

Crosses Short Guide

Crosses by Shelley Stoehr

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Overview

"We cut ourselves." Like the first line of Robert Cormier's groundbreaking novel *The Chocolate War* ("They murdered him"), *Crosses* starts with a bang and never lets up.

Crosses tells the story of two young women who are cutters. Katie and Nancy cut their own skin with sharp objects; Nancy even keeps a supply of jagged glass in her purse or hidden in her room so she has quick and easy access when the compulsion to cut strikes her. But cutting is only one of the self-injurious behaviors in Nancy's life. She also abuses drugs and alcohol (the abuse her parents share with her); she is abused verbally by her parents, socially by her classmates, physically by her boyfriend, and raped by an acquaintance. Katie shares a similar catalog of pain and compulsions, although it is Nancy who narrates the story and that readers learn and care most about.

Katie and Nancy meet in the bathroom at their high school during their 9th-grade year. Nancy is smoking a cigarette, finishing up vodka hidden in a shampoo bottle, and just starting to carve a cross into her own skin with a piece of jagged glass. She is in the process of cutting, when Katie interrupts her and asks her for a cigarette; that is when Nancy notices that Katie has crosses carved into her skin as well. The book takes off from that dramatic first chapter to tell the story of the two characters as they interact with each other, with a variety of substances, with their boyfriends, and with some adults. Along the way Nancy attempts suicide, and by the end of the book, it is Katie who dies. After Katie's death, Nancy enrolls in a new school and starts to change her life as the book ends.

About the Author

Shelley Stoehr was born Michelle Stoehr on January 31, 1969, in Sellersville, Pennsylvania, a small town located in Bucks County between Philadelphia and Allentown.

Her family later moved to Long Island, New York, which is also the setting of the book *Crosses*. Growing up, Stoehr's artistic instincts were nurtured by her family. Her grandmother took her to art classes, while her parents both read and critiqued her writing. Books were always around her house, and her mother, a teacher, encouraged her writing and feverish reading.

Stoehr noted that in an article for *ALAN Review* "when I was young, I needed to borrow my parents library card until I was thirteen to take out anything from either the young adult or adult sections of the library. And I brought home everything—from *Frankenstein* to *Sybil* to *The Joy of Sex* to *Jane Eyre* to *Grease*." She also read young adult (YA) novelists like Judy Blume and S. E. Hinton, two pioneers in creating controversial YA fiction. As early as 7th grade, she was writing and submitting stories (without success) to literary magazines, including the *New Yorker*. Although her work was rejected, Stoehr was not; she kept on writing and submitting her work. She told young adult literature critic Patty Campbell that "they always send things back. I never liked criticism, but I always take it, once I calmed down and stopped being so self-righteous." Her willingness to revise would eventually led to the publication of *Crosses*.

After high school, Stoehr attended Connecticut College. There she studied both English and modern dance. It was during her college days that she wrote *Crosses*.

Stoehr believes that more college students should write YA fiction since they "still have a hold on the emotional reality of teenage life." According to David Gill, Stoehr "got the idea for *Crosses* from a research *Crosses* 83 study about victims of self-inflicted injuries." Stoehr has said she also knew people who "cut" in high school. She shared the novel with a professor who told her it was "terrible." Stoehr rewrote most of the novel and sent it off as an entry to Delacorte Press's contest for best first YA novel.

Delacorte editors loved the story, but were concerned that the book had "no ending."

Stoehr quickly wrote an ending, sent it back to Delacorte, and scored an honor prize in the contest and a publishing contract. The book was a huge, if controversial, hit upon its release in 1991. It was named to both the Young Adult Library Services Association's Best Books list and its list of Recommended Books for the Reluctant Young Adult Reader.

A paperback copy was released a year later.

A new paperback, with a dramatic new cover, was published in 1998.



Stoehr's first book did not go unnoticed, in part because of the widespread discussion among critics, teachers, and librarians that the book was "harmful" to teen readers. Discussion about the book centered around the rough realistic language and the "cutting," but mostly about the matter-offactness to the substance abuse and sexual situations. Stoehr defended the book and the need for "controversial literature" writing, stating that: there are many advantages to allowing young people access to books with controversial content. First, it's entertaining, and readers can live vicariously through the characters. . . . Also, a love for reading means young adults will read anything. . . .

Finally, young adult literature is a great catalyst to open the lines of communication between teenagers and adults about the issues in their lives. To bring up issues of sex and drugs directly to young adults is to waste your breath if you are an authority figure. But with a book, you can discuss those same issues in a non-threatening manner. . . . We need to worry less about the inevitable sex, drugs and rock and roll, and more about whether young adults are reading. Once they're reading, and choosing to read because they like it, the other issues become easier to address and conquer.

While tackling unique subject matter, especially in *Crosses*, Stoehr is in many ways a very traditional YA novelist as she presents teen characters "in over their heads" and forced to make tough decisions, often with little adult support. Her teen characters partake physically in drugs and sex, but are unable to cope emotionally with the consequences of those actions, or deal with the problems that often lead them down that path. It is the characters, not the problem or the plot, that matters most to Stoehr and also is the genus for each novel. She told Gill that she writes character outlines as her first step, then considers "where the characters might go and to begin to show how they will intersect and influence each other." After climbing around in the heads of her characters, often using music or photographs (her husband is a photographer) to inspire her, she writes short summaries of each personality. Once she is done laying out the cast, she lets the characters guide the story and the plot evolves as they make decisions.

Like many YA novelists, Stoehr never intended to write books for teens. She told Gill that "[I] just wanted to be published.

Now that I'm involved with the YA market, I think it's really exciting and I want to keep with it as long as I can." Stoehr followed *Crosses* with novels equally controversial in tone, theme, and subject matter. Her next book, *Weird on the Outside*, concerned a teenage runaway's life as a dancer in New York strip clubs. Stoehr used her own experience, not as a stripper, but as a bartender and dancer to add texture to the story. After graduating from college, Stoehr performed in a modern dance troupe and also worked as a choreographer. Her next book, *Wannabe*, is almost a teen version of the television show *Sopranos*, although it actually predates it by several years. It concerns a young woman who works in club run by organized crime and whose brother is getting increasingly involved in the business. Once again, the work features the sex, drugs, and foul language triple-threat that endears Stoehr to her readers and infuriates some of her critics. Her 1998 novel, *Tomorrow Wendy*, is a very unique love story. Set again in a Long Island high school, it focuses at first on the relationship between a young woman,

Cary, and her boyfriend, Danny. As the novel progresses, however, Cary turns her attention and affections toward Danny's sister Wendy. While *Crosses* received (almost) unanimous praise, her later novels have not met with the same critical acclaim.

After *Weird on the Outside* was published, however, YA reviewer Campbell wrote that "Stoehr is a new kind of young adult writer . . . in touch with realities that the adult world does not want to admit are part of the experience of their teenage children." One part of that experience is the act of selfmutilation, also known as cutting.



Setting

Crosses is set at Babylon High School in Long Island, New York. Babylon High represents in many ways a stereotypical large suburban high school. Interestingly, in one journal, the review of Crosses was paired with a review of Teenage Wasteland: Suburbia's Dead End Kids, A great deal of the novel takes place at school—not in the classrooms, but rather in bathrooms where Katie and Nancy steal away to smoke, drink, and cut.

They also get high almost every day at school and at a Chinese restaurant near school. Other prominent settings in the book include the Sunrise Mall where the girls go to hang out (and steal clothing) and Nancy's house, where she is hounded by her parents and sleeps off her hangovers. At the end of book, Katie enrolls in another suburban high school.

Setting the book in a suburban high school provides the necessary clash of cultures. In some ways, it is symbolic of the conflict going on within Nancy. Nancy has always "fit in" and is expected by her parents to fit in with all the normal kids at school. She rebels against this though, not just in her behavior, but in her dress. She leaves for school dressed to blend in with everyone else, but then changes into her "punk" persona with ripped t-shirts, inside-out jeans, safety pins as jewelry, and spiked hair. She is an outcast by choice, fighting off her previous "good girl" image. In the first chapter, there is a scene in which Nancy is standing in the bathroom with one of the "normal" kids at her school and the contrast is quite deliberately shocking. Because of their outsider status (a classic YA theme), Nancy and Katie are drawn even closer together.

The setting is also important in that the carnage of Nancy and Katie's life is going on right under the noses of various adults.

The teachers and school counselors in the book are either portrayed as ineffectual, or if anything, too trusting. The girls find they can manipulate most of the adults in their lives, relying heavily on Nancy's old image as "good girl." Midway through the novel, Nancy and Katie are caught drinking by a teacher, yet nothing seems to change their behavior, nor does it help that Nancy is grounded by her parents. Another setting is the various parties at the houses of friends, featuring heavy doses of teen drinking, drugs, and sexual activity. These scenes portray teens in a manner that is not nice, maybe not even normal for all teens, but certainly a reality for some young people, in particular those who have become disconnected from their surroundings as Nancy and Katie have. Although the settings in the book are important, they mostly serve as a backdrop to the action—regardless of where they are, Nancy and Katie will react the same way by spending "nearly every day stoned, high, tripping, or drunk."



Social Sensitivity

Crosses is loaded with social problems; it is almost a catalog of teen trauma. The characters in the book face, in addition to cutting, substance abuse issues. Nancy is also the child of substance abusers bringing in the entire issue of the effects of alcoholism on families. Nancy's behavior is, in many ways, almost textbook behavior for the child of alcoholic parents. Interestingly, despite her parents' constant admonishments, it is obvious to Nancy (and the reader) that their own house is not in order.

The "moral" authority parents and adults claim is lost here.

Crosses is as much a book about moral issues as it is about social problems. The ending of the book drives home the point that actions do have consequences. The characters are involved physically in things they cannot handle emotionally. The chasm between the two becomes a spiraling abyss into which Nancy and Katie fall. Yet, the problem that Stoehr presents—and for which she was criticized—is that the actions indulged in by the characters are presented in an almost titillating fashion. The characters get pleasure out of drugs, alcohol, sex, and even cutting their own skin. This is a book about the dark side of teen life; it is a book about kids so cut off from everything and everyone that they cannot relate to society in any normal way. But Nancy and Katie's reaction to all this is the normal reaction of Crosses 89 lots of kids to similar situations. And that fact is what disturbs so many people about the book is that it sheds light on that dark side that many would rather pretend did not exist.

Literary Qualities

Like many YA novels, *Crosses* is told in the first person. The voice of Nancy is very strong, very real, and very honest. She is angry and it shows. Particularly striking is the use of language. Nancy, Katie, and the other character's vocabulary is filled with curse words and slang. Characters do not feel bad, they feel "shitty." Things are not rotten, they "suck." Nancy and Katie use explicit language quite often, yet another controversial aspect of the book. Stoehr defends the language, writing that "I'm not saying it's impossible to write a young adult novel that speaks to teenagers without using foul language in the work. Many authors don't use foul language and still create beautiful, meaningful young adult novels.

It happens not to be the way I write, and more importantly, it's not the way my characters talk." No doubt, the vocabulary stems from the fact that so many of the conversations in *Crosses* are not dialogues, they are shouting matches. The book is filled with conflict: the short violent stabs Nancy makes in her skin mirror the short violence stabs that pass for communication.

The book moves quickly. Months click off at a time; each chapter announces the time of year or how much time has past since the previous chapter. The pace is rapid; the book takes the characters from scene to scene at a breakneck speed. They never seem to relax; the intensity of the prose mirrors the insanity and intensity of their life. The characters act and react, rarely taking time for introspection. The introspection is as twisted as their behavior— Nancy blames all of her family's ills on herself—and there is a true lack of perspective. The pace of the book, the harshness of the language, and the dialogue which is more often screamed rather than spoken resembles the punk music to which Nancy and Katie listen, relate, and dress. The detached tone simply adds to the mix of making *Crosses* a unique work, one which has rightly been compared to *Go Ask Alice*.



Themes and Characters

Crosses is not a problem novel; it is a pain novel. The book is also about a totally new problem. Unlike many YA problem or realistic novels that seem to draw on contemporary headlines for their subject matter, this story is written from the underground.

No YA novel had ever dealt with cutting or punk characters like Katie and Nancy, and few dealt with teen life with this type of brutal honesty. Instantly, the characters are recognizable as real people. The language they use, the observations they make, the things they do are all too real. Almost every scene seems to take place in a cloud of cigarette or marijuana smoke, a haze of alcohol or drugs, and with loud music crashing around the characters.

Maybe most teens do not suffer from as much pain or as many problems as Nancy and Katie do in *Crosses*, certainly not the ones in most YA fiction. Characters in most YA books follow a pattern: they have a problem, and then through out the book, they work toward solving it. *Crosses* is the exact opposite: the characters have many problems and rather than solving them, they only seem to make them worse. They are searching for their next high, the next "shock," not a solution. The characters are not interested in growing, just surviving.

They encounter hostility all around them, in the other, kids at schools, in their parents, and in the suburban world they inhabit.

They react by drawing closer to each other, drawing crosses in their skins, and drawing marijuana, among other drugs, into their system. Nancy, as the narrator, describes 86 *Crosses* each of these acts in a stark tone with a matter of fact attitude. For her, they are not problems; they are her real life.

The drug use in the book is excessive, yet also seems real. Katie and Nancy take drugs to fight off their pain as an escape, but also because they are fun. They are not experimenting and they are not tricked by some playground pusher; it is their choice to use drugs. While Stoehr says she does not advocate drug use, she points out that her approach is more honest than the "just say no" campaign that had been THE message during her teen years and the year (1985) in which the book is set: The "just say no" mentality is not only unrealistic but can even be harmful, because it lumps all drugs, and all situations, together. . . . In my books, it's clear that, although there is some casual drug use wherein my characters don't seem to suffer repercussions, in the end there certainly are some very serious repercussions. . . . It's much more honest, and effective, to say, if you smoke a joint, your life will probably not be any different. If you smoke every day, you run the risk of messing up your life. If you smoke crack every day, you run the risk of dying or, in the very least, really screwing up your life.



The toll that drugs take on Nancy is mirrored by the toll which alcohol takes on the life of her parents. Besides, drugs are just another addictive habit for Nancy which brings her that strange mix of pleasure and pain.

The sex scenes also mix pleasure and pain, and are quite real. It is not that there are sex scenes in the book, but that Nancy has a sex life. While other YA characters in other books may have sex, the matter of fact aspect is somewhat unique. Unlike many YA novels which take teen sex "off stage," *Crosses* presents it in all of its grimness and griminess. Rarely do Nancy and her boyfriend even undress totally, never is Nancy sexually satisfied, and the sex is so rough that it borders on abuse. Nancy is raped when she has passed out from drinking too much by a character named Andy. But perhaps the most shocking description, because it is lacking from just about every other YA sex novel, concerns Nancy and Katie practicing and discussing oral sex.

Nancy's boyfriend Mike is one of the most interesting characters in *Crosses*, although he gets little screen time. He cares for Nancy, and she for him, yet both are ultimately interested primarily in their own needs. He makes no attempt to satisfy Nancy sexually, and is so self-involved that he never notices, comments, or cares that her body is covered with scars. His primary interest is sex. He is also presented as a contrast to Nancy; he is very "straight" and not into the punk scene at all. They seem to share very little in common and Nancy realizes that "it seemed like sex was my only reason for staying with Mike." They meet when Nancy is drunk at a party. Mike becomes her vehicle to get to parties, to hang a little bit with popular kids, and to have sex. Nancy is not shy about her sexuality, noting, "if you're good in bed, you can get away with a lot."

Mike almost becomes a prop, whom Nancy manipulates at will to serve her needs. When Mike finally leaves her, it becomes yet another thing in her life over which she has lost control. Her reaction is predictable—to lose control first by cutting, then by smashing her room ("the violence felt good because I was so violent inside"), burning herself with cigarettes, and then finally jamming nails into her arms. For once, her actions have dramatic consequences, as she is taken the hospital to repair her physical injuries and to begin work on her self-destructive behaviors.

While in the hospital, she is forced to talk to a psychiatrist. At the same time, her parents vow to start attending Alcoholics Anonymous, as her mother admits to Nancy that growing up she also did many of the same things. This, followed quickly by Katie's death after sharing a bag of psychedelic mushrooms with Nancy, lead her to the conclusion that she needs to change her life.

When she is confronted with a stressful situation at the end of the book, she starts to cut, but then realizes that "once I started, I wouldn't be able to stop" and that her time in the hospital and Katie's death would mean nothing. Nancy consciously chooses to not cut; she chooses to change her life and to become healthy. With that decision comes the recognition, missing through out most of the book, that the world does not revolve around her needs and her pain. Her self-injury was just more selfishness.



All of these issues add up to the overriding theme of risk taking behavior among adolescents. Nancy's and Katie's lives are a catalog of unhealthy activity: drugs, drinking, being sexually active, hitchhiking, shoplifting, eating disorders, suicidal tendencies and self-mutilation. They "know" better, they are both smart, but they are convinced they will not get caught. They are not overly concerned with any possible consequences, but mostly they try to live up to their motto "what is life without risk?"

The reason for their risk-taking behavior is simple: they are cut-off from most of the things which would steer them toward healthy behavior. Other than each other, they have few friends. They are cut off from their parents, their teachers, or any sort of adult in their life. They have lots of free time, access to money to buy drugs, and people in their lives who "enable" them.

Nancy feels her parents do not accept her, do not love her, and do not listen to her. Her cutting is the manifestation of her pain and her anger; since all she seems to find in her world is pain, she makes those emotional hurts all too real. Despite the relationship between Nancy and Katie, the main thrust of the book is Nancy's relationship with herself. But the cutting demonstrates that that too is a dysfunctional relationship.

Relationships are the guts of *Crosses*. The cool, easy friendship between Nancy and Katie is contrasted with the shouting and screaming which characterizes Nancy's relationship with parents. Katie's parents are barely present in the book. Her father was last seen two years ago, while her mother, who works as a teacher, merely comes home long enough to change clothes ("something slinky") and then go out. Nancy's parents are major characters and her main antagonists, in particular her mother. It is not pretty. There are few conversations, mostly shouting matches. They talk at a high volume but they do not hear each other. Not surprisingly, the only way Nancy's mother can make a point is to strike her. Nancy is the product of a classically dysfunctional household ruled by fear and soaked with alcohol, where conflicts are solved with brutality.

Another major theme of *Crosses* is a classic one in YA literature—need for acceptance. Nancy bemoans the fact that "in fifteen years, my parents had yet to accept anything about me" whereas Katie accepts her immediately. The pull of peers is strong here; Nancy was already headed in "the wrong direction," but her meeting with Katie put her even more at-risk. The risk stems not from the actions, but Nancy's seemingly lack of concern about them. On occasion she will be disgusted with her behavior, but those bouts of introspection are few and far between. Her lack of acceptance is coupled with her boredom. Without a lot of other friends, with no home life, and with considerable intelligence that requires little time or effort spent on homework, Nancy talks often about being bored. The drugs and the cutting are the kicks she needs to feel something. What makes *Crosses* so unique among YA books is that Stoeher, 88 *Crosses* through the voice of Nancy's narration, is able to portray the intensity of those feelings. *Crosses* is not intended to be an entertaining read; it is a rant by a young woman who manifests her pain through selfmutilation.



Topics for Discussion

1. Compare and contrast the fictional characters in *Crosses* with the teens described in the book *Teenage Wasteland: Suburbia's Dead End Kids* or portrayed in movies like *River's Edge* or *Kids*.
2. Did Katie jump or did she fall? Did she commit suicide or did she die accidentally?
3. Some reviewers criticized the end of *Crosses*; one described it as "gratuitous and perversely prim." What were some other possible endings for this story?
4. Can a book like *Crosses* cause readers to try to copycat a practice like cutting? Does the book make cutting, drug use, and other behaviors seem too enticing and too appealing? Rather than exploring a problem, is Stoehr exploiting one?
5. Should a book like *Crosses*, with its strong language and sexual situations, be used in school setting? Should it be in a school library? Should it be in a public library?
6. What happens to Nancy after the book ends? Does she really stop cutting for good, or are there signs that the fix might be temporary?
7. Do the characters in *Crosses* have too many problems? Are these real characters or stereotypical angst-ridden troubled suburban kids?
8. How would the book have been different if told from Katie's point of view? From Nancy's parents' point of view?
9. Katie and Nancy are "outsiders." What other books for teens talk about this theme of outsiders? How does *Crosses* compare to them? Are there recent instances in the news about the pressures on outsiders at high school?
10. Would *Crosses* have been a much different book if the two main characters had been male rather than female?
11. The book is filled with words which are considered "foul" language? Is it necessary or gratuitous? Is this a larger issue with popular entertainment, in particular with movies aimed at teens? If *Crosses* was a movie, what would it be rated?
12. The beginning of the book *Crosses* is dramatic and gets your attention right away. Are there other books that you know of which do the same? Read over the first chapter again and see if all the important information about Nancy is revealed in just those first few pages.
13. Read Stoehr's article "Controversial Issues in the Lives of Contemporary Young Adults" and discuss it. Is she right? What is the purpose of books for teens? Should they carry a moral message?

14. The adult characters, in particular Nancy's parents, are not portrayed in a very flattering light. Do they "deserve" the negative portrayal in the book?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What are the causes of self-mutilation? How widespread is the practice? What, if any, treatments are available?

2. Nancy is the victim of a date rape. Research date rape, in particular the role that drugs and alcohol play in the crime.

90 Crosses 3. Nancy and Katie are described as "punks". What does "punk" mean?

What is the origin of the punk rock movement? What influences did it play on music, fashion, and other aspects of popular culture?

4. Nancy attempts to kill herself with an overdose of aspirin. Research teen suicide, in particular the role that drugs and alcohol sometimes play in it. Why do teens attempt suicide? What methods do they use?

5. Nancy's parents are alcoholics. What are the signs and symptoms shown by children of alcoholics?

6. Crosses won an honor award as best first young adult novel. What other books won the award? What characteristics do the books have in common?

How is Crosses similar and how is it different than these other titles?

7. Crosses has been the object of censorship in some libraries. Research the banning of books in libraries, in particular of books for teenagers in school libraries.

8. The teen characters in Crosses are sexually active. Is this a true representation of teen life? How widespread is sexuality activity among teens? Is it increasing or decreasing? What factors play a part?

9. Most of the teen characters in Crosses smoke. Teen smoking has become a huge issue in the United States. How widespread is the practice of teen smoking? What efforts are being made to reduce it?

10. Crosses has been called the Go Ask Alice for the '90s. What does that mean? Compare and contrast Crosses with Go Ask Alice. How are the characters and situations similar? How are they different?

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ALAN Review, (winter 1997): 3-5. The author examines the need for young adult literature to look at issues which affect the lives of teens, in particular, she notes "sex, drugs, and rock and roll." She reviews how these issues emerge in her own books and



sees young adult novels as a "great catalyst to open the lines of communication between teenagers and adults about the issues in their lives."

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Sutton finds the book to be "superficial, lacking in any distance or perceptiveness."

Rather than addressing the problems of the characters, Stoehr merely exploits them for "thrill of titillation." Ending of the book is also criticized.

Related Titles

Crosses is the book which launched Stoehr's career, introducing her major themes and narrative style. All her books since are related to many of the themes she explores in this novel. Nancy and Katie would fit quite well hanging out with main characters in many of Stoehr's other novels. Crosses is also related to other titles in the Delacorte Press' best first YA novel contest, in particular Center Line by Joyce Sweeney, one of the first titles to win the Delacorte award.

Finally, Crosses is related to many other "grim" titles which have become a huge trend in literature for young adults. Crosses was very much a forerunner in unleashing a new honesty in language and situation which paved the way for novels like Rats Saw God (Rob Thomas), When She Was Good (Norma Fox Mazer), and The Facts Speak for Themselves (Brock Cole).



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