

Gold Dust Short Guide

Gold Dust by Chris Lynch

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Overview

Richard Riley Moncrief, a seventh-grader at St. Colmcille's, cares only about one thing in his life: baseball. From the hot summer days to the freezing Boston winters, Richard lives baseball, whether daydreaming in school or freezing his fingers off in February hitting frozen ice balls. Life is simple for Richard in his small, working-class neighborhood, and more importantly, he wants to keep it simple, but the racial tensions of 1974 Boston keep seeping in. While segregated schools were ruled unconstitutional decades earlier, in Boston the racial makeup of schools often did not change with the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. In the fall of 1974, Boston began busing students out of their own neighborhood schools and into schools across the city, trying to achieve a racially diverse student body. Some parents objected, instead sending their children to private schools, like St. Colmcille's.

Despite the turmoil of the 1974-75 school year, all Richard concentrates on is baseball and the arrival of rookies Fred Lynn and Jim Rice to the Boston Red Sox for the 1975 season. That is, however, until the arrival of Napoleon Charlie Ellis. A student from Dominica, Napoleon joins St. Colmcille's mid-year and, searching for a friend, strikes up a conversation with Richard. Thinking that he can turn Napoleon into a baseball fiend like himself, Richard takes up Napoleon's hesitant overtures at friendship, not knowing that this new acquaintance will force him to look at his comfortable but racially segregated world in a new way.

About the Author

Born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1962, award-winning young adult author Chris Lynch grew up in the Jamaica Plains district of that same city. The fifth of seven children, Lynch was raised by his widowed mother after his father died when the author was five years old. Referring to his mother, Lynch once said in an interview with Artists and Authors for Young Adults (AAYA), "she did a good job of covering it up, but things were pretty lean back then.

We were definitely a free cheese family, though I never felt deprived as a kid." After attending Catholic elementary and middle schools, Lynch found high school an abrupt change. While he described his early educational experience as "nurturing" in the AAYA interview, he explained that "I hated high school—every minute. It was rigid, kind of a factory. An all-boy's football factory. Nothing like the arts was encouraged in any way." After dropping out of school in the eleventh grade, Lynch began college at Boston University before earning a degree in journalism from Suffolk University.

Six years of post-graduation odd-jobs, including work as a house painter, moving van driver, and proofreader, encouraged the author to return to school, and in 1989, Lynch set about earning a master's degree in professional writing and publishing from Emerson University in Boston.

It was at Emerson that Lynch's own writing took a new course. While taking a children's writing class from noted author Jack Gold Dust 181 Gantos, Lynch found himself free from the obvious influence of other authors that frequently plagued his own attempts at adult fiction. He relates to AAYA, We were supposed to write five pages on a childhood incident. I had a vague idea of writing about some things my brother and I had done in our youth, but as soon as I sat down with it, I was off to the races. . . .

With this assignment, the very first words actually made it into the actual published book.

This book would turn out to be *Shadow Boxer*, a work that would put Lynch on the path towards becoming a respected author of young adult literature. Since that first novel, Lynch has earned a reputation for producing edgy, street-wise fiction. While enjoyed by many, Lynch's books are often recommended for reluctant readers, readers who are perhaps initially attracted to Lynch's short, snappy writing style but remain for the author's larger themes of surviving adolescence, dysfunctional family life, and racial prejudice.

Setting

Autumn of 1974 is anything but pleasant for children returning from school after summer vacation. Forced busing means many children will leave their neighborhood school for ones in other areas of the city. Some parents accept this new system, but others resist it, particularly those in the working-class area of South Boston. Here, mobs of white parents screamed and threw objects at buses of black students arriving at schools that were full of nearly all white students the year before. In other areas of Boston, parents pulled their children out of public schools and put them into private schools, often subjecting them to long bus rides across the city. It is estimated that some 40,000 students left the public school system during this time, many of them entering schools like the fictional St.

Colmcille's, an event that a few years earlier, Richard observes, would have been absurd because no one left their neighborhood school. Individuals tended to remain in their own neighborhoods, living and going to school among people most like them.

However, when the federal government stepped in, creating a plan to integrate the schools by busing students into other neighborhoods, already present racial tension intensified throughout the city, culminating in sporadic violence at some schools.



Social Sensitivity

While *Gold Dust* appears to be only about baseball, it is more than that, tackling tough issues such as racial intolerance and class conflict. Characters such as Butchie resent blacks for forcing them to travel great lengths in terrible weather just to get to school.

Tensions rise not only on the schoolyard, but also on the streets of Boston, as Richard, Napoleon, and Melanie cannot even enjoy an ice cream without feeling threatened.

Perhaps most difficult for some readers is Napoleon's insistence that Richard not ignore the racism that exists around him, but instead recognize that it is real and not a figment of Napoleon's over-sensitive imagination. Lynch puts the reader into the position of examining his or her own experiences objectively. Just as Napoleon forces Richard to acknowledge the racism that exists in his neighborhood, Lynch makes readers examine their own community and reflect on how others may view it. Frequently, one wishes to pretend that all is perfect, but as Lynch shows readers, life is far more dangerous if no one wishes to disrupt a bigoted status quo.

Another subject Lynch touches on concerns broken families and absent parents.

While Napoleon's mother and brother are still in Dominica and planning to come to Boston, Richard's mother is never mentioned in the story. In fact, Richard rarely talks about his father as well. Alert readers can detect from the story that Mr. Moncrief, while holding down a job at a muffler repair facility, perhaps drinks too much and spends little time with his son. The older Moncrief gives his son little guidance and few rules other than a ten o'clock curfew. In the story, Richard never seems to find anything wrong with his situation. He loves his father for who he is, and even when presented with the upper-class lifestyle of the Ellises, he recognizes that though his family is different, they are no better or worse than Napoleon's family.

Literary Qualities

In *Gold Dust*, Lynch tells Richard's story from a first-person point of view, meaning that all of the action is told through the perspective of Richard. This view makes it possible for the reader to understand what the narrator is thinking as the action unfolds. However, because everything is told only from the narrator's eyes, it can be difficult to understand other characters in the novel. This effect works well for Lynch because both Richard and the reader share confusion over the character of Napoleon.

Richard has a difficult time understanding the Dominican, and the reader must struggle along with Richard, trying to figure out what Napoleon is thinking. Napoleon is a complex figure and readers must collect information as related by Richard to form an opinion of him.

Critics have also credited Lynch for his writing style, a way of creating short, expressive text that engages the reader. While the language is not complicated, the content is, helping reluctant readers to become interested in Lynch's ideas without being overwhelmed by complicated language.

Lynch's books, including *Gold Dust*, tend to be written as a series of interrelated episodes, without many transitions. As the action in one chapter closes, the next chapter begins with a totally different event.

However, as a credit to Lynch's skill as an author, readers easily follow the story without confusion. It is through these brief and often intense chapters that Lynch is able to make readers focus on his characters and attract them to his material.



Themes and Characters

Gold Dust revolves around the experiences of Richard Riley Moncrief as he tries to share his intense love of baseball with the newly-arrived Dominican, Napoleon Charlie Ellis. Richard prefers to keep his life simple, devoting all of his energy to following the game. Playing year round in all sorts of weather, Richard intends to play baseball professionally one day, and in Gold Dust, Lynch captures Richard's obsession with the game. While other characters outwardly think the seventh-grader is out of his mind hitting ice balls in the freezing winter cold, Lynch carefully and simply presents Richard as a boy in love with the clarity of the game. Richard accepts the rules of baseball for what they are, never trying to second-guess them or disagree with them. Preferring status quo, the young baseballer takes the same view toward life.

Richard does not question his place in the world. His working-class neighborhood suits him fine, and he seems to have no questions about his place in it. Richard accepts the rules that govern the behavior of his socio-economic class as easily as he accepts baseball's concept of three strikes and a batter is out.

However, as Richard learns from Napoleon Charlie Ellis, life is not as simple as he would like. For Richard, unpleasantness, such as racism, should just be ignored. If he forgets about it, then it does not exist. Perhaps because it affects him more, Napoleon refuses to accept other people's hatred of him because of his dark-hued skin. Confident in himself, Napoleon shows no fear of small-minded bigots and does not allow them to interfere with his liberty. As Richard and Beverly, a new girl who enjoys Napoleon's love of music, fear an ugly mob is about to pounce on Napoleon, the transplanted Dominican calmly acts as he always does, pointedly unaware of the threat.

Where Richard prefers to run from a problem and not challenge the status quo, Napoleon stands up for himself, always ready to fight ignorance.

Initially, Napoleon's refusal to get along with others, including bullies like Butchie, strikes Richard as being stubborn, overly sensitive, and just plain difficult. But he goes along with it because he firmly believes that he and Napoleon could be the next "Gold Dust Twins," referring to the Red Sox rookie combination of Jim Rice and Fred Lynn. Napoleon, who is used to playing cricket, learns baseball with Richard's help and insistence, and Richard convinces himself that Napoleon loves the game as much as he does. For Richard, there is no question that baseball is the game to play because it is the game he loves to play. It is only when Napoleon leaves St. Colmcille's to attend the nationally famous Archdiocese Choir School that Richard slowly begins to comprehend that there is more to life than his little neighborhood and baseball. At first incredulous that Napoleon would even want to attend the Archdiocese Choir School, Richard slowly understands that his dream that he and Napoleon would become the next Gold Dust Twins was his dream, not one shared by Napoleon. It did not even occur to him that Napoleon's goals might be different than his own. Through the course of the novel, Richard's world view opens up just a little, and he realizes that there are other concerns



in the world beyond his own. Though Richard cannot always understand them, he grudgingly realizes that these concerns are just as valid as his own.

Napoleon is a difficult character for Richard to figure out. Born in a different country to an upper-class family, Napoleon does not blend in well with his Boston classmates. Everything about Napoleon seems to be different, including his English, manners, and attitude. Richard notices that he does not wish to fit in with the rest of the students. While Richard does not want to talk about it, Napoleon immediately senses the hostility from some of the other students toward being a black pupil in an allwhite school. For Richard, he sees things as they always have been, and it is only through Napoleon's experience that he fully comprehends how others see the world.

Other characters in *Gold Dust* show readers the attitudes around Boston in the 1974-75 school year. New students, taking buses from across town, take opposite sides of the integration debate. Butchie expresses contempt at having to take such a long journey to school to avoid attending classes with African Americans. Beverly, on the other hand, also takes a long bus ride to attend St. Colmcille's but enjoys her friendship with Napoleon. While Beverly is regarded as strange, but pleasantly strange, by the other students, she is the only one to have the same interests as Napoleon, namely that of music, art, and other cultural activities.

Adult characters appear infrequently in the novel. Few mentions are made of Richard's father, who works in a muffler repair shop and has a drinking problem, and nothing is mentioned of his mother. Befitting his character, Richard simply accepts his father for who he is, saying "He's mine. You have to like your people, I think, because their yours. Other folks don't have to like them."

Nonetheless, Richard acutely recognizes the difference between his family and Napoleon's family. Dr. Malcolm Ellis, Napoleon's father, teaches Caribbean and French literature and is a respected author. With Napoleon's mother and brother remaining in Dominica until the end of the school year there, Dr. Ellis suggests that Richard and his father join them for dinner one evening.

Though Richard lies and says it would be a great idea, readers see a slight class conflict in action. Richard understands that Napoleon and his father come from a much higher station in life. Though he is slightly embarrassed by his home, Richard is not ashamed of his family's working-class status. He comprehends that he and his father do not have the same position in life as the 184 *Gold Dust* Ellises, but he does not think of his family any less for it. Richard recognizes that his family is merely different from Napoleon's family, not any better, not any worse.

Another far-reaching theme in the novel is that of friendship. In the beginning of the story, Richard thinks that Napoleon already has three strikes against him. First, Napoleon must deal with a bitter-cold Boston winter, much unlike the warm climate of the Caribbean. Second, the Dominican was forced to repeat the seventh grade when he enrolled at St. Colmcille's. Third, according to Richard, was that he was away from his



family and countrymen. For what it is worth, Richard is not going to let Napoleon get shortchanged again and tries to establish a relationship with him.

Richard's friendship with Napoleon impacts him in more ways than he first imagined. Richard recognizes that Napoleon "could make me appreciate things I couldn't manage on my own. This could be a good thing or a bad thing, . . . Mostly, I was happy enough knowing what I knew, and doing what I did." In the story, Napoleon's presence serves as a way for Richard to experience new things and be exposed to new ideas, maturing into a slightly more reflective young man by the book's end. For Napoleon, Richard's presence seems to be needed to counter feelings of loneliness.

Aside from Beverly, Richard is the only acquaintance Napoleon has. To perhaps repay Richard for his kindness and acceptance of him, Napoleon tolerates Richard's endless talk of baseball and endures hours of practice, trying to turn him into a star baseball player. Napoleon is consistently loyal to Richard; he is so loyal that Richard is surprised that Napoleon has dreams different than his own. By the story's end, Richard realizes the uniqueness of Napoleon and his way of opening up Richard's eyes to what happened outside his safe, little neighborhood. Instead of resenting Napoleon for shattering his comfortable but small-minded way of looking at the world, Richard wishes him luck at following his musical dreams.



Topics for Discussion

1. Is Napoleon hypersensitive to the racism around him, as Richard initially believes, or are his feelings justified?

Why or why not?

2. Why does Richard take refuge in the sport of baseball?

3. Is there a reason why Napoleon hangs around Richard? Does he actually think of Richard as a friend, or does he just use Richard to avoid being alone in a strange city?

4. Richard's life revolves around baseball. Is this obsession healthy?

5. Why has Richard not previously noticed the lack of African-American fans at Fenway Park?

6. In your opinion, is Napoleon a realistic seventh-grade student, or are his thoughts and ideas too adult-like for a juniorhigh schooler? Explain.

7. Why would Richard assume that Napoleon held the same aspirations towards becoming the next Gold Dust Twins as he did? Why did it not occur to him to ask Napoleon about his own dreams?

8. Characters from other areas of Boston, such as Butchie, feel resentful about having to attend St. Colmcille's. Why do they not like attending the school?

9. Why is the combination of Boston Red Sox rookies Jim Rice and Fred Lynn significant in the novel?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the island of Dominica and present a report to your classmates, explaining the climate of the land, foods enjoyed there, and the history of the island.
2. In 1954, the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision ruled that segregated schools went against the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. However, in Boston, as in many American cities, schools still tended to be segregated, partly due to official policy and partly because schools existed in neighborhoods that tended to house people of only one race. Examine the 1974 court decision by U.S. District Judge W. Arthur Garrity Jr. that forced Boston schools to bus students out of their neighborhood school to other schools in the city, thereby achieving a racially diverse student body in all classrooms.
3. Look for more information about the 1975 Boston Red Sox team that featured the Gold Dust Rookies Fred Lynn and Jim Rice. How well did the Red Sox fare that year?
4. Select a sport or activity that you enjoy.

Write a persuasive paper about that activity, not only explaining it but also expressing why you enjoy this particular sport or activity so much.

5. Napoleon's love in life is music, and he looks forward to attending a special school to pursue his interests. Research schools like the Archdiocese Choir School, and compare them to the school that you attend. How do the two institutions differ? How are they similar?
6. Find out more information about the game of cricket, finding out how and where it is played. Using what you have learned, write a paper explaining the game and why you think Napoleon learned to play cricket rather than baseball in Dominica.

For Further Reference

Adams, Laura. Review of *Gold Dust*. *Horn Book* (November 2000): 758. This favorable review of *Gold Dust* notes that, while Richard may not always understand what Napoleon is talking about, readers will comprehend Lynch's efforts to alert individuals to "the far-reaching effects of unconscious racism."

Carton, Debbie. Review of *Gold Dust*. *Booklist* (September 1, 2000): 116. While Carton admits that *Gold Dust* "is a wonderful baseball book," she goes on to claim that "it's the awkward, intense friendship that drives the story."

"Lynch, Chris." In *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*, vol. 19. Detroit: Gale, 1996.

This is an in-depth discussion of Lynch's life and critical reaction to his works.

Includes an interview with the author.

McCullough, Michael. Review of *Gold Dust*.

School Library Journal (October 2000): 194.

McCullough praises Lynch's effort, saying *Gold Dust* "contains some of the best sports writing readers will ever find in a YA novel."

Related Titles/Adaptations

For readers interested in other sportsthemed fiction by Lynch, his first novel, *Shadow Boxer*, tells the story of fourteen-year-old George as he tries to convince his younger brother, Monty, not to become a boxer. Witnessing the early death of his journey-man boxer father, George tries to find a way to keep Monty from facing the same fate. Lynch's "Blue-Eyed Son" trilogy not only deals with sports, but also with race relations in the working-class sections of Boston, where traditional Irish-Catholic neighborhoods are slowly being transformed by the arrival of immigrants from non-European countries. *Mick*, *Blood Relations*, and *Dog Eat Dog* all follow the story of fifteen-year-old Mick, who struggles to understand and accept the changes going on in his neighborhood, even if his family does not.

Baseball is the subject of other books for young adult readers, including Alden Carter's 1997 novel *Bull Catcher*. Like *Gold Dust*, *Bull Catcher* focuses on a pair of high-school characters, Neil Larsen and Jeff Hanson, who dream of making it to the Big Leagues.

However, Neil must face the realization that he has the heart but not the talent to make it to the next level. Carl Deuker's 1993 *Heart of a Champion* and 1997 *Painting the Black* both relate the story of baseball-loving young men who must make a difficult decision in their lives. In *Heart of a Champion*, Seth Barham appreciates Jimmy Winter and Mr. Winter's help on the baseball diamond. However, as their friendship develops, Seth notices that Jimmy abuses alcohol, affecting his ability to play ball. *Painting the Black* stars Ryan Ward, a high-school student who regains his love for baseball after the athletic Josh Daniels moves into his neighborhood. After witnessing Josh commit an unsavory practical joke, Ryan must decide whether to remain with his new friend or tell someone about the incident.

Related Web Sites

Richer, Matthew. "Busing's Boston Massacre." Policy Review
<http://www.policyreview.org>. November, 1998. This site gives an excellent overview of Boston's efforts to integrate its school system. It explores not only why Boston's school system remained segregated after the Brown v. Board of Education decision, but also how forced busing affected the entire community.



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