

# My Left Foot Short Guide

## My Left Foot by Christy Brown

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## Overview

*My Left Foot*, published in 1954, tells of the childhood and adolescence of Christy Brown, the author. Though Brown is born with severe cerebral palsy, unable to communicate or control his movements, his mother believes that his mind is unaffected.

Her confidence in Brown's growing abilities never falters as her son grows up and becomes increasingly aware of his physical disabilities.

## About the Author

The celebrated author Christy Brown was born in 1932, the tenth of twenty-two children born to a bricklayer and a homemaker in working-class Dublin, Ireland.

Only thirteen of the children survived infancy, five older than young Christy. His mother noticed developmental differences in her son by the time he was four months old; at a year old he was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, and many doctors told the Browns that nothing could be done for the child, who would always be physically and mentally disabled.

Brown's family was not wealthy in material goods, but they were generous with their time and affection for their son and brother. As a child he was taken out by his brothers, first in a battered go-car and later a wheelchair, into the streets, parks, moviehouses and countryside. Gradually he learned to speak, and to write and paint using his left foot. His mother taught him to read, and a few volunteers gave him books and painting materials. At seventeen Brown visited Lourdes for a few days, and at eighteen he went to London for a day to meet a specialist in the treatment of cerebral palsy.

He began a course of exercise therapy that improved his ability to control his movements, to some extent. About this time he emerged as an author, and eventually his published works included his autobiography, novels, and volumes of poetry. Brown married a young nurse and lived happily with her until his death in 1981, at the age of forty-nine.



## Setting

This autobiography is set in Dublin, Ireland, and almost the entire story takes place in the house where Christy Brown grew up.

Aside from some play with his brothers, Brown almost never left his home as a child and teenager, and so the house dominates his autobiography. It becomes a metaphor for the disabled body in which Christy Brown lived: a body which sustained his able mind but did not allow him free movement.

It must have been a crowded house, with two parents and thirteen children. It cannot have been a large one, as when Brown (at eighteen years old) was doing exercises in the kitchen he would bang his leg on the fire-grate or his head on a chair. It was, however, a house that made him welcome.

From his early childhood where he lay in the kitchen or garden, through the years where he crawled about and chinked on the floor or painted on papers tacked to the floor, till his family built him a large room of his own, this house was always a loving home but also a de facto prison with all the world outside.



## Social Sensitivity

This book is a wonderful presentation of life as a differently-abled person, from Brown's own perspective. As a young child, though frustrated by his inability to communicate or control his movements, he was almost unaware of the extent of his differences until his go-car broke down and he could not go out with his brothers for some weeks. As a teenager, Brown felt the frustration and depression that is common among many adolescents, though usually for far less cause. It took becoming part of a community of other people besides his loving family, and of disabled people in particular, for Brown to realize his own nature.

Not only did he see his flaws and strengths more accurately on an absolute scale of suffering, he also was more able to evaluate them in comparison with other people.

The incoherent frustration that constrained him is described eloquently and usually in simple and straightforward terms. It will be well understood by any young reader who has envied athletes their strengths or celebrities their graces. It will inspire in most readers slinking embarrassment at their own personal grumpiness.

Brown does not mention in this book how disabling frustration or depression can be for an able-bodied person, that perspective can be sought in other books. *My Left Foot* is the story of a child and adolescent, told from the perspective of a very young man. Young readers can take a lesson from Brown to "look at other people, but get on with doing your own best"—the best advice for all of us, no matter what our abilities.

## Literary Qualities

It is clear from the first lines of this book that Christy Brown read and admired the works of Charles Dickens. From line to line his writing shifts from a formal, structured style with sophisticated vocabulary to a more relaxed use of a spoken-word style that shows his working-class origins. These shifts are not jarring, but rather, they make clear how much time there must be for selfanalysis when a writer can speak or write only with great concentration.

The result is a book which is accessible for young people in their teens, as Brown was when he began to write. Though the actions and motivations of the characters are straightforward, the tone of the writing varies so that the reader must pay more than casual attention to the story being told.



## Themes and Characters

The characters in Christy Brown's autobiography are his family, and the few volunteers and doctors he meets who take an interest in helping him. The father is hardworking and dour, but a considerate caregiver for his son. The mother is never idle, but always willing to give her time and attention to the son in whom she has confidence. Among Brown's twelve brothers and sisters, there are individual voices and natures for some in particular, mostly the older siblings. The younger ones are less clearly depicted. Descriptions of ordinary family dinners sound rather like the hullabaloo of a family reunion.

The main theme throughout is almost surprising—Brown describes himself, as a young child, as almost unaware of the extent of his different abilities from most of the people in their Dublin neighborhood.

Increasingly he becomes aware and frustrated by his limited ability to move and communicate. His resentment grows to very nearly suicidal levels. It is through learning to communicate via painting, writing and increasingly fluent speech that Brown achieves some measure of peace.





## Topics for Discussion

1. What difference did physical therapy make for Christy Brown? He did not learn to walk and earn his living as a bricklayer with his brothers, so what value did therapy have in his life?
2. How did Christy Brown benefit from being part of a large family? What were the positive aspects he found of living with many siblings? What were the positive aspects for his siblings of living with young Christy?
3. Describe a typical day's activities for Mrs. Brown, during the years she had several children at home. What leisure could she enjoy?
4. Why did so many of Christy's brothers become bricklayers, like their father?  
How did this affect their education, job prospects and local community development?
5. Several young women made deep impressions on Christy. What are some traits these women had in common? Is it surprising to learn that Christy eventually married a nurse?
6. At the time Christy was born, families often sent their disabled children to live in care homes, or kept them shut away in a back room. Why did Mr. and Mrs. Brown make Christy an active part of their family?
7. What effect did his pilgrimage to Lourdes have on Christy? Was it a success or a failure? He did not gain an immediate and complete physical healing, nor an instant and lasting peace of mind. What then did he gain?
8. Was Christy's interest in young women a natural sign of wellness and health, or a delusion which brought him only rejection and unnecessary emotional suffering?
9. How can community efforts to minimize physical barriers for differentlyabled persons end up helping many able-bodied persons as well?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What health care options are available for differently-abled children now in your community or country? What difference does this care make for these children? What were the health care options in your community or country for severely physically handicapped children before the 1930s? What health care is available at present for these children in other countries?
2. What in general are the benefits of having a large family? Is a close genetic relationship necessary for these benefits? What are the disadvantages of having a large family? Do the benefits outweigh the disadvantages? What can families do to incorporate as many of the benefits as possible while minimizing the disadvantages? Is there a role for the extended family and the community in this goal?
3. What is the role of the nurse in Community Health Care Services? What training and accreditation do nurses need? Are there employment options for nurses, besides acute-care hospitals, in your community? What differences in nursing are necessary when one compares urban communities with rural and isolated areas?
4. Describe row housing in working-class Dublin in the 1930s and 1940s. What was the population density? How well serviced were the neighborhoods? What options did people living in these neighborhoods have for health care and recreation?
5. Draw a floor plan of a typical house in row housing in working-class Dublin in the 1930s. How large were the rooms? What was each room used for? How many children would commonly share a bedroom? Would the house be conveniently accessible for a differentlyabled person who could only crawl or shuffle on his/her rump? Compare the house to a modern townhouse or subsidized housing in your community.
6. What is the history of Lourdes? Who are the people who make pilgrimages there? How do these people benefit from their pilgrimages? How does the community of Lourdes accommodate these pilgrims? How does the community benefit from the ongoing pilgrimages? Compare Lourdes to other sites of devotional pilgrimages, such as Lac Sainte Anne in Alberta, Canada.
7. What is a miracle—by definition and by common usage? What hope can modern people have of miracles in their own lives? Must a miracle be instantaneous, or can its profound nature be revealed subtly or gradually? Can it be argued that Christy Brown experienced miraculous change in his life; and if so, how?
8. Name a person who has overcome great hardships in her/his life. What goals did this person reach, and what barriers did s/he have to overcome? What aspects of her/his childhood were positive resources for the future? How was this person helped to achieve her/his goals, and by whom?



9. Research the life of an outstanding Olympic athlete or Nobel Prize laureate. What were the achievements for which this person was celebrated? Can you determine how much time or how many years of this person's life was spent in preparation for her/his major accomplishment? What other goals did this person set for him/herself? Did s/ he achieve these goals? Name other life accomplishments that can be credited to this person, such as: a family life, a secure home, a community of likeminded people, artistic creations, teaching, community service, etc. What do you admire most about this person?

## For Further Reference

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147-50. Includes biographical and critical information about Brown and his work.

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Lavery, David. "The Strange Text of *My Left Foot*." *Literature-Film Quarterly* (July 1993): 194-96. An unfavorable comparison of Brown's book to the film version, directed by Jim Sheridan.

Obituary of Christy Brown. *Newsweek* (September 21, 1981): 79.

Profile of Christy Brown. *Contemporary Authors, New Revisions Series*, vol. 72.

Detroit: Gale Group, 1999, pp. 126-29.

Overview of Brown's life and work.

## Related Titles/Adaptations

Readers looking for autobiographical writings by persons living with disabilities could start with *The Story of My Life* by Helen Keller and pick out other titles from the same shelf in the public library. Books by parents of differently-abled children may also be of interest, such as *Karen* and *With Love from Karen* by Marie Killilea. This author in particular describes home life with all her children, not just Karen.

A tendency may be noticed in these books for the differently-abled person to be an intellectual genius. It can take the powers of a genius to communicate in spite of speech and motor impediments, but this is not always so. Some of the books written since 1990 have been written by people who are of average or moderate intelligence; some have been written by the parents of children who are mentally disabled or have never been able to communicate. For those who are intrigued by the fact that Brown often felt more impaired by his speech difficulties than by his physical disabilities, there is the viewpoint to consider of a young woman who had impaired communication and perception. Donna Williams wrote *Nobody Nowhere: The Extraordinary Autobiography of an Autistic* and an equally astonishing sequel, *Somebody Somewhere: Breaking Free from the World of Autism*.

*My Left Foot* is an accessible book for young people, in part because Christy Brown was so young when he wrote it. It would be worthy to compare it with *Little by Little*, the autobiography of Jean Little. This famous children's author takes the time to describe her childhood, growing up blind, from a more mature viewpoint than Brown.

Miramax films released an excellent film adaptation of the book *My Left Foot* in 1989.

Directed by Jim Sheridan, with a screenplay by Jim Sheridan and Shane Connaughton, this critically acclaimed film starred Daniel Day-Lewis. Video copies of this film are available from HBO Video in many libraries and in stores, as it is still popular viewing.



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