

To Take a Dare Short Guide

To Take a Dare by Paul Zindel

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Overview

The development of Chrissie Perretti is well worth following. She transforms from sweet innocent Chrissie, to Chrissie the Punk Queen, to Chrysta the runaway. Her problems with bizarre parents, adventures on the road, and final relationships in Excelsior Springs, Arkansas, are described with detail and vigor. It is not all fun and adventure as Chrysta faces separation from her one true friend, copes with being in love, deals with the separation from her parents, and learns that she can never have children due to an early case of gonorrhea. In keeping with the troublesome themes of the book, its ending is not that of a fairy tale, but nonetheless is worth the long trip from Benton, Illinois, to Excelsior Springs where Chrysta finally finds her home.

The best way to establish the tone and attitude of this book is to supply a quick summary of the first few chapters: At twelve and one half years, Christine Perretti lives a miserable life with her hugely overweight mother and obsessively religious father in Benton, Illinois. She is the only girl with a 36 C bra in middle school, and her maturity is a fact her parents tend to ignore; her mother makes a rather bewildered attempt to explain the facts of life to Chrissie, her "little girl." Chrissie describes the day she became a teen-ager: "On my thirteenth birthday my father called me a slut once too often, my dog was hit by a car, and I lost my virginity—what was left of it."

Most communication with her parents ends, other than her father's constant accusations.

Sexually very active, but caring for none of the boys with whom she has sex, Chrissie develops gonorrhea. She lies about her age during a physical examination and gets prescription medication to treat the venereal disease, but her father discovers the pills and takes them away. He doles them out one at a time so Chrissie must come to him and listen to his daily abuse in order to receive her treatment.

After three days, she can stand it no longer, and she runs away, without completing her antibiotic treatments.

She remains on the road, drifting from town to town, until she is sixteen, when she discovers Excelsior Springs, Arkansas, and the chance to have a better existence. As part of her search for a new identity, she changes her name to Chrysta, and begins a new life.

A staunch representative of the "realistic" school of literature, this novel reveals the possibilities for ugliness in life. The problems its heroine faces comprise a list which would discourage the most optimistic of people. Yet the book's message is one of optimism and possibility in the face of isolation and defeat. Chrysta's hardships are not stressed as much as her spirit and determination to find the peace constantly eluding her. She reminds herself that she is not a "bad" person, blaming most of her problems on her parents. This attitude motivates her through the worst situations as she manages to retain some trust for fellow human beings.



Although most readers cannot identify with the personal situations in which Chrysta finds herself, they will likely feel familiar with her reactions and attitudes. There are no "easy outs" to this book which has its share of losers as well as winners. Chrysta's failure to reform the incorrigible twelve-year-old-boy, Dare, darkens the novel's conclusion. Even though definitely depressing at times, *To Take a Dare* encourages its readers to take control of their lives and overcome less than positive pasts.



About the Author

Crescent Dragonwagon: Yes, her name is real. First married to Crispin Dragonwagon in 1970, the author retained this pen name following their divorce. A prolific author, Dragonwagon produces adult fiction and nonfiction as well as children's works.

Born November 25, 1952, in New York City with two authors for parents, she grew up in a household where writing *To Take a Dare* was a normal part of life. Her mother, Charlotte Zolotow, has authored many children's books. Dragonwagon left school at age sixteen but an intense self-designed reading program helped her educate herself in a manner like that of her heroine, Chrysta, in *To Take a Dare*. The book reflects some of the author's own experiences in the "hippie" lifestyle of the 1970s. She describes her collaboration with author Paul Zindel in most complimentary terms. Although the majority of the writing is her own, Dragonwagon credits Zindel with helping motivate her to continue the project, even when she became discouraged. *To Take a Dare* deals with adult themes and language, and it is one of the works she describes as borderline adult/young adult books.

Presently married to Ned Shank, Dragonwagon divides her time between their bed-and-breakfast establishment in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, and Atlanta, where her husband is employed. She has combined her talent as a writer with that as a cook, publishing her own cookbooks. Her message to young writers is, to borrow a popular phrase from today: Just do it.

Dragonwagon continues to write and believes the desire to create is more important than any natural talent. Her everyday experiences are often processed into her stories—it is a method which has proved extremely successful for her.

Paul Zindel is well known not only for his children's stories but for the plays he has written. He won the Pulitzer Prize among other awards for a drama with the trademark Zindel unusual title: *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* (first produced in 1964, although the award came much later). *To Take a Dare* is not the only work in which he has shared authorship. He wrote a book with his wife, Bonnie Zindel, titled *A Star for the Latecomer*.

Zindel was born in New York, and abandoned by his father at an early age. Raised in poverty and a broken home, he feels close to people of similar backgrounds, including minority groups. His family raised dogs to help pay the bills. A bout with tuberculosis interrupted his high school career and he entered a New York sanatorium for a year and a half. Able to graduate from high school later, he attended Wagner College in New York, where he later also received a master's degree in education.

His jobs include technical writer and high school chemistry teacher, as well as creative writer. His successful play caught the attention of a publishing house which asked him to write books for young people. Many of his books for teen-agers have the same tone



as J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), which remains very popular. His experience as a teacher helps him find his plots and characters.

Zindel's characters are always intelligent with a good sense of humor, but generally are miserable due to a collection of parents who represent everything "bad," from drugs and drunkenness to near idiocy. Consequently, even when their intentions are good, the young people generally fall into trouble. His plots have entertained young readers for years who seem to respond well to his humor as well as his portrayal of "rotten" parents.

Setting

Chrysta's story begins in Benton, Illinois, where she is an unusual twelve year old. Her well developed body causes problems at school and home, and she always associates anger and distrust with Benton. She leaves Illinois to hitchhike around the West as a runaway, encountering various adventures in New Mexico and California, and meeting her first best friend. Finally ending up in Arkansas by mistake when her means of transportation breaks down, Chrysta feels a certain aura about the town, "vibes" that tell her Excelsior Springs is a good place to live. With the many "artsy" young people around, the tourist center seems warm and inviting, providing not only employment, but friendship. Most of the novel's action takes place here as Chrysta tries to find what she has never experienced before—a true home.



Social Sensitivity

The very qualities which probably attract young readers to this book may cause an instructor or parent to pause before recommending it. The main character's involvement with indiscriminate sex at the age of thirteen, her contracting of gonorrhea, her father's attitude toward her, drug and alcohol usage, abundant profanity among the young people, communal nude bathing, and an attempted rape are described and openly discussed. The twelve-year old Dare reads *Hustler* and begs alcohol and cigarettes from the locals of Excelsior Springs. Chrysta's first meeting with Lissa is over the need for a tampon, and the two girls discuss the men they have slept with, in a very general way. As runaways, they are constantly threatened by truly dangerous situations. Lissa describes an incident in which some men played Russian roulette with a gun at her head, and Chrysta is narrowly rescued from Howie's intended rape. The fact that they do escape harm may be satisfying to the reader, but is very unrealistic.

That a young woman on the road for three years on her own is never harmed is explained away by Chrysta's statement about her "luck": "And I never got ripped off, I never got raped, I never got busted as a runaway, I never got down to my last dollar . . .

and I was never hungry for more than a day or two." At one point, Chrysta thinks to herself, "I mean I was a drop out and I'd done O.K."

Chrysta's ability to find work to support herself instead of turning to the streets is easily explained by her looking much older than she already is. A runaway at the early age of thirteen, she manages to not only support herself, but to save money for travel. She often depends upon men for her existence, sometimes trading sex for a place to stay. The unreality of her adventuresome survival is something most adults will question, along with her ability to educate herself through reading books. Although there is not a completely happy ending to the novel, this uneducated, untrained (other than on-the-job) sixteen year old ends up as assistant manager of a resort kitchen, enrolled in a management program paid for by her wealthy boss, engaged to a psychology college student, completely free of drug or alcohol addiction, and ready to finally enjoy the good life.

In defense of the authors, they do attempt to balance this situation.

Chrysta's improperly treated gonorrhea eventually puts her in the hospital where a partial hysterectomy leaves her sterile, cheating her from having the children she so badly desires. Her relationship with Luke is not completely smooth—they both must face up to the problems her past will bring them. Her relationship with Dare illustrates the fact that not all such stories have happy endings. And she does partially reconcile with her parents at the book's end.

Some readers may find it offensive that the only character with a pronounced Southern dialect is Howie, the kitchen manager with a criminal mentality who plans to rape Chrysta. This is particularly notable when the action takes place in an Arkansas community, where many of the people should have Southern accents.

The book is recommended by the publishers for ages twelve and above.

Although Dragonwagon's and Zindel's award-winning (American Library Association Notable book) inspirational story may merit its frank presentation, adults should take note of this and consider the individual student before encouraging its reading.

Literary Qualities

The first-person narration of Chrysta adds to the novel's attractiveness. Her changing attitudes are easy to follow, and her interpretation of events is vital to understanding her development as a person. This story is written on the level where it takes place—that of the stark reality of the street. Profanity, drug usage, nudity, promiscuity, and the threat of rape are openly presented.

Because Dragonwagon has been involved in some of these situations in her past, the descriptions and narration have a very authentic quality.



Themes and Characters

A variety of characters influence Chrysta Perretti as she fights for her own identity. She desires a happy life but her obese mother, overly religious and restrictive father, and her own body all seem intent upon betraying her. Her overly developed figure leads to trouble. Unloved at home, Chrissie becomes involved in sex for attention at school and turns to drugs and alcohol to support her low self-esteem. Her image as "punk queen," complete with overdone makeup and high heel shoes, brings her notice, but little satisfaction.

Independent and bright, she knows things are not right in her life, and desires freedom from her parents' oppression.

When Chrissie contracts a venereal disease, her father's reaction finally spurs her into action, and on her thirteenth birthday, she runs away. Adopting a new identity with a new name, Chrysta, she continues her avid reading habit and exists the best she can, her mature looks and independent nature helping her find jobs and places to stay. As she tells her story, she realizes she has never experienced true love, and this leaves a big hole in her life.

Meeting Lissa, her first true friend, helps her understand about caring for others, but it is Luke, the Arkansas musician, who really touches a chord within Chrysta.

Her optimistic attitude never completely diminishes, and Chrysta remains true to her "quest" for peace and love. Her relationships in Excelsior Springs are all very important, especially with the young Dare with whom she closely identifies. Even when circumstances seem the worst and she finds she can have no children due to her early promiscuity, Chrysta finds the strength from herself and those around her to persevere. More than anything else, she is a survivor, and she refuses to give up on herself.

Chrysta's best friend, Lissa, provides the support Chrysta has never had. A tiny, foul-mouthed runaway herself, Lissa is wise to the ways of the road and men. The two girls travel toward New Orleans together, and Chrysta discovers, with Lissa's support, that she does not have to sleep with men.

Unwillingly, Lissa leaves Chrysta behind in Excelsior Springs, but she later returns from New Orleans during Chrysta's illness. Their friendship is for a lifetime, and, ever practical, Lissa helps Chrysta in her search for happiness. She encourages her to accept the caring Excelsior Springs bunch: Nettie, Tess, Hoot, Susan, Cleota, and Joanie.

Joanie, owner of the Yeller House where Chrysta lives in Excelsior Springs, is supportive and trustworthy.



Although she can never take Lissa's place, Chrysta finds her a valuable friend. It is Joanie who first suggests that Chrysta search for employment at the General's Palace Hotel.

Chrysta's first experience with the hotel crew is memorable. Her very unfavorable first impression of Luke and his crazy Aunt Nettie soon changes as she comes to know the kitchen gang.

Luke is an orphan, attends the nearby university, and has worked in the kitchen for years. Eventually, he and Chrysta must confess their feelings for one another, first expressed through some of the music Luke writes. But before that happens, there is kitchen business to tend to.

If truth be told, Luke actually manages the hotel kitchen, although that job officially belongs to the villainous Howie. Manipulative and dishonest, Howie almost ruins Chrysta's stint as an employee of the hotel. With the help of the kitchen crew, Hugh Dewling, the hotel owner and Howie's uncle, Chrysta finally learns the truth about Howie.

Wealthy, cigar-smoking Hugh places his trust in her, and for the first time she feels she may have a bright future.

Her fortunes seem to change and her natural loving nature causes her to want to care for Dare.

Although his parents are still alive, Dare is "orphaned" by the drug culture. His no-good junkie father phones every now and then, but basically farms Dare out to anyone who will take him. At sixteen, Chrysta sees herself in the rebellious, stubborn twelve-year-old boy. Her attempts to help Dare are thwarted when his violent side eventually emerges. Dare is an example of someone who cannot see beyond his troubles to envision a new life or identity, as Chrysta can.

Accompanying the theme of identity in this novel is that of hope and trust.

Even after years of distrust and disappointment, Chrysta hangs on to the little self-esteem she is allowed, eventually nourishing it into a promising future. Although filled with discouraging events, the novel ultimately is a story of hope and accomplishment in the face of failure, embodied by Chrysta and Luke.



Topics for Discussion

1. Throughout the book, Chrysta chooses several methods to confront her problems. Name a few and discuss their success or failure.

2. Which of the various characters in the book have the greatest influence on Chrysta and why?

3. What do the various settings in this book add to its action?

4. Do you feel Chrysta has reached the end of her road at the story's close?

Why or why not?

5. Is Chrysta a likable character? Discuss her personality traits as positive or negative.

6. On page 121, Chrysta and Luke discuss "playing parts." Mention the different parts that several of the characters in the book play.

7. The book could have ended with Chapter 21. Lissa even remarks at the beginning of Chapter 22, "Chrysta lived happily ever after." Why did the book not end at this point?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Discuss the appropriateness of the book's title, its double meaning, and apply it to several different events in the story.
2. An initiation story is one in which a certain event, or series of events, change a young person forever. Think of Chrysta in this way, discussing both her exterior and interior changes.

Which one event do you think affected her the most?

3. Compare and contrast the following characters from this book: Chrysta and Dare, Donny Figueroa and Luke, Lissa and Joanie.
4. Is the book's ending a good one in your opinion? Why or why not? Note special passages which may have predicted such a conclusion.
5. Throughout the book, various songs and works of literature are mentioned, and the arts are a very important part of life in Excelsior Springs. In what way does this provide a type of framework for the story?
6. Compare Luke's life story to Chrysta's. Is it realistic that they would end up together?



For Further Reference

Chevalier, Tracy, ed. *Twentieth-Century Children's Writers*. Chicago: St. James Press, 1989. A short biography of Zindel, mentioning his awards and his publisher's address. Some of his publications are reviewed.

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something a About the Author*. Vol. 16. Detroit: Gale Research, 1979. An in-depth article describes Paul Zindel's life and attitudes toward work.

———. *Something About the Author*. Vol.

41. Detroit: Gale Research, 1985.

Dragonwagon's background, work, and philosophy are illuminated in an interesting illustrated presentation.

The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984. A brief biography of Zindel is accompanied by comments concerning his children's novels.

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