

# The Crazy Horse Electric Game Study Guide

## The Crazy Horse Electric Game by Chris Crutcher

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# Introduction

*The Crazy Horse Electric Game*, published in 1987, is a coming-of-age story that combines elements of sports, family dysfunction, physical disability, and social issues but also manages to infuse humor into tragic circumstances. Author Chris Crutcher specializes in young adult fiction and often draws inspiration from his work as a child and family therapist as well as his desire to give teens a dose of truth about the real world.

Crutcher received the prestigious Margaret A. Edwards Award for his young-adult writings, which, as Edwards Award committee chair Joan Atkinson told Betty Carter in *School Library Journal Online*, "bring to life the contemporary teen world including its darker side." The protagonist of *The Crazy Horse Electric Game*, Willie, lives a sheltered and somewhat charmed existence until circumstances force him to embark on a journey in order to discover how to live life under a completely different set of rules. When Willie leaves the small town of Coho, Montana, he's confronted with difficult situations that test his resilience yet also show him that he does have power and influence over his world.

The novel is told from the point of view of Willie, which reflects the influence that Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* had on Crutcher. He admits that the strength of the main character's voice is unforgettable, which serves to make the novel synonymous with the character. Ultimately, Crutcher began writing *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* because he wanted to tell some silly jokes.

However, the story of Willie's journey does much more than provide comic relief. As Crutcher explains to Betty Carter in *School Library Journal Online*, it "give[s] hope to young adults struggling with the eternal questions of who they are and where they belong."

## Author Biography

Chris Crutcher, born in the small and isolated logging town of Cascade, Idaho, on July 17, 1946, graduated from the Eastern Washington State University in 1968 and, despite what he calls his unremarkable performance as a student, later excelled as a teacher for at-risk teens at the Kennewick Dropout School in Washington State. After spending the next ten years working with troubled youth, specifically as a mental-health therapist, Crutcher became reacquainted with old college friend and writer Terry Davis. After working with Davis on his novel *Vision Quest*, Crutcher embarked on a writing career of his own, publishing his first book, *Running Loose*, in 1983. The novel was named an ALA Best Book and led to a string of successful young adult novels, which earned Crutcher a reputation for telling stories that honestly portray the life struggles of adolescents and tackle tough issues.

Despite his lack of formal training in the art of writing, Crutcher would go on to pen six novels for young adults, as well as one adult novel, over the course of his career. While his writing eventually took precedence over his work as a therapist, Crutcher still works with the Child Protection Team in Spokane, which is an organization of mental-health professionals who handle the most difficult cases. Continuing his work with disadvantaged youth gives Crutcher material for his novels, and he draws upon real-life experiences for inspiration. In fact, his mother was an alcoholic for the duration of Crutcher's adolescence, which he says gave him a real connection with troubled kids.

An avid sports enthusiast, Crutcher runs marathons, swims, and participates in triathlons, subjects that also find their way into his work. Because he undertakes difficult subject matter, Crutcher has, in the past, found himself the victim of censorship in some conservative school districts. Crutcher interprets the censorship as a desperate and shortsighted attempt to protect children from the truth, telling Betty Carter in *School Library Journal Online*, "When my books are banned, they're banned because people are afraid for kids to know about something I wrote about. Now, how dumb is that?"

Crutcher, who never married, still lives in Spokane, and has written screenplays for two of his novels, *Running Loose* and *The Crazy Horse Electric Game*, while *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* has been optioned by Columbia Pictures. His short story "A Brief Moment in the Life of Angus Bethune" from *Athletic Shorts* was made into a major motion picture by Disney Pictures. In 2000, Crutcher received the Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement in young-adult literature.



# Plot Summary

## The Championship Game

*The Crazy Horse Electric Game* by Chris Crutcher begins with Willie Weaver, the star pitcher for Coho, Montana's local baseball team, preparing to play the most important game of his life. Willie is blessed with a golden arm that earns him legend-like status among his friends and family, and he knows that winning the game for his team, Samson Floral, rests entirely on his shoulders. However, Willie's got the confidence to know that when he's on, nobody can touch his fastball. The whole town of Coho is counting on Willie to bring in their very first championship trophy, especially Willie's father, Big Will, who seems to be living vicariously through his son's sports triumphs and failures. Big Will's claim to fame was playing football in the '60s for the University of Washington and winning the Rose Bowl. Despite the fact that Willie knows his dad is proud of him, father and son have never been able to achieve any significant emotional connection.

On the day of the big game, Willie is on fire; no batter has reached second base, and Samson Floral is ahead 1-0 in the seventh inning. By the bottom on the ninth, however, Willie makes his first mistake of the game, putting the tying run on first just before the opposing team's big hitter steps up to the plate. When the next pitch is thrown, Willie loses his balance as the ball is hit hard toward third base. Miraculously, Willie catches the line drive on pure instinct and "etches the Crazy Horse Electric game in the mind of every citizen and ball player and coach—maybe even dog and cat—in Coho, Montana."

## The Accident

With the championship under his belt, Willie is riding high for the whole summer. On a weekend getaway with his parents, his girlfriend, Jenny, and best friend, Johnny, Willie has a tragic accident while water skiing that leaves him physically disabled. The body he once had complete power over is now broken and out of his control. Willie feels ashamed, embarrassed, and frustrated over his condition. He wants to avoid everyone, but Jenny and his friends insist on bringing him back into the fold. Despite everyone's efforts to make Willie feel comfortable, their behavior has the opposite effect. Willie can't stand the pity and begins to retreat into his own world, which is wrought with depression and suicidal thoughts.

Willie's parents send him to a therapist, who tries to help Willie deal with his feelings about the accident. After a few sessions, it seems as if Willie is making some progress until he has a big blowout with Big Will, who thinks Willie isn't trying hard enough to recover. Willie feels like he's failed his father while Big Will's insensitive attitude angers Willie's mom and it creates a wide rift in the marriage. In addition to Willie's family life falling apart, he catches Jenny with a classmate and knows that she's betrayed him. That night, Willie overhears a vicious fight between his parents, fueled partly by



lingering resentment over the death of Willie's baby sister a few years ago, and he believes the only answer is to run away and release his loved ones from the burden he has put on them.

## The Escape

Willie packs his bags, takes all the money he can find, and boards a Greyhound bus headed toward San Francisco. He makes it all the way to Oakland, but gets stranded late at night because the bus breaks down. Willie finds himself surrounded by a local gang who spot his cane and see him as an easy target. Despite his best efforts to escape, the gang attacks Willie, takes all his money, and leaves him battered and bleeding in the street. Willie is rescued by a local bus driver named Lacey, who takes him home and lets him stay the night.

Despite Lacey's original insistence that Willie can only stay one night, the two work out an agreement where Willie agrees to help Lacey around the house in exchange for room and board. In addition, Willie discovers that Lacey is in a dubious line of work. Lacey calls it "human relations," which Willie quickly translates. Even though Lacey is a pimp, Willie knows he's in no position to be making moral judgments. That day, Lacey calls in a favor in order to get Willie enrolled in a local school for disadvantaged and troubled teens called OMLC (One More Last Chance) High School.

## OMLC

At OMLC, Willie bonds with Lisa, the physical education teacher who recruits Willie as her pet project in working toward her physical therapy degree. Willie is reluctant at first to trust her, but she makes quick progress with Willie, thus enabling him to feel less self-conscious about his broken body. He also becomes close to Andre, the school's principal, who looks after Willie like an older brother. Life with Lacey, however, doesn't go as smoothly. Late one night, Willie wakes to a fierce argument between Lacey and one of his girls, who just happens to be a classmate of Willie's. When he defends the girl and leaves Lacey unconscious, Willie is terrified that Lacey will kill him. He is set to move into the school's basement, but for some mysterious reason, Lacey tells Willie to stay.

Soon, Willie learns that he is granted permission to stay because Lacey is trying to redeem himself for a past wrong. Apparently, Lacey beat his own son so badly that he was permanently brain damaged and now lives in a hospital. Lacey is forbidden to see his own son and believes he can ease his troubled conscience by aiding Willie.

## Burning Down the OMLC

As Willie continues to progress with Lisa's help and some tai chi classes, he finds his center and makes strides on the basketball court, which also gives Willie an opportunity to make friends with two other classmates, Hawk and Kato. At the same time, Andre is



working hard to make decorative improvements on the school. However, the improvements are short-lived when the gang who beat up Willie months ago starts to deface the school with graffiti. Kato decides it's time to teach the gang a lesson, and with the keys to the school, makes a plan for himself, Hawk, and Willie to take down the gang when they make their next strike. The night of the rumble, Willie finds himself facing the gang alone. The gang sets the school on fire, and Willie barely escapes but manages not only to save his own life but that of the gang leader as well.

## Going Home

Despite the tragedy, Andre vows to work just as hard to return the school to its old glory. Willie, inspired by Andre's vision, works so hard with Lisa that it is now almost impossible to tell that he has any physical disability. On the day of graduation, Willie makes a moving speech and thanks everyone, including Lacey, who has helped him recover. Believing his time at OMLC has run its course, Willie boards a bus and heads back to Coho, where he hopes to make amends with his friends and family. When he arrives, Willie finds that in the two years since he's been gone, so much has changed. His parents are divorced, his mother is remarried, and his father is unemployed and struggling with alcoholism. In addition, Willie's surprise reunion with Jenny is wrought with tension as she is just not ready to deal with the aftermath of Willie's sudden disappearance and unexpected return. After two lengthy and separate conversations with his parents, Willie realizes that Coho is not his home anymore. He knows it will take time to rebuild a relationship with his parents, and that someday he'll come back again, but in Coho, he still feels disabled, like he did before he left. As the novel ends, Willie takes his father's motorcycle, says goodbye, and heads back to Oakland.





# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

The narrator opens this chapter by saying that the events leading up to Willie Weaver's last big baseball game against Crazy Horse Electric happened two summers ago. Willie is still not sure if that game is the best thing or worst thing that ever happened to him.

One day, Willie and his two best friends, Petey and Jenny, go to visit Mr. Samson of Samson Floral Shop. Samson Floral is the sponsor of Coho, Montana's baseball team. Willie is the team's pitcher, and Johnny is the catcher. Other teams tease them brutally, because Samson Floral's neon pink rose is their team logo. As spokesperson for the team, Willie asks Mr. Samson if they can choose a different logo for their ball caps. Although Samson's is the only floral shop in town, he refuses to change the logo, because it is good advertising.

Later, after Samson Floral's team has won 10 games thanks to Willie's fast pitch, the team prepares to win the Eastern Montana American Legion Championship. Willie walks to practice with Johnny. The field they practice in is named after Willie's grandfather, who played football, basketball and baseball at Notre Dame. He donated the land for the field, as well as most of the money to build it.

Walking to practice, Willie and Johnny strategize how to take the championship from Crazy Horse Electric, whose team has held the title for the last three years. Their best player is Sal Whitworth. Johnny assures Willie that, once Willie gets his fastball past Sal, the championship will belong to Samson Floral.

Willie feels invincible, but he still looks up to his dad, Big Will Weaver, who is a mythic figure in Coho, Montana. He played football in the Rose Bowl during his senior year in college, and he was voted Most Valuable Player. His hometown was thrilled when he came back home to settle down and raise a family. Big Will is still in great condition, very good-looking, polite and helpful. The whole town looks up to him, and Willie wants to make him proud, so it seems that his successes or failures belong to his dad, rather than to Willie.

At practice, Johnny tells corny jokes that end in terrible puns, and the team gets even with him by hosing him down with water. All of these moments are happy memories of a time when life was simple, and Willie's body was like a friend that would do anything he asked of it.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

At first, Willie's memories of that summer are idyllic. He is the picture of the all-American small-town teenager. He plays baseball, has a best friend and a girl he likes, and his biggest problem is the pink rose logo on his baseball cap. Willie's life looks simple. He



appears to be the luckiest guy in town. Willie is a winner from a family full of winners. His roots go deep in his hometown. His grandfather built the ball field where Willie plays. His father, another winning athlete, was also a favorite son of Coho.

However, in the first paragraph, the reader learns that the Crazy Horse Electric game, although a pivotal moment in Willie's life, is not the real story of this book. Using the omniscient narrator's viewpoint, the author foreshadows that life before this championship game is very different from the life that develops after that. It is clear that Willie has sustained a loss and that he will not always feel like a winner. The mention of some distance and tension with his dad foreshadows some kind of loss in their relationship, as well as in Willie's relationship to his own body.



## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

In the late evening on the Monday before the Crazy Horse Electric game, Willie and his dad take a motorcycle ride. When Big Will stops for gas, they leave their helmets there at the station. They had only worn them to satisfy Willie's mother, Sandy.

Willie's dad steers the motorcycle through seven miles of curves, taking each curve faster than the last, his and Willie's shoulders are closer to the highway each time. When they reach the straight road atop the bluff, they go full speed. The first time they rode in this manner was four years ago, soon after Willie's baby sister, Missy, died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

On the bank of their favorite fishing spot, they rest awhile, and Willie's dad advises him to stay focused on the Crazy Horse Electric game from now until game day. When he thinks of the Rose Bowl, Big Will says, he not only remembers the game, but he also remembers everything leading up to the game. He knew the Rose Bowl would be the last game of his career. "This won't be the end of your athletic career like the Rose Bowl was mine." Will says to Willie, "But it's big enough to be worth remembering."

On Wednesday afternoon, Willie pitches to his dad, as he has for thousands of hours over the last three years. They have a regulation pitcher's mound and home plate, right in their backyard. Suddenly, Willie asks his dad whether Missy was a planned baby, because when he is warming up with his dad, it seems they can talk about anything.

Willie has learned from his mom not to fight the thought of Missy. He wishes she would do the same. Willie had been the one to discover his sister, dead in her crib at six months old. Since then, the Weaver family has never been the same. Even though they all went to therapy, it really was never quite right again. It was the first time that Willie saw his dad not meet something head-on.

### Chapter 2 Analysis

Even though he is not the main character of this book, Big Will is the main character in Willie's life. The relationship with his dad is the most important thing to Willie, and this chapter foreshadows trouble in that relationship by showing us Big Will's weaknesses.

First, Big Will has not dealt with his grief over the loss of his baby daughter four years ago. Instead, he takes self-destructive risks. More than that, he puts Willie at risk, too, by driving too fast and encouraging Willie not to wear his helmet.

At the same time, Big Will appears to take an intense interest in Willie's life. He gives him advice on his sports, he has invested in a pitcher's mound and home plate so Willie can practice at home and he spends hundreds of hours practicing with Willie. However,



Big Will's interest in Willie is very narcissistic. Willie's success as an athlete is an extension and reflection of Big Will's earlier successes as an athlete. Big Will accidentally foreshadows Willie's last big game, when he encourages Willie to remember the details of Crazy Horse Electric in the same way Big Will remembers his last football game.

If Willie wants to talk about anything else with his dad, he has to do it when they are playing ball. His dad will open up a bit then. However, Big Will does not discuss or ask anything about Willie that would help him know Willie as a person. He just knows Willie as his son and an athlete.

Willie's mom, on the other hand, openly mourns her daughter and encourages Willie to be safe. She has been able to help Willie mourn Missy by teaching him not to avoid the thought of her.



## Chapter 3

### Chapter 3 Summary

At the bottom of the seventh inning, Samson Floral is ahead of Crazy Horse Electric, 1-0. Willie strikes out the first batter, walks the second and then faces Sal Whitworth. Willie calls a time-out to confer with Johnny and Coach Ivy. He looks to his dad in the stands and thinks to himself that he cannot let Big Will down.

When Willie has pitched Sal two balls and two strikes, he winds up, and loses his balance slightly. His loss of balance accidentally gives Sal the pitch he wants. Sal hits the ball with a powerful swing that would have been a triple, except that Willie has regained his balance in a phenomenal way. He pivots around, and with his back to the plate, he catches the ball backhanded for the second out.

Willie gives his first baseman time to realize what has happened and then tosses him the ball. Since the runner does not realize Willie caught the ball, he has run to second and is now the third out. Samson Floral has won the Eastern Montana American Legion Championship, and Willie becomes a legend in Coho, Montana.

### Chapter 3 Analysis

Willie has now become a local legend, just like his dad and granddad before him. To understand what Willie loses later in the story, it is important to notice that what is so amazing about Willie is the terrific coordination, between his mind and body, which allows him to regain his balance as few people could. It is also important to notice that at the pivotal moment in Willie's big game, what motivates him is not his desire to win for himself. Rather he wishes not to let his father down.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

On the first day of school, Willie is looking forward to football, and he is in love with his friend Jenny. In literature class, the first book they will study is *Bless the Beasts and the Children*. Their teacher explains that the book is about "a group of misfits who seem discarded and uncared for and who have to pull together to fend for themselves and find meaning in their lives."

After a long football practice and late dinner the same day, Willie and Jenny ride their bikes to his fishing hole. He wants to ask her to be his girlfriend, but he cannot seem to get around to the subject. They talk about what a good fisherman his mom used to be, before his baby sister died.

Jenny remembers how Willie withdrew into himself for several months after her death, so she does not ask questions. This time, though, Willie shares with her some of his feelings about his lost sister. Jenny puts her arms around him, and Willie realizes that she already knows how he feels about her. In fact, she asks him if he wants to be her boyfriend, and he gives her his American Legion Championship Ring. Biking home, Jenny races him, and wins.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Now that the Crazy Horse Electric game is over, this chapter tells the reader what the book is really about. When the literature teacher describes *Bless the Beasts and the Children*, she is also describing the theme of this book.

However, Willie's apparently idyllic life continues a while longer. Football season has started, and he is good at that game, too. The girl he loves becomes his girlfriend, without his even having to ask. Jenny's character is warm, caring and as athletic as Willie is.

Jenny also has a need for Willie to be open with her about his feelings. Her memory of Missy's death reminds the reader that life is not ideal, and it points out a flaw in Willie's character that will hurt their relationship later. When Willie was first hurt by his sister's death, he withdrew into himself. Now that Willie communicates his feelings about his sister, Jenny draws closer. Later on, when Willie does not communicate about other losses, it will create distance between them.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

On the last weekend before winter, Willie, his parents, Johnny, and Jenny go boating. Big Will starts talking football. Coho High School is doing well and Willie has been mentioned in the newspaper, along with his dad. Still, Big Will scolds Willie about a sloppy pass he made at last night's game. "Never do less than your best," he says.

While the kids put on their wet suit tops, Big Will takes the boat for a warm-up spin around the lake. Willie watches him and thinks about how much he loves speed. His mom warns him to be careful, saying, "I've lost all I can afford to lose."

The family has left one of the ski vests on the porch at home, so Johnny and Willie have to use Big Will's extra large vest. When they have all skied and had lunch, Big Will and Sandy take the boat out to fish, while the kids hang out on the dock. Jenny remarks that Willie's parents really seem to love each other. Both Jenny and Johnny envy Willie in that sense, as they confide what their home lives are like.

As the day ends, Big Will offers one more run, and Willie accepts. Jenny spots him, while Big Will drives the boat. Willie asks to go without the jacket, because it is so big, but his dad insists on his using it.

The water is rougher than earlier in the day, but Willie signals his dad to crack the whip. As he begins to tire, Willie stoops a little. As he stands back up, the tip of the ski bounces up and cuts a gash in his forehead. The too-large life jacket slips up and traps his arms and head.

Big Will panics. In trying to help, he traps Willie even more in the tangled jacket. Jenny dives in, kicks Big Will away, frees Willie's head and begins mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Willie begins breathing again, but on the way to the nearest hospital, he does not regain consciousness.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

Big Will has taught Willie to court danger on the water, just as they do on the motorcycle. However, when they go too far, and Willie is injured, Big Will is not at all prepared to deal with the consequences. Jenny, whose life does not seem so ideal, is the one who is able to keep her head and save Willie's life.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Three months later, it is 5:30 a.m., and the temperature is below zero, when Willie prepares for a morning run. It took him two months to go back to school, because he hates everybody to see that he cannot walk or talk the way he used to. He feels pitied now, as he drags the left side of his body around. His mind is just as sharp, but his speech is slow, so people treat him as if he is retarded. Everything he does is slow now.

Willie does not know if he will ever regain the brain function that he lost, but he is using his body as much as he can, to give the healthy parts of his brain a chance to compensate for the functioning he lost in the accident. Willie does a lot of hiding. He jogs while it is still dark, for instance, his right side dragging his left.

When he gets to school, the girls' basketball coach offers Willie the role of team manager. He thinks that being around sports again might do Willie some good. That is the last thing Willie wants to do, but he does not say so. As he leaves the office, Willie imagines hitting the smiling secretary.

Later in the day, Willie's speech therapist scolds him for not trying. When he says he does not care, she leaves the room. Willie tries to get up to stop her, but hurts his leg on the corner of a desk, falls to the floor, and roars in pain from his throat, but the walls are soundproofed. No one hears. Willie climbs back into his desk and sits until the bell rings.

That Friday, Jenny comes to Willie's house to give him a ride to Johnny's house. Johnny's parents are out of town, and he insisted that Willie come to his party. While Jenny waits for Willie, she senses tension between his parents, and she wonders why Big Will has been so distant from her ever since the accident.

At the party, Willie is uncomfortable at first, but then he is surprised to find that he enjoys being around all his old friends. When people start dancing, though, Jenny dances with another friend, and Willie begins to feel paranoid that Jenny will leave him.

Late in the evening, some of Coho High School's stoners, led by Marty Cross, crash Johnny's party. They bring alcohol, but promise not to give any to the jocks in training. Marty feels sorry for Willie, though, and he points out that Willie has lost his best stuff and is no longer in training. He gives Willie a beer and some kind of pill.

The pill turns out to be acid, and it brings on a variation of a nightmare that Willie began having during his coma. In the dream, Willie sees railroad tracks that are misaligned, and he knows that is his brain. He screams with no sound, falls, and suddenly is at the Crazy Horse Electric game, except that this time, Sal Whitworth's ball hits him in the back of his head and knocks him flat. Hundreds or thousands of Crazy Horse players run the bases, while everybody laughs, even Big Will. Then, Willie is screaming on the





couch at Johnny's party. Johnny beats up Marty, while someone else calls an ambulance for Willie.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

This chapter highlights all of Willie's losses. He has lost his physical coordination. Although he works hard to regain as much as he can by himself, what he used to do no longer works. He no longer feels at ease with his friends and is afraid of losing Jenny. He is no longer a hero. Big Will is distant, so Willie feels that he has lost his father and that his parents are in trouble. Marty is right; Willie has lost his best stuff. At least, he has lost what he thinks was his best stuff. Everything that used to be good has become a nightmare. By the end of the chapter, Willie has also lost his status as one of the athletes that have never done drugs.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Because of his drug use at Johnny's party, Willie has been referred to Cyril Wheat, a mental health counselor. He is not happy to be there at first, but he quickly begins to feel comfortable with Cyril. Cyril's a comedian, and yet very understanding. They discuss Willie's bad acid trip, the nightmares and the Crazy Horse Electric game.

Willie also talks about the signs of trouble he sees in his parents' marriage and his feeling that his dad almost hates him, ever since the accident. The last thing on his mind is that the school wants to put him in Special Ed. Because he cannot speak as he used to, they think he is not as smart.

As he wraps up their session, Cyril explains that he has no magic to help Willie solve his problems, but he can give some suggestions that Willie can use to solve them. He recommends no drugs, honesty with Jenny and his other friends, and some goals toward which to work. Cyril also offers to meet with Willie and his parents, or even with Willie and Jenny.

Cyril explains that Willie is facing a lot of loss. He has lost an old life that will not ever come back, but Cyril can help him grieve it. He tells Willie that it would be normal to have thoughts of suicide, but if the thoughts get serious, he wants Willie to call him. As they say goodbye until the next session, Cyril assures Willie that he will not end up in Special Ed.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

In this chapter, the author uses the character of Cyril Wheat to explain to Willie, and to the reader, what Willie faces. He is grieving his old life, and it is not coming back. He needs to be honest with Jenny and his friends, and he must reach out for help, if he feels self-destructive. Cyril makes a commitment to help with the things he can do something about, such as making sure Willie does not end up in Special Ed. He also offers to see Willie's parents, but Willie is afraid to ask his parents to do that.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

A couple of months later, Willie works as team manager for the girls' basketball team, where Jenny is the star. She scores a shot that ties a game, and then her team wins in overtime. During and after the game, Willie is ashamed of himself, because he envies Jenny. After the game, Jenny wants Willie to celebrate with her, but he admits he is too jealous to enjoy her victory.

During his next session with Cyril, Willie talks about all of this. Cyril says that the only solution is for Willie to let go completely of the golden boy he used to be. Otherwise, he will continue to feel jealous and angry with everybody. Cyril warns Willie that if he does not let that go, he will lose Jenny. Willie decides to ask Jenny to come to a session with him next week.

That night, Willie lies awake, taking inventory and feeling sorry for his self. He avoided Special Ed, thanks to Cyril, but he still struggles to give even the simplest answers in class. He got back into sports by becoming a team manager, but that only reminds him of what he used to be. Things with him and his parents, and between his parents, are distant. He is too afraid to ask them to go see Cyril. By the next morning, he has had no sleep and decided that his parents' lives would be better if he was not there.

That evening, Big Will brings Willie a surprise from the sporting good store, a racquet for playing racquetball. He thinks this would be the perfect sport for Willie, because it takes just one arm. Willie has a feeling this may not be a good idea, but since this is the first time, since the accident, that his dad has tried to get close to him, he does not argue.

However, Willie still has not learned to work with his new body, and the game is a disaster. Big Will finally explodes in anger and accuses Willie of not trying. Willie sees someone watching them and collapses sobbing, hurt and humiliated. His dad apologizes, but Willie has completely internalized his dad's disgust.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

While Willie has made some progress with Cyril's help, it is clear in the chapter that he is not doing well. Being team manager of a basketball team just frustrates him, because he cannot play. He feels angry and jealous of everybody, even Jenny. He comes dangerously close to having suicidal thoughts, when he decides that his parents would be better off without him.

Big Will tries to make a connection with Willie, but he does so for his own comfort, rather than his son's. The only way Big Will knows how to feel close is through sports. When that does not work, he is just as helpless and useless as he was the day of Willie's accident. Willie is not only crippled by his accident. He is also crippled by a

teenager's acute sense of humiliation, lack of sleep, and his father's unrealistic expectations.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

When they get home from the gym, Willie goes straight to bed, but for the second night in row, he cannot sleep. He goes downstairs at 3 a.m. to get warm milk. He overhears his parents arguing about him. He hears, for the first time, his mother's rage at Big Will for the way he is treating Willie and his dad's guilt over panicking when the accident happened. Every time his father looks at Willie, he is reminded of his guilt; he sometimes wishes Willie had died.

The next day at school, Willie decides to go tell Coach Williams that he is going to drop the team manager job. He cannot pretend anymore to be okay hanging around with athletes. On his way to the gym, Willie runs into Jenny and a boy named Jeff, and he sees that they are both startled and guilty to be seen together. Willie does not confront them, and he tries to believe he has not lost Jenny, but he knows the truth.

Afterward, during algebra class, Willie blurts out to Jenny that he knows. When she looks at Jeff and then the floor, Willie really does know that Jenny is involved with Jeff. He yells in pain and leaves the classroom. Jenny follows him into the hall, where they have a terrible argument.

Willie stumbles out of school in tears. He leaves his books there on the ground, but he takes the cane his friends gave him, even though he does not use it to walk anymore. The top of it is a brass baseball, and the engraving on it says, "Willie Weaver – 1, Crazy Horse Electric – 0."

## Chapter 9 Analysis

This is a dangerous point for Willie, but also a turning point, because he begins to face reality. His dad cannot handle what has happened, his parents' marriage is definitely in trouble and Willie's fear that Jenny would leave him for someone else has come true. Though he leaves his books at school, he takes his cane with him, which is a symbol that he has not given up on life completely, even though it hurts so much.

# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

Willie takes \$479 out of savings and rides a Greyhound bus, first to Spokane, then down to California. He does not leave a note, because he wants to be long gone before his parents realize he is left. When he buys his ticket in Spokane, he uses the name, Louie Banks, which is a character in another of this author's books.

Every time he gets scared and thinks of going home, Willie thinks of what he would be going back to, and he keeps going. He is not mad at Jenny anymore, just sad and hurt. He will miss her and Johnny a lot. He knows Cyril would say he should stay and face his problems, but Willie feels Cyril would understand.

At the bus station in Spokane, Willie writes a postcard to Cyril, Jenny, Johnny and his parents. The cards simply say that Willie cannot make it in Coho, and he hopes they understand. He asks another boy in the bus station to mail them from Phoenix.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

Although Willie is frightened to leave his known world, the fact that he chooses to use the name Louie Banks shows that he is also hopeful. Louie is a character in another of Chris Crutcher's books called *Running Loose*. It is another book in which a high school hero survives losing everything he cares about in life. Now, Willie's life is not about ball games and baseball caps. It is about survival. The fact that he identifies with Louie Banks foreshadows the fact that Willie will survive.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

During his bus ride, Willie has had some vague thoughts of looking up some distant relatives outside of San Francisco. He has thought of working at a fast food place, while he rents a motel room, so he can save his money and figure out what to do next.

In Oakland, however, the bus has a layover at the terminal for minor repairs. Rather than wait for another bus to San Francisco, Willie decides to walk several blocks to the BART station, where he can catch a subway that would take him under the San Francisco Bay and into San Francisco. He makes this decision, even though the Greyhound driver tries to tell him this is not a good neighborhood for being out at night.

After walking a frightening couple of blocks from the bus terminal, Willie sees a city bus stop with a BART logo. He is scared to continue walking these streets, so he decides to take the city bus the rest of the way to the BART station. Unfortunately, this bus stop is also the turf claimed by an Oriental gang called Jo Boys.

The leader of the gang says Willie has to pay for using their corner. Willie claims to have only six dollars, but when the bus comes and Willie pays his fare, the boys see his roll of money. They all board the bus behind him.

The bus driver says there is nothing he can do, but he tries to help by jamming the back door, when the Jo Boys try to exit behind Willie. He intends to give Willie a head start, but in his current condition, Willie cannot get far before the Jo Boys catch up to him.

Willie hand the leader part of his money, but the gang knows there is more, and they beat him badly to get it. When they find the rest of the money, they leave him there on the sidewalk. Before he loses consciousness, Willie wishes he were back in Coho. He had let his parents blame him for their unhappiness and let Jenny date anybody she wanted. He had no idea, until now, that the world contained things much worse than his problems in Coho.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

In this chapter, Willie loses some of his naiveté and meets some of the characters that will figure in the rest of his story. If he thought before that things could not be worse, he has learned now that they could. The Jo Boys, rather than the Crazy Horse Electric game, will provide the real climax of this story, later in the book.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

Willie wakes up to find that the bus driver, a muscular black man named Lacey Casteel, has come back to help. He fusses at Willie for being out so late at night in this part of town, and for riding his bus, but he takes Willie with him to ride out the rest of his route.

Over breakfast at a diner at the end of his shift, Lacey explains that he didn't help Willie before, because Jo boys isn't just a group of boys; it's a street gang that will kill a person. Lacey does not explain why he turned around and came back to see about Willie.

After hearing Willie's story, Lacey offers to pay the bus fare to send Willie home, but Willie asks to stay at Lacey's place for one night. At first, Lacey refuses, because he does not want to attract the attention of the police by harboring a runaway. Then, he relents and says Willie can stay for just one night. Still, Willie has gotten good at reading people since the accident, and he senses Lacey feels for him, though he does not know why.

The next day, Willie sees why Lacey does not want to attract the attention of the police. He is a pimp, though he calls what he does human relations management. Lacey agrees to let Willie work as his housekeeper, on the condition that he keeps his eyes, ears, and mouth shut, that he goes to school, and that he not ask Lacey why Lacey's taking him in. Willie agrees to everything.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

Willie's old ideas continue to crumble in this chapter. Now, instead of having a hometown hero as a father, a pimp is his father figure. Previously, the closest he ever got to a criminal lifestyle was through television. Now, he is living off it.

In Willie's old world, things were black or white. A person was good, or he was bad. Now, Willie's good dad has let him down, and the bad pimp is the person who saves Willie's life. Willie will never see good and bad so simply again. Later in the story, he will learn the reason for Lacey's help, but for now, he is just grateful to have it.





# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

Lacey drops Willie off at OMLC (One More Last Chance) High School for an admissions interview. It is a non-profit high school for kids with various special needs. Lacey claims that the school's director, Andre Porter, owes him some favors. It is not true, but there are two work scholarships available, and Willie takes one of them. He trusts Andre, and he can get more specialized attention here than he could in a large public school.

Late the same night, Willie lies on the couch in Lacey's apartment, missing Jenny and wishing he could let his parents know he is all right. He cannot do that yet, though. He wonders if the kid from Phoenix mailed his postcards. Suddenly, he remembers his baby sister and how connected he had felt to her. He thinks that he is now just another death in the family.

## Chapter 13 Analysis

In this chapter, Willie meets Andre, the school director that takes Cyril's place as trusted advisor. One of the first things that Andre does is congratulate Willie on his resume and confront him that he looks like a victim. Willie will not make it at this school, if that does not change.

When Willie wonders if his postcards made it home, the author is reminding the reader that this is improbable. That way, it will not be a surprise, at the end of the book, when his family and friends are shocked to see Willie. He is right. To them, he has become another death in their family.



# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

Willie watches a woman named Lisa teach a PE class at OMLC. Andre has given him three weeks to get comfortable, before he has to participate in the class. Lisa instructs all her students to take a moment and find their centers. Willie does not notice yet that the center is in a different spot for each person.

After all the kids choose a sport, Willie watches Lisa play basketball. Suddenly, an eccentric boy named Jack, who has telephone repair equipment around his waist, wants to play basketball with Willie. Willie does not want to play, but Jack's insistence is loud and draws attention, so they play. Their game draws attention, too. It ends abruptly, though, when someone in the crowd of onlookers makes fun of Jack's nose.

Lisa calls Willie into the office. She explains that she is working toward a Master's in Recreational Therapy, and she would like to do some work with Willie. They can trade. He will get the benefit of recreational therapy, and she will get a good paper for her class. Willie agrees, and Lisa guides him in finding his new center before he leaves her office.

## Chapter 14 Analysis

In this chapter, Willie meets his new female authority figure, Lisa. She teaches him to acknowledge that the center of his life has changed. Like his mother Sandy back home, Lisa teaches Willie to live with what is, instead of what he wishes would be. Willie twirls his cane as he leaves her office, the first sign that his confidence will return to him.



# Chapter 15

## Chapter 15 Summary

Three weeks later, Willie dances to music in Lacey's living room, moving from his new center. Lacey is not home. Willie does not see much of him, but he sees Lacey get extremely upset whenever he talks to his ex-wife on the phone. Andre has offered to let Willie live in the basement apartment at school if things get too rough, but Willie senses that Lacey is attached to him, and Willie does not want to seem ungrateful.

Then Lacey comes home drunk, and he has a girl with him that Willie recognizes from school. Her name is Angel, and Willie sees that she works for Lacey. It makes him sad, and he excuses himself to go to bed.

Late in the night, Angel's screams awaken him. Lacey is beating Angel severely. Willie instinctively grabs his cane and goes upstairs to Lacey's room. He opens Lacey's door just in time to see Lacey punch Angel in the jaw. Before Lacey can punch her again, Willie knocks Lacey out with the cane.

Instead of thanking him, Angel is upset and scared. She says Lacey will kill them both. She says a pimp has to be mean, or he will not make a living. Willie calls an ambulance and plans to leave while Lacey is in the hospital. As he tries to fall asleep after Lacey has gone in the ambulance, Willie daydreams about convincing Angel to quit working for Lacey.

After he does his morning janitorial work at school, Willie gets Andre's permission to go deal with Lacey at the hospital, which he thinks might be safer. Lacey has a cast on his right arm and a brace on his neck. At first, he threatens Willie, insisting that Angel is his whore, so he can do to her as he pleases. However, when Willie tells him that he plans to move out, and also that his ex-wife telephoned and called him a killer, tears come into Lacey's eyes. He tells Willie he will not hurt him, and he asks Willie not to move out yet. Willie is surprised, but agrees, on the condition that Lacey free Angel.

The same afternoon, Lisa works with Willie on the basketball court, helping him adjust his shot to the reality of his new body. Willie wonders aloud why he is crippled. Lisa rewords the question differently, though, to ask why he crippled himself. Willie flinches at that, but Lisa explains that Willie crippled himself simply because he took risks and stretched the rules of safety until they broke.

Afterward, Lisa gives Willie a ride to the hospital. Lacey is asleep, though, so Willie goes home for supper. He practices dancing again and feels the same sense of mastery he experienced on the basketball court this afternoon. For the first time, he thinks he may be able to face his family again someday.

## Chapter 15 Analysis

There are two signs in this chapter that Willie is outgrowing his victim status. First, he protects Angel from Lacey. He does not receive a hero's welcome, but he protects her, anyway. Second, Lisa teaches him to take responsibility for the risk-taking that caused the accident. Because of this, as much as because of his physical therapy, Willie can begin to imagine facing the people in his past.



# Chapter 16

## Chapter 16 Summary

While playing basketball with Willie one afternoon, Andre mentions that Willie does not interact much with the students at OMLC. Willie admits that he has not given the other kids much of a chance. He has stayed close to Andre and Lisa, where he feels safe. Andre suggests that Willie try to hang out and play some pickup games with the other kids.

Later, Willie is home, polishing Lacey's car for him, when Lacey's ex-wife calls. She says their baby boy is still rotting away in an institution, and Willie should get as far away from Lacey as he can. Willie just writes a note on the chalkboard to say the ex-wife called.

When Lacey comes in drunk, after midnight, he is upset by the message. He decides to take Willie to the institution and show him what all this is about. Lacey has a son, and he once beat him so badly that the boy is completely numb and brain damaged. Lacey's not allowed in to the hospital, so they look at Lacey's son through the window. The boy stares straight at the window, drooling, but does not see them. Lacey sobs and Willie understands that Lacey took him in to make up for hurting his own son. Doing some good for Willie is Lacey's way of trying to correct some of the bad he has done.

The next day, Willie hangs around outside the school. Kids surround him, but he does not know how to connect. Nearby, the school hero nicknamed Hawk, lights up a joint. When Willie passes it along without smoking any, Hawk asks him if he is a narc. Willie assures him he is not, and Hawk's sidekick Kato speaks on Willie's behalf. Hawk invites Willie to play basketball, whenever he feels ready. Andre has told him about Willie. When Kato makes a horrible pun, the way Johnny used to, Willie relaxes and feels more at home.

## Chapter 16 Analysis

In this chapter, Willie finally learns why Lacey took it upon himself to help Willie. Neither of them, nor their story's narrator, seems to question the sexism implied. It does not occur to any of them that Lacey could have chosen to "fix" a female child, instead of exploit her, as restitution for "breaking" his son. Of course, Willie is understandably grateful to be the beneficiary of this trade, and he feels sympathetic toward Lacey, although Lacey has as much of his own agenda tied up in Willie's success as Big Will used to have.

When Willie interacts with Hawk the next day, he is dealing with his own counterpart. Hawk is the big man on this campus, just as Willie used to be in Coho. His sidekick, Kato, is similar to Willie's old sidekick, Johnny, with his loyalty, fast talk and bad jokes.

Although the early years of their lives may have been very different, Willie finds he has some things in common with Hawk.

# Chapter 17

## Chapter 17 Summary

For a while, things are quiet for Willie. He now has a group of friends. He works hard in school and even harder in therapy. Lisa says it is time to begin what she calls Phase 2 of the physical therapy. She tells Willie to get \$140 from Lacey for a special class.

After she leaves, Willie practices his new basketball moves alone on the court. Hawk, Kato and a boy named Ernie show up suggesting a game. Willie starts to refuse. He wishes Hawk could have seen him in his Crazy Horse days. Then, Willie realized that Hawk wants him on his team. They play four games, but Willie is so excited to be playing well again, he does not remember who wins what.

Two days later, Lisa takes Willie and the \$140, to join a Nautilus gym. She shows him how to use the machines to help his left side catch up to his right. She also enrolls him in martial arts training with an Oriental instructor named Sammy.

Over the next few months, Sammy teaches Willie to tap into something infinite within him. He also teaches Willie to use his cane. In July, Sammy asks what is left that needs work. At first, Willie does not understand the question. Sammy rephrases the question. What hurts?

Willie admits that he sometimes wishes he did not have to know how much he has lost. He sometimes wishes his sister had never been born, and that the Crazy Horse game had never happened. That way, he would not have to feel the pain of their loss. Sammy offers an alternative way to view this issue. Instead of thinking, he can never have those highlights of his life again; Willie can choose to think that he will always have them, because they are a part of him and his history. In late August, Willie finds that his center has moved.

At school registration in September, Willie feels powerful. He sees Angel and asks her out to lunch. He wants to ask her why she still works for Lacey. Willie cares for Angel, he says, and wants her life to be better.

Angel states bluntly that Willie does not know her, so he cannot possibly care for her, except that he wants her sexually, which is true. She learned to be a prostitute at the age of seven, she says, when her uncle began having sex with her and giving her nice things that she could not get any other way. Angel finishes her indignant speech by offering to pay for lunch, since she makes a lot more money than he does, but Willie says he can pay for lunch.

## Chapter 17 Analysis

His first night in Oakland, Willie suffered from the Jo Boys' misuse of martial arts. Now, he has his own instructor in Sammy, who teaches him the spirit of the arts, not just the physical techniques. When Willie's center has moved again, it is a symbol of his returning balance and the improved coordination between his mind and body.

He still has some things to learn about women, though. He feels a sense of power returning, and that gives him confidence to approach Angel, but he seems oblivious to the fact that the money he makes as Lacey's housekeeper comes from the sex work that Angel does. Her work supports both Lacey and Willie, but she does not mention this, any more than Willie does.





# Chapter 18

## Chapter 18 Summary

The rest of September and October are happy times for Willie. He works with Andre and Lisa on Saturdays to paint the outside of the school building. Lisa sometimes ties Willie's right hand to his belt, so he will have to use his left hand. They recruit helpers from the school and the surrounding neighborhood, in exchange for grilled hamburgers and games of basketball. Most of the kids work for about 30 minutes, but Jack, the Telephone Man, works as much as Willie, Lisa and Andre do.

In late October, Willie goes into the building one Saturday morning, to do some of his janitor work, and find that the Jo Boys have painted their logo inside the building on several walls. He knows they cannot possibly know he is here, but he still has the feeling they have followed him. He paints over the logos and decides to walk to the mall for lunch.

Along the way, he comes upon the Jo Boys hanging out on the sidewalk, with their leader Kam doing his karate kicks and spins. Willie is scared, but he walks on through them. The gang allows him to pass without incident, but Willie thinks that Kam may have recognized him and his cane.

On Sunday, Willie finds their logo on the school's walls again. This time, he leaves it there for everyone to see on Monday morning. Andre calls the police, and Hawk talks about what he will do to the Jo Boys, if they keep messing with his school.

After English class, Willie finds Telephone Man in the restroom. He has eaten a box of Bisquick from home and followed it up with what he thought was strawberry syrup. Actually, it was a bottle of shampoo that Willie keeps at school. Of course, the mixture made him sick, so Telephone Man is naked in a restroom splattered with strawberry Bisquick, with all his clothes stuffed into a toilet. Willie keeps everyone out of the restroom by saying it is out of order and gets Jack some clothes from the Lost and Found. He sends the boy home to change into an outfit of his own, so that no one will ever know. Meanwhile, Willie will clean out the bathroom.

Later, in the middle of government class, a girl runs in to say that the Jo Boys are beating up Telephone Man. The students run outside. Hawk gets there first and leaps onto Kam, pins him to the ground, and warns him not to mess with OMLC High School anymore. During lunch, though, Hawk tells Willie that he is sure the Jo Boy will be back, especially after being embarrassed. He plans to wait at school for them, and Willie can either give him the key or wait with him. Willie does not want to be a snitch and get on Hawk's bad side, and he will not give up the keys that Andre has entrusted to him, so he agrees to come to school tonight.



## Chapter 18 Analysis

At the beginning of this chapter, it is clear that Willie has become a real part of his new community. He gets help from the school, but he contributes a lot to it, too.

Just when it seems things are going well, the Jo Boys come back into Willie's life. He will have to face them again, as a different person than he was when he first arrived in Oakland.

In addition to being stronger, Willie is different in another way. He is more able to handle the complexities of life. For example, his choice to meet Hawk at the school tonight shows that he has learned that a human's choices are always between good and evil, but sometimes between the lesser of two evils.



# Chapter 19

## Chapter 19 Summary

The same night, Willie is in the school's basement room alone, surprised that Hawk and Kato are more than an hour late. The room is lighted with a bare bulb, and there is a radio playing low, but there is a gym towel stuffed under the door. No light or sound escapes.

Willie is writing a letter to his parents, but he has not gotten very far. He is not sure what he wants to say. It might be easier to write Johnny first, but his parents might feel betrayed if he contacted someone else first. He feels apologetic, although Andre has reminded him that it was his dad's job to stick with Willie through his bad time, and he did not do it.

Suddenly, Willie hears noise in the school building. He hopes it is Hawk, but after a minute he knows he is hearing the Jo Boys. Eventually, Kam finds the basement room, and Willie hears Kam waiting outside the door, while the rest of the boys set fire to the school. When the basement room gets too hot, Willie kicks the door open and uses his cane to break Kam's collarbone and bring him down. Then, he makes it to the fire alarm and pulls it, though it can only make noise. It is not connected to a fire station.

Willie then turns to escape the building, but Kam is alone at the bottom of the basement stairs. The rest of the Jo Boys have fled. Willie drags Kam up the stairs by his collar, and they make it outside just as fire trucks arrive.

## Chapter 19 Analysis

This chapter shows how much stronger Willie has become, both physically and emotionally. Not only is he able to confront the Jo Boys without being victimized, he can also do it without being cruel. This is because of Sammy's instruction. In addition, Willie is almost strong enough to encounter his parents again.



# Chapter 20

## Chapter 20 Summary

It was thanks to Hawk that the fire trucks came. Hawk's brother had come home high, looking for money, and Hawk was stuck there protecting his mother and sister. By the time he got to school, he could see flames and called the fire department. For the next three weeks, the entire school worked to restore the damaged building. Now, at graduation six months later, OMLC High School looks better than ever.

Willie is one of 18 students to graduate tonight. He has continued to work with Sammy and Lisa, and now it is almost impossible to tell he was ever hurt. When Willie's name is called, Andre presents him with a tacky three-foot trophy for Comeback Kid of the Year.

Everyone who wants to is allowed to give a speech at this graduation. When Willie speaks, he thanks Lacey for sticking by him, as well as Andre, Lisa, and the entire school. His life has more value to him, now that it has been tested, and he knows he is still a very lucky person, even though he has lost the protected life he knew before his accident. Most of all, Willie thanks Sammy for teaching him that mind and body are part of the same unlimited thing; that he does not have to go outside himself for answers and how to listen to his gut to survive. Willie tells the audience that he now feels strong enough to go back home and face his parents and friends.

## Chapter 20 Analysis

Although this high school graduation is a very different event from the one taking place in small towns like Coho, Montana, it is extremely meaningful to the people at OMLC. Thanks to his friends in Oakland, Willie graduates from high school, ready to face his family.



# Chapter 21

## Chapter 21 Summary

Willie takes a bus back to Coho. Lacey gave him an extra ticket back, to use if things do not work out. After riding all day and night on the bus, Willie arrives in Coho on Friday, a little after 4 p.m. The bus station is still at Carson's Drugstore, but Mr. Carson does not recognize him. When Willie gets to his house, he sees that someone else lives there now.

Back in town, he finds Johnny working at the Conoco station. Willie learns that his parents have divorced; his mom is re-married and his dad stays drunk a lot. Everyone thinks Willie is dead, but Johnny's folks would be glad to have him stay with them.

Willie now feels stupid and selfish for not trying harder to let everybody know he was okay. He finds Big Will at the local tavern, but the father is too drunk, shocked and angry to talk, so Willie goes back to the Conoco station for a while.

When Johnny is done with work for the day, Willie rides home with him. Johnny calls some people to come to his house for a surprise. Jenny is the last to arrive, and when she sees Willie, she is so shocked and furious that she leaves immediately.

The next morning, Willie decides surprising people is not working too well. He calls his mother's new home, and his stepfather invites him to come right over. Willie drives his dad's motorcycle, which is stored at Johnny's house. After a polite visit with the stepfather, Willie and his mom go for a walk alone.

Sandy does not blame her son for leaving. She also understands that he could call, because he was afraid they would talk him into coming back. She explains that she and Big Will were not equipped to deal with anything in life more significant than a ball game. Willie stays for dinner, although he graciously refuses his stepfather's offer to stay with them over the summer.

On his way back into Coho, Willie goes to visit his dad at the Ranch Motel. Big Will does not let him in the room, because he does not want Willie to see how he lives, but he comes out to walk to the restaurant for a talk. Big Will sees the motorcycle and says Willie can have it, since he has found a slower way to kill himself.

Big Will apologizes for yelling at Willie in the bar, but he cannot offer Willie anything else. Willie is heartbroken, but he does not show it. Instead, he passes his dad a note from Lacey Casteel that says Willie is fixed, and if Big Will does not want him, he should send him back to Lacey.

After walking his dad back to the motel, Willie goes to see Jenny, who is still angry. She has blamed herself for Willie's disappearance this whole time. She thought she had killed him, and she is too hurt, angry and confused to talk.



Early Sunday morning, Willie loads his belongings onto the motorcycle. He loves Montana, but he feels as crippled here now as before he left. This time, he gives everybody his address at OMLC and says he will be back.

On his way out of Coho, Willie goes to his old house to see his baby sister's room. The new people have a baby girl in there now. Willie peers over the crib to see her, and she grabs his finger like Missy used to, which makes him cry. Back outside, Willie climbs onto the motorcycle and drives to Oakland, without looking back.

## Chapter 21 Analysis

When Willie returns, he finds that while he may be ready to face Coho, two of the most important people in Coho are not ready to face him. Willie has grown, but his dad has not gotten any better at facing things. His mom has survived, but she has remade a new life that does not really include Willie. Jenny has spent the last year and a half thinking she caused his death, and she seems as sorry to see him alive as his dad is. Johnny is still the loyal friend, but he is loyal to the old Willie. He does not really know the new Willie.

Willie will come back again someday, but this is not his home for now. After one last goodbye to the memory of his sister, Willie returns to his new home in Oakland. This time, the motorcycle is not an instrument of self-destruction, but a tool he uses to get home.



# Characters

## Angel

Angel is a classmate at the OMLC high school and a prostitute who works for Lacey Casteel.

spite Willie's attempts to help her out of her situation and the fact that Willie has developed a crush on her, Angel inexplicably prefers to stay with Lacey and does not return Willie's romantic feelings.

## Big Will

See William Weaver Sr.

## Jenny Blackburn

Jenny is Willie Weaver's girlfriend and best friend. Also an athlete, Jenny bonds with Willie over their love of sports and competition. When Willie has his accident, it is Jenny who saves his life and remains by his side to nurse him back to health and give him all the love and support he needs. However, Jenny finds that her generosity and patience toward Willie result in jealousy and resentment on his part. While she swears to stand by Willie, the relationship comes to a tragic end when she begins dating another classmate. When Willie discovers her betrayal, Jenny tries to explain her actions, but ultimately her behavior ends the relationship permanently. Just before Willie leaves, she argues with Willie over his behavior since the accident: "You treat your friends like spit. I'd have stayed with you, Willie, if you'd have made any attempt to be decent. But no! Not Willie Weaver! If he can't be a hero, then to hell with everyone else." When Willie returns two years later, Jenny initially refuses to speak to him, but later has a conversation in which she reveals that she's too hurt and confused to tell Willie how she feels. They part ways amicably before Willie returns to Oakland.

## Lacey Casteel

Lacey is a black bus driver and part-time pimp who rescues Willie one night after a gang attack. Lacey allows Willie to stay with him and enrolls Willie in a local school; however, Lacey's generosity is somewhat duplicitous. By caring for Willie, Lacey feels he can somehow redeem himself for beating his own son many years ago: "I get this idea to get me out of Hell. Raise me a white cripple kid. Can't fix all the bad shit, but maybe I make up *some*." Lacey is prone to violence and often drinks to extreme, which culminates in a physical confrontation between him and Willie. While Lacey prefers to keep his life private, he reveals parts of himself and his past to Willie, and the two make amends and develop a strong bond. Lacey struggles with his ex-wife and the son he is forbidden to



see but becomes a better man through his relationship with Willie. Lacey attends Willie's graduation and is touched by Willie's public expression of gratitude toward him.

## Warren Hawkins

Warren is a black student at OMLC high school and one of the toughest kids on campus. He's tall, smart, strong, and intimidating, with a short temper, a tendency to fight, and a penchant for pot smoking. However, he's also easygoing with a good sense of humor. His skills on the basketball court impress Willie, and despite their differences, the boys become allies in the fight against the street gang that tries to ruin the school.

## Kato

Kato is a stocky black kid and Warren Hawk's sidekick. His eccentric sense of humor reminds Willie of an old friend back in Montana and acts as a bridge between Willie's past and present.

## Lisa

Lisa is the physical education teacher at the OMLC high school. An excellent basketball player who is studying for her degree in physical therapy, Lisa takes Willie under her wing and teaches him how to build up his strength, both physically and mentally, with different exercises and the use of visualization. Her encouragement and wisdom help Willie come to terms with the accident and force him to take responsibility for his life. She tells him point-blank, "You crippled yourself because you stretched the rules till they broke. Simple as that."

## Andre Porter

Andre is the principal at the OMLC high school. He accepts Willie into the school in exchange for maintenance work. Acting as a mentor for Willie, Andre guides him through some of his more difficult challenges and encourages him to reach out to the other students. It is Andre's commitment to the school and the students, as well as his determination to accept responsibility in the most desperate times, that helps Willie realize he has to keep fighting to improve his life.

## Johnny Rivers

Johnny is a close friend and teammate of Willie's who reveres Willie and his athletic talent. Johnny's admiration grows after Willie's unforgettable performance in the championship game. However, after the accident, to which Johnny was a witness, the friendship becomes strained. Johnny is unable to relate to him outside of the sports arena. He tries to support his friend and invite him to parties, but discovers that it's





impossible to communicate with Willie: "I'm your friend, man. I wanna stay your friend, but I don't know what to *do*. Really. Just tell me what to do." Johnny watches, helpless, as Willie retreats further and further into his shell. When Willie returns to Montana, Johnny is the first person he seeks out. Even though Willie has been gone for two years, Johnny holds no hard feelings toward his old friend. Johnny welcomes Willie back but he is also the one to reveal the difficult news about Willie's parents' divorce.

## Sammy

Sammy is Lisa's boyfriend and the tai chi instructor who helps Willie on his road to recovery, both physically and spiritually. He believes in "lust and passion and good old common sense. And in staying alive."

## Telephone Man

Telephone Man is the first student Willie meets at OMLC high school. He is an emotionally-challenged and sensitive teenager who wears a full set of telephone repair tools on a belt around his waist. Telephone Man acts as the catalyst for the final showdown with the gang at the school. Because the gang violently attacks Telephone Man, Willie and two other students decide to fight back. This act of loyalty means the world to Telephone Man because it makes him realize that he is liked by his classmates.

## Sandy Weaver

Sandy Weaver is Willie's mother. She blames herself for the death of her baby girl to SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) a few years ago, and has never fully recovered from the loss. While she's proud of her son's accomplishments, she worries that his bravado will result in him taking his life for granted. She wishes that Willie would understand that he has been given gifts for which he should be thankful. After the accident, Sandy watches her marriage fall apart because her husband is overcome with guilt. Her relationship with William Sr. is marked by tragedy, but she criticizes her husband for his reaction to their son, saying "I don't treat our son like a leper; or worse yet, like he's invisible. He's not some possession . . . he's not a car you can take back to the dealer because it doesn't run right." When her son disappears, Sandy leaves her husband, and by the time Willie returns, she is remarried to another man. While she wishes Willie would come and live with her, Sandy understands why her son must leave again.

## William Weaver Sr.

William Weaver Sr. is Willie's father and former star football player. His claim to fame is winning the Rose Bowl back in 1968. As he watches his son excel in baseball, William Sr. seems to be living vicariously through Willie's successes and failures. While proud of his son's accomplishments, William Sr. remains emotionally distant from his son and is



more often imparting sports wisdom than offering fatherly support and advice. When Willie is injured in the accident, William Sr. blames himself for almost drowning his son and is unable to cope with his guilty conscience. He can't deal with Willie because he's a constant reminder of William Sr.'s mistakes. He reacts to Willie's apathy by saying, "You want to be a cripple all your life, just keep it up. When it gets a little tough, slack off." William Sr. alienates himself from his family and turns to alcohol when his marriage falls apart after Willie runs away. When Willie returns, William Sr. finds it difficult to make amends with his son, but is impressed with the way Willie has recovered.

## Willie Weaver

Willie is the novel's protagonist. He is a gifted and confident baseball player and all-around athlete who pitches the local team to its first championship and, with an amazing catch, etches that particular game into the town's history. However, Willie's life changes dramatically when an accident leaves him physically disabled. Unable to deal with the physical and emotional consequences of the accident, Willie leaves rural Montana, his friends, his girlfriend, and his family behind and arrives in Oakland, California, an urban street-wise city significantly different from his hometown.

During the two years that he spends in Oakland, Willie forges friendships with various characters and graduates from an alternative high school. By working with a physical therapist and taking tai chi classes, Willie is able to regain control over his body, come to terms with the accident and how it changed his life. In his graduation speech, Willie thanks Sammy, his tai chi instructor, saying, "He talked to me, mostly without words, and I think he told me a whole lot of what I'm going to need to be an adult. He showed me how my mind and body are just different parts of the same thing and that there are no limits for either; that most of the really important answers are already inside me. ... He taught me how to go to my gut to survive." Willie returns home to make amends with his past; however, after discovering that his family fell apart in his absence and that his friends have moved on without him, Willie returns to Oakland to continue his new life.

## Cyril Wheat

Cyril is Willie's therapist, whose unconventional style succeeds in reaching Willie in a way that no one else can. With his frank and direct manner, Cyril tells Willie, "That golden boy isn't you anymore, and as long as you keep measuring yourself up against him, you're gonna be mad as hell at *everybody*." Cyril interprets Willie's dreams and encourages him to communicate more with his family and friends. He even suggests that Willie bring his parents and his girlfriend into his office for some group sessions in order to help Willie sort through his problems. Despite the small progress Cyril makes with Willie, he can't stop him from trying to escape his problems. Once Willie leaves Montana, Cyril never sees him again.



# Themes

## Identity

One of the prevalent themes in the book involves how young people determine their identity as they come of age. For Willie Weaver, he identifies himself as an athlete first and foremost. Because of his talent on the baseball field and the relative ease with which he is able to master certain sports, Willie couldn't imagine living his life any other way. Sports are an essential element to his life; it's how he relates to his father, William Sr., who was a star football player in his day, his friends, who are also his teammates, and his girlfriend, who shares Willie's love of competition. Ironically, it is a sporting activity that takes away his physical abilities. When Willie loses power over his body and his ability to play sports in a water-skiing accident, his whole world falls apart as he can no longer relate to the people in his life. If he's not the star pitcher for the baseball team, then who is he? Willie watches as each relationship in his life suffers because of his unwillingness to accept the consequences of the accident or to make any attempt to recover. It is only when Willie travels to a place where no one knows him or who he was that he is able to find the freedom to discover who he really is.

## Self-Reliance

Throughout the novel, Willie's resilience is tested several times, beginning with the accident that leaves him physically disabled. While he survives the accident, he struggles greatly with the consequences of his disability and must deal with the depression and suicidal thoughts that follow. Ultimately, Willie believes he must escape his surroundings in order to continue his life and then faces a number of challenges as a result of leaving those familiar surroundings. Once he arrives in Oakland, he suffers a violent gang attack that leaves him beaten, bloody, and broke. Yet once again, he finds the strength to survive by striking a deal with a man who offers him a place to stay free of charge. Finally, Willie's attendance at the OMLC (One More Last Chance) High School represents his final chance at survival and the ultimate test of self-reliance, which is heightened by the fact that he is surrounded by other disadvantaged individuals who face similar, difficult challenges in their struggle to survive with the limited resources they've been given.

## Fate

Connected with the concept of survival is the idea of fate and the way one single moment can define a lifetime. Willie has two similar experiences that have dramatically different results. The first is his amazing play during the Crazy Horse Electric game. By making a miraculous catch to win the game, Willie becomes a minor legend in a matter of seconds. A few weeks later, during a weekend trip with his family, Willie is injured in a water-skiing accident that leaves him severely disabled. These two events are related to



fate in the sense that Willie had no control over either of them. One resulted in him being a hero while the other took away the only life he ever knew. Inevitably, Willie questions why he was injured and tries to figure out whom or what to blame. He needs a reason or a purpose for his suffering. Ultimately, however, even as Willie comes to terms with the how and why of his accident, he knows the answer doesn't necessarily make him feel better about his life. Willie isn't able to move on until he accepts his situation and makes a concerted effort to recover.

## Family

At the start of the novel, Willie has a traditional family that is stained by a struggle with a past tragedy. Despite the loss of a child, Willie's parents are still together and providing him with a somewhat stable home. This traditional family structure, however, is threatened after Willie's accident. Willie leaves home as a way to release his parents of the burden he has created, an act that eventually causes the end of his parents' marriage. Once Willie arrives in Oakland, he succeeds in creating another kind of family, one that is unconventional but nonetheless provides him with the support system he desperately needs. Several different characters combine to act as Willie's caretakers and substitute parents, from the man who first takes him in, Lacey Casteel, and the principal at OMLC, Andre, to his physical therapy teacher, Lisa, and his tai chi instructor, Sammy. In addition, the other students at the OMLC act as extended family members who provide Willie with loyalty and companionship. When Willie returns to Montana, he realizes that his family has fallen apart, forcing him to reconsider the concept of family. At the end of the novel, he decides to return to the home and family that he's created back in Oakland.



# Style

## Setting

The novel's two settings serve to greatly differentiate between Willie's life before the accident and after the accident and the spiritual journey he makes over the course of the story. In the small town of Coho, Montana, Willie leads a sheltered life in which everything comes easily to him. He is well known by the townsfolk, and the championship game turns him into a hero. However, his hero status comes too easily; he is never confronted with obstacles or major challenges. He lives a charmed life, one that is never contested, which is reflected in his safe, small-town surroundings. When Willie arrives in Oakland, he's forced to figure everything out on his own. In the tough, urban setting of Oakland, Willie is no longer the boy with the golden arm; he's just another kid down on his luck in a place filled with disadvantaged people. In this new setting, Willie learns the importance of being challenged. In his speech at graduation, he acknowledges the gift he's been given, saying, "My life is more valuable because I got knocked out of my favored spot." It's only by expanding his life experience in another setting that Willie can grow as a person.

## Symbolism

Symbolism is a literary device used to instill meaning into an object. One of the symbols in this novel is a walking cane given to Willie by his teammates after the accident. It is a custom-made cane with a golden baseball for a head, reading Willie Weaver-1, Crazy Horse Electric-0, an inscription that represents Willie's shining moment. Willie uses the cane for a few weeks after the accident; he needs it to help him walk. However, even when Willie no longer physically depends on the cane, he keeps it with him, and it acts as a reminder of Willie's former glory. When Willie arrives in Oakland, the cane becomes a symbol of weakness and vulnerability. In his most desperate time of need, the cane becomes his enemy and the reason why Willie is chosen as a target. Later in the novel, as Willie begins to have some control over his life, the cane mirrors his progress and becomes a weapon that Willie uses to defend a girl whom Lacey is beating.

As Willie starts his tai chi classes, Sammy, his instructor, teaches him to use his cane to his advantage and incorporates it into Willie's balance. When Willie grows stronger, the cane comes to represent something other than the Crazy Horse Electric game. Just like Willie must learn to make allowances for his body and use what he has to the fullest extent, the cane becomes less of a symbol of who Willie used to be and more of an indication of how far he has come. In the final confrontation with the gang at the OMLC, Willie brings his cane for protection against the boys and uses it to defend himself and escape the burning building. Willie makes it out alive, but the cane gets left behind in the rubble. When he travels back to Coho, Montana, Willie arrives in town without the cane, which symbolizes that he has come full circle in his recovery.



## Young Adult Literature

*The Crazy Horse Electric Game* is a novel that falls within the young-adult literature genre. A book is characterized as young-adult because it addresses the issues and problems of contemporary life as experienced by this particular age group. The novels within this genre often discuss many of the same questions and difficulties that teenagers must confront, such as drugs, divorce, parents, alienation, suicide, disabilities, abuse, gang violence, school, sports, and relationships. At the same time, many adolescents must deal with the transition between childhood and adulthood and the idea of discovering their identity, which is one of the main issues explored in this novel. One of the crucial elements in young-adult literature is its ability to reach its audience in a way that allows them to better understand and authenticate their own life experiences in a safe environment. It's a forum for teenagers to work through their problems without being threatened with exposure. It is also an important way to introduce teenagers to literature and create a lifelong interest in reading.



# Historical Context

## The War on Drugs Campaign in the 1980s

When *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* was published, President Ronald Reagan and First Lady Nancy Reagan had launched the war on drugs in America. Nancy Reagan had made it one of her personal crusades and created the slogan that urged young people to "Just Say No." As a result, "Just Say No" clubs were springing up in schools across the country. This effort was started in 1984 and continued up through President George Bush's inauguration in 1988.

In September of 1986, Ronald and Nancy Reagan gave an address from the family quarters of the White House on the subject of drug abuse. In the speech, as reported by Jacob Lamar in *Time*, Ronald Reagan said: "Drugs are menacing our society. They're threatening our values and undercutting our institutions. They're killing our children." The First Lady continued: "Today there is a drug and alcohol epidemic in this country, and no one is safe from it—not you, not me and certainly not our children, because this epidemic has their names written on it." The whole effort was widely criticized for its simplicity, its general lack of understanding of the real problems facing youth, and its superficiality. Specifically, the President's message was denounced for budgeting approximately \$3 billion to fight the war on drugs but refusing to offer any real solutions to the problem. Many educators and health professionals recognized the need to create more in-depth educational programs to deal with drug use, particularly among youth with disadvantaged backgrounds and those living in decaying urban communities.

As a mental health therapist, Crutcher had first-hand experience with the issues facing disadvantaged youth. He also expressed his moral commitment to protect kids. In *School Library Journal Online*, he told Betty Carter:

"For me, the moral thing is to set up a structure that protects kids emotionally, physically and spiritually, which is to say, 'When something hurts you, come talk to me about it. I will hear you and not punish out of fear. There's nothing you can tell me that will make me turn my back. But I'm not going to keep you in the dark about anything. I'm going to protect you from bad guys. I'm going to protect you from running out on the street. . . I'm going to do all those things, but my moral job with you is to be there and accept you.'"

Crutcher's realistic and sympathetic treatment of his characters in the novel serves to reflect the need for a more comprehensive and honest approach to the subject of drugs and the other problems teens must face in their day-to-day lives. Crutcher's effort also worked to humanize the problem. His novel shows that not every young person in America was on drugs—as implied by the perceived national crisis—and those who might experiment with drugs were not to be dismissed as junkies. He tries to emphasize that these kids have many redeeming qualities and have the ability to contribute to society. Perhaps most evident is Crutcher's message that troubled teens desperately



need support from responsible, caring adults and their communities in order to safely navigate their rocky adolescence.

## Gang Violence in the 1980s

*The Crazy Horse Electric Game* addresses the prevalence of gang violence in the small cities of America by highlighting an Asian youth gang who terrorize the local community and school. At the time the novel was written, street gangs were spreading from the major cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago into smaller towns and cities. In 1984, there were 28,500 gang members in Los Angeles with 20,000 of those members living outside of the city. Federal researches also reported in 1984 that two-thirds of the cities reporting gang violence had populations under 500,000, which included suburbs of major cities like New Haven, Connecticut; Jackson, Mississippi; and Portsmouth, Virginia.

The spread of gangs into smaller cities was directly related to the fact that the same problems that plagued major cities, such as poverty, racial separation, youth unemployment, and broken families, were now affecting smaller cities. In addition, when youths moved from the inner cities, they often started gangs in their new surroundings. Another new problem that surfaced was that gang violence was not confined to the streets anymore; the activity often spread onto school grounds in suburban areas.





## Critical Overview

When *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* was published, Chris Crutcher had already established a solid reputation for himself as a refreshing new voice of young-adult fiction that appealed to both critics and audiences. Most reviewers had praised him for addressing popular themes with adolescents, such as divorce, drugs, mental and physical handicaps, and gang violence in a manner that managed to be both humorous and unsentimental. However, critics' opinions were mixed about the effectiveness of *The Crazy Horse Electric Game*. Todd Morning, in his review in *The School Library Journal*, states:

Willie's present-tense narration is annoying, and does not work well for this story that covers several years. The author is best in the effective description of Willie's effort to recover from his injury. But this is the best that can be said for a novel that often seems contrived.

Roger Sutton of the *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* agrees with *SLJ*, saying:

Crutcher's special brand of tough but tender machismo (used to good effect in *Running Loose*) is on uneasy ground of sentimentality here, and the thematic concerns are too obvious.

Despite these criticisms, other reviewers praised Crutcher for his development of eccentric yet truthful characters and his honest portrayal of harsh realities. Pam Spencer in *Voice of Youth Advocates* notes that "this book could have ended 'happily ever after' with Willie returning home to girlfriend and parents, all waiting for him with open arms. But tragedies don't leave a family un-scarred." It is Crutcher's commitment to examining subjects with substance that led Susie Wilde of *Children's Literature* to say that "the story is a poignant telling of courage, the struggle to survive life on all levels, and an examination of values once held dear."

When Crutcher received the Margaret A. Edwards Award in 2000, he solidified his mission to continue writing about adolescence because it is such a crucial time in one's life. He told Betty Carter of *School Library Journal Online* that he writes about teenagers because "they're on the edge of having to live their lives themselves. Those initial decisions they make are really important." However, it is also Crutcher's wish to write about some of the most controversial subjects for teenagers, such as sexual abuse, which he covers in two of his books, *Running Loose* and *Chinese Handcuffs*. As a result, his works have occasionally been banned by conservative school districts. In fact, *Booklist* refused to even review *Chinese Handcuffs*. Crutcher disagrees with the idea that it's necessary to protect children from life's uglier truths and admits to dealing with these same issues in his own adolescence and suffering because of it. In an interview with Betty Carter for *School Library Journal Online*, Crutcher said:

I had a mom who didn't want me to feel bad. She wanted me to think everything was going to be all right because she wanted them to be all right. . . . When I got out on my



own, I had to take a look and say sometimes things don't turn out okay and sometimes there isn't a happily ever after, and all those things they tell you about marriage and relationships and jobs are sometimes just not the truth. ... I don't think we should trump the bad, but there's a world out there. There's a good chance at some time in your life you're gonna run into it.

Despite the censorship, or perhaps because of it, Crutcher's novels always seem to find their way into his readers' hands. While conducting a writer's workshop in Houston, Crutcher was approached by a young girl who was the victim of sexual abuse and had read *Chinese Handcuffs*. After reading the novel, the girl felt safe enough to seek help. Experiences like these give Crutcher the fuel to keep writing while refusing to shy away from the controversy that some could say has become a signature of his work. He told Heather Vogel Frederick in *Publisher's Weekly* that he knows "it's risky business letting people have their own lives, particularly if they are our children." But he's willing to take that risk because, he adds, "I'm only interested in stories that I care about. ... If I don't feel passionate I can't write."

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3



# Critical Essay #1

*Drohan is a professional editor and writer who specializes in fiction and nonfiction for young adults and children. In the following essay, she explores a concept prevalent in The Crazy Horse Electric Game and other novels in the young-adult genre, which concerns a loss of childhood innocence and the idea of confronting one's mortality during adolescence. While life's learning experiences often occur during tragic events, those hard lessons later prove invaluable as young people try to make sense of their lives.*

Critics have recognized that Chris Crutcher's *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* explores how a young man must dig deep within himself to find his inner strength. It's a story of personal courage, and the structure of the story highlights the journey that many young people must take in order to understand their place in the world. The novel is told from the point of view of an unnamed narrator, and it opens with the statement, "Sometimes he remembers it as if it were unfolding in front of him this very minute, all of it; event by amazing event. And sometimes it seems as if it all happened a long, long time ago, maybe in another lifetime." This statement implies that the protagonist, Willie Weaver, has endured a tragedy that dramatically affected his outlook on life and one that still affects him to this day. Even more compelling is the idea that the protagonist is now an old man, looking back on his life. However, it is soon revealed that the event in question occurred just two years ago when Willie was sixteen years old, reaffirming the concept that coming of age means the attainment of maturity.

Willie Weaver comes from a long line of athletes. His grandfather was a legendary athlete at Notre Dame while his father holds the distinction of playing in a winning game of the Rose Bowl in 1968. Crutcher provides this family history as a way to give readers a strong idea of Willie's sense of entitlement to his gifts as a baseball pitcher. While Willie's life is far from perfect—his father is emotionally distant while his mother is still grieving over the loss of her infant daughter—the summer of his sixteenth year is full of promise and possibility. As Willie approaches the championship game for his team, Samson Floral, he has the kind of confidence that comes from never enduring any real obstacles in his life: "He's always been better at sports than any kid his age, so he's never felt any different than this. It's just the way things are; he's *supposed* to be a hero." Willie feels invincible as his body will do anything he asks of it and his teammates would "[sell] their souls to play on the same team as him."

Crutcher provides a moment of foreshadowing just before the game as Willie and his father have a rare moment of closeness. During the conversation, William Sr. tells his son to remember everything that happens up to and during the game. Speaking from experience, William Sr. relates the Rose Bowl as the highlight of his career and how he savored every moment because "[he] didn't know if [he'd] ever be that good at anything again." Willie listens to his father's words but does not hold them close to his heart because he knows the game will belong to him. Crutcher uses this opportunity to show Willie's bravado and naivete, and while Willie doesn't realize it, readers will understand that those very words will come back to haunt him.



Winning the game serves to bolster Willie's sense of immortality. Because he made a miraculous play and took his team to the championship, Willie has yet another reason to feel blessed. The game takes on a magical quality, which dramatically heightens Willie's sudden fall from grace. During the weekend vacation by the lake, Willie decides to take the last water-skiing run of the day, even though his body is fatigued. He pushes himself, riding high on the adrenaline that comes from the speed and power of the water. However, his shoulders begin to ache and his legs go numb, which leave him vulnerable to the water. The accident occurs quickly, and Willie is knocked unconscious. Ironically, Willie's father panics and is unable to help him, which points out another element in Crutcher's coming-of-age theme. It's the moment when children understand that their parents are fallible.

Willie is devastated by the accident and stays out of school for as long as possible. The idea of being confronted by his classmates and teammates is too much to bear. Not only will they see the full extent of Willie's disability, but it also means Willie must face what he's lost by watching his girlfriend, Jenny, and his friends, continue to excel in sports. Willie can't help feeling that he hates his friends because they can still do all the things he can't do. Willie's sense of martyrdom grows as he searches for the reason he must endure this hardship: "He'd give anything to step back over that tiny sliver of time—the point of impact with the water ski—and be just a *hair* more cautious; back off the edge just enough. But the circumstances that allowed the Crazy Horse Electric game to be will never happen again, because he can't step back." By forcing Willie to relive the moment over and over again in his head, Crutcher highlights Willie's failure to fully accept what has happened to him.

When Willie decides the only answer to his problems is to leave Montana, it is unclear whether or not this is the right decision. This is a turning point in the novel, when Willie's actions could be interpreted as further denial and a wish to escape his problems. However, as Willie begins his journey, his thoughts fall to his girlfriend, Jenny, and her betrayal. Crutcher uses this relationship to have Willie learn one of life's more important lessons—that even the people you trust most in the world can lie. As Willie continues his journey by himself, he proceeds to learn hard lessons about life. Even though Willie's been through difficult times, he will come to realize that it's no guarantee that he's safe from further harm. Arriving in the bus terminal in Oakland, Willie is confronted by a stream of transients for whom "desperate times are the order of the day. Abandon hope is written across their faces in greasy city dirt." This gives Willie yet another epiphany—he is not special in his state of suffering. In fact, there are people in the world that have it much harder than he does.

When Willie is the victim of a violent gang attack, he thinks he'd give anything in the world to be back in Montana because "he never had any idea there was this in the world." His rude awakening to life outside his small hometown further confuses Willie, and his survival instincts begin to take shape. He understands now that he must dig deep within himself just to live another day. He has no other choice but to try and make the best of his situation. This results in his rescue by a local black bus driver and part-time pimp named Lacey Cas-teel. Lacey represents an opportunity for Willie, and while Willie understands that Lacey is in a dubious line of business, he realizes that he needs



Lacey and he's in no position to make snap moral judgments about anyone. Lacey is quick to see that Willie is not wise to the ways of the world and jokingly tells Willie that he ought to find a place close to the bus station as it would keep Willie apprised of what the world is *really* like. Willie is beginning to understand those very words: "Something changed in him after last night, after he survived what he was sure was his last second on earth, and from now on Willie Weaver's going to take whatever he has to take to survive."

When Willie enrolls in the OMLC (One More Last Chance) High School, he is surrounded by other disadvantaged kids. His friendship with the physical education teacher, Lisa, not only helps Willie regain his physical strength but it proves to Willie that once he begins to reach out to others and really try to recover, there are people he can depend on for help. It is a conversation with Lisa that helps him come to terms with his accident. When he asks her, "why me?", she confronts him directly without pity and puts the blame right on his shoulders, saying, "You crippled yourself because you stretched the rules till they broke.

Simple as that." Willie is not satisfied with this explanation and mentions God, implying that if he does exist, there is no good reason why God hurt Willie. However, Lisa gives him the lecture of a lifetime: "You had to go a little faster than you could, push out there at the edge because you thought nothing could hurt you. The rules don't slack off for naive. . . .You broke the rules, you got hurt."

By the end of the novel, Willie has worked so hard to recover that it's impossible to see that he has any disability. He has expanded his horizons, thanks to tai chi lessons that taught him that "his mind and body are mere extensions of each other." By living and experiencing events that never would have occurred had the accident never taken place, Willie realizes how his loss of innocence has brought him to a better place, that pain and suffering are a necessary part of life. Every moment of his life is a part of who he is and this gives him a power he never had. In his speech at graduation, Willie expresses his gratitude over the fact that no one at the school ever preached to him, but instead "let [him] figure it out for [himself], *demand*ed that [he] figure it out for [himself]." He's ready to go back home and face the unknown. He's not sure if he can make it, but he knows he's strong enough to try.

Finally, Crutcher uses the graduation speech in order to show Willie's full transformation: "There are lots of people . . . whose lives are protected from the day they're born until the day they die. But no matter how wonderful those lives seem, if they're not contested, never put up against the wall, then they exist inside very narrow walls, and because of that I believe they lose value, in the most basic sense of the word." This realization is the culmination of Willie's facing his own mortality—that it's only when you lose everything you hold dear that you are able to really accomplish anything. Even if he could go back to his old carefree, charmed life, he would choose not to. The essence of the novel puts forth some of Crutcher's own hard-held beliefs, that you cannot protect children from harm or stop them from falling, but you can be there to pick them back up.

**Source:** Michele Drohan, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.



## Critical Essay #2

*In the following essays, Davis explores the "strong" characters and "painful" subject matter Crutcher presents in The Crazy Horse Electric Game.*

There's a point near the end of *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* when Willie has gone home to face the people and things he ran out on. He finds his parents divorced and his mom remarried, his dad has become a brutal drunk and tells him "I'm not your dad," and his old girlfriend Jenny calls him a son of a bitch. He rides up into the hills on the motorcycle he and his dad used to ride together, and the narrator tells us: "Willie can't believe there's this much sadness in the world."

When we consider Crutcher's status in young adult literature it might be hard to believe that any of his books were ever met with disapproval or disdain. But *Crazy Horse* was, and so was *Chinese Handcuffs*. *Crazy Horse* is, in fact, the only one of Crutcher's books that wasn't a unanimous ALA Best. He enjoys telling the story of how the novel was effectively banned in Hawaii. In that state, he says, a book has a chance to be reviewed twice. If two librarians veto it, the state buys only one copy. The first librarian who reviewed *Crazy Horse* said it was trash, and poorly edited trash to boot, and such an awful book that it had no right to be published. Crutcher uses the word *vicious* to describe her commentary. The second found it well written but so depressing that she couldn't recommend it for young adults. Proponents of the book worked two years to overturn this initial decision.

*Crazy Horse* is full of sadness, and so is life—most of us recognize this and admit it. But to call it "depressing" isn't a measure of the book; it's a measure of the reader. Other readers argue that *Crazy Horse* presents a positive view of life and is uplifting because, while it imitates accurately the painful nature of our existence, it also allows for "one more last chance" to learn the rules that can save us.

Art is different from life. Art—at least the storytelling art—is an imitation of life made by human beings in an attempt to bring life's complexity into focus. A story is controlled. Nothing in it happens by chance. Yes, as the story is composed, inspiration and intuition do strike, unconscious forces rise to the light and bestow their surprises. But by the time the story is ready to go out into the world and meet its readers, it's been revised until not just every story element but every single word has become the result of the writer's conscious choice.

We can be there as Willie Weaver puts on the life jacket that's too big for him. When he pushes the limits of his waterskiing ability, falls and gets hit in the head with the ski, "and the life jacket slips

up, trapping his arms and head, and Willie slips into darkness" and into the brain damage that destroys what might have been a one-in-a-million athlete, we know the cause—not just the only cause we can observe but the only cause Willie could have





controlled: He shouldn't have worn a life jacket that was too big. He broke the rules, and he paid.

Here's the point: God's will doesn't matter□ not in a Crutcher world. Willie has no control over God's will. Willie can, however, refuse to wear a life jacket that doesn't fit; he can choose not to push his ability when he's too tired to exercise it. He can *do* something to alter possibilities; he can be a causal agent in his own life. There are things he can *control*.

Religious faith, which is to say the belief in realities beyond what we can see or understand, does not bring us control. Religious faith brings peace to some of us, but it doesn't bring control. Religious faith, in fact, is relinquishing control. And control, in a Crutcher world, is a method of salvation.

Listen once more to Crutcher speaking through another of his personas. This is Lisa, the PE teacher at One More Last Chance School, responding to Willie's question about why he got hurt:

"You mean . . . why you crippled yourself?"

Willie grimaces and nods. Lisa always words things like that; *why you crippled yourself* instead of *why you got crippled*. . . .

"You crippled yourself because you stretched the rules till they broke. Simple as that.

"God didn't cripple you, Willie. *You* did. You stretched the rules till they broke."

This question about why things happen, why the innocent suffer along with the guilty, this stuff about the nature of life is the core element in all of Crutcher's work. This core begins to glow *in Running Loose*; Crutcher puts it under greater pressure in *Stotan!*; it erupts in *The Crazy Horse Electric Game*; and the magma's heat and speed intensify as it flows through *Chinese Handcuffs* and *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*. We have no obligation to believe and adopt this view of the world Crutcher presents, but if we don't see it, then we're missing what he spends so much effort trying to show and tell us.

What is this molten material flowing through the books? It's pain, the most common currency in life, a great deal more common than love. Pain is the element that allows so many readers to see their

own lives mirrored in Crutcher's work. We are all experts in pain. Even those of us who can't articulate our pain□*especially* those□recognize it and know absolutely when a storyteller presents it accurately.

In *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* the pain starts before the action of the story. The Dragon, incarnate in sudden infant death syndrome, took Willie's sister Missy. The pain of her death haunts Willie, Big Will, and Sandy Weaver, and the fact of her death□the fact that it just happened, that it was nobody's *fault*□hovers over the story until the final moments.



What we said about *Stotan!* in relation to *Running Loose* we can say about *Crazy Horse* in relation to *Stotan!*: The same elements are here; the differences are intensity and focus. Remember what Crutcher gives as the reason his books become more and more painful: "it is the increased damage I've seen, [and] my increased awareness of what that damage is." He's speaking about the damage we do to one another, and this damage—as opposed to the damage done to us by circumstance—is what he focuses on more closely here and hereafter. In *Sarah Byrnes*, for example, the damage Virgil Byrnes did to his daughter is what fuels the central action of the story; in *Ironman* Beau Brewster's central battle is to let go of the anger that's the result of the damage his father did him.

There are the same thematic elements and similar character types, but there's also something different about *Crazy Horse*. We feel it in the opening sentence: "Sometimes he remembers it as if it were unfolding in front of him this very minute." What's different about this narration?

What's different is a shift in point of view. The position from which the author allows us to view the action of the story has changed. Crutcher has chosen third-person limited narration over first-person here. "Limited" refers to the degree of omniscience the narrator exercises. In this case the narrator limits to one the number of characters whose minds we're allowed to enter. He can shift focus into Willie's mind, allowing the reader to see as Willie sees and be present in his thoughts.

This change from first-person narration is another example of Crutcher's increased confidence in the craft of writing and maybe also in the magnitude of his subject matter. It takes courage and skill to abandon the first-person narrators with whom he's had so much success. These characters' voices alone are engaging enough to hook readers. But Crutcher steps outside his main character here and allows a more distanced, objective persona to tell his story. Then again we can look at this in another way: one might say that now, in third-person, Crutcher can tell the story himself—in his own voice, out of his own experience, directed by his own passions—rather than under the limitations inherent in a youthful pose.

The biggest difference this change in point of view creates is seen—is heard, really—in the story's tone. *Tone* refers to the storyteller's attitude toward subject matter; in *Crazy Horse*, since the narrator is no longer invested in events, the presentation of events has a more distant, objective ring. If the narration is successful, as Crutcher's is, there's no loss of emotional intensity. The source of the intensity just shifts from narrator to focal character.

An intriguing and illuminating way to consider *Crazy Horse* is as the fulfillment of Walker Dupree's musings at the conclusion of *Stotan!* We remember that Walker says if he ever makes it to adulthood and decides to turn back and help someone grow up, as a parent, teacher, or coach (or writer), he will concentrate on "dispelling myths, clearing up unreal expectations." And this is just what Crutcher does in *Crazy Horse*. Before Willie's injury changed everything, "his father was mythic to him," and part of the positive



transformation that results from the way Willie's injury changes his perspective on the world is that this mythic quality gets busted.

The other word Walker uses is *expectations*, and in the book's final pages, when Willie learns about the hell his parents' lives became, we hear his mother tell him something that warrants quotation:

"[Y]ou don't always get what you expect. I wish someone, sometime when I was growing up, would have told me what expectations would get me. . . . Our parents, schools, everyone tells us things will be a certain way when we're adults and if they're not that way, we should make them be; or at least pretend. But after a certain point that just doesn't work."

What Willie's mother says here about parents, schools, and everyone telling us things will be a certain way—and that we should *pretend* they are even if they aren't—lead us into another theme that evolves from *Stotan!*, which is the theme that to speak and act honestly is the healthiest way to live for us and for the world around us. If this isn't the major theme of *The Crazy Horse Electric Game*, it is certainly the novel's driving force.

Consider, for example, how directly it evolves from the concluding lines of *Stotan!*: "But first things first," Walker says. "Right now I've got to get dressed and go pick up Devnee. Gotta set her straight." What Walker has learned about lying—along with coming to believe that everything unsaid is a lie—is that lying unbalances the liar and the world. Walker lies to Devnee, and neither of them is able to make decisions based on "what is," because what is can no longer be perceived accurately.

The theme of honesty permeates *Crazy Horse*. As chapter 2 opens, Big Will and Willie take one of their evening rides on Big Will's 700 Honda. They wear their helmets for Willie's mom's benefit as they pull out of the driveway but take them off at the edge of town. It's dishonest, and it's also messing with "the rules." This story element wouldn't be particularly significant if Crutcher hadn't made it a part of the unity of his story by returning to it in the conclusion. Now that Willie has learned from pain and from the wisdom of others, he "thinks of strapping the helmet to the sissy bar... but that's just like the old days and he keeps it on." Willie won't lie now, not explicitly or by omission; and if he's going to break the rules—like Crutcher himself does by not wearing a helmet—he's not going to be surprised when the rules break him.

Willie's mom knew all along that the guys dumped their helmets. She reveals this to Willie just moments before he hurts himself waterskiing. "Don't get too taken by fast things," she says. "They can hurt you. One of these days you and your dad may have to pay for all your recklessness." Consider this and then remember what Max told Walker in *Stotan!*: "This is a world where you pay for everything you do."

Crutcher shines his honesty spotlight on Big Will again as chapter 2 closes. Willie is thinking of Missy's death and how it caused the Weaver universe to shift. "Big Will held the family together with his powerful, stoic presence," and finally time began to dull the pain. This was "something Big Will couldn't take head on, something he had to turn his



back on." Here's Crutcher's point: if we turn our backs on it—on pain, on loss, on the truth—it will come back and kick the hell out of us, which is exactly what Missy's death finally does to the Weaver family. Powerful stoicism doesn't do it. Allowing ourselves to feel and to express the pain is what keeps us from being devoured by it. Crutcher tells us again and again: we can't fight the Dragon head-on, but we can go *with* him and beat him.

Cyril Wheat, the therapist Willie sees after his injury—and after the frightening reaction to the LSD he took at the party—is a Crutcher persona more Crutcher-like than most, particularly in his sense of humor and his commitment to honesty. When Willie first meets him Wheat is wearing his Gay Vegetarian Nazis for Jesus T-shirt, and when Willie gives him a look he shrugs and says, "I'm a joiner." This is vintage Crutcher humor in real life (he wears a Nuke the Children shirt), as well as in writing. Wheat's response to the events and feelings Willie recounts is this:

"A lot of what happens now depends on truth. When you're afraid your girlfriend is going away or your friends are keeping you around just because they feel sorry for you, you have to say that to them."

Some of the book's most incisive and painful honesty is present in Willie's feelings about Jenny. He's accepted the manager position on her basketball team, and "he's aware that something nagging down deep in him wants Jenny to blow it." This honest portrayal of human reactions is one of the reasons people trust Crutcher as a storyteller. We all know—even those of us who can't articulate it—that this is an accurate portrait of pain.

Willie tells Cyril about his jealousy, and the therapist's response is grounded in the healing nature of the truth, in spite of how much the truth hurts: "That golden boy isn't you anymore, and as long as you keep measuring yourself up against him, you're gonna be mad as hell at *everybody*. . . . And you'll lose your girl."

The pain becomes too much for Willie to handle when his loss of Jenny is confirmed. She couldn't muster the courage to tell Willie she liked another boy. "I didn't know what to do," she says. And Willie replies, "You . . . coulda . . . just . . . told me . . . the . . . truth." Jenny then goes on to tell him the truth that if he'd made any attempt to be decent she'd have stayed with him. "But no! Not Willie Weaver! If he can't be a hero, then to hell with everyone else." Willie "just wants to hurt her back." When he calls Jenny a bitch his life in Coho, Montana, has unraveled to the last thread. That night he steals money from his folks and catches a Greyhound west.

We need to remember that Willie is "a cripple" now. This is his physical state when he arrives in Oakland. Crutcher doesn't use the term *physically challenged*, because his commitment is to accuracy. He uses *crippled* because Willie is, indeed, "a damaged or defective object." This diction is another element in the matrix of honesty Crutcher creates. It's also important to consider in terms of story structure that if Willie isn't profoundly damaged, his recovery can't be profound or heroic enough to touch us as a great story does; if he's not brought low, he can't raise himself high.



The worst of Willie's pain isn't physical, although the beating he gets from the Jo Boys is no fun. The worst of Willie's pain is the fear and humiliation he feels now that he's been brought so low and found himself so alone. *"If I were okay, I'd beat this kid to death,"* Willie says about the gang's leader. Before he loses consciousness he realizes "he'd give anything in the world to be back in Coho." Willie never realized there was this much poverty and savagery and desolation . . . and pain in the world. Willie continues to suffer in Oakland, but this is probably his low point.

Crutcher shifts his focus slightly after Willie moves in with Lacey and enrolls at One More Last Chance School. This is a new Willie in a new world. There's so much for Willie to learn now that he's been forced into a new perspective and rendered capable of learning from it. Among the vital things he learns is the reason he's able to learn them. Crutcher makes this clear in Willie's speech to the commencement audience. He says he's aware that if they had known him back in Montana they would have hated his guts because he had everything, including people around him to protect him and make sure he didn't lose it. "And there are lots of people like that," he says, "people whose lives are protected from the day they're born until the day they die."

But no matter how wonderful those lives seem, if they're not contested, never put up against the wall,

then they exist inside very narrow walls, and because of that I believe they lose value, in the most basic sense of the word. I guess what I'm saying is that my life is more valuable because I got knocked out of my favored spot. I can't believe I'm saying that, but I am and I know it's true. I learned it from the people who picked me up here.

We hear Crutcher's voice in the passage, of course. In a body of work packed with vital exposition, there's probably no expository passage more important than this one. Remember, again, that Crutcher has seen so much damage done. So, how do the damaged make something positive out of all their pain? We accept our new condition and the new view of the world it gives us, and we act on our new perception.

Willie's first positive contact with humanity in Oakland is Lacey Casteel, bus driver and pimp. Lacey is not a role model, but there is much to learn from him. He's capable of kindness in spite of the overriding brutality in his character. He takes Willie in after the beating, and he is sincere at the end of the story when, in his note to Big Will, he says: *"Here you boy back. He fix. Be careful how you treet him, he special. If you don't want him, send him back."*

Lacey tells Willie he's taking him in for a reason Willie doesn't know. We discover Lacey's motivation after he's helped Willie enroll at One More Last Chance. Lacey comes home drunk late one night and finds the note Willie has left him about a phone call from his former wife. Lacey says he needs to "purge his soul" and takes Willie out for a drive. "I beat my boy," he tells Willie as they drive. "Start on beatin' him. Couldn't stop. Beat my boy numb." They park and walk to a huge, dark institution, climb over the fence, and stop beneath a window too high to see into. And then in one of the most powerful scenes in Crutcher's work—reminiscent of Jeff's empty lane scene in *Stotan!*



because of the power and sharpness of focus but more complex and illustrative of greater skill with prose□Lacey grabs a drainpipe and pulls himself up even with the window. Willie hears a moan and looks up to see Lacey's face go soft. Willie watches the man stare into the window through a "bottomless despair." Lacey drops to the ground and tells Willie to look. "Don' worry," Lacey says, "he don' see you." So Willie climbs on Lacey's back, stands on his shoulders, and looks in. He sees

a tall, extremely thin black boy; he could be anywhere from fifteen to forty. His long arms hang out of his plain white state-issue shirt like useless ebony twigs, their outstanding features the gnarled, twisted elbows and knuckles. ... A narrow string of spittle

hangs from one side of his mouth, and as it lengthens, finally dropping to the floor, the boy makes no attempt to stop it. He's vacant; gone

Listen to the passage Crutcher presents as transition from Willie's visual recognition of what Lacey has

done to Lacey's explanation of its consequences. This is Willie's intellectual recognition:

[T]his is *family* gone crazy. It comes in a flash the boy before him is wrecked; the man beneath his feet, desperately holding on with everything he's got to stay just above the quicksand. This is what happens when we astonish ourselves with our capacity to be vicious; when we realize so late how our expectations have betrayed us.

We hear, of course, the theme of the destructive power of expectations.

Willie feels through his feet the vibration of Lacey's sobs. Lacey falls and Willie tumbles to the ground. Lacey lies there crying. "He jus' there hauntin' me," the man says. "He there an' I can't see him; they won't let me go close." Now Willie knows that Lacey took him in to take this boy's place

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This passage is illustrative of a number of things, only a few of which we've discussed here. But too important to go unmentioned is how the passage illustrates Crutcher's growth as a writer. The writer of *Running Loose* could not have written this. It's too understated□which is to say too *restrained*□in its description; it's too complex, and it's also too wise. Crutcher has seen so much more damage now and knows so much more surely the source of it. Willie's physical healing begins at One More Last Chance. The school enhances his emotional healing also, to be sure, but Willie has hit bottom now and he's ready to start stroking back up. Crutcher makes this clear in Willie's response to the school's required resume. He was "absolutely straight" about the reasons he left home, "crystal clear in his final statement that he wasn't going back to Montana." Willie has changed: no more lies, not explicitly and not by omission. The truth does set us free, and one of the things it sets us free to do is heal ourselves.

Andre, the school's director, is another Crutcher character. His physicality, his forthright speech, his humor, and his honesty are mirrors of these qualities in Crutcher himself.



Look at him and listen to him, and you'll see and hear Crutcher. Except that Andre is black and Crutcher is white. Listen, for example, to Andre describing the Last Chance students: "Some of these kids seem pretty damaged before you get to know them. Some of them seem pretty damaged *after* you get to know them, but I'm sure there are friends for you here."

And Willie does make friends at school, two of whom are women: Lisa, the PE teacher, and Angel, a fellow student and prostitute who works for Lacey. Few readers would dispute that these are "strong" women characters, but few would think of them—particularly Angel—as role models. Lisa, whom we can see as an older Elaine Ferrel from *Stotan!*, might be more overtly sexual with Sammy, the Tai Chi teacher (and a Max II Song character) than some readers find appropriate in a school setting. And Angel isn't simply a teenage prostitute, she's a teenage prostitute resolved not to give up the trade. Willie asks Lacey to let Angel go, but Angel doesn't want out. "You think I'm a whore because of Lacey?" Angel asks. "If Lacey wasn't my pimp, I'd get someone else. I'm a whore because that's how I survive."

When we talk about "strong" characters in literature we don't mean "admirable," although strong characters are often admirable in at least some ways. Lisa is a fine athlete, for example, and it's through her coaching that Willie learns to compensate for most of the physical damage he has suffered. She's also honest, which Crutcher accents particularly in the ease and openness with which she's able to be sexual with Sammy while Willie's around.

Literary characters are referred to as "strong" when they are sharply delineated and consistent and when they know and accept themselves. Angel, for example, does not lie to herself, and she knows the source of one of the strongest currents in her personality. "You know how girls get to be whores?" she asks Willie. "Girls get to be whores when they grow up thinking sex is the only way to get anything." She then goes on to say she had sex first with her uncle when she was 7 and that it went on until she was 17. It was ugly and she hated it, but he was nice to her and gave her things she never would have gotten in another way.

Lisa and Angel are deeply tied to the unity of the story. They're important to the plot because of Lisa's role as mentor figure and Angel as the focus of Willie's romantic interest and the source of some painful information about the complexity of life. And they are integral to the theme of honesty.

It's not hard to see that *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* ventures deeper than the previous books

into wild country, and we are not, of course, speaking about California here. We're speaking about the wild country of human life. In spite of language and subject matter that make it more difficult to teach in public school, it is still a novel full of victories for the damaged souls who populate it. Hawk, the basketball player who becomes Willie's friend, attends their graduation ceremony with a cast on the arm he broke protecting his mother from his drugged-out brother. Hawk stands when he receives his diploma, looks



out at his father and says, "I tol' you I ain't no worthless sh□." And Telephone Man, one of Crutcher's strangest and most touching characters, "who wears a full set of telephone repair tools on his hip, giving him the appearance of an AT&T gun-slinger from outer space," concludes his commencement speech by looking over at Hawk and saying, "Hawktor Doctor must really like me ... and that's the first time anybody really liked me and I'm glad I went here."

But here's the kind of victory that makes the book most difficult for teachers and librarians in schools besieged by book *challenges*:

[Angel] takes the diploma, looks out at the audience, then over to the graduates and simply says, "Thanks." Willie looks out to see Lacey nodding his head and clapping.

It's difficult to justify this complexity and lack of resolution to some people. Such people want Lacey and Angel, pimp and prostitute, nailed up tight in a box with the word BAD written on it. But Crutcher is wiser than that. He knows that human beings are both ghastly and glorious, and that even in their ghastliness and pain they are capable of heroic endurance, such as he implies here as Willie's bus heads out of Oakland, taking him back to Montana and more heavy jolts of sadness:

Willie watches Lacey standing, arms folded, looking powerful and confident, without a trace of the horror in his life, and Willie marvels at the astonishing ability of human beings to go on.

**Source:** Terry Davis, "Yes, There Is Much Sadness in the World," in *Presenting Chris Crutcher*, Twayne Publishers, 1997, pp. 75-87.





## Critical Essay #3

*In the following essay, McDonnell traces Crutcher's personal background and connections to situations Crutcher explores in his novels.*

Writing with vitality and authority that stems from personal experience in *Running Loose*, *Stotan!*, and *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* (all Greenwillow), Chris Crutcher gives readers the inside story on young men, sports, and growing up. His heroes—sensitive, reflective young men, far from stereotypic jocks—use sports as an arena to test personal limits; to prove stamina, integrity, and identity; and to experience loyalty and cooperation as well as competition.

Louie, in *Running Loose*, is no natural athlete. "I've never been all that good. Not too big, not too fast, and a lot more desire to be a football player than to play football, if you know what I mean." Walker, the swim team captain in *Stotan!*, values his team experience over his personal achievement. "I'm part of a group of really special guys—and a girl—who happen to swim. ... It's a lot more important to me to be a part of that group of humans than it is to be in a school of fast fish." Willie, the gifted baseball player who makes his most famous move in *The Crazy Horse Electric Game*, loses his athletic gift in a boating accident and must learn both a new way of moving and a new definition for himself. For all three, winning is not the goal; doing your best, stretching your limits, is the only true measure of success.

The vitality in these books comes from the characterization, the physical action, and quick dialogue. Crutcher gives us believable glimpses of locker rooms and practice sessions, spiced with irreverent, sometimes coarse, male humor. He shows brief awkward moments of romance in contrast with the honesty, ease, and trust of male friendships. These books are overwhelmingly male, peopled with teammates, coaches, bosses, fathers, and father figures. Women do appear as mothers, girlfriends, even as a coach, and issues of sex and love surface. In *Running Loose* the death of Louie's girlfriend is a central crisis in the book. But for the most part although women are attractive, strong, and smart, they are peripheral to the action, relegated more to fantasy than to day-to-day life.

The action scenes, the training sessions, games, and meets, provide a showcase for the strongest writing in the books. In these, Crutcher's knowledge of sports and his insight into the inner lives of young men merge. He shows not only the physical details of training and practice, the laps, exercises, drills, pacing, and strategies but also the personal experience, the pain, fatigue, exhilaration, pressures, and release. In *Running Loose* and *Stotan!* the final meets rise above simple athletic competition to take on deeper meanings. Athletes compete hoping for victory but also rejoice in one another's performances. Louie runs to prove his strength and independence in a school where his idealism and honesty have isolated him; the team in *Stotan!* swims in honor of their teammate, dying from a blood disease. In both cases the characters are supported and respected by their opponents. Competition can be unifying, not divisive. Over and over again the message is stated: don't give up; give it your best; run your own race.



"I think my job in this life is to be an observer. I'm never going to be one of those guys out there on the tip of the arrow of my time, presenting new ideas or inventing ways to get more information on a smaller chip. But I think I'll learn to see pretty well." The speaker is Walker Dupree, narrator of *Stotan!* but it could be Crutcher describing himself. Speaking directly about his writing, Crutcher said, "I want to be remembered as a storyteller, and 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. That's what I like to explore and put into stories."

The connections between Crutcher's background and the situations he describes in his novels are numerous. Taken in order, *Running Loose*, *Stotan!*, and *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* give a rough outline of his life. He grew up in Cascade, Idaho, a town exactly like Trout in *Running Loose*, with wilderness nearby, deer in the backyard, driving licenses for fourteen-year-olds, and a school so small that athletes participate in every sport. He played football and basketball and ran track. "There was too much snow for baseball. The high-jumpers wore wet suits and practiced on snowdrifts." Like Louie, his father was the chairman of the school committee, a thoughtful, scientific man who appreciated independence and disliked people accepting things without questioning.

In college at Eastern Washington State, selected because the red and white of its catalog cover set it apart from others on the shelf, Chris swam competitively on a team like the one described in *Stotan!* "But the coach was even more maniacal." With his teammates he experienced a *Stotan* week that stretched them beyond the limits of their own endurance and forged the bonds of loyalty vividly depicted in *Stotan!*

After college Chris worked as a teacher and as director of an alternative school in Oakland, California, the model for the school described in *The Crazy Horse Electric Game*. The next stage of Chris Crutcher's life appears indirectly in his novels: fed up with waiting in lines and in traffic, he moved to Spokane where he works as a child and family therapist dealing with physical and sexual abuse cases. In Spokane he began to write seriously.

He now divides his week between his mental health work and his writing, enjoying the balance and contrast of the two. "In my work, the daily crisis of people's lives is so immediate. Time moves so fast. But the books are so permanent. They have their own life in time." Not surprisingly, he also makes time for running and basketball.

"I started writing late, when I recognized the need for a creative outlet in my life. Though I had read relatively little, I had always loved stories. So I gave it a go." While living in the Bay area, he experimented with fiction in a writing workshop. After moving to Spokane, he had time to develop his writing more fully. An author friend remembered one story that Chris had written earlier and suggested that he expand it. *Running Loose* was the result.

Chris Crutcher describes himself as being poorly read. "In high school I was less than a totally serious student. I never had a burning desire to be a writer then. In fact during my four years in high school I read one novel cover to cover: *To Kill a Mockingbird*



(Harper)." He still doesn't read much, but through his work he hears stories every day. "I'm interested in relationships, in complexities, in seeing patterns in people's lives. I get information from other people's lives, and I put it into stories, expanding, adding more to make characters richer." Describing his writing process, he cites character as his primary source. "I start with character. Somewhere along the line I get plot. Plot comes last."

But inattention to plot in Crutcher's books is far overshadowed by the strength of characterization and dialogue, coupled with the detail and vitality of the sports scenes. Even when events are surprising, characters are consistently believable. Louie, Walker, and Willie, poised on the edge of manhood, measure themselves in sports and friendships and struggle with larger issues of integrity, dignity, and personal loss. Through their experiences, Chris Crutcher comments powerfully on the broader topic of growing up. At the end of *Stotan!* Walker speaks in a voice that echoes Chris Crutcher's own: "I think if I ever make it to adulthood, and if I decide to turn back and help someone grow up, either as a parent or a teacher or a coach, I'm going to spend most of my time dispelling myths, clearing up unreal expectations. . . . I think I'll learn to see pretty well. I think I'll know how things work□understand simple cause and effect□and, with any luck, be able to pass that on. And that's not such a bad thing."

**Source:** Christine McDonnell, "New Voices, New Visions: Chris Crutcher," in *Horn Book*, Vol. 64, No. 3, May 1988, pp. 332-5.



## Topics for Further Study

Chris Crutcher has often been criticized, and sometimes censored, for tackling serious and controversial subject matter. Is it wrong for teachers and parents to ban his books? Argue for or against censorship in schools.

Research the history of gang violence in the United States. Discuss the effects of gang violence on surrounding communities, and how the situation has changed in the last decade.

Read Crutcher's *Ironman* and compare it with *The Crazy Horse Electric Game*. Explore the similarities and differences between the two novels and then discuss why you think *Ironman* was met with such controversy and subsequently banned.

Define and explore some of the major elements of sports, such as competition, team work, stamina, integrity, loyalty, and cooperation, and then explain how each one directly relates to dealing with life's difficult challenges and forming one's identity.



## What Do I Read Next?

*The Ironman: A Novel*, by Chris Crutcher, is an intense look into the life of a seventeen-year-old athlete whose strained relationship with his father lands him in an anger management group, where he must deal with his feelings among other emotionally-challenged students.

Carl Deuker's *Heart of a Champion* chronicles the close friendship of two boys, who bond over their love of baseball while struggling with some of life's more difficult challenges, specifically alcoholism.

*Roughnecks* is Thomas Cochran's debut novel about a high-school senior who believes his performance on the football field is inherently connected to discovering the truth about himself.

Chris Crutcher's *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* follows the friendship between a physically-deformed girl and the boy who stays overweight for fear of losing his best friend.

## Further Study

Davis, Terry, *Presenting Chris Crutcher*, Twayne Publishing, 1997.

This biography explores the author's life and work.

Gallo, Donald R., ed., *Speaking for Ourselves: Autobiographical Sketches by Notable Authors of Books for Young Adults*, National Council of Teachers of English, 1990. A collection of autobiographical essays by young-adult authors, including Chris Crutcher, that discusses their lives and work.

Silvey, Anita, ed., *Children's Books and Their Creators*, Houghton Mifflin, 1995.

A collection of articles that explore children's book authors and the themes of their work.



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## **Introduction**

### **Purpose of the Book**

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's □For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels



frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

### Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

### How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

### Other Features

NfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

### Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

### We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: [ForStudentsEditors@gale.com](mailto:ForStudentsEditors@gale.com). Or write to the editor at:

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