a person becomes free—his "journey" changes. He tells the secret early on, telling his brother Preston that the way to do it is "by releasing, not by pulling hard," but he is unable to integrate that wisdom until he rescues Jennifer.

Themes and Characters

Although *Chinese Handcuffs* is about many different subjects, too many according to critics of the book, the overriding theme is healing from emotional trauma. What happens to Dillon, who witnesses his brother's suicide, and Jennifer, the victim of not just sexual abuse but almost a campaign of terror by her stepfather, is not the stuff of typical young adult "problem" novels; it is much harsher. With this book, Crutcher shows teens who are drowning in pain, and it is only through letting go and making connections that they can rise above it, much the same as a person seeks to escape the party favor Chinese handcuffs by getting help. Crutcher told Jenkinson that for many teens real life deals with "overloads."

In telling the story of characters as damaged as Dillon and Jennifer, Crutcher communicates a message about overcoming pain: ghastliness does not negate human glory. Both qualities are indeed facts of life. Humanity is flawed, to be sure, but there is no fatal flaw, no idea of original sin or necessity for divine intervention.

The people in Crutcher's world rise and fall, are saved or lost, by the degree to which they are connected to the humanity in themselves and others. These themes of connectedness, loss, and salvation are the core of *Chinese Handcuffs*.

Dillon's conflict comes through in the letters he writes to his dead brother. At the start of the book, the letters are filled with great anger; Dillon calls his brother a coward. As the book develops and Dillon learns more about his brother, gets closer to his brother's girlfriend Stacy (to whom he is also attracted), and becomes involved in Jennifer's life, he is able to let go of his anger and release some of his pain. In the last letter of the book, Dillon tells his brother that "my struggle with you is finished. I'm going to let you go, push my finger in and release it from these crazy Chinese handcuffs."

Dillon Hemingway is, in many ways, the typical Crutcher protagonist: an introspective male athlete with a strong sense of independence and justice. But Dillon is embattled on many fronts, including one with the principal of his school, Mr. Caldwell, who is frustrated by Dillon's refusal to participate in school sports. Dillon, however, believes that school sports are corrupt, and he wants to retain the innocence of competing in a triathlon. While there are sports scenes in the book, they do not play a central part in the story.

The book, like *Stotanl*, has two main female characters, toward whom Dillon has sexual feelings: Stacy, his brother's girlfriend, and Jennifer, whom he knows because he manages the girls' basketball team (the same job held by Willie Weaver in *The Crazy Horse Electric Game*). Jennifer is the star of the team, maybe, as Dillon tells his brother, "the best athlete at her sport, male or female, at Chief Joe." Jennifer is known both for her defensive and offensive skills. Here, Crutcher is working on two levels. "Playing defense" is Jennifer's almost daily means to ward off another visit and incident of sexual abuse from her stepfather.



The two young women also represent Dillon's struggle with history, as he admits in his letter to Preston: "Stacy's big in my past.. . and Jen seems big in my present."

His attraction to both is not just physical.

With both he shares something underneath the surface. With Stacy, it is the haunting memory of his brother. With Jennifer, the attraction is a kinship which he describes in the first letter to his brother: "what drew me to Jen was that magical sense of connection . . . that sense that we already shared an important knowledge." The connection turns out to be trauma; Dillon was unable to "save" his brother, but he believes he can and must save Jennifer.

Rare in young adult fiction, Jennifer is also portrayed as a child, J. Matty. Thus, the horror of her "loss of innocence" is heightened. Similarly, we see how Jennifer loses the only adult, her grandfather, whom she can trust. Her biological father is the first to abuse her, so her suspicion of adults comes at an early age.

The adult characters in *Chinese Handcuffs* are broadly drawn, Coach Sherman representing good, while Jen's stepfather, T. B., represents evil. Dillon admires Coach Sherman because she "knows what athletics is about... her players never walk away empty-handed, never walk away without a lesson." The not as clearly drawn Dr. Newcomb, a professor who specializes in child abuse cases, seems to be the "dry run" for the main character in Crutcher's adult novel, *The Deep End*.

In contrast to the other adult characters in the book, T. B. is the invulnerable villain.

Crutcher told Carter: I made him bad because I made him smart. I gave him knowledge of the legal system so he could stay ahead of it. I wanted him to be invincible. I worked on a case once where we couldn't get to the parents because they were so well established in town and had such powerful legal counsel. Their girl was on a 15-minute suicide watch in the hospital and ended up killing herself when she discovered she had to go back home. And we couldn't protect her because the adults involved were so smart.

Although T. B. is evil, Crutcher exposes the sordid abuse T. B. himself experienced in explaining the character's past. The initials deliberately underscore the devastating effects of child sexual abuse which, just like tuberculosis, diminishes and even claims the lives of its victims. What makes him particularly despicable is the fact that "he never loses." When Jennifer tells Dillon her stepfather never loses in his work as an attorney, she also sends him an early message. Everything T. B. does is evil. One of his most shocking acts is murdering Jennifer's dog when she tries to tell her mother about his abuse.

Both Jennifer and Dillon come from unhappy families. Dillon's family breaks apart after the death of Preston, which served as "the conclusion to the family unraveling that began when Preston started to go off the deep end." Jennifer's family life is a horror show. Jennifer suffers both from her stepfather's abuse and her mother's denial.



In the relationship between Dillon and Jennifer, Crutcher stresses the importance of friendship, of caring, and of making connections.

Stacy emerges as strong yet afraid to admit her secret: the baby she has been passing off as adopted by her parents is really her own and Dillon's brother Preston is the father. Like Jennifer, Stacy perpetuates her secret because she feels shame. Yet she overcomes her shame about Preston's death and proudly tells her secret and admits her lies to the school. Her decision to come forward is one of the key scenes in the book and it helps inspire Dillon to take action against Jennifer's stepfather.

All the characters face choices, some easy, most hard. The choices force the character to stand up for themselves or for others.

Some of the characters in *Chinese Handcuffs* make bad choices, some like Preston make tragic ones, but most try to do "the right thing." Dillon struggles with determining what the right thing is through the entire book.

When he takes on Jennifer's stepfather, Dillon chooses good by attempting to stop evil. Susannah Sheffer notes about *Chinese Handcuffs* (as well as Crutcher's next young adult novel, *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*): "there is a brutal adult, a tough, resilient yet also deeply tormented heroine, a fiercely loyal male friend, and at least one adult who is willing to go out on a limb."

Chinese Handcuffs is about the power in and of relationships. Relationships in which people connect on the human level bring hope and strength; those which exploit and degrade emerge from weakness. Just as Dillon participates in a triathlon, a grueling event filled with obstacles and hardships requiring several skills, so too do Dillon and Jennifer take part in the often grueling process of growing up. Through each other, they gain strength; through adults like Coach Sherman and Dr. Newcomb they gain support, and through their choices and their letting go, they are set free. The book ends with the hope that they will learn to be free of the pain which has haunted them. In the end, as Dillon and Jennifer are gaining their freedom, T. B. is on his way to jail.



Topics for Discussion

1. A reviewer for Booklist called *Chinese Handcuffs* a "disappointment" because the plot is too heavy. Do you agree or disagree? Explain your view.

2. At one point, it appears as if Dillon is going to kill Jennifer's stepfather. Do you think he would go through with it?

Is murder under any circumstance justified?

3. Does *Chinese Handcuffs* give too "lurid" a description of suicide, date rape, and sexual abuse? What argument could be made to support or oppose this book being taught in schools?

4. The title of the novel is referred to many times. In the context of the story, what does the title mean?

5. Dillon will not play sports for his school because he is concerned about the attitudes of coaches? Explain why his decision is right or wrong.

6. Explain in what ways the adult characters in the novel are true to life. Is T. B. too evil? Is Coach Sherman too good?

7. There are two graphic scenes describing animals being killed. Were these necessary? If so, explain why.

8. The book is told using letters to both reveal the past and to allow Dillon to express his emotion. Does this technique work? Why or why not?

9. Some reviewers described the book as melodramatic. What did they mean by this term? Do you agree or disagree?

Explain.

10. Two suicides, one successful (Preston) and one not (Jennifer), are caused by pregnancy. What are the motivations behind each of these characters wanting to take their own lives? What other actions might they have considered taking to help resolve their problems?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Jennifer is a victim of sexual abuse by a family member. Research sexual abuse, in particular focusing on the treatment of survivors. What kind of help could Jennifer receive?

2. Dillon's brother Preston becomes a drug addict and later commits suicide.

Research the connection between suicide and addiction to alcohol and other drugs. What resources do people have who are addicted and suicidal?

3. Dillon's brother Preston rides in a motorcycle gang. Research motorcycle gangs, in particular focusing on the Hells Angels. What other groups could Preston join which might be able to help him?

4. Dillon witnesses his brother's suicide.

Research the survivors of suicide victims, in particular children or teens who have a family member take his or her own life. What effects does suicide in a family have on surviving children?

5. Dillon alludes to Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*. Both Walker's novel and *Chinese Handcuffs* tell the story (or part of the story) through the use of letters. Research this literary technique, and give examples of other novels which employ it.

6. Stacy becomes a mother while still a teenager. Research teen pregnancy, in particular focusing on efforts to reduce the number of pregnant and parenting teens.

7. Dillon participates in triathlons. Research this sporting event. What does Dillon's interest in this sport tell us about his character?

8. Jennifer considers killing herself in order to escape from her situation. Research teenage suicide, in particular focusing on the efforts to reduce the number.

What are the mistaken beliefs which some teens have when they consider suicide?

9. Jennifer's stepfather (T. B.) sexually abuses Jennifer. Research the "profile" of a typical adult who sexually abuses members of his or her family, in particular focusing on what treatments and remedies are available.

10. In *Chinese Handcuffs*, the sexual abuse of Jennifer actually occurs, but there have been examples in the news of "false memories." Research false memory syndrome, in particular focusing on recent court cases.



For Further Reference

Brough, Randy. Review of *Chinese Handcuffs*. *Voice of Youth Advocates* (June 1989).

While concerned about a bloated plot, the reviewer calls the book a "rewarding novel, tough, topical, compelling, and well written."

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

Bush, Margaret. Review of *Chinese Handcuffs*. *Horn Book* (July 1989): 487. This is a long positive review noting that the complex structure mirrors the difficult issues faced by the characters. Called "compelling," the novel is described as a painful, powerful story with the complex character of Dillon holding the plot together.

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 experiences while growing up.

"Chris Crutcher." In *Children's Literature Review*, vol. 28. Detroit: Gale, 1992. This long sketch contains a short summary of Crutcher's themes and reprints excerpts from a long article based on an interview with Crutcher. The sketch also provides excerpts for general critical works and reprints parts of reviews for each novel.

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

Crutcher, Chris. "The 2000 Margaret A. Edwards Award Acceptance Speech."

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.

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 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 Crutcher by his friend, mentor, and fellow young adult author Terry Davis. Davis examines each Crutcher title, focusing on characterization and themes.

Frederick, Heather Vogel. "Chris Crutcher: 'What's Known Can't Be Unknown.'" Publishers Weekly (February 20, 1995): 183-84. Describing Crutcher as a "ferocious child advocate," Vogel discusses Crutcher's works based on an interview.

Crutcher describes his writing process for *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* and also discusses his own teen years.

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. Also available at: <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/Fall94/Greenway.html> Jenkinson, Dave.

"Presenting Chris Crutcher." *Emergency Librarian* (January-February 1991): 67-71. Based on an interview, article examines Crutcher's works, 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*, vol. 9. Detroit: Gale, 1992. Lengthy profile based on secondary materials and an interview with Crutcher.

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

McDonnell, Christine. "New Voices, New Visions: Chris Crutcher." *Horn Book* (May 1988): 332-35. Short essays focusing on the connections between Crutcher's background and the situations in his works. Also, examines the role of sports in his works.

Sheffer, Susannah. "An Adult Reads Chris Crutcher." *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*. Also available at: <http://www.scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/Spring97/s97-10-Sheffer.html> Unsworth, Robert. Review of *Chinese Handcuffs*. *School Library Journal* (April 1989): 118. Long negative review which notes the book has "enough plots here to fuel a soap opera for a year." Review is negative toward the characters, the dialogue, and what is described as a "contrived" ending.

Zvirin, Stephanie. Review of *Chinese Handcuffs*. *Booklist* (August 1989). A controversial review about Crutcher's most controversial book. Breaking with the magazine's policy of

reviewing books which it does not recommend, one of the review editors calls the new novel an "exploitative melodrama" rather than a successful coming of age story like Crutcher's other novels. The long review is critical of the book's excesses in description of brutality, in the number of important issues Crutcher is trying to handle in the book, and its overloaded plot.

Related Titles/Adaptations

There have been no media adaptations of *Chinese Handcuffs*. There are two types of young adult fiction books similar to *Chinese Handcuffs*, the first being those which deal with sexual abuse of teens. *When She Hollers* by Cynthia Voigt (Scholastic, 1994) concerns a character very much like Jennifer who has been sexually abused for years.

Cynthia Grant's *Uncle Vampire* (Athenaeum, 1983), Jacqueline Woodson's *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* (Delacorte, 1992), and Francesca Lia Block's *The Hanged Man* (Harper, 1994) all confront the issue of sexual abuse by a family member. *Chinese Handcuffs* also is part of a trend in young adult fiction toward a harder edged, even darker kind of writing. Sarah Dessen's *Dreamland* (Viking, 2000) involves several painful issues, including date violence, as does *When Kambia Elaine Flew in from Neptune* by Lori Aurelia Williams (Simon and Schuster, 2000).



Related Web Sites

"Author Profile: Chris Crutcher." TeenReads.Com (www.teenreads.com/authors/au-crutcher-chris.asp) A 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. <http://www.aboutcrutcher.com> This is the author's official web site. It 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/custom1/deluxe-content.html) Crutcher talks about the role of sports in his novels and the reason his main characters engage in athletic pursuits.

Hamilton, Kim. "Chris Crutcher." Kidreach: The Online Reading Center. (<http://www.westga.edu/~kidreach/ChrisCrutcher.html>). This online source contains lesson plans for various Crutcher novels, a list of awards, and a massive list of web links.



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