

Running Loose Short Guide

Running Loose by Chris Crutcher

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Overview

Running Loose deals with serious problems—parent/child relationships, dating, sex, racism and death—with a light-hearted tone. The novel also explores whether athletics in high school is taken too seriously.

Louie Banks starts his senior year with high hopes of having a successful football season, graduating, and getting into college. The year begins well.

He is in excellent physical shape due to hard work, and the football team is off to another winning record. (Sports fans will enjoy the many references to football tactics and plays.) A smart, pretty cheerleader decides she likes him, so he has a terrific personal relationship going. But trouble begins when the coach insinuates that the black quarterback for their toughest opponent should be put "out of the game! Early!"

When the deed is actually done, Louie's ideals of sportsmanship won't allow him to play any more, and he embarrasses the coach by making a scene and walking off the field. How Louie copes with this decision makes up much of the book, and the issues are not clear cut. Louie's best friend Carter, for example, is able to continue playing, justifying his compliance in ways that make Louie's stand against injustice seem pointless. However, the coach and the school principal are evil types, so Louie's civil disobedience seems admirable.

Louie's physical relationship with the more experienced Becky is sensitively portrayed. The characters' attitudes toward sex and the choice to wait are positive and responsible messages for young readers.

When Becky dies suddenly, Louie's life is even more stressed and confusing. His behavior shocks the town but seems understandable to the reader who feels the sadness with Louie.

Despite the many unsettling events, Crutcher tells the story with a consistent tone of humor and sympathy.

Louie never fails to see the ridiculous side to his own behavior and to make fun of himself. He also gets plenty of amusing jabs in against the people around him whom he does not respect.

Louie is an endearing character, and the reader feels empathy for him throughout the novel.

About the Author

Chris Crutcher was born on July 17, 1946, in Cascade, Idaho. He has a B. A. from Eastern Washington State College. He has worked in mental health care, frequently with abused children, with family problems, and with at-risk teen-agers. Currently he works on contract with Community Mental Health in Spokane, Washington, but his main occupation is writing fiction. His literary works reflect his interest in young people, in mental health, and in sports. All his books have been recognized by the American Library Association as Best Books for Young Adults. Crutcher has developed *Running Loose* into a screenplay and looks forward to its production. Another of his books, *The Deep End* (1991), a suspense story dealing with mental health issues and aimed at adults, has been bought for film release.

Some of the characters who appear in the novels also appear in Crutcher's collection of short stories called *Athletic Shorts*. The title of the collection typifies the author's sense of humor and enjoyment of words.

Crutcher has completed a book, *Ironman*, about a triathlete who has difficulty controlling his anger, or so the adults in his life think.

Like many successful young adult authors, Crutcher does not write intentionally/or teen-agers. He writes about teen-agers, and the resulting books are thus appealing to high school-aged readers.

Setting

The story is set in a small town in Idaho called Trout, a rural community of white residents. The smallness of the town is significant because the characters have generally known each other for a long time and have small-town attitudes—the good ones and the bad ones. There is a strong community spirit, often centered on the football team, and many adults in town show interest in the young people. On the other hand, everyone knows everyone's business and jealousies and bad feelings occur.

Social Sensitivity

Running Loose is an excellent vehicle for discussing matters related to prejudicial attitudes, especially in sports.

Like Huck Finn, who feels he is damned because he tries to save Jim, the main character, Louie, feels the ostracism of the community because of his protest of the treatment of the black athlete from the neighboring school.

Racist attitudes are presented in two characters. Coach Lednecky sets up a major plot conflict by suggesting in the locker room that the football team should look for ways to disable the opponent's talented black quarterback in order to secure their undefeated season. Louie's nemesis Boomer, a crude teammate, is the other exponent of racism, and it is he who tackles Washington, the black quarterback, hard enough to send him to the hospital. Louie's response to this unsportsmanlike conduct and to racism supports values of fairness and equality.

The two prominent women characters are both positive portrayals.

Brenda, the mother, and Becky, the girlfriend, are interesting, intelligent, caring individuals with great strength of character.

How people respond to death is the issue which dominates the last third of the book. Becky dies in a senseless car accident, causing deep grief, not only in Louie but in the whole community.

Louie expresses his anguish in ways which offend many townspeople—disrupting the funeral and destroying the memorial plaque at the school. Fortunately for Louie, he has adults in his life who help him adjust to his loss, especially the wise Dakota who discusses his philosophy of the role of God in tragedy.

Many young people experience the loss of friends in accidents, and this novel might be helpful in such circumstances.

Literary Qualities

Running Loose makes good use of several literary techniques. Louie Banks, the first-person narrator, is a very believable character, endearing but not perfect. His voice is honest. He does not always like himself and what he does. He worries about what people will think, but not enough to change his behavior. He is unsure of himself, but cocky too. He does not take himself too seriously. These attributes make his character both sympathetic and likable.

Humor is a major element of the novel. One example is verbal irony— when what is said is not what is meant.

When Louie is so angry over what happened to the black quarterback on the other team, he kicks the pep club girls off his truck, spilling their popcorn and soda. He describes this as "a move that I'm sure got me nominated for Mr. Congeniality of Evergreen County."

Exaggeration is another verbal type of humor used frequently. In this same scene when Louie is so angry, he says to Coach Ledneck, "I wouldn't play another down of Trout football if you were holding my mother hostage!"

Sarcasm makes many of Louie's firstperson speeches amusing. When describing how his senior year proceeds, he admits that few people at the school seemed to like him. "There weren't many teachers I'd have felt comfortable asking for a letter of recommendation from. Unless I wanted to go to college in El Salvador or Iran or someplace."

The use of foreshadowing appears a number of times. Banks discusses in the first chapter how well his life was falling into place until his senior year.

"Seemed like all I had to do was shove 'er in neutral and coast on in to graduation. But when it goes, man, it goes."

The tone of the novel is intimate. The first-person narrator tells the reader everything in his head, including many thoughts he would not admit out loud.

The tone is also informal and colloquial; the language is that of the normal adolescent. Crudities, swear words, and references to body parts are minimal and are only included when appropriate, either for humor or for realism.



Themes and Characters

The nature of friendship among young people is an important theme, particularly supportive relationships.

The main character is Louie; his best friend, Carter, is an interesting character who remains somewhat enigmatic, but is still very appealing. He is the hero of the school, good at everything, and a friend to the end. In spite of some hardships in his life, Carter has learned how to maintain an attitude of success without seeming arrogant or self-centered.

The antagonist is the class bully/tough guy, Boomer. Boomer's father is very hard on him, using corporal punishment at the slightest provocation. Because readers learn something about Boomer's parents, they may understand better why aggressive people behave the way they do.

The difficulties and decisions of dating and sex are also shown with realism. Louie's struggle over how far he should go with his girlfriend Becky is sympathetically portrayed. She is more mature than Louie, but gives him space to be himself and does not pressure him into more of a relationship than he can handle. She is a wonderful girlfriend—pretty, popular, straightforward, funny, and interesting. Her parents are divorced, and she lives with her father who is a more stable personality than her mother.

The novel has a number of sympathetic adult characters, unlike many books for adolescent readers where the adults are the enemy. Louie has a good relationship with his parents whom he calls Norm and Brenda. His father listens to Louie and considers all sides of a difficult problem before speaking.

When Louie makes an unpopular decision about his football career, Norm does not urge him to change his mind.

Louie's mother, Brenda, cooks and worries and complains to him about small things, but he understands how much she loves him. Louie appreciates both his parents in different ways.

Another caring adult is Dakota, the owner of the bar where Louie works, cleaning up. He is a rough, old character, but he gives Louie someone to talk to with a different perspective than a loving parent or a best friend.

Not all the adult characters are so sympathetically portrayed as Norm, Brenda, and Dakota. Some "villains" emerge as well—mainly Coach Lednecky who embodies some of the worst characteristics one can find in adults who are supposed to be role models for young people but who instead give the wrong messages. The coach wants to win at all costs, and it is those costs which form one of the main conflicts of the book. Coach Lednecky exhibits prejudicial attitudes which are important to the plot as well.



Topics for Discussion

1. Who are the "good" characters and who are the "bad" ones? Are there some "not so good" characteristics in the "good" characters and redeeming qualities in the "bad" characters?
2. "Round" characters have many dimensions and are like people we actually know. "Flat" characters are dominated by one main characteristic, like Scrooge being miserly. Make a list of characters who are round and a list of those who are flat. Can you think of three or more adjectives to describe the round ones? What is the one main adjective you would use to describe the flat characters? Compare your lists to Running Loose 3941 those of others in the class.
3. High school sports are an important element of culture in the United States. Think about sports in your city or town. How important are they? To the students? To the school administration and teachers? To the townspeople?

Are some sports more important than others? What would you say about sports in your own school? Do you see any real or potential problems with the attitudes people have about sports?

4. How would you describe Louie's feelings about sex? Becky's feelings about sex? The book was written in the early 1980s. Do you think the characters' feelings are typical of high school students' feelings today or have attitudes changed?

5. Prejudice is an element in the book, sometimes dealt with humorously, as when Boomer accuses Louis of being "Trout's own silver rights worker." How did you react to the theme of racial prejudice in the book?

6. Louie makes a choice about his football career after the incident with Washington, the black quarterback. Did you think he made a good choice?

Would you have done the same or something else? What other choices did he have?

7. Describe some of the ways Louie reacted after Becky's accident. Do you know anyone who has lost a close friend? What reactions did you see in him or her? Do you think Louie's reactions were realistic?

8. Some books make us feel sad, others happy. How did this book make you feel overall? Give reasons using specific events from the novel.

9. Pick the incident in the story that you liked the best and read it to the class. If you want, tell why you picked it.

10. Humor is important to this book.

What parts of the book struck you as amusing, if any? Read one for the class.

What generalizations can we make about what makes us laugh?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Report on the history of African Americans in professional sports in the United States. You will probably want to focus on one sport. Who are some of the best players from the past and the present? Who was the first player to be allowed to play on a mainstream professional team and how long ago was it?

2. Many people study the effects of death on family and friends. Find information about people's reactions to death. Compare your information to the way Louie reacted in the book.

3. In Chapter Five, Coach Lednecky says, "Now I don't want to sound prejudiced, but I played with blacks up at the U, and there's only one way you can stop them. That's to hurt 'em." Describe the role of prejudice in this novel. Do you see evidence of prejudice in your community against any group?

Ethnic? Religious? Racial? Gender-related? Socio-economic? Focus your report on one of these areas.

4. Boomer is a bully. Find a book on assertive behavior. What are the causes of aggressive behavior? How does aggressive behavior differ from assertive behavior? Some people do not use either type of behavior and avoid conflict altogether. How would you categorize yourself? Your best friend?

What are some techniques people use to avoid aggressive behavior and to learn assertive behavior?

5. There is some talk in the novel about getting into college, entrance requirements and grade point averages.

What are the requirements for getting into college on a sports scholarship?

Do they differ at different colleges?

What about colleges or universities in your area? Talk to your counselor, the athletic director, admissions counselors at local colleges or universities, and anyone else you know who has knowledge about this topic. You may know a "student-athlete" in college who could give you his or her point of view. What problems do student-athletes face in college?

6. One element of a round character is that the character experiences some change during the novel. What changes do you see in Louie throughout the novel? Be specific. Quote passages which support your opinion.

7. Find another book about high school sports and read it. Compare the two novels. Which did you like better?



Support your opinion by discussing what the authors have done with plot, character, theme, and point of view.

What other qualities did you either like or dislike about both books?

For Further Reference

Bushman, John H. and Kay Parks Bushman. "Coping with Harsh Realities: The Novels of Chris Crutcher." *English Journal* 81,3 (1992): 82-84. The Bushmans give brief plot outlines of Crutcher's four young adult novels, and then praise them for dealing with tough, realistic issues which adolescents face in their families, schools, and neighborhoods. They like the fact that he does it without reinforcing standard conceptions about religion, institutions, family, and patriotism.

McDonnell, Christine. "New Voices, New Visions: Chris Crutcher." *Horn Book Magazine* 64 (1988): 332-35. This article gives a positive review of Crutcher's first three novels (*Running Loose*, *Stotan!*, and *The Crazy Horse Electric Game*), with particular praise for his characterization. Connections between events in the three novels and Crutcher's life are explored. Several quotes from Crutcher on his theories on writing may interest teachers.

Spencer, Patricia. "YA Novels in the AP Classroom: Crutcher Meets Camus." *English Journal* 78,7 (1989): 44-46.

Spencer shows how two Crutcher novels, *Running Loose* and *The Crazy Horse Electric Game*, as well as a third novel, *God, the Universe and Hot Fudge Sundaes* by Norma Howe, can be used to stimulate discussion in advanced placement classes which are wrestling with existentialist philosophy. While students may grow tired of *The Stranger*, their interest may be sparked by adding an young adult novel to the reading list. In Crutcher's books, Louie and Willie both face intensely difficult situations and, for a time, lose hope, feel alienated, and see the world as chaotic.

Eventually, they move toward a type of commitment which is part of the existential world view.

Related Titles

Crutcher has written another novel *Stotan!* about teens in sports. The sport in this novel is swimming. The main character also has a pretty girlfriend, but his relationship with her is very different from Louie and Becky's relationship. There is a death in *Stotan!* but it is also very different from the one in *Running Loose*. There are many ways the two books could be compared; such a comparison would make an interesting paper or report.

Students who like shorter fiction might find the six stories in *Athletic Shorts* enjoyable, and they can compare the characters to those of *Running Loose*. Louie Banks appears in one of the stories.

The Crazy Horse Electric Game deals with a good athlete who loses his abilities in an accident, along with his connections to his family and friends. The novel details his return to self, a journey Louie takes as well in *Running Loose*.



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Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

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Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996