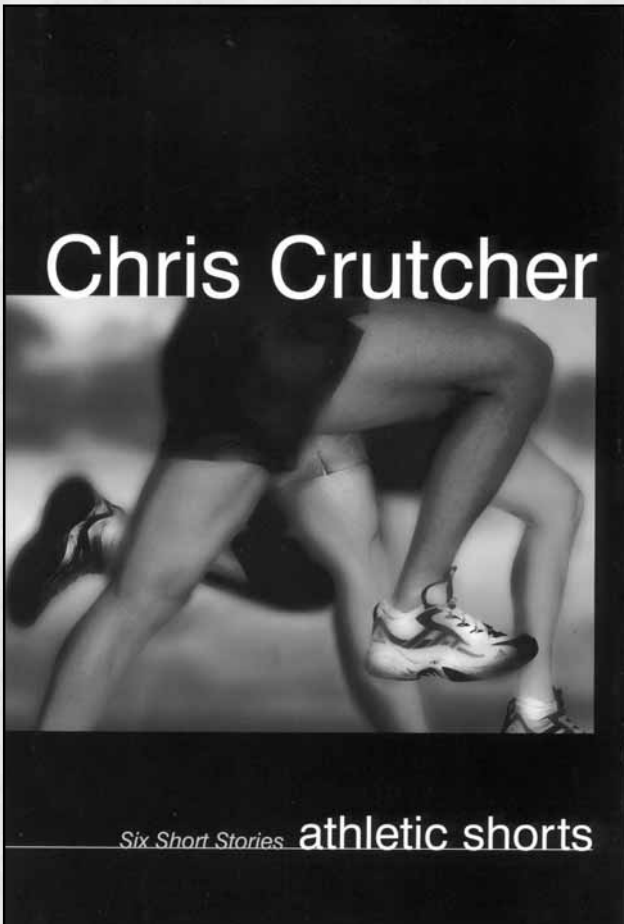


Athletic Shorts: Six Short Stories

by Chris Crutcher

A Character Study Guide



INTRODUCTION

Characters are the lifeblood of any story. The story flows as a result of what they say, how they feel, and how they react in a given situation. It is only when the reader cares about the characters that he/she can become involved in the story. Chris Crutcher creates characters that are human beings; they have heart and flaws, but they do their best in tough situations. He portrays a world where characters show “what they are made of”; they live in a world where tough decisions have to be made, where life isn’t always easy, and where conflict abounds. Readers connect to these characters, and when that happens, the characters become real.

IN THE CLASSROOM

This guide provides activities and discussion questions to help students grasp the conflict and pain of Crutcher’s characters, and at the same time help them understand their own world. Literature becomes meaningful when students make the connection between the characters they read about and their own lives. It is through discussing, investigating, and synthesizing the information into real-life presentations that learning becomes authentic.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Athletic Shorts is a collection of short stories about the characters that Chris Crutcher has created in his novels. In it, he attempts to answer questions about the characters’ lives, either before they made their debut in his novels or after the story ended. Ask students to read a story from *Athletic Shorts* and predict what might happen to the characters and to describe the various circumstances they might encounter. Then ask them to read the corresponding novel. Crutcher wrote, “When I come to the last page of any novel, I present the characters to you, the reader. What happens next is up to you” (p. 1, *Athletic Shorts*). Allow your students the privilege of making that determination.

ABOUT SOME OF THE CHARACTERS AND THE STORIES IN *ATHLETIC SHORTS*

“THE PIN”–

CORRESPONDING NOVEL: **THE CRAZY HORSE ELECTRIC GAME**

Although Johnny Rivers’s quick wit and ridiculous sense of humor sometimes get him in trouble, his friends know Johnny for his loyalty, commitment, and dependability. In “The Pin,” Johnny struggles to be a better wrestler than his father was in his heyday. The power struggle between the “Great Cecil B. Rivers” and Johnny culminates in a wrestling match to be performed before the student/parent volleyball game. And although Johnny wins the match, his victory is empty because of his father’s jealousy and poor sportsmanship.

“THE OTHER PIN”–

CORRESPONDING NOVEL: **THE CRAZY HORSE ELECTRIC GAME**

Petey Shropshire’s quiet good nature and willingness to help and support his friends bring him the respect he deserves. When the coach asks for a volunteer to wrestle the opposing team’s number-one wrestler, who happens to be a girl, his friend Johnny Rivers volunteers for him, and Petey finds himself signed up for a task he doesn’t want. Petey later meets the girl and discovers she would like to quit wrestling but doesn’t know how. Together they devise a plan to help them both get what they want.

“TELEPHONE MAN”–

CORRESPONDING NOVEL: **THE CRAZY HORSE ELECTRIC GAME**

Jack Simpson is known as Telephone Man because he wears a telephone tool repair belt and wants to grow up to become a telephone repairman. His mental handicap makes him loud and obnoxious and fearful that no one likes or understands him, but he knows right from wrong and has a sense of justice, which is why he is loyal to his friends. When the Jo-Boys, an Asian gang, attack Jack and try to steal his telephone “stuff,” his friend Hawk, a muscular black guy, comes to the rescue. Now Telephone Man must come to grips with the prejudice his father has poisoned him with and learn to accept other people.

“GOIN’ FISHIN’”–

CORRESPONDING NOVEL: **STOTAN!**

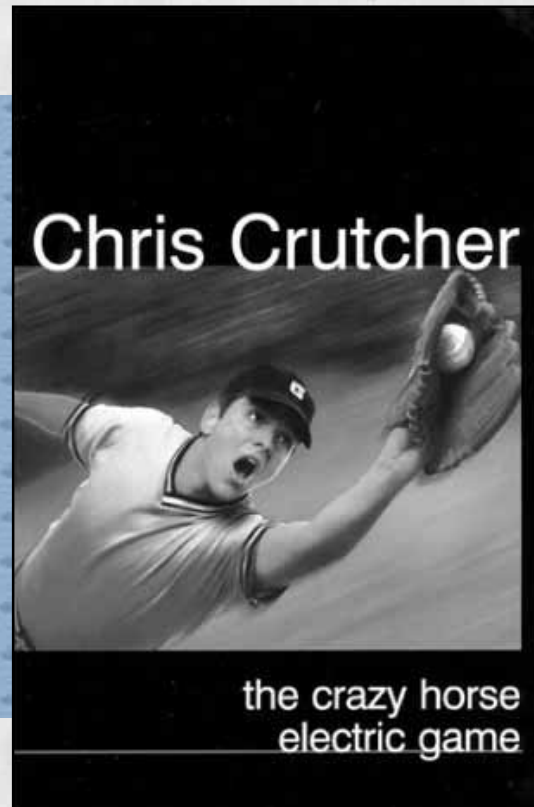
After Lionel Serbousek’s parents and younger brother are killed in a boating accident, Lion lives alone—although he is not a loner. Lion is a dedicated swimmer and an artist with many friends because he brings fun with him wherever he goes. It is his friend Elaine who forces him to deal with the young man, formerly Lion’s best friend, who was driving the boat when his parents were killed.

“IN THE TIME I GET”–

CORRESPONDING NOVEL: **RUNNING LOOSE**

Louie is an honest, forthright young man who is known for taking a stand against social wrongs—even when it is not the popular thing to do. He fought a battle against racism in high school, and after graduation, he is forced to face his own brand of bigotry. When he meets Darren who he discovers is gay and has AIDS, he avoids him out of fear of what people will think. Eventually, Louie’s need to do what is right overcomes his fear.

DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES FOR THE CRAZY HORSE ELECTRIC GAME



ABOUT THE BOOK:

Both Petey and Johnny are friends with Willie Weaver, who is a star athlete and takes his team to the top when he wins the Crazy Horse Electric Game. The excitement is short-lived—a few weeks later, Willie is injured in a waterskiing accident that leaves him partially paralyzed. Although Willie and his friends try to overcome the change the handicap brings in their relationship, they are not successful. Willie catches a bus to Oakland, where he meets Lacey Casteel. Lacey insists Willie attend the One More Last Chance High School, where he meets Telephone Man. Willie eventually learns how to use his body to compensate for the paralysis and works his way back to physical and emotional health.

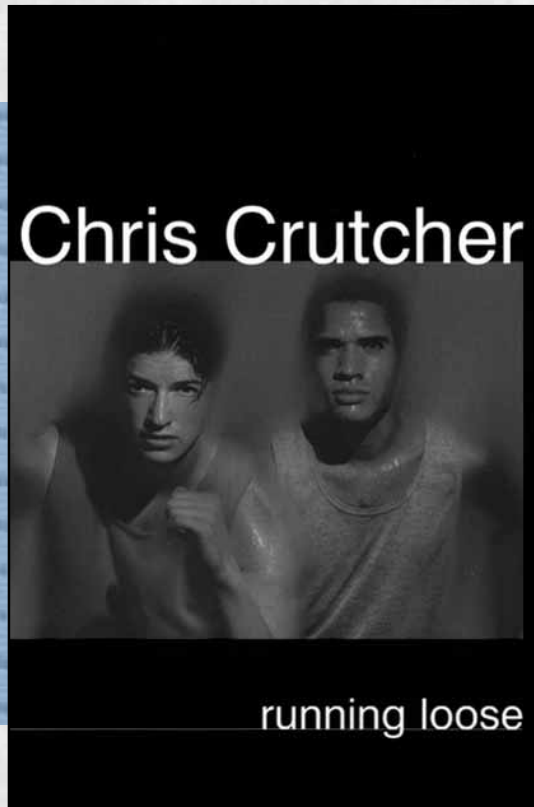
DISCUSSION

In order for Willie to fully recover from the pain of his past, he must come to grips with the sudden death of his baby sister. Have students investigate Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) to determine if Willie is correct in assuming the blame for Missy's death. After they learn about SIDS, students can roleplay, taking the part of doctors explaining to Willie how and why his sister died.

ACTIVITY

When Willie runs away from home, his life is miserable and no one knows where he is or how to find him. He feels misunderstood and thinks that no one will know how to accept his disability. Discuss the circumstances that might cause someone to run away. Ask the class where they would go and how they would survive if they ran away. Then have students examine the runaway problem in the United States. Incorporating what they learned from their research, have students assume the role of a runaway and ask them to write a letter to their parents. They can also assume the role of a parent and write a letter to their runaway child. They must convey their feelings and the rationale for their actions.

DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES FOR RUNNING LOOSE



ABOUT THE BOOK:

Louie Banks has the opportunity to play on a championship high school football team, until a new black player joins the number-one rival school. When the coach orders his players to cause injury to this new player, Louie refuses and tempers begin to rise throughout the school and town. Louie's fight against racism causes him to lose his position on the team, get suspended from school, and be barred from participating in all athletics. His parents fight the decision, and Louie is allowed to run track. The prejudice that invades Louie's world destroys people and their reputations.

DISCUSSION

Whenever prejudice rears its ugly head, people are hurt and lives are destroyed. Hold a class discussion about a time when either they or someone they know has experienced prejudice. Be sure to include the details of the situation and the reactions of the people involved. Comment on how things would have been different if someone involved had taken a stand for what was right.

ACTIVITY

The senseless death of a teenager is always hard to accept, and the number of teens killed in car wrecks is on the rise. Have students conduct simple research to determine what could be done to lower the death rate of teens killed in car crashes. Should the legal age for driving be raised? Should driver training school be more difficult? Have students write a letter to their senator voicing their opinion, which should be supported by facts gained from the research. Try to offer a solution to the problem.

DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES FOR STOTAN!



ABOUT THE BOOK:

Nortie, Jeff, Lion, and Walker are seniors who make up the swim team for Frost High School, and they are determined to win the state swim meet. Their coach challenges them to volunteer for Stotan Week, a series of intense training sessions to push them past the point of pain. They complete the week and are on a natural high when Nortie's dad beats him up, and they learn Jeff has leukemia. The situation gets worse when Nortie, who dates a black girl, is beaten up by a group of racists. Each of them learns a lesson about life and begins to understand that not everyone gets what they deserve.

DISCUSSION

Chris Crutcher has been criticized for "packing too much into one book, for depicting [his] characters' hardships too graphically, and for using language and ideas that kids don't need to be exposed to" (p. 2, *Athletic Shorts*). Using *Stotan!* as a reference, ask students how they would argue against or defend that statement.

ACTIVITY

The hardships that befall the characters in *Stotan* are devastating. Jeff contracts leukemia, Walker's brother is a drug dealer, and Nortie suffers from child abuse and racial violence, but the racists suffer no apparent punishment. Not only do the main characters deal with the pain of their present lives, but their past is full of sorrow as well. Lion's parents and brother were killed in a boating accident, and on Nortie's sixth birthday, his older brother committed suicide to escape the physical and emotional abuse of their father. Ask students to choose one of the characters in the book and investigate the issue(s) the character had to deal with. Using what they learned, have them write a section of a self-help booklet that your class will put together as a resource to help others.

photo by: Kelly Milner Halls



NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR:

I probably experienced more delight writing *Athletic Shorts* than with any of my novels. For one thing, it allowed me to answer the question I'd get in almost every other letter from a teacher or a student: "Are you going to write a sequel?" The answer was always no, but it was fun to look at some of the characters I had created at some time other than that in which their stories were told. It also allowed me to focus more specifically on one theme, as there is little room for wandering inside a short story.

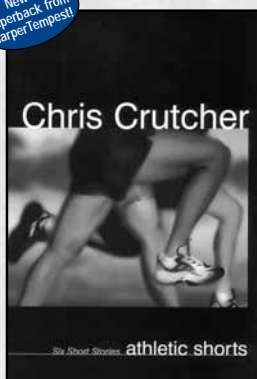
If you're using *Athletic Shorts* along with any of the novels in which the characters first appeared, you may notice some discrepancies. I'm constantly asked if there were clues in *Stotan!* or "In The Time I Get" to Lion's stated sexual preference later in *Ironman*. The answer is no. The reason is that I didn't know it when I wrote those stories. When I knew it, you knew it. You will also find a few discrepancies in Telephone Man's history as stated in *The Crazy Horse Electric Game*, and in his short story in this book. Chalk it up to artistic license. (I chalk it up to failing memory. When I wrote the short story, I'd forgotten some of the little details I'd written in *Crazy Horse*, which means you could also chalk it up to laziness.)

I hope the stories will make you laugh and I hope they'll make you cry. I hope you talk about the issues openly. A story isn't made complete when I stop writing it. It is made complete when you read and respond.

Enjoy.

Chris Crutcher

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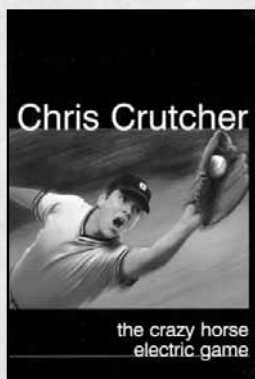


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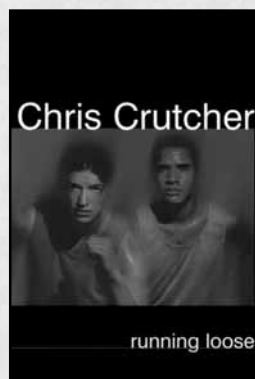
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