



# Teaching the Selected Works of Chris Crutcher

Patricia M. Hauschildt

*Foreword by Chris Crutcher*

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## FOREWORD

It seems a bit self-serving to write a foreword to a book about teaching my writing in schools, but what the hell. I'm amazed sometimes that my work gets as much scrutiny as it does regarding its appropriateness for middle and high schools. All my stories have been gathered from and inspired by real people—people the ages of my protagonists. I used to sit in my therapist's office opposite a kid telling me some of the most horrendous stories I could imagine, and I'd think, "This kid is in a school somewhere in my town. No way do his teachers know what he's going through. They must be astonished at his behavior when they have no way of knowing where it comes from; and here I sit, astonished at his restraint, given what I know." I would also wonder if the other students in classes with my clients would treat them better if they had a better sense of their histories. The world of child mistreatment is a world of secrets. If we can bring those secrets into the light without shining it directly on them, we've done everyone a favor.

But then I realized something else. There are a lot more kids in those classrooms who feel invisible or picked on or mistreated because of their own histories. No one escapes adolescence unscarred. A teacher looks out over a middle or high school classroom and he or she is staring at one in three girls who have been sexually mistreated, one in six or seven boys. There are kids locked in power struggles they can't win or even understand. There are kids aching for empowerment—empowerment that would allow them to feel and act like completely different people.

There are stories to match up with each and every one of those kids. Not Chris Crutcher stories necessarily, but Walter Dean Myers stories, and Maya

Angelou stories, and Judy Blume stories, and Lois Lowry stories and Harper Lee stories—well *one* Harper Lee story, but what a story it is—and Brent Hartinger stories and Alex Sanchez stories, and Jackie Woodson and I could go on and on . . . in fact it appears that I did. But I didn't scratch the surface. What censors don't seem to care, or know, about is the value of the connections teachers can make with kids through stories, and they don't seem to pay much attention to the fact that teachers are the *experts* when it comes to matching kids up with stories. English and language arts classes are, or can be, one of our last bastions of defense against the corrosive effects of No Child Left Behind. They are the places where creativity and imagination can still flower.

Censors often say that in difficult times they want kids to keep their innocence as long as possible, and books like mine and many other authors' talk about issues that destroy that innocence. But they never seem to know at what point innocence turns to ignorance. A five-year-old who believes in Santa is cute. A fourteen-year-old who believes in Santa is likely to get a bloody nose.

I cannot think of the issue that is not better talked about than kept secret. What you can read in this book, among other things, is how tough stories can be taught with respect to kids' sensibilities and their parents' sensibilities. I really like what these teachers are doing.

—CHRIS CRUTCHER



## I N T R O D U C T I O N

When I hear Chris Crutcher being introduced to an audience, the speaker often says, “How does one introduce Crutcher?” and the audience chuckles with understanding. When I read an article about him, the writer often says something like, “What can one say in a short space?” Those who have read, heard about, or come to hear Crutcher speak already know that he is a popular author with teens and teachers as well as a persistent advocate for teens’ right to read, for honest writing, and against censorship. Plus, he excels at storytelling, creating stories that make us wince, laugh, and think.

He appreciates good teachers who make every effort to promote reading. He supports teachers who practice in ways that get students imagining, through reading, what life could be beyond their current boundaries or perceived limitations. He recognizes that censors lurk within and outside of our schools and that a teacher must be prepared for such an occurrence. But, he tells us, “There is a way to do it. You say: I’m a teacher. I have been prepared to do this. My job is to put the right book into the hands of the right kid. This is America! Kids are under eighteen and kids have no rights. But, by God, teachers do” (Crutcher, speaking at the ALAN Workshop, New York City, November 19, 2007).



### A Biographical Capsule

Ohio born in 1946 but raised in rural Idaho, Crutcher describes himself as a willful child and a “bawlbaby” (19), his willfulness developing into a teenaged tem-

per (*King of the Mild Frontier*). He was not a good student by choice and rarely read more than cereal boxes and two favorite magazines, but he could disrupt a Sunday School class with probing questions that sought logic over a blind-faith acceptance of Bible stories. Why was he a reluctant reader as a teen? Crutcher tells a Teenreads.com interviewer (2000) that it was “because people kept giving me the wrong stories to read. There are times when I don’t know what’s worse—being Silas Marner, or reading about him.”

He once crafted a faked book report about a nonexistent book using his brother’s newly discovered A-graded book reports as a model, with his goal to get a C. Much to his chagrin, he received an A. He participated in school sports because he attended a small school in a small community that expected it. While growing up, he called his parents by their first names, as Louie does in *Running Loose*.

After college (so he did finally begin reading), Crutcher taught elementary school and then at an alternative high school in Oakland, California, for about ten years. Moving back to the Northwest, he began his current career as a writer and as a child abuse and family therapist. With his reputation as an author and speaker, he is now frequently found about anywhere in the United States—in schools, libraries, or public meeting places—sharing his life and thoughts with those in attendance.



## The Works of Crutcher

Since 1983, Crutcher has written ten young adult books that have endeared him to readers: *Running Loose* (1983), *Stotan!* (1986), *Crazy Horse Electric Game* (1987), *Chinese Handcuffs* (1989), *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* (1993), *Ironman* (1995), *Whale Talk* (2001), *King of the Mild Frontier: An Ill-Advised Autobiography* (2003), *The Sledding Hill* (2005), and his most recent *Deadline* (2007). In 1991, he wrote an adult novel, *The Deep End*, which was a Literary Guild selection, a riveting mystery about children, troubled and abusive parents, and a family therapist. [The dates used for Crutcher’s work in this section indicate original publication dates and vary from those cited elsewhere in this book.]

*Athletic Shorts* (1991) adds a short story collection to the list. He also has short stories in six anthologies, with a seventh anthology just out in 2008 (see

Bibliography at the end of this book). He has an autobiographical entry in *Author's Insights: Turning Teenagers into Readers and Writers*, edited by Don Gallo, and another in *Great Failures of the Extremely Successful* by Steve Young. For six years, Crutcher was a special column editor for *Voices from the Middle*, the National Council of Teachers of English journal for middle school teachers. He has ventured into the movie world with *Angus*, but the movie reworks the original short story "A Brief Moment in the Life of Angus Bethune" (1995). According to Crutcher, a second movie of one of his novels may actually happen.

With the exception of just-published *Deadline*, all of his young adult novels and the short story collection *Athletic Shorts* have won multiple awards, award nominations, and honors. Along with numerous awards for his writing, Crutcher is the winner of three lifetime achievement awards: the Margaret A. Edwards Award for Outstanding Literature for Young Adults, the ALAN (Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English) Award for Significant Contribution to Adolescent Literature, and the NCTE/SLATE National Intellectual Freedom Award. He was the first individual to receive the Intellectual Freedom Award. A complete list of awards is available on his delightful homepage website ([www.chriscrutcher.com](http://www.chriscrutcher.com)), which is packed with information and pictures that may amaze, surprise, or entertain most who spend time there. A Google search will reveal many additional websites, some with interviews (e.g., [www.teenreads.com](http://www.teenreads.com)), others with biographical information, reader comments, and blogs.

Three biographies about Crutcher have been written for young adults. One is in digital article format, available through librarians for patrons in remote locations needing access (Gale Reference Team 2007). The other two are books, one by Michael Sommers (2005) and one by Terry Davis (1997), each part of an author biography series. Crutcher has published his autobiographical stories in *King of the Mild Frontier* (2003).

Crutcher has also written forewords and afterwords in several books about teens and young adult literature (see Bibliography). A journal reviewer for VOYA (*Voice of Youth Advocates*) claims that Crutcher's foreword for *Hit List for Young Adults 2: Frequently Challenged Books* (Lesesne and Chance 2002) is worth the price of the book, calling it "a thought-provoking and passionate commentary" ([www.barnesandnoble.com](http://www.barnesandnoble.com)).



## Interviews with Crutcher

Several interviews offer excellent information about Crutcher's writing and his views on reading, teaching, today's teen experiences, and censorship. Teenreads.com provides three different interviews done between 2000 and 2005 (Alessio 2005; Halls 2001; Teenreads.com 2000). Another interview with teacher Debbie Erenberger (2001) focuses on Crutcher's writing and his works as literature in the classroom. Pam Cole (2005) talks with Crutcher about *The Sledding Hill* and censorship. Discussing *Deadline*, Colleen Ruggieri (2007) also asks him questions that cover a broad range and elicit rich answers. All are effective resources for teachers to use as discussion starters with students prior to or during a reading of a Crutcher work. By using direct quotes from Crutcher, one could create a simulated meet-the-author activity as a way to explore why he writes with such passion and why he takes on controversial issues in young adult literature.

For example, when Amy Alessio (2005) asked Crutcher why truth is so important to him, he responded: "I grew up with a lot of really well-meaning people telling me a lot of lies that felt good at the time, but they ended up coming back to bite me in the ass. Too often, the adults in your life don't tell you the truth—they don't tell you what the world is really like." Crutcher's insistence on honesty in his writing identifies what his teen readers consistently say about his works—they're *real*. He tells it as he knows and observes life, complete with attitudes and language that tend to get his works into a censorship spotlight.

Crutcher has said that censorship dishonors the people who have lived the experiences about which he writes: "I write stories about real kids . . . who have come up through extremely difficult situations, and their behaviors and language reflect those situations. When we censor those kids' stories, we censor those kids. We leave them behind. They become an afterthought, or nothing . . . the kids who have always been left behind. I'm still waiting for the first politician with the guts to do what is needed to *really* leave no child behind" (Cole 2005, 76). Teachers who truly care about all students, even students who seem impossible to reach or inspire, or who unravel the class and push a teacher's proverbial buttons, can resonate with Crutcher's moral imperative to let truth speak to the censors—for the sake of the kids—and to speak up for our democratic right to intellectual freedom.



## A Personal Theory

Having read all of Crutcher's works, many of them numerous times, I am always a bit surprised at how his protagonists and their efforts to navigate life suck me completely into the story's drama every time I read one. I re-enjoy parts I remember and utter a "wow" at some poignant detail I missed in earlier readings. Like Susannah Sheffer (1997), I "freely admit that I find [his work] captivating" (10). I resonate strongly with the traits of so many characters: their inner thoughts, their poor choices and reactive natures, their good decisions, their insights, their personal flaws and strengths. I find myself trying to read both as a teen *and* as my well-into-middle-aged adult self, "living" inside the story, vicariously experiencing the worries, the angst, the happiness, and the freedom to be a smart-ass and get away with it. Both his teen and adult characters present people so real that I can imagine meeting any one of them.

My responses to his works raise three questions: How does Crutcher write in such a way that readers can identify so strongly with the people and situations about which he writes? Why do such real-life characters and the issues that arise in their lives cause some readers to cringe and censor? Why would anyone want to prevent teen readers from learning about life through reading?

By connecting the work of three researchers, I find theories that help me answer my first question. I believe Crutcher to be a person with a highly developed emotional and social intelligence. Recently several psychologists have concluded that emotional intelligence, distinct from academic abilities, is a specific kind of sensitivity to tacit messages (Goleman 1997, 42). When Kelly Milner Halls (Teenreads.com 2001) asked Crutcher, "How do you create realistic teen characters as a (then) fifty-four-year-old man?" he responded: "I usually end up dragging the 1964 Chris Crutcher, or part of him, into the era in which I'm telling the story. At least I drag out his sensibilities." I suggest that his use of *sensibilities* matches Goleman's notion of a knowing-beneath-the-surface of observed behaviors.

Other characteristics of this intelligence include a self-awareness of one's emotions as they happen, an ability to manage one's emotions, a self-motivating mastery for attention and creativity, empathy, and the skill of managing emotions in others (Goleman 1997, 43). Crutcher's stories of growing up with his "Wanna do something neat?" brother (*King of the Mild Frontier*) tell us who may have ini-

tiated his need to figure out how to gradually gain self-control when up against outside manipulation.

Crutcher also appears to have extensive social intelligence, which Daniel Goleman defines briefly as “a display of the highest order of neural jujitsu” or “sheer relationship brilliance” (2007, 83). Ingredients here involve a primal empathy, attuned listening for full receptivity, empathic accuracy in understanding another, a social cognition about how the world works, a synchrony that interacts at the nonverbal level, effective self-presentation, an ability to influence the outcome of social interactions, and a caring about others’ needs and acting accordingly (84). Having heard Crutcher speak several times and having talked with him individually, I would credit him with all of the above. I would speculate that his success as a counselor draws upon these skills as well.

What becomes wonderful for millions of readers is that Crutcher can *write* in ways that translate his personal knowledge of social and emotional workings into people/characters of all ages in his works, thus tapping into all that readers of any age can identify with when reading his works. Because of his personal social and emotional intelligence (SEI), he is able to create a range of these intelligences into the shaping of his characters. As readers, we experience characters who on an imaginary SEI chart seem to score zero (Boomer in *Running Loose*), some who are attempting to develop workable SEI (Bo in *Ironman*), or others who are outstandingly gifted with SEI skills (T. J. Jones in *Whale Talk*).

Now to my other two questions. Because Crutcher’s works seem to tap into all possible human emotions, his fans enjoy being able to talk about characters as personalities, about their ability to do what it takes to make sense of life as it happens to them, about whether we as readers think they are wise, stupid, honest, or mature. We like this emotional opening that lets us compare his characters to our own ways of responding or to be able to think about alternatives, in the event that we were placed in similar situations. For others of us as readers, however, angry or satirical comments from a character may insult our belief system or disturb our values. We don’t use profanity and do not like to hear or read it. We want to stop the disruption and return to believing all is well with the world.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1991) claims that as human beings we all seek happiness through optimal experiences but that obstacles and frustrations are inevitable: “the universe was not created to answer our needs” (7). To protect ourselves from obstacles, every culture develops “protective devices—religions, philosophies, arts, and comforts—that help shield us from chaos. They help us

believe that we are in control of what is happening and give reasons for being satisfied with our lot" (7–8). Csikszentmihalyi helps me better understand that when an author or a teacher steps across a comfort line and begins mucking around with her own or a student reader's boundaries for belief systems, the protective devices can rise to the surface as reader resistance or some form of censorship.

Those who can accept new ideas (obstacles and frustrations) without feeling threatened, if only to consider alternatives and return to their original beliefs, enjoy the intellectual and emotional challenges that Crutcher's works present. Those who feel that his challenges threaten their comfort zones will seek a protective device—argument, anger, silence, refusal to read, or public censorship.

For teachers, the works of Crutcher extend unlimited opportunities for themselves and for students to explore beliefs and values together. His characters let us reexamine human commonalities and differences, good and evil in individuals and situations. We can then walk away with a deeper understanding of what might be done to make our world a better place, beginning with ourselves.



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