

# Stotan! Study Guide

## Stotan! by Chris Crutcher

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# Contents

<a href="#">Stotan! Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">About the Author.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 1.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 2.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 3.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 4.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 5.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 6.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 7.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 8.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 9.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 10.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 11.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 12.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 13.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 14.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 15.....</a>	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">34</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">37</a>
<a href="#">Setting.....</a>	<a href="#">39</a>
<a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>	<a href="#">40</a>
<a href="#">Literary Qualities.....</a>	<a href="#">41</a>



[Themes..... 42](#)

[Themes/Characters..... 44](#)

[Style..... 46](#)

[Quotes..... 48](#)

[Topics for Discussion..... 50](#)

[Essay Topics..... 51](#)

[Ideas for Reports and Papers..... 52](#)

[Further Study..... 53](#)

[Related Titles..... 54](#)

[Copyright Information..... 55](#)

## Overview

Stotan!—a 1986 American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults—is, on one level, a detailed account of the physical and psychological struggles of four swimmers as they train for and participate in various meets, including the State Championship. At the same time, the novel is a character study which treats topics such as friendship and loyalty, adversity, racism, endurance, young love, and the effects of abuse and terminal illness. These serious subjects, however, are enlivened with humorous sequences and appealing characters.

As a sports novel, Stotan! provides suspense and drama, and yet it generally avoids clichés and stereotyping.

The main characters come across as realistic young adults, at least partially because they are allowed to recount their own stories, each of which provides insight into their personalities.

While the team does succeed athletically, Crutcher refrains from too neatly tying up loose ends or providing quick, prepackaged solutions to problems. At the end of the novel, Jeffrey Hawkins is still dying, Walker Dupree is still confused about his feelings for Elaine and Devnee, and Nortie has not reconciled himself with his abusive father.

Each member of the team, however, has proved that he is a Stotan. All in all, the novel manages to go beyond mere formula, creating suspense, likeable characters, and a realistic picture of teen-age friendships at their best.

## About the Author

Christopher C. Crutcher was born on July 17, 1946 in the logging and lumber camp of Cascade, Idaho, which he transformed into Trout, Idaho in *Running Loose*. Because he attended a small high school, he participated in most major sports, including football, basketball, and track. Like Louie Banks of *Running Loose*, Crutcher's father was also the chairman of the school committee.

Crutcher attended Washington State College, majoring in sociology and psychology. While in college, he swam competitively, experiencing a week of endurance training like the swimmers in *Stotan!* After graduating in 1968, Crutcher became a teacher and the director at an alternative school in Oakland, California, a setting which he used in *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* (1987). While in California, he took a writing workshop to provide himself with a creative outlet. At the suggestion of a writer friend, he expanded a short story into *Running Loose*, his first published novel. In 1976, he moved back to Spokane, where he still works as a child and family therapist in a mental health center.

Crutcher's background in sports is obvious in his young adult novels, each of which uses athletics to explore human nature. Crutcher's first novel, *Running Loose* (1983), which features a high school senior, Louis Bradley, who runs track to keep his sanity in the face of his girlfriend's death, was named an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults, as were *Stotan!*

(1986), *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* (1987), and *Chinese Handcuffs* (1989).

His recent collection of short stories, *Athletic Shorts* (1991), also uses sports settings, helping him earn the reputation as one of the best contemporary writers of young adult sports fiction.



## Plot Summary

"Stotan!" tells the fictional story of a high school student Walker Dupree who is the captain of his school's small swim team in Spokane, Washington. Walker and the other three members of the team, Nortie Wheeler, Lion Serbousek, and Jeff Hawkins are good friends who create an even stronger bond after spending a week of intense training together in what their coach, Max Song, calls "Stotan week."

A "Stotan" is a cross between a Stoic and a Spartan, Max explains to them, and the training technique is meant to push the boys' endurance to the point where they transcend their physical pain and adopt a mental attitude that allows them to withstand any hardship. The boys enter into the ordeal with enthusiasm, moving into Lion's dismal apartment for the duration of the week. This takes place over Christmas vacation. The boys are exhausted after the first two days, but soon reach a new level of appreciation for their own capabilities.

Each of the boys faces challenges outside the pool. Walker is dating a girl named Devnee in whom he has lost interest but cannot bring himself to address. At the same time, he is attracted to another friend named Elaine who has started seeing someone else. Lion is an orphan who lives on his own and was once expelled from school. Nortie lives with an abusive father and carries guilt over the suicide of his older brother. Jeff is diagnosed with leukemia during the swim season and his health fails rapidly.

At Jeff's insistence, the three other swimmers continue to train hard with the goal of performing well at the state swimming championships. They also band together to take a stand against another high school student named Marty O'Brian who has been distributing white supremacist literature at the school and taunting Nortie because he is dating a black girl. After some skirmishes in which Nortie is injured, the Stotans carry out a plan that humiliates O'Brian in public, putting an end to his harassing behavior.

The novel culminates at the state swim meet where the remaining three swimmers perform very well, set some state records, and make a symbolic gesture of support for their missing teammate, Jeff, who has once again been hospitalized.

Stotan explores themes of friendship, loyalty, honesty, and death. Recounted from the viewpoint of Walker, the story reveals Walker's experiences and observations that convince him that mortality, certainty, honesty, and friendship are even more important in life than winning or being popular. He also comes to terms with his attraction to Elaine and his true feelings for Devnee, along with the senselessness of Jeff's impending death.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

Chapter 1 opens with an entry dated November 5. The narrator and his teammates on the Frost High School swim team are looking at a poster put up by their coach, Max, advertising something called "Stotan Week" to take place over the upcoming holiday vacation. There are few details on the poster, which only states the dates, and that Max is "looking for a few good men" to volunteer.

Walker Dupree, the narrator, is the swim team captain and he discusses the mysterious poster with his teammates, Lionel Serbousek, called "Lion," Jeff Hawkins, and Norton Wheeler, who is called "Nortie." Nortie is apprehensive about the poster and wonders what it could be about. The other boys wonder, too, and they speculate over it as they eat a large meal at a restaurant.

Frost High School is in Spokane, Washington and is the only high school in the city that still has a swim team, Walker explains. It is the last year there will be a swim team, as the boys are preparing to graduate and the school has decided to discontinue the program because they have to travel farther and farther away to find meets to attend.

The boys train hard, practicing before school every day beginning at 5:30 a.m. They push each other to excel and spend much of their time outside of school together, along with a girl named Elaine, who was an excellent swimmer herself but stopped competing the year before. They respect their coach, Max Song, a Korean American who grew up in Montana. Max is a martial arts expert.

All of the boys on the team are excellent swimmers and often win the individual events they participate in, Walker explains. However, since there are only four of them, they never win any meets because they cannot score points in as many events as larger teams. They take this in stride and even joke about their team win-loss record. Nortie is the best swimmer on the team, Walker explains, but he himself has been improving and hopes to qualify for state-level competition.

Walker has a brother who is 15 years older than him who has influenced his taste in music and literature. He has also served as a negative example for Walker, as he suspects that his older brother is a drug dealer.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

Chapter 1 establishes the voice of the narrator, Walker Dupree, although his name is not fully known at this point. It also establishes the structure of the novel as a series of short, personal pieces written in the first person and mostly in the present tense, as if the novel is part of a diary or journal.



The setting in Spokane is established, as well as the association of the central characters with the high school swim team at the fictional Frost High School. Walker's conflicted feelings about his older brother are mentioned here, laying the foundation for a meaningful episode later in the book.

The author does not lay out the explanation of the characters and setting in an explanatory way. Instead, by choosing to tell the story using the voice of a single character, these details are revealed gradually as part of the narrative.





# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

Chapter 2 begins on November 12. Nortie is the first of the four to sign up for Stotan week, hoping that Max will tell him more about it if he volunteers. Max only takes down his name and reveals nothing. Walker and the others enjoy tormenting Nortie for a few days while he worries he will be the only one signed up.

Walker writes about himself and his interests. He has written some articles for local newspapers and thinks he may be a writer some day. He has also started taking martial arts instruction from Max, who has made him promise to never use his abilities except in defense. While he occasionally fantasizes about using his martial arts to clear out the dangerous biker bar where his older brother hangs out, he has become more serious in his outlook during his senior year. He realizes it is probably the last year he and his friends will be together before they go off and become adults, and he hopes to enjoy the time together with his friends while he can.

Walker and Nortie are relaxing at Walker's home one afternoon, listening to some of the old bands that Walker's brother has turned him on to, when Jeff comes over. He tells them he has learned what "Stotan" means after some research at the library. He reveals nothing except that the term came from Australia and hints that it is something very ominous. Nortie tries to get him to tell them more, but Jeff dramatically exits. Nortie goes after him, but comes back to Walker's room having learned nothing. Jeff had spurned him with a disgusting behavior where he sucks on an abscessed tooth he is being treated for and blows the foul stench from the tooth into someone's face. Walker calls this "sucking his tooth."

## Chapter 2 Analysis

The author builds some suspense toward the central event of the story, "Stotan Week," in Chapter 2. The boys, and perhaps the reader, do not know what the word means and the author generates some interest by hinting that it is something dark and difficult.

More of Walker's mindset is revealed in this chapter. He enjoys the fun he is having as a high-school student, but realizes that his life and the lives of his friends will soon change after graduation. He acknowledges this fact, but does not appear to be looking very far into the future as far as making plans.

The easy interaction between Walker and his friends is established here, as well as the particularly close friendship between Nortie and Walker. Walker takes a somewhat protective attitude toward Nortie, who appears naive in some respects.

More of the various settings are established here, such as the Red Rooster, the tough biker bar where Walker's brother is a regular, and where the eventual showdown

between the two characters will take place. Walker is also protective of his older brother and has frequently gone to the bar to take him home when he is too intoxicated.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Chapter 3 is dated November 15. Walker tells more about his friend, Nortie, who is a physically imposing person but is very mild mannered and likes to work with children. Walker attributes this part of Nortie's character to the fact that he has been beaten up by his father all his life. He relates a story of visiting Nortie's house for dinner, a rare occurrence since Nortie rarely invited any of his friends over. Walker and Nortie were sent to the store to get something for the meal and the car Nortie was driving was hit by another driver in an accident that was not his fault. Regardless, when they returned to Nortie's house, his father was furious about the damage to the car and hit Nortie repeatedly. Walker did not stay for dinner.

The swimmers and Elaine are sitting together at the school cafeteria when Jeff shows them a newspaper called the "Aryan Press," which shows derogatory illustrations of black people and argues for white supremacy. Jeff tells them that someone has been putting the papers in people's lockers and that there is a stack of them near the entrance to the school.

Upon learning this, Lion jumps up and walks to the front entrance with Walker and the others following behind him. He finds the stack of papers and spreads them out on the front sidewalk before setting fire to them. As a crowd gathers, Lion gives a short speech that he is disgusted by the papers and that he will personally beat up anyone who brings them on campus. Mrs. Stevens, the vice principal of the school, arrives and puts out the fire with an extinguisher and tells Lion to go to her office.

Lion expected to be called to Mrs. Stevens' office, but he also expected her to be lenient because of the nature of the newspapers and because of the fact she is black. He joins his friends a short time later, having been let go with only a warning.

The discussion among the friends returns to the possible meaning of Stotan Week. Jeff is crushed when Elaine tells the others she has learned what it means. It is a word made up of the words Stoic and Spartan, and refers to an intense training program undertaken by an Australian athlete named Herb Elliot, who would run through the dunes of Australia after his regular hard workout.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

Two of the main threads of the novel are started in Chapter 3. One has to do with Nortie and his abusive father, a situation that Walker has observed first hand and which he describes here. The main characters will respond to this situation later in the novel in a dramatic confrontation with Nortie's father.



Another of the main threads concerns racism and white supremacy among some of the high-school students, which takes the form of an anonymously distributed newspaper that appears on campus. It will be revealed later that it is a fellow student involved in the distribution of the papers. That student will be confronted by the main characters as well.

The character of Elaine Ferral is described in more detail in this chapter and she is established as an intelligent person with an easy relationship to the other swimmers. She will become a romantic interest of Walker, and his internal conflict over his attraction to Elaine and his desire to avoid hurting his current girlfriend, Devnee, is established. This conflict will continue through the rest of the story and is not fully resolved by the end.

Some of the other characteristics of the main characters are established through illustrative episodes, such as Lion's dramatic act of burning the racist newspapers on campus. Mrs. Stevens is established as a secondary character who is tolerant of Lion and the other swimmers.

The answer to the mystery of "Stotan" is revealed to the swimmers by Elaine as the story moves closer to the event that gives the book its title.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Chapter 4 begins on November 23, the day after Thanksgiving. Walker explains that his parents took a trip to Seattle for the holiday but he stayed behind. After strategically mentioning he would be alone for Thanksgiving while at Elaine's house, he was invited to eat with her family. He is increasingly attracted to Elaine, but is in a difficult situation because he is dating a girl named Devnee, who he feels he should break up with. Devnee is kind and very pretty, he explains, but lately his attraction to Elaine has made him think he ought to break up with her and pursue Elaine instead.

Dinner at Elaine's is entertaining. Her father is a packrat and the house is full of clutter and boxes of things he is saving. He is also fanatical about watching television and has two TVs on at all times.

After dinner Walker goes for a walk with Elaine and they talk about their families. Walker wishes he could be closer to his parents and his brother, and realizes he looks to his friends to supply an anchor in his life. He admires Elaine's cozy family life, but she points out that her father's priorities of sitting on the couch watching television constantly are not what she would hope for. They talk about Lion, who was orphaned as a young teen and now lives on his own.

After their talk, Walker goes for a long drive and thinks about his situation. He contemplates what he should do about Devnee and his attraction to Elaine, and thinks about his brother who he has often had to rescue from the bar where he hangs out when he becomes too intoxicated to get home. He reaches no clear resolutions and heads home.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Walker arranges to spend time with Elaine and their close friendship is illustrated in this chapter. Very little action takes place in the chapter and it is made up mostly of Walker's introspective thoughts about the two main conflicts in his life at this point of the story, which are what to do about his brother, Long John, and what to do about his relationships with Devnee and Elaine.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Chapter 5 begins on November 29. Walker explains that athletics are a central part of Frost High School and the Athletic Council made up of coaches and team captains is an influential group. As captain of the swim team, Walker is a member of the council, which addresses the issue of the racist newspapers that had appeared on campus. Walker and some other students were in favor of issuing a statement against the distribution of the papers and calling for disciplinary action against anyone who gives them out. A boy named Marty O'Brian, the captain of the baseball team, brings up the issue of protected free speech. Even if the message is disagreeable to some people, he argues, it should not be censored. The Council calls a vote on issuing a statement without calling for any punishment, and it passes with everyone but O'Brian voting in favor. O'Brian abstains, prompting Walker to openly ask him if he is the one distributing the papers. O'Brian does not admit or deny it.

Walker becomes infuriated with O'Brian. He has promised Max he will never use his martial arts skills in offense, but he begins to look for a chance to provoke O'Brian into a fight. He goes to talk to Max about his feelings and Max gives him the advice to not give the matter too much importance. The people who believe in white supremacy are idiots, he tells Walker, and treating them like their backwards thinking is important only gives them legitimacy.

Walker thinks over his relationship with Devnee. He realizes that although he no longer wants to go out with her, he is jealous at the thought that if he breaks up with her she will start dating someone else. He decides to resolve the matter once and for all and break up with her. The next entry is dated December 1, and Walker has failed to break up with Devnee the night before as he had hoped to do. In the end he got scared.

Something more pressing comes up. Nortie arrives at Walker's house distraught one night. He works at a childcare center in the evenings and on weekends and enjoys working with children very much. Walker explains that Nortie seems to have a natural ability to relate to children and imagines he will probably become a teacher some day.

Nortie is sobbing and crying to Walker that he "blew everything." After asking several times what was upsetting him, Walker finally learns that Nortie hit a child at the center. It was a boy who had been giving the other children trouble and racial slurs toward some of them. After several attempts to get the boy to stop, Nortie grew frustrated and slapped him several times. Immediately regretting what he had done, he ran from the center to Walker's house.

Nortie believes he has ended up like his father, knowing that children who are abused are more likely to become abusers themselves. Walker tries to convince him that he can learn from the experience and it does not mean he will become an abuser. Nortie is still



distraught. He confides in Walker that the reason he was so dedicated to helping children was because of an older brother who had killed himself when he was 13 years old because of their father's abuse.

The news stuns Walker, who did not know that Nortie had ever had an older brother. He says he will help Nortie sort out the situation at the childcare center and makes him promise to stay at Walker's. Worried about what Nortie had said about suicide, he calls Elaine and asks her to come sit in her car near his house to make sure Nortie does not leave.

Walker goes to the childcare center and speaks with Nortie's boss, a woman named Maybelle. She admits that they will have some explaining to do to the father of the boy Nortie hit, but is more concerned that Nortie left the children without telling her. She tells Walker to have Nortie get in touch with her. When he returns home, he finds Nortie has gone. He has left a note saying he knows what he has to do, and not to worry that he might also commit suicide. He asks Walker not to tell anyone else about his brother.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

The character of Marty O'Brian is established in Chapter 5. O'Brian will become the main oppositional character in the novel once it is learned that he is the one responsible for distributing the racist newspapers. This has not yet been revealed to the characters, although Walker suspects that O'Brian sympathizes with the message of the papers after an interchange during the Athletic Council meeting. Once the facts are known, O'Brian appears hypocritical in retrospect.

The theme of abuse continues to be explored as Nortie comes to the conclusion that he is in danger of being an abusive person himself. He is greatly disturbed by his physically violent reaction to the misbehaving child at the childcare center where he works, and even more disturbed that he felt motivated to hurt the child as he was slapping him. In an emotional interaction with Walker, Nortie tells about his older brother who had committed suicide when Nortie was a young boy. This event in Nortie's life has provided the character with motivation to help children, and he is devastated that he has ended up hurting one. Walker's protective tendencies are once again called into service as he goes to the center where Nortie worked to try to fix things for him.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Nortie quits the childcare center, leaving a note for Maybelle without speaking to her. Walker is worried because Nortie has also not spoken to his girlfriend, Milika, who he worked with at the center and who goes to a different school. Milika is black, Walker explains, and both her parents and Nortie's parents would be u very angry to learn their children were dating someone from a different race so they have kept their relationship secret.

It is December 16, just before Stotan week is to begin. The teammates convince their parents to let them stay at Lion's apartment and haul some mattresses in to sleep on the floor. The apartment is heated by a single electric heater plugged into an extension cord that runs to an outlet in the bar below the apartment.

The next entry is dated Monday evening of Stotan week. Walker and the others are exhausted. Max had put them through a series of non-stop drills, calling out orders through a bullhorn. Each time they slowed down he would have them do pushups or swim sprints in the "torture lane."

The second day, Tuesday, is more of the same, but after a few hours Walker notices that Lion begins to swim faster than he ever had before. Then he feels himself slipping into a kind of fuzzy zone where the four of them are like swimming machines. When the workout ends at noon he almost feels let down. The other boys seem to feel the same thing, but nobody talks about it afterward, afraid to ruin it by analyzing it too much.

Later that night the boys are at Lion's discussing how much their bodies can take. Jeff tells them a story from the year that he was off school after punching another student. He had previously gone on a sailing trip with the friends of his family, but the boat had wrecked and he almost drowned. Once he returned to Spokane, it was the middle of the school year and he decided to join the Marine Reserves and undergo training before the summer and then return to school the next year. While in training, his sergeant chose to make an example of him and made him crouch with his back against a wall in his barracks for hours. Jeff endured it and by the end had made it a point of pride to outlast the sergeant's expectations.

In the mood to tell similar "Stotan" stories, the boys ask Nortie to tell a story. He chooses to tell the full story of his brother's suicide after making everyone promise not to tell anyone else. His brother had hanged himself in their garage, he said, after an especially brutal incident with their father. It was Nortie who discovered the body along with an apologetic note addressed to him tied to his brother's shoe.

The boys are quiet after Nortie's story, but Lion lightens the mood with a humorous "Stotan story" about a time when he tried to remove a large pimple from his forehead





with a hot coke bottle at Walker's suggestion. The attempt only made the redness on his forehead worse.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

Stotan Week begins in Chapter 6 and the main characters become isolated from the outside world as they move in together for the duration of the five-day training session. The shared ordeal of the intense physical workout along with the close proximity of living in Lion's cramped apartment brings the boys even closer together and they begin to share private stories, such as Nortie's experience with his brother's suicide. Walker notes that the basis for this new closeness is trust in one another, something he speculates is scarce in their lives, especially Nortie's. These private stories also add color and depth to the main characters and generate interest in them for the reader.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

The next day, Wednesday, the swimmers train even harder. Nortie, who seems to have had a weight lifted from him, swims faster than ever. Walker believes it has to do with the trust he has discovered after telling his friends about his brother and having them accept him.

After the workout, the boys are not feeling as exhausted as they had on previous days and they go out for some pizza at Savage House, a favorite restaurant. Afterward, Walker and Jeff go to a nearby drugstore to get some supplies and as they are inside they see Marty O'Brian walk past and drop some newspapers near the door of the drugstore. They are copies of the same white supremacist paper that had appeared on the high school campus. They walk back to Lion's apartment but decide not to tell him what they saw or he will want to go out and hunt down O'Brian.

Elaine comes to Lion's apartment with Milika, who Nortie has not spoken to since he left the childcare center. Milika is angry with him, but he apologizes and they make up. Elaine offers to let the boys draw straws to see which one will get a massage from her and Walker wins. He resolves again to talk to Devnee as Elaine is skillfully rubbing his back.

The following day is Thursday of Stotan week. The feeling of the previous day is gone, Walker explains, and Max works them harder than ever. Afterward, Walker goes out with Devnee, and is again unable to tell her how he feels even though he has decided that as part of becoming a "Stotan" he needs to be completely honest with the people in his life. He promises to call her Friday after the Stotan training is over.

On the final day, Max just has the boys swim. At 11:30, half an hour before the scheduled end of the day at noon, Max blows his whistle and calls the boys together. He tells them that he recognized the special connection they had all made on Wednesday of the week and hoped that they would remember it. The lesson of Stotan week, he tells them, is that you cannot always fight a dragon head on, but if you go with the dragon you can beat it. He leaves the boys with a gift, a metal bracelet for each of them inscribed with the word Stotan.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

Stotan week continues and the boys come out of their exhaustion-induced isolation to some degree. O'Brian is confirmed as the distributor of the racist newspapers, but Walker keeps the information to himself to prevent Lion from taking immediate action. This delays the impending conflict until later in the book and allows it to build before being resolved.



Once again Walker resolves to settle his internal conflict over his romantic life by breaking up with Devnee, but delays when he cannot bring himself to do it.

Stotan week concludes with a serious talk from Max, who wants to impart to the swimmers that they have the capability to endure great challenges, but that sometimes facing challenges head on is not the best way. Sometimes a person needs to bend and adapt and overcome the challenge over the long run. Walker will find application for this lesson later in the novel as he copes with the news of Jeff's fatal illness.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

After Stotan week, the boys go back to their homes and look forward to the Christmas dance. Walker has decided to do nothing about his dilemma over Devnee and Elaine and prepares to take Devnee to the dance. He takes her to a nice restaurant and has a good time. At the dance, Jeff arrives with his girlfriend, Colleen, who is home from her first year in college at Stanford. Lion arrives in his convertible Jeepster that he has painted to look like a German World War I fighter plane complete with a fake machine gun mounted on the back.

Nortie and Milika arrive at the dance. Milika's eyes are red from crying and Nortie's face is swollen. Milika tells the boys that someone called Nortie's father and told him about Milika. Nortie seems distant and disoriented and Milika says she thinks something is wrong with him. Walker and the others ask Nortie if he has taken something. Nortie shrugs and says he doesn't know what he took, but he got something from Long John. Walker quickly gives his car keys to Devnee and tells her to take Nortie to the emergency room and he, Lion and Jeff get in Lion's car to go looking for Long John.

They find him at the Red Rooster, the dangerous biker bar where he hangs out. The boys walk in and are immediately the center of attention, with Jeff in his Marine uniform and Lion and Walker in formal suits. The bartender and some of the bikers threaten to throw them out, but Walker says he just wants to speak to Long John, who comes over to them near the door. Walker insists on knowing what Long John gave Nortie, and when Long John says he doesn't know, Walker loses his temper and hits him in the face. The boys leave immediately to avoid being attacked by the other bar patrons.

Nortie has his stomach pumped and is alright at the hospital. Walker decides that Nortie should not go back home and should come live with him. He and Lion and Jeff get back in Lion's car and go to Nortie's house to get his things. They push their way into Nortie's house, but Mr. Wheeler takes out a pistol and tells them to leave. At the sight of the gun, Mrs. Wheeler begins to cry and tries to knock the gun from his hand, but Mr. Wheeler hits her. Furious, the boys leave.

They stop at a gas station and call Mr. Wheeler. They tell him they will be back in 30 minutes and expect Nortie's things to be on the sidewalk or they will call the police. They also speak to Mrs. Wheeler and tell her to be outside as well and they will take her to a friend's house. She is reluctant, but when they return they find her outside with Nortie's things.

They take Mrs. Wheeler to a friend's house and Walker wonders what it is that makes her and Nortie keep returning to such an abusive person. It seems crazy, but he knows they are not insane. Something about human nature seems to make it difficult for them to leave the situation.



## Chapter 8 Analysis

Two major conflicts occur in Chapter 8, a showdown between Walker and his brother, Long John, and a tense confrontation between Nortie's friends and his father.

The central event of the chapter is the Christmas dance, which brings all of the main characters together in a social setting. When Nortie arrives acting strange and with a swollen face, events begin to snowball. Walker resolves his ongoing conflict with his brother using violence, and narrowly escapes being hurt himself. The confrontation with Mr. Wheeler does not end in violence, although deadly force is implied when Mr. Wheeler pulls a gun on the boys as they try to take Nortie's things from his house.

These two issues are only temporarily resolved. Although the boys take Nortie's mother from the house, it is implied that she will probably return after a while. Walker's violent reaction to his brother was a statement of his feelings, but does not resolve the problems at the core of Walker's conflict with him. The author does not fully resolve these matters by the end of the novel, accentuating that these kinds of events do not usually unfold in neatly-organized story lines where everything is settled by the end. This is a central theme of the book and one that the main characters come to understand.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Nortie goes to live at Walker's house, staying in the room that had been Long John's. Worried about having broken the school's athletic code against using drugs or alcohol during the season, Nortie decides he must confess to Max what he has done. Walker tries to convince him not to tell Max. Nortie was not a regular user and the situation was extreme. Still, Nortie insists on telling Max even though it would mean being taken off the swim team.

Max listens to Nortie's story and gives him another chance. He tells him to pretend as if they have gone back in time to when Nortie had not told him anything and to move forward as if it had not happened. Discussing the incident with Walker afterward, Nortie tells him that he suspects Marty O'Brian was the one who told his father about him dating a black girl. His father reads the same newspaper that O'Brian distributes. After another encounter with O'Brian in which he catches him delivering more of the same paper, Walker decides that Max is correct that making a big deal about it only makes him look legitimate. He is still very angry at O'Brian but decides if he is going to get back at him it will have to be for some other reason.

Nortie speaks to Walker about something that has been bothering him. His girlfriend, Milika, wants to have sex with him but he is afraid to. He asks Walker if he has had sex with Devnee and Walker tells him it is none of his business. They both agree that it is distasteful to speak about girls crudely, and Walker relates a story about a boy named John Dolan, a friend of Marty O'Brian's, who went on a date with Elaine and then began to brag that they had had sex, which was not true. When Elaine heard about Dolan's bragging, she publicly embarrassed him at school, humiliating him in front of his friends.

Nortie and Walker wonder if Jeff and his girlfriend are having sex. Walker jokes that he hopes so, because he has noticed that Jeff has started to get winded during their workouts.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

Some of the various threads of the story are tied together in Chapter 9. As it turns out, Nortie's incident with his father is related to the racist newspapers by way of O'Brian, who is likely the one who alerted Nortie's father to the fact that Nortie was dating a black girl. The incident heightens the tension between Walker and his friends and Marty O'Brian, increasing the suspense leading up to a final showdown with him.

The subject of sex is introduced in this chapter and treated seriously and as a private matter. Elaine's character is illustrated in a story related by Walker where she confronts a boy spreading characteristically crude gossip about her.



A slight reference to Jeff's impending illness is made at the end of the chapter as Walker remarks that Jeff became winded during a routine run. A short remark at the end of the chapter refers to a rumor that Elaine went to the Christmas dance with a student teacher named Peter Wheeler, which promises to complicate Walker's romantic intentions even more.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

Chapter 10 begins on January 21. School is back in session and Nortie has replaced his enthusiasm for becoming a teacher to going into educational research. He spends time after school working with rats in the psychology lab teaching them complex tasks through reinforcement. Walker comes with him and helps, and they talk about the possibility of changing the behavior of people by similar methods.

Lion confronts O'Brian at the school one day, telling him he does not care what his personal beliefs are but that if any more white supremacist newspapers show up on campus he will personally punish him. Walker expects O'Brian will back off.

The swimmers look forward to competing at a meet in Montana which involves a long drive. The road trip is a highlight of their season, Walker explains, as they have time to be together during the long trip then spend two long days at two separate meets. The road trip makes them feel like family, he explains. They are all swimming well and hope to qualify for individual state competition.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

Much of Chapter 10 is taken up with a scene between Nortie and Walker as Walker helps Nortie with his psychology experiments for school. Nortie is conditioning rats to perform complex behaviors by rewarding them with food. Walker finds the experiment fascinating, and Nortie speculates that it is possible to condition people in the same way. An underlying message to the scene appears to be that people will continue in behavior for which they are rewarded, calling attention to one of the themes of the book concerning how to react to the racist literature and remarks that appear in the town. Max offers the advice to Walker that treating racists like they are important rewards them by making them feel important. The implication is that by rewarding them with attention, opponents may only be reinforcing their beliefs.

The conflict with O'Brian simmers and Lions makes another threat, but the issue is not yet over.





# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

The four swimmers and Max take a school van on the 500-mile drive to the first of their two meets in Montana. Jeff and Nortie play gin rummy in the back almost non-stop, with Jeff beating him repeatedly. Lion psychs himself up for the meet by getting very quiet and drawing in a sketchbook. Walker sometimes takes turns with Max driving the van. After several hours they have crossed the mountains and are in a long flat part of Montana. Unexpectedly, Max turns the van off the highway and drives a few miles to a house at the end of a long driveway. Walker sees a woman and a young girl standing in the window, and the girl runs out into the snow, excited to see Max. They play in the snow for a while as Walker watches and the other boys sleep in the van.

Max returns to the van, looking sad, and Walker does not ask him about the episode. After a time, however, Max tells him that the girl was his daughter, whom he does not get to see very often. He adds that unlike athletics, the consequences of your actions in life cannot always be predicted. He offers this as advice to Walker. Life can be unforgiving, he tells him.

As they approach Billings, Max and the boys begin to discuss their strategy. They want each of the boys to have a chance at qualifying for state in an event, which means mixing up the races they compete in and sitting out some events to get rest. As they expect, they lose the meets as a team, but do very well in their individual events, except for Jeff who suddenly collapses during one of his events in the second meet. He becomes disoriented and has to be pulled from the pool and is taken to a local hospital by ambulance.

Max goes with Jeff while the boys go back to their motel and wait for news. Max tells them the doctors want to keep Jeff overnight and so their return to Spokane will be delayed. The next day at the hospital, Walker overhears a doctor telling Max that Jeff's condition could be very serious, but when Walker enters the conversation, the doctor hedges and says he spoke too soon and that they will have to learn more.

Jeff is weak and tries to be upbeat. Walker is worried that he may actually be dying.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

Chapter 11 takes place on the long road trip the team takes to Montana to compete in two swimming competitions. They are alone together as a team unit or several days, which Walker explains makes them feel like a family unit. Each has a routine during the long drive with Lion making sketches, Jeff and Nortie playing cards and Walker riding in front with Max and sometimes driving.



More is learned about Max and his background during the trip when he makes a short side trip to visit his daughter at the home of his estranged wife. Very few details are offered by Max but he makes it clear to Walker that he had made some mistakes and was suffering the consequences for them.

The novel shifts direction sharply with the sudden unexpected illness of Jeff, who collapses during a swimming event. his teammates are worried and gradually come to realize that Jeff's illness may be very serious.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

Chapter 12 begins on February 17. After getting back from Montana, Jeff goes directly into the hospital and asks that his friends not come to see him for a while. Max knows what is wrong, but honors Jeff's request not to talk about it. After Jeff has been home from the hospital for a while Walker and the other swimmers go to see him. He has lost his hair and is much thinner.

Walker's plans to break up with Devnee and explore his attraction to Elaine are complicated when Elaine is called in to Mrs. Stevens' office for attending the Christmas dance with Peter Wilson, a college student who is working as a student teacher at the high school. Elaine is told she cannot date Mr. Wilson while he is teaching at the school and she gets very angry. Mrs. Steven explains that it is inappropriate and tells her to wait until school is over.

Walker had planned to tell both Devnee and Elaine how he felt once he got back from Montana, but Devnee was very comforting about the ordeal with Jeff and Elaine was worked up about being told not to see Mr. Wilson and it became clear he could not follow through.

Jeff calls all the swimmers and Elaine, to his house. His girlfriend, Colleen, is also there. He tells them that he has a blood disease and is likely to die from it. He also tells them that he has heard the swimmers talked about quitting their season because he could not compete, but he asks them to keep swimming for him. After a while, the friends leave Jeff and go out to a diner to talk. Elaine insists that Jeff may still have a chance of surviving, but Nortie is straightforward about the likelihood that he will die. Lion is quiet, but finally speaks up to say that it is more important than ever that they all stick together.

Marty O'Brian walks into the diner, but steers clear of them. Elaine suddenly says she has to leave and Walker notices Peter Wilson waiting outside.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

The novel now centers on Jeff's illness and the reaction of the other swimmers to it. At first, Jeff wants to keep to himself but after some time he calls the others to his house and tells them how serious his sickness really is. Although the other swimmers have contemplated giving up going to the state competition after losing Jeff from the team, he asks them to keep training and to compete for him. This provides motivation for the remainder of the novel, which ends shortly after the competition takes place.

Jeff's friends react differently to the news of his illness. Nortie is certain that Jeff will die, while Elaine holds out hope that he might recover. Nortie seems to be the best equipped



to accept the news as he has witnessed death himself and knows that "the bad stuff is real." (p. 212)

Walker confirms that Elaine is dating a college student, which further complicates his plans to break up with Devnee.



# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

Things come to a head with Marty O'Brian in Chapter 13, which begins February 24. Nortie takes Milika out for pizza at the Savage House, a local favorite. Marty O'Brian is also at the restaurant with some of his friends, and he begins to make racist remarks about Nortie and Milika. Nortie is determined to ignore O'Brian, who continues to make remarks even after two of his friends ask him to stop. Nortie continues to ignore him until O'Brian comes up close to him and says something about Jeff. Nortie snaps and the two boys begin to fight. Nortie ends up outside the restaurant with a cracked rib.

Milika takes Nortie to Walker's house and they talk about what to do. Walker decides they should take it up with Jeff, who will undoubtedly come up with an excellent plan for getting even. After school the next day, they go to Jeff's house and tell him what happened. Jeff asks if Lion has his winch on his Jeepster and tells him to get it. He does not tell the others what he has in mind but he begins to get dressed even though he is very weak. When they tell him he shouldn't go out, he tells them that in his condition he can go wherever he wants.

The boys get some mattresses and pile into Lion's Jeepster and head for the community college, where O'Brian and Dolan are working out with the baseball team. They find O'Brian's treasured Mustang parked near a slope leading down to a muddy creek and using the mattresses as a cushion push the car down the slope into the mud, where it begins to sink. O'Brian learns what has happened and rushes out to see his car sinking. The swimmers deny knowing anything about it, but they offer to pull the car out with their winch, charging O'Brian all of the money he has on him as a fee.

Afterward, they take Jeff home and go to the Savage House for pizza. Marty O'Brian and some of his friends come in and Walker and Nortie watch them closely in case they try or say anything. Walker tells Nortie to call Max on the payphone and ask him to come down. Max arrives within a few minutes and sits down with the boys. He appears to think for a moment, then walks over to O'Brian and tells him calmly that if he gives Nortie any more trouble, he will personally harm him.

O'Brian is astonished. He tells Max that he cannot threaten him because he is a teacher and that he will report him to Mrs. Stevens. Max kicks the legs out from under O'Brian's chair in response and then pulls him over to the payphone. He makes O'Brian call Mrs. Stevens and then gets on the phone himself when O'Brian does not talk. Max reports that O'Brian wants to report he is threatening to hurt him if he bothers Nortie again. Mrs. Stevens tells Max to tell O'Brian to complain to someone who cares.



## Chapter 13 Analysis

The conflict with O'Brian erupts into violence as O'Brian taunts Nortie over his black girlfriend and over Jeff's illness. The swim team bands together, including Jeff who plots their revenge, to humiliate O'Brian. While the swimmers' revenge does not involve physical violence against O'Brian, it does escalate the situation to the point that they fear O'Brian will retaliate with more violence. Max is called in to threaten and intimidate O'Brian into leaving Nortie alone. This appears to resolve the situation for the time being as O'Brian finds little support among his friends or the faculty at the school. There is no indication that he changes his racist beliefs, however, and this part of the conflict is left unresolved.



# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

Chapter 14 begins March 10, with less than a week before the state swimming championships in Seattle. Walker, Nortie and Lion have all performed well and qualified to compete, and Walker looks forward to it.

At school, O'Brian mouths off about Max but the reaction he gets from most people is that he should be careful. His baseball coach tells him that if he is involved in any more trouble at all he will be taken off the team.

Walker is once again conflicted over his relationship with Devnee and his desire for Elaine. He goes to Max for advice, but Max insists he is not very good at romantic problems. He asks Walker if he has talked to Devnee about how serious she is about the relationship, suggesting she may just be thinking it is casual. He also asks Walker if he can truly envision himself as a couple with Elaine. Walker realizes the timing is not good since Elaine is interested in Peter Wilson, but he decides he will talk to Devnee about how she feels.

He does speak with Devnee, and she admits she is not sure how Walker feels. She says she is willing to follow him to college, within reason, depending on where he might get a scholarship. Learning that she is serious about their relationship makes it harder for Walker, so he stalls and says he hasn't thought much about it, but will talk to her more after he returns from the state meet.

Max calls the swimmers together for a serious talk. Jeff has gotten worse and it is likely he will die soon. He asks the boys to remember the lesson of Stotan week that they can face down a dragon by accepting it and going along with it and sticking together. The "dragon" is Jeff's death, he tells them, which is inevitable, but which means they need to band together for strength.

## Chapter 14 Analysis

Walker does make some progress in his conflict over Elaine and Devnee after speaking with Max. He determines that Devnee is taking the relationship more seriously than he is, but this only makes it harder for him to do what he feels he must. He decides that the timing is not right to speak to Elaine about his feelings given that she is fired up about her relationship with Peter Wilson.

The chapter closes on a serious note as Max confirms for the swimmers that Jeff's illness is very serious. He calls on them to rely on the feelings of trust they developed during Stotan week and to recognize that they cannot hold back Jeff's death and so must accept it and move on together.



# Chapter 15

## Chapter 15 Summary

Chapter 15 begins on March 10. The high school holds an assembly to send off the three swimmers to the state competition. Walker realizes that after the meet is over there will be nothing left to do for Jeff. They trained hard and will be swimming with him in mind, but once it is over they will be faced with his impending death again. As they are about to leave in the van, Elaine comes to Walker and says she knows what he has been going through. He is surprised and at first pretends he does not know what she means, but she tells him despite his thinking he was being cool, she could tell. He admits it and adds that he decided it wouldn't work between them. She agrees.

In the van, Walker sits up front and Nortie makes Lion play gin rummy with him like he once did with Jeff. Neither of them are very good at the game. At the state meet they enjoy a bit of celebrity. Swimming is a more popular sport in western Washington than in the east and the teams and coaches have seen the Frost High swimmers' names near the top of the statewide results. Walker is matched against an excellent swimmer in a 500-meter freestyle event. He wins the event, barely, despite badly cutting his foot on the side of the pool during a turn. Nortie sets a record in his event and Lion places well in his meet. One of the last events is a four-man relay race which the team had planned to enter but had to drop when they lost Jeff. They asked the officials if they could swim in three of the legs as a tribute to Jeff and to see how they might have placed. Max is told by the officials that they cannot.

Without Max's knowledge, they come up with a scheme after talking to some of the other swimmers, who agree to go along with their plan. They put on sweatshirts from another school that is competing in the relay and hang around the pool as the race is about to begin. As the swimmers are called to the blocks, Walker wanders over to the far side of the pool to an unused lane and gets on the block. The starter pauses for a moment, but then fires the starting pistol and Walker dives in, swimming as fast as he can. He finishes well and sees Lion above him, ready to dive in as soon as he touches.

An official comes to Walker and warns him that they might forfeit all their races for disobeying their decision. The official tells Nortie not to swim the third leg, but Nortie swims it anyway. After he finishes, they watch the end of the race and determine they would have had a chance to win it had Jeff been there. The other teams do not protest the results of the race, so the Frost swimmers do not lose their results. As Max comes up to them afterward, they all burst into tears.

The rest of the year seems anticlimactic to Walker. He thinks over the situation with Jeff and sometimes finds himself wishing Jeff would just pass away in his sleep so he could be out of his pain. He realizes that life is not like a competition where the best person is likely to win. Someone like Jeff, who is dedicated and intelligent is dying at a young age while someone like Marty O'Brian is allowed to live. Walker accepts this, and decides





that if he is ever in a position to help a younger person once he is an adult, he will do what he can to teach this lesson to them. Life must be taken as it comes.

## Chapter 15 Analysis

The final chapter culminates in the success of the three swimmers at the state competition, which is capped off by a symbolic gesture where they swim three legs of a four-man relay without Jeff. The boys disregard the rules and the warning of the meet officials to swim in the race, but they are not disqualified in the end.

Walker has still not resolved his romantic issues, but he does get a more clear picture of Elaine's thoughts when she tells him she understands what he has been going through. He pretends at first not to know what she is talking about in a reaction similar to that when Devnee asked him what he wanted from their relationship before he had a chance to ask her the same thing. In the situation with Devnee, he chose to lie and said he had not given the matter much thought. With Elaine, however, his attempt to lie fails as she sees through him, and he admits she is right.

After the meet, Walker reflects on the events of the previous months. His conclusions reflect the lessons he has taken from Stotan week and his interaction with his friends and with Marty O'Brian. Life does not play out like a swim meet where the best swimmer wins. The novel ends as Walker is off to talk to Devnee and set things "straight." It is suggested that he will break up with her, even though he does not have Elaine to turn to, although this question is left unresolved.



# Characters

## Walker Dupree

Walker Dupree is the narrator of the story from whose point of view everything is described. He is a senior at Frost High School in Spokane, Washington and is the captain of the school's small swim team. Walker lives with his parents, who are quite a bit older than the parents of most of his friends. He also has an older brother John who is 15 years older than him.

Walker enjoys classic rock music, a taste passed down to him by his older brother. He otherwise despises his brother, who is a drug user and, he suspects, a drug dealer. Walker's parents are not greatly involved in his life, and he has learned to be independent.

Walker is fiercely loyal to his friends on the swim team and comes to their aid whenever needed. He has a girlfriend named Devnee who he feels he should break up with but cannot bring himself to leave. He also develops strong feelings for a longtime friend named Elaine, but has difficulty telling her how he feels.

Walker is faced with several challenges over the course of the novel which bring him to evaluate his priorities and basic values. He decides that being honest and true to ones friends are two central values he wants to stick to.

## Norton Wheeler

Norton Wheeler is one of Walker's teammates at Frost High School. He is usually called "Nortie." Nortie lives with his parents in Spokane. His father is abusive and regularly beats Nortie and his mother. When the abuse becomes too much, Walker and the other swim team members take Nortie and his mother from their house. Nortie then goes to live with Walker.

Nortie dates a girl from another high school named Milika who is black. They keep their relationship secret from their parents, who disapprove of their children dating because of race. When Nortie's father finds out about the relationship, his explosive reaction leads to Nortie leaving home.

Nortie's older brother committed suicide when Nortie was young, and as a result of this early experience he decided to pursue a career helping children. When he discovers he may have abusive tendencies of his own, he is devastated and decides he will become a psychologist instead.



## Jeff Hawkins

One of Walker's friends and teammates. Jeff is large for a swimmer, but very powerful. He is an intelligent person and stays well informed on current events by reading widely. He is impulsive and was once expelled from school. During his year away he went on a boat trip during which he was shipwrecked and nearly drowned. Upon returning, Jeff entered the Marine Reserves and underwent Marine training.

Jeff becomes very ill during the swim season with a blood disease, and his health deteriorates quickly. The other swimmers decide to cancel the season after Jeff cannot compete, but he asks them to continue on, which they do out of loyalty to their friend. As the swimmers compete in the final state events, Jeff has been admitted to the hospital as his condition worsens.

## Lionel Serbousek

Lionel, or "Lion" as he is called, is one of Walker's friends and teammates. He lost both his parents in a boating accident and has lived independently ever since. He lives in a run down apartment without electricity or heat where the teammates live together during Stotan week. Lion frequently takes up various activist causes and sometimes acts impulsively.

## Max Il Song

Max Il Song is the swimming coach at Frost High School. He oversees the gruelling Stotan training week that the main characters undertake. Max is a Korean-American who grew up in Montana. He is estranged from his former wife and has a young daughter he sees only occasionally. Max is trained in martial arts and passes some of his training to Walker. When some high school students begin to express white supremacist views, Max threatens them with violence.

## Elaine Ferral

Elaine is a former swimmer at Frost High School and a good friend of Walker and the other boys on the team. She is very intelligent and a strong swimmer, faster even than many boys. She dates an older boy, a college student named Peter Wilson who is also a student teacher. Dating a student teacher gets Elaine in some trouble at school, but she continues to see him secretly.

Elaine is aware of Walker's attraction to her, and speaks to him about it, suggesting that it would not work out between them. Walker accepts this as well.



## **Marty O'Brian**

Marty O'Brian is a baseball player at Frost High School. He is involved with a white supremacist group and distributes newspapers that reflect racist views. He is bold about his beliefs and frequently makes overt remarks to Nortie about his girlfriend, who is black. O'Brian is humiliated by the swim team when they push his car into a stream then charge him to pull it out. He is also threatened by Max when tensions escalate between him and the swim team members.

## **Long John Dupree**

Long John is Walker's older brother. He is 15 years older and has done little with his life. Walker suspects he is a drug dealer, as he has no job but seems to support himself somehow. He hangs out at a bar called the Red Rooster, which is known for its frequent violent fights and drug use. Walker confronts Long John after John gives Nortie some drugs.

## **Mr. Wheeler**

Mr. Wheeler is Nortie's father. He is abusive both to Nortie and his mother, beating them frequently. After an especially violent incident, Nortie's teammates confront Mr. Wheeler and try to take Nortie's things from the house. Wheeler responds by pulling a gun on the boys. They convince him to let Nortie and his mother leave.

## **Mrs. Stevens**

Mrs. Stevens is the vice principal at Frost High School and is in charge of discipline. She sometimes takes a lenient stance on the disruptive behavior of students and faculty, particularly in the case of Marty O'Brian who gets into trouble with some students after he begins distributing racist literature on campus.



## Objects/Places

### Stotan

A Stotan is a made up word that refers to someone who is a cross between a Stoic and a Spartan, two types of almost legendary figures from ancient history. A Stotan is able to endure and accept great hardships without complaint and is fiercely loyal.

### Spokane, Washington

A city in southeastern Washington where most of the action of the novel takes place. The climate is cold in the winter with regular snow.

### Frost High School

The high school in Spokane where most of the main characters attend school. Of all the high schools in the city, Frost has the most black students. It is also well known for its strong athletic program.

### Havre and Billings, Montana

The location of two swim meets attended by the Frost High team on their long road trip to Montana. It is while in Havre that Jeff Hawkins first falls very ill.

### The Red Rooster

A dangerous biker bar in Spokane where Walker's brother hangs out and where Walker sometimes has to rescue his brother. The Red Rooster is also the location of Walker's showdown with his brother over his drug use.

### Seattle, Washington

The large western Washington city where the state swim championships are held.

### Savage House

A pizza restaurant that is a favorite among Frost High students. Walker and his friends meet at the restaurant often and sometimes clash with other students there.



## **Lion's Apartment**

A small, run down apartment where Lionel Serbousek lives. The apartment's only electricity is from an extension cord to the bar below it, which is used to run an electric heater. The four swimmers move into Lion's apartment together during Stotan week.

## **Elaine's House**

Elaine Ferral lives with her parents in a middle-class section of Spokane in a house that is surrounded by junk and clutter. Her father is a compulsive collector of junk, which crowds their yard and house. Walker goes to Elaine's house for Thanksgiving dinner.

## **Walker's house**

Walker lives with his parents in an affluent part of Spokane. After Nortie undergoes an especially brutal beating by his father, Nortie also goes to live at Walker's house.

## Setting

Stotan!—which begins on November 5, 1984 and ends on March 10, 1985— takes place mostly at Frost High School in Spokane, Washington, where Crutcher attended college and lives today. Athletics are very important at Frost, which the narrator, Walker Dupree, describes as a "jock school." In fact, according to Walker, the athletic council is more influential than the student council. The swimming program, however, is being phased out.

Spokane itself contains a variety of neighborhoods and people from markedly different backgrounds, each with his or her own set of problems. Walker finds his own upper-middle-class neighborhood sterile and isolationist, while Elaine's neighbors are like a family. At the time the novel takes place, a racist newspaper, the Aryan Press, is circulating around town, and several students, including Marty O'Brian, a baseball player, have begun to espouse its ideas. Towards the end of the novel, the swimming team leaves Spokane to make a road trip to Montana, a trip which causes Walker to become introspective.

## Social Sensitivity

In creating realistic, believable young adults, Crutcher also treats subjects which might be controversial. For example, the characters discuss sex, although they make it clear that abstinence is actually normal. They also battle racism; Nortie even has a black girlfriend. All of the Stotans are very opinionated, often self-righteous, and, as a result, are very heavy-handed in their reaction to the white supremacist newspaper, the Aryan Press. They do, after all, push Marty O'Brian's car into a river and use force to get him to stop delivering the paper. Similarly, they rescue Nortie from his abusive father by threatening to create a major disturbance. Even so, the novel does suggest that such tactics do not solve problems for good, especially as the Stotans try to deal with Jeff's illness.

While Crutcher occasionally climbs on a soapbox, using Walker as his mouthpiece, he also questions the very opinions he seems to espouse, suggesting that there may be alternate points of view.



# Literary Qualities

In *Stotan!* Crutcher begins with a seemingly typical formula plot involving a team that is sparked on to victory as the result of a teammate's illness.

Crutcher infuses this simple story with narrative complexity, a literate and readable style, and believable characters, making it worth reading. The central idea of becoming a Stotan is used to structure the novel and a number of seemingly unconnected episodes reveal the boys' gradual movement toward their ideal.

Much of the novel's effectiveness results from the introspective, sometimes cocky voice of the narrator, Walker Dupree. Walker's descriptions of Stotan Week, as well as the final championship, which contain vivid, specific details that clearly come from Crutcher's own experience as an athlete, help the reader to share the team's experiences. The novel is presented in the form of Walker Dupree's diary, which provides both immediacy and suspense, since Walker does not know how everything will turn out as he is telling the story.

Crutcher also includes several stories within Walker's narrative, mostly the personal experiences of other team members, to develop characters and reinforce his ideas. Along the way, Crutcher creates rounded, realistic young adults who counter the stereotypical image of the student athlete.

This is not to suggest that Crutcher's characters are always developed; both Marty O'Brian and Mr. Wheeler, two of their antagonists, are almost cartoonlike. Stories about teamwork, particularly in sports, are certainly not new.

However, Crutcher manages to make his tale seem both original and worth reading.



# Themes

## Loyalty

The four members of the Frost High School swim team are fiercely loyal to one another and this loyalty is a central theme of the book. Their connection to one another is based on a mutual respect they have for each other, which becomes evident through the descriptions of Walker Dupree, the captain of the team and narrator of the story. Their bond is strengthened through the shared ordeal of Stotan week, the central event of the novel.

This loyalty takes many forms. When one of the team members gets in a fight, the others band together to avenge him. During Stotan week, when Lion goes overboard and takes on something grueling like bearwalking through the snow the others follow. Finally, when Jeff becomes gravely ill the remaining three swimmers decide to cancel the rest of their season in solidarity even though they each have good chances of winning state events. In the end, they continue swimming in tribute to Jeff, whose loyalty takes the form of asking them to keep swimming. At the state championships, the boys risk being disqualified when they swim three legs of the four-leg relay race without Jeff as a symbolic gesture that shows that they think of themselves as a loyal unit.

## Racism

One of the central themes of "Stotan!" is the reaction the main character and his friends have to racist views expressed by some of their fellow high-school students. Early in the story, a newspaper published by a white supremacist group appears on campus, sparking a discussion at a meeting of the Athletic Council. One student named Marty O'Brian defends the publisher's right to print and distribute the racist papers but appears to join the sentiment of the other students that the papers are deplorable.

In the end it is revealed that O'Brian is responsible for distributing the papers and that he believes the white supremacist message they promote. The main characters threaten O'Brian over his racist views and stop him from distributing more of the papers.

Walker does not imagine that the threats have actually changed O'Brian's racist views, but he decides to follow the advice given to him by his coach, Max, that the best thing to do is ignore the taunts and provocative language used by people like O'Brian because responding to them only gives them legitimacy. It is not a natural reaction for the main character to ignore racism when he sees it and he struggles with what he should do. Walker's struggle poses the question to the reader of how to respond to racism and whether it is better to confront it or ignore it.



## Bending the Rules

One of the parallels drawn by the author is between life events and athletic competition. As the character Max explains to Walker, the two are different in that in athletics you can reasonably expect the better competitor to win and the rules of the game are fair and well-understood. Real life events do not unfold in such a predictable way, however. People who are intelligent, talented and good friends may be cut down by terminal illness at a young age, like Jeff Hawkins. Hateful bigots like Mr. Wheeler and Marty O'Brian may never be held accountable for their actions.

Partly in reaction to these inequalities in actual events, sometimes the characters in the novel bend the rules to allow for the actualities of the situation. For example, when Lion starts a fire on the sidewalk during school, his actions would normally be punished. Mrs. Stevens, however, is lenient because his actions were a statement against the racist newspapers that had been distributed on campus.

In a similar fashion Max bends the rules of the Athletic Code when he learns Nortie reacted to being beat up by his father by taking some drugs. Knowing the circumstances, and knowing that Nortie was repentant and not a regular drug user, Max gave him another chance.

A similar case of rule-bending caps off the novel when the three remaining swimmers break the swim meet rules and swim in the final relay event with only three men. Although they could have been disqualified, the officials bend the rules because of the symbolic significance of the act.

This "bending" is part of the lesson that Max hopes to impart on the swimmers during Stotan week. Part of being strong is knowing when to take a stand and when to give way.



## Themes/Characters

Stotan! is as an ensemble novel, one in which characters are more important than plot. Indeed, Crutcher himself suggests that he begins writing by first creating characters and only then worrying about the story. While Stotan! is narrated by Walker Dupree, the captain of the swim team, it is more about the team than individual people. Most of the novel centers on each team member's attempt to become a "Stotan," which is "a cross between a Stoic and a Spartan."

The novel is presented as a series of Walker's journal entries. As he describes himself, Walker is both a budding journalist and a storyteller. It is Walker who grows the most during the novel, as he begins to recognize the uncertainty of life and realize that many of his questions do not have answers. His friend, Lionel "Lion" Serbousek, has already proved he is a Stotan.

He has come to grips with the death of his parents and now lives alone. Even so, he is a sensitive artist, as well as a strong athlete. As with the other members of the swim team, Nortie Wheeler goes against the stereotypical image of an athlete. He is quiet, is good with children, and has been physically abused by his father for years. Teammate Jeffrey Hawkins enjoys current affairs and often dominates conversations. Walker describes him as him as a "destroyer" when it comes to swimming. It is Jeff who was expelled from school for beating up a rival for his girlfriend and who has lied about his age and joined the Marine Reserves.

Jeff is also the one who develops an unnamed blood disease and begins deteriorating physically, providing his teammates with an added reason to win the State Championship.

Two other characters, Elaine Ferral and Max Il Song, become honorary members of the team, helping the four boys with their struggles. Elaine is an expert swimmer who has lost interest in athletics, replacing them with more "cosmic" pursuits. Walker, who is attracted to her, finds it difficult to maintain the same relationship they have always had. Max, the team's Korean coach, issues the challenge to the team to become Stotans, offering them a week of almost torturous training and exercise during Christmas vacation.

The main purpose of Stotan Week, however, is not merely to prepare the team for subsequent meets. According to Max, it is to help the Stotans "to see what is what and go with that."

The novel also contains several fairly flat characters who primarily serve to complicate the lives of the team members. These include Long John Dupree, Walker's much older brother who gives Lion drugs; Marty O'Brian, a baseball player who helps distribute the Aryan Press; Mr. Wheeler, Lion's abusive father; Devnee, the girlfriend that Walker cannot quite leave; and Milika, Lion's black girlfriend.



Many of the novel's themes grow out of the week that Walker, Lion, Nortie, and Jeff spend training with Max II Song. During this period, the four boys open up to one another in evening storytelling sessions, developing a closeknit relationship which helps them overcome subsequent obstacles. They also learn to submit to reality; as Max tells them at the end of the week, they have begun to see things as they really are. They have started on their path to become real Stotans, a necessary step if they are to deal with their various problems. The four boys' subsequent struggles with abuse, racism, and family and romantic problems are shaped by the qualities they have begun to foster during Stotan Week.

At the end of the novel, Walker articulates another of the novel's important themes when he explains that he now has more questions than answers, that growing up does not provide one with pat solutions. Asking why things happen is a waste of time; it is important to accept the world as one finds it.



# Style

## Point of View

Walker Dupree, a teenager and high-school athlete is the narrator of "Stotan!" The story is recounted completely from his point of view. Walker is a young man at a time when he is making choices about his life as an independent adult. He is an independent person and his parents, who are a good deal older than the parents of his friends, have not been very involved in his life. As he looks ahead to his own future, he also looks to the example of his brother, John, who is 15 years older than him. John is a drug user and dealer who has done little with his life and Walker wants to avoid ending up like him. Nevertheless, he admits he has been influenced by his brother, if only in his appreciation for the music of an earlier generation.

The narration unfolds as if it is a series of dated diary entries written by Walker. He describes the actions of the other people sometimes adding his own personal observations about their character or motivation. Since the description is from his own personal point of view, however, he does not have insight into the personal thoughts of the other characters unless they express themselves to him. He is an observant character, however, and his descriptions are vivid and entertaining.

## Setting

"Stotan!" takes place in the town of Spokane in eastern Washington state in 1984 and 1985. Most of the characters, including the narrator, are students at Frost High School and are associated with athletics. They spend much of their time training at the school's pool, at each others' homes, and eating together at local restaurants. The swim team sometimes travels to meets, and some portions of the book take place in Seattle, Washington and Billings, Montana.

While the main character, Walker, lives in a fairly affluent neighborhood of Spokane, other characters live in less-wealthy conditions. One character lives in a bleak apartment with no electricity or built-in heat above a bar. Walker's brother, John, frequents another bar that is known for its frequent violent fights and drug use. The main character moves within all these settings, from the comfortable home of his parents to the cramped, cold and dirty apartment of his teammate, Lionel. Spokane receives cold weather and snow during the winter, which is when the story takes place. While many of the locations in the novel are real places, the author also mixes in fictional settings that may be based on actual places.

The time setting is the early 1980s before cell phones and internet access were widely available. The characters interact in person and read magazines and newspapers to stay informed. It is a time when people who were politically active in the 1970s, such as Walker's brother, are now young adults with some of them struggling with continued



drug use. Eastern Washington and Northern Idaho are also the location of some white supremacist groups that gained national prominence during this period and the presence of these groups is a thread in the story.

## Language and Meaning

"Stotan!" is written in a casual style set in the present day from the first-person perspective as if the narrator is recording events in a diary. The language used is appropriate for main character, who is an 18-year-old high-school student named Walker who is the captain of his swim team. The narrator describes the events of the novel in an informal way, focusing on the dialog and interactions of the other characters. Most of the characters are also high-school students, and they speak to one another in an informal fashion, using slang and sometimes calling one another derogatory names in an affectionate manner. While the main characters are teenaged boys who might be expected to use vulgar language at times, the author largely avoids the use of these kinds of words.

There are some racially-charged slang words the author uses intentionally in relation to a theme of the novel that addresses the white supremacy movement and the racist attitudes of some of the characters. These words are used sparingly, and their use is immediately addressed by the characters who hear them.

The present-tense style of writing creates a vitality to the writing, as if the reader is experiencing the events as they happen, or as if the narrator is relating them directly to the reader immediately afterwards.

## Structure

"Stotan!" is presented as if it is a series of journal entries made by the main character. It is made up of several sections that are dated or headed with reference to the current day, such as "December 16," and "Monday Evening." The first entry is dated November 5, 1984 and the final entry dated March 10, 1985. It is written in the present tense, with the narrator explaining things as if they are happening at that moment or happened in the recent future, with occasional stories from farther in the past that provide background information for current action.

The story is centered around two significant events. The first is the "Stotan Week" of intense training the swim team endures and which brings them closer together as a team and as friends. This takes up the first portion of the novel. The middle portion of the story describes these friendships and develops some of the main themes. The second major event takes place in the third part of the story. It is the development of a terminal blood disease by one of the swimmers in the third part of the novel, which challenges the young swimmers to confront their own mortality.

The novel ends with some of the major questions unresolved, leaving readers to draw their own conclusions.



## Quotes

"We saw the notice about Stotan Week on the bulletin board just off the deep end of the pool after our early-morning workout today. It was already curling at the edges from the high humidity and chlorine content of the air, a lot the way my skin feels after a good three-hour workout" (Chapter 1, p. 1).

"Nortie volunteered for Stotan Wee today. The little screwball hoped Max would tell him more about it if he just walked in and signed up, but Max merely said okay and wrote his name down" (Chapter 2, p. 15).

"You have to hurt a little for Nortie. He's a classic case of what can happen to a guy who's been beat up all his life. Eighteen years old and his old man still punches him around" (Chapter 3, p. 29).

"And how about old Long John? Somehow he gets me thinking that because our parents don't have time for him anymore - or at least Dad doesn't - that responsibility has fallen to me." Chapter 4, p. 48

"Boy one of these days I'd like to get a shot at O'Brian. I know he can catch a baseball coming down the pipe eighty miles an hour; I wonder if he can catch my foot before it gets to his ear at about that speed" (Chapter 5, p. 53).

"Somewhere in the couple of repeats I noticed things going soft at the edges; and we were a machine. Max put the bullhorn down and just called the starts. He didn't call out times or shout encouragement, or in any way risk jolting us out of the spell" (Chapter 6, p. 83).

"We flew through most of the workout today on the Norton Wheeler Express. Nortie was feeling so good about unloading the weight of his brother that he didn't care how badly Max hurt him" (Chapter 7, p. 106).

I got home and called Devnee to be sure she knew what time I was picking her up and she sounded real excited and warm and I was glad I hadn't gone ahead and ended things. Besides, she makes me look like such a star, she's so pretty" (Chapter 8, p. 132).

"It's strange. As wild as we get sometimes, we've all tried hard not to break the Athletic Code. Sure, we have a few beers now and then, and I suppose a couple of us have tried grass, but never in season, and never to excess" (Chapter 9, p. 153).

"Nortie has also decided on a new and different life's work, now that he's convinced he's too dangerous a dude for the teaching profession. Nortie's now going to be a psychologist; and from what I've seen so far, someone should warn serious members of that profession that he's coming" (Chapter 10, p. 170).





"Boy, the last couple of weeks have been a horror show. Something's really wrong with Jeff. He won't tell us what it is and he asked his parents not to discuss it with anyone, but it's serious" (Chapter 12, p. 201).

"But I guess I have learned a few things. I've learned that asking 'why' is more often than not a waste of time; that it's much more important to know what is so" (Chapter 15, p. 260).



## Topics for Discussion

Several of the main themes of the story are left unresolved by the end. Why does the author do this?

Some characters in the novel suggest the best response to racism is to ignore it. Why do they think so? Are they correct?

What are the factors keeping Walker from telling his girlfriend how he truly feels? Do you think he broke up with her in the end? Is it important to the story whether he does or not?

What are some of the ways the author suggests that life parallels athletic competition. How are they different?

Discuss the theme of loyalty and trust among the main characters. How do they demonstrate their loyalty and trust?

What role does violence play in the novel. Is it ever necessary?

What does it mean to be a "Stotan?"



## Essay Topics

1. Besides their participation in athletics, how do Walker, Jeff, Lion, Nortie, and Max prove that they are Stotans?
2. Since it is clear that Jeff Hawkins is dying, why does Crutcher end the novel while Jeff is still alive?
3. The novel, which includes an interracial romance and depicts a white supremacist group, has a number of scenes in which the characters discuss racism. What does the novel suggest about the effects of racism and its origins?
4. What is Elaine's relationship to the four swimmers? Why will Walker never be able to become romantically involved with her?
5. What do Walker and Nortie learn from the latter's experiments with the rats and the Skinner Box (Chapter 10)?  
  
Does the experiment have any relevance for the Stotans?
6. Walker claims that Nortie "keeps everything in and lets it eat out his insides" (Chapter 6). How do you account for this behavior and does Nortie ever overcome it?
7. What do Walker, Jeff, Lion, and Nortie learn about themselves and each other as a result of Stotan Week?
8. Compare the parents of Walker, Nortie, and Elaine. To what extent do these parents seem to have helped shape the personalities of their children?
9. What is the real significance of the final swim meet for the Stotans?
10. Since the Stotans know they cannot win a meet, only individual events, because their team is so small, why do they keep swimming?
11. How important is it that Walker is the novel's narrator? What reasons might Crutcher have for using him instead of Jeff, Lion, or Nortie?
12. Early in the novel, how does Crutcher foreshadow the ending? For example, what details suggest that Jeff Hawkins may become ill?

## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Watch a sports film centering on the efforts of a team to succeed against great odds, such as *Breaking Away*, *Hoosiers*, or *The Bad News Bears*. Discuss the extent to which *Stotan!* shares similar characters and themes and how it differs.
2. In Chapter 6, Nortie, Jeff, and Lion each share a story from their past. Discuss what these stories reveal about each teller and their relevance to the novel as a whole.
3. Examine the novel's attitudes toward death and the various ways the main characters react to it.
4. In Chapter 11, Max tells Walker, "But no matter how decent you are, no matter how intensely you work toward the light, nothing changes the past.

This is a world where you pay for everything you do." Discuss this statement as it applies to the novel's main characters.

5. Read Crutcher's *Running Loose*, noting its similarities to *Stotan!*—both in plot and character. Which is the better book and why?
6. Discuss this novel's attitude towards a social issue, such as child and spouse abuse, racism, or terminal illness, and how this attitude is developed throughout the novel.

## Further Study

Crutcher, Chris. "Chris Crutcher." In *Speaking for Ourselves: Autobiographical Sketches by Notable Authors of Books for Young Adults*. Edited by Don Gallo. Urbana: NCTE: 59-60. An autobiographical discussion of Crutcher's own adolescence and writing career.

Flack, Jerry. Review. *School Library Journal* 32 (1986): 100. A positive review which argues that the novel teaches readers about responsibility, courage, and heroism.

McDonnell, Christine. "New Voices, New Visions: Chris Crutcher." *Horn Book* 64 (1988): 332-337. A biographical summary of Crutcher's life and an analysis of the themes of his first three novels, including *Stotan!*

Nelms, Ben, and Beth Nelms. Review.

*English Journal* (April 1987): 83. A summary review highlighting the novel's themes of endurance and self-discipline.

Roback, Diane. Review. *Publishers Weekly* (April 25, 1986): 229. A short review which mostly summarizes the novel. It points out the novel's contention that one cannot understand everything that happens in life.

Silvey, Anita. Review. *Horn Book* 62 (1986): 596. A brief review which stresses the excellent characterizations in the novel and which likens it to Bruce Brooks's *The Moves Make the Man* and John Tunis's sports novels.

## Related Titles

Although, with the exception of *Athletic Shorts*, Crutcher has used new characters and settings in each of his young adult books, all of them are closely related, both in theme and content. Like *Stotan!* Crutcher's other works often present brash, yet sensitive and introspective young athletes who are forced to confront tragic events. In Crutcher's books, athletics are often used as a sort of therapy to help young adults confront extraordinary problems. Like *Stotan!* Crutcher's first novel, *Running Loose*, also involves a boy who confronts the death of a friend, in this case his girlfriend. Willie Weaver of *The Crazy Horse Electric Game*, a former high school baseball star, faces the loss of his athletic abilities and is forced to question why he has been singled out to become the victim of an accident. Dillon Hemingway, an aspiring triathlete, tries to cope with his brother's suicide and help basketball player, Jennifer Lawson, overcome her abusive childhood in *Chinese Handcuffs*.

Abuse is also a subject of Crutcher's recent novel for adults, *The Deep End* (1992), a suspense thriller. In "Goin' Fishin'," one of six stories in *Athletic Shorts*, Crutcher returns to ground broken in *Stotan!*—providing the reader with Lionel Serbousek's narrative of his early attempts to cope with the deaths of his family.

*Stotan!* also shares similarities with other popular sports novels and movies, such as *Hoops*, *Breaking Away*, *Takedown*, *The Bad News Bears*, and *Hoosiers*, many of which also include a climactic meet or game in which the team is inspired to win because of tragic or serious events. Like *Stotan!* many of these stories are ensemble pieces, including several plot lines, each surrounding a different athlete. However, *Stotan!*

manages to go beyond mere formula due to the strength of its characterizations.



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