

A Guide to Teaching Challenged and Banned Books

Featuring the novels of Chris Crutcher



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About this Guide

This guide will help teachers and librarians gain a better understanding of banned and challenged books and equip them to answer questions about the reasons books are banned, the ramifications of banned books, and the effects that challenged and banned books have in the classroom. This guide will also introduce Chris Crutcher and his novels—all of which have been challenged—and his response to his critics.

What Is a Banned/Challenged Book?

- A challenged book is a book that a person or a group has attempted to remove from the library shelves and/or a school classroom because of objections regarding book content.
- A banned book has been successfully removed from the library shelves and/or school classrooms.

Why Are Books Challenged?

- Profane language
- Sexual, racially discriminatory, or violent content
- Political and/or religious differences
- A variety of other reasons

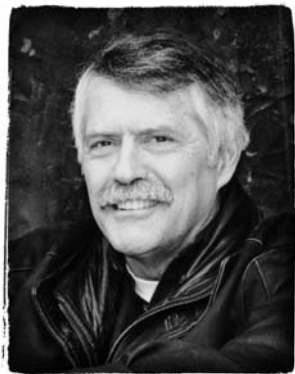
When people challenge a book, they are attempting to impose on others their views and opinions about what is appropriate or fitting reading material. When a challenged book is banned, the complainants have usurped the rights of those who might choose to read the book. Because of dedicated librarians and teachers, many challenges are unsuccessful, and most books are retained in the school curriculum or library collection.

Teaching Banned/Challenged Books

If a teacher chooses to use a banned book as part of an assignment, he or she should be prepared for possible objections. The following suggestions could be helpful.

- Offer students who object to the banned/challenged book an alternate book that deals with similar topics and themes
- Ask all students to have their parents sign a permission form stating that it is acceptable for them to read the banned/challenged book
- Provide reviews from professional sources that support teaching the banned/challenged book, and document the benefits students will receive from reading the book
- Discuss the controversial subjects with your students openly

Meet Chris Crutcher



Chris Crutcher is well-known for the books he has written for young adults; eight have been named ALA Best Books for Young Adults, and four of his books have appeared on *Booklist's* Best 100 Books of the 20th Century. His novel *Staying Fat for Sarah*

Byrnes is currently being adapted as a major motion picture by Riverrock Entertainment, as are *Whale Talk*, *The Crazy Horse Electric Game*, and *The Sledding Hill*. Mr. Crutcher has also received numerous awards, including the ALAN Award in 1993, the NCTE/SLATE Intellectual Freedom Award in 1998, the Margaret A. Edwards Award for Lifetime Achievement in 2000, *The Writer Magazine* "Writers who make a difference" award in 2004, and an award in 2005 from the National Coalition Against Censorship "for his courageous novels for young adults and his outspoken defense of free speech."

The most endearing part of Mr. Crutcher's books are the characters he creates—real people, gleaned from his small town boyhood in Idaho, his ten years directing an alternative school, and his twenty years as a child abuse and neglect counselor. His characters are the kids who walk the halls of today's schools and read at public libraries. Mr. Crutcher's stories urge kids to have courage and to take responsibility for their lives, to become everyday heroes who stand up and do what is right. His readers recognize themselves in his books, and realize that somebody else might just understand their crises after all. Mr. Crutcher says, "The truth screams to be told in its native tongue." By telling his characters' stories in language authentic to

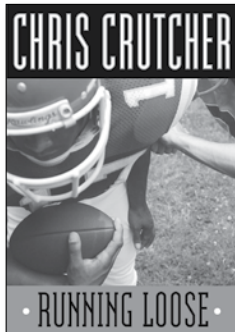
their life experiences, he honors the struggles of people he considers truly heroic. For Chris Crutcher, life influences the stories he writes, and writing the truth as he sees it distinguishes him as the man and writer he is.

A champion for free speech, Chris Crutcher continuously fights for intellectual freedom. He loudly proclaims the rights of high school students to feel visible and to find and read the books they need most, in spite of censors. All of his books have been challenged and/or banned; most recently, *Whale Talk* has been challenged in three states.

Mr. Crutcher recognizes that censors' desire to suppress his stories comes from fear and ignorance, and he knows they bear him no ill will. In order to fight those censors, he works closely with the National Coalition Against Censorship; he writes articles to newspapers and magazines defending freedom of speech; he speaks on radio talk shows advocating the rights of teenagers to read stories of authentic life experiences; he writes to teenagers expressing his concerns that adults are trying to "protect" them by keeping them in the dark; and he continues to write stories teens want and need to read.

Willingly speaking to school boards and parents, Mr. Crutcher openly discusses with them the "uncomfortable" truths and controversial language and ideas he writes about. Because of his commitment and dedication to the concept of intellectual freedom, Mr. Crutcher travels all over the country to speak at schools, state and national library and teachers' conferences, and public libraries. Just like the characters he writes about who take risks for their beliefs, Mr. Crutcher proves himself to be a perpetual defender of intellectual freedom.

Chris Crutcher: A Book Study



Running Loose

(1983)

When Louie's football coach orders the players to hurt an African-American player on another team, Louie refuses. His fight against racism causes him to lose his position on the football team, get suspended from school, and be barred from participating in all athletics. Prejudice in Louie's small town threatens to destroy people and their reputations.

Whenever prejudice surfaces, people are hurt and lives are destroyed. Why don't the other players take a stand for what is right? Why is Louie able and willing when none of the other players are? Are the sacrifices Louie makes for his beliefs worth the pain he suffers?

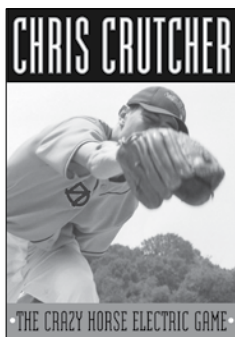


Stotan!

(1986)

Four high school swimmers volunteer for Stotan Week, a series of intense training sessions to push them past the point of pain. Upon completion of the week, Nortie's dad beats him up, Jeff discovers he has leukemia, and Walker and Lion do their best to hold the team together against an onslaught of racist attacks.

Not only do the main characters deal with the pain of their current situations, but the circumstances of their past are full of sorrow as well. Who does each character draw on for strength? How does the group dynamic help each character individually?



The Crazy Horse Electric Game

(1987)

When an accident leaves all-star pitcher Willie Weaver partially paralyzed, he realizes he cannot function in his old life. He boards a bus to Oakland, where he meets Lacey Casteel, a pimp who takes him in but forces him to attend the One More Last Chance High School. There Willie learns to compensate for the paralysis, fighting his way back to physical and emotional health.

When Willie first runs away from home, his life is miserable, and no one knows where he is or how to find him. Why does Willie feel that this is the only solution to his problem? What is Willie really running from? How does the reader know that Willie finds the peace that he is seeking?

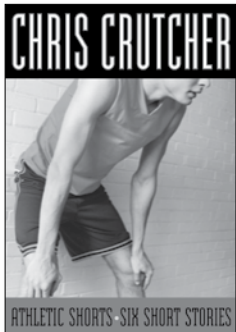


Chinese Handcuffs

(1989)

After witnessing his brother Preston's suicide, Dillon attempts to put his life back together. For one thing, he has to accept how he feels about Stacy, his brother's old girlfriend—and about their child, whom he desperately loves. Dillon's friend Jennifer must also learn to move past her pain and confront the sexual abuse to which she is being subjected.

The title of this book is symbolic of Dillon's struggle with his circumstances and emotions. What are Chinese handcuffs? How do they play a role in this book? Why is this the perfect title? If Dillon's finger is in one end of the Chinese handcuffs, who or what is in the other end?

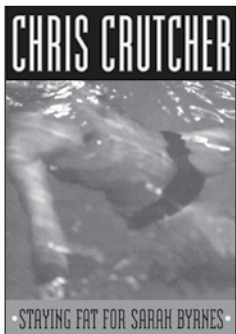


Athletic Shorts

(1991)

In this collection of short stories about the characters in his novels, Crutcher attempts to address unanswered questions about his characters' lives either before they made their debuts in his novels or after the novels ended.

What theme runs through each of these stories, even though the characters and the situations they face are different? How does this theme apply to each story? How do the characters' actions contribute to this theme?

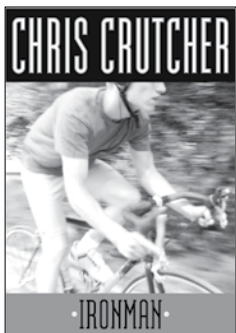


Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes

(1993)

When overweight Eric joins the swim team, he begins to slim down and make new friends, suddenly threatening his relationship with Sarah, a classmate disfigured at the age of three when her own father pushed her face against a hot stove burner. Eric does his best to stay fat so that he and Sarah will continue to share their outcast status. But the situation comes to a head when Sarah totally stops speaking and is institutionalized for mysterious reasons.

Although the external conflict surrounding Eric and Sarah's friendship seems to be the driving force of the story, the real issues stem from their individual internal conflicts. What are the major external conflicts? How do the external conflicts drive the internal conflicts?

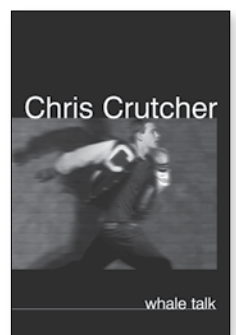


Ironman

(1995)

Bo must interrupt his triathlon training two mornings a week to attend an anger management class with a group of social misfits. As the triathlon event approaches, Bo makes a wager with his fiercest competitor, only to learn that his own father has given the opponent a world-class competition bike to insure that Bo will lose.

How does Bo's anger drive him to succeed? What role does Bo's father play in both harming and helping Bo? What does Bo learn about himself through the anger management class?



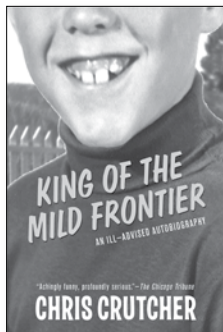
Whale Talk

(2001)

Although T.J. is a talented and gifted athlete, he refuses to join any of the school teams or participate in any other school activities. However, when his charismatic English teacher convinces him to begin a swim team, despite the overwhelming odds against success, T.J. is inspired to beat the system. He recruits every misfit in the school to be on the team and tries to ensure they will all win letter jackets.

T.J.'s obviously strong leadership abilities allow him to take a group of kids who are not athletes and lead them to victory. What pivotal decisions does T.J. make to set the wheels in motion? What are the results of his decisions? What is T.J.'s motivation for starting the swim team?

Chris Crutcher: A Book Study

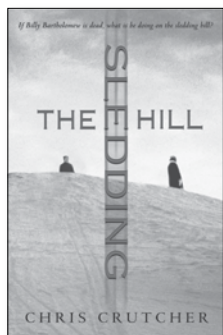


King of the Mild Frontier: An Ill-Advised Autobiography

(2003)

Crutcher shares stories of his life growing up in a small town in Idaho and reveals the inspiration for some of his characters and the situations in which they find themselves. His readers will once again appreciate the truth and empathy with which he writes, and see the connection between his writing and his real-world experience.

How does Crutcher's coming-of-age in the 1960s differ from a teen's coming-of-age today? What societal changes have taken place in the last forty years to change the definition of coming-of-age? What dangers do teens face today that teens in the 1960s did not face?



The Sledding Hill

(2005)

When Eddie's father and his best friend, Billy, are both killed accidentally within a month, Eddie is left alone to deal with his grief. But Billy, the narrator of the story, sees no reason to let death interrupt their friendship, and begins to visit Eddie. Reverend Tarter, who also teaches English at Eddie's school, does his best to manipulate Eddie into joining his church and his crusade to get a book banned at school.

Intellectual freedom is at the heart of this novel. What is intellectual freedom? How does Reverend Tarter threaten the students' freedom to read? What bigger issues are at stake?

Classroom Activities

1. Since all of Chris Crutcher's books have been challenged, ask students to select a book and research the reasons that it was challenged and find out the final results. Then ask them to write a rationale for keeping the book on the library shelf and in the classroom. Have students read their rationales to the class and then combine them in a booklet.
2. Divide the class into two groups and have one group argue against censorship under any circumstances and the other argue that the need to protect students outweighs the rights of the majority. Ask each group to answer these questions: Who determines what needs to be censored? Who should judge what is appropriate?
3. Have students conduct research to find books that might have been considered controversial decades ago but that are not considered controversial today. As a class, discuss why public opinion has changed toward these books.
4. Movies, television programs, video games, and music recordings all carry ratings to indicate an age-appropriate audience. Why are these dealt with in a different way from books?

More on banned/challenged books

Web links to more information about banned/challenged books:

- www.forbiddenlibrary.com
Banned and challenged books
- www.georgesuttle.com/censorship/bookbanning.shtml
A list of websites about banned books and censorship
- www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbooksweek/bbwlinks/100mostfrequently.htm
A list of the 100 most frequently challenged books of 1990–2000
- www.pabbis.com
Parents against bad books in schools (understand the thinking of censors)
- www.ala.org/ala/oif/
ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom
- www.kellymilnerhalls.com/index.2ts?page=challengedbooks
Challenged YA books
- www.chriscrutcher.com
The author's personal website gives information about his books and his experiences

Organizations that fight censorship:

- www.ncac.org
National Coalition Against Censorship
- www.ala.org
American Library Association
- www.kidspeakonline.org
Where kids speak up for free speech

Other authors whose books are frequently challenged:

Francesca Lia Block
Chris Lynch

Walter Dean Myers
Katherine Paterson
Shel Silverstein

Sonya Sones
Paul Zindel

Books by Chris Crutcher

Running Loose

Tr 0-688-02002-X • \$18.99 (\$28.50)
Pb 0-06-009491-5 • \$6.99 (\$8.99)

"A hard-hitting and candid coming-of-age story."—*ALA Booklist*

- ALA Best Book for Young Adults
- New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age
- ALA Booklist Editors' Choice
- ALA Best of the Best Books for Young Adults

Stotan!

Tr 0-688-05715-2 • \$17.99 (\$25.50)
Pb 0-06-009492-3 • \$6.99 (\$9.99)

- ★ "A fine coming-of-age novel. . . *Stotan!* is very, very good."
—*School Library Journal* (starred review)

- ALA Best of the Best Books for Young Adults
- *School Library Journal* Best of the Best in YA Literature
- ALA Best Book for Young Adults

The Crazy Horse Electric Game

Pb 0-06-009490-7 • \$6.99 (\$8.99)

"Magnificently portrays the thoughts and feelings of a crippled athlete . . . a testimony to the indomitability of the human spirit."
—*The Horn Book*

- ALA Best Book for Young Adults
- *School Library Journal* Best Book

Chinese Handcuffs

Tr 0-688-08345-5 • \$17.99 (\$25.50)
Pb 0-06-059839-5 • \$6.99 (\$9.99)

"Crutcher constructs his tangled web with intelligent insight, creating a painful, powerful story."—*The Horn Book*

- ALA Best Book for Young Adults
- ALA Best of the Best Books for Young Adults

Athletic Shorts

Tr 0-688-10816-4 • \$17.99 (\$25.50)
Pb 0-06-050783-7 • \$6.99 (\$8.99)

- ★ "The characterizations are powerfully drawn, and the dialogue is quick and scorching."
—*The Horn Book* (starred review)

- ALA Best Book for Young Adults
- ALA Quick Pick for Reluctant Young Adult Readers
- ALA Best of the Best Books for Young Adults
- *School Library Journal* Best Book
- *School Library Journal* Best of the Best in YA Literature

Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes

Tr 0-688-11552-7 • \$17.99 (\$25.99)
Pb 0-06-009489-3 • \$6.99 (\$9.99)

- ★ "A masterpiece."
—*School Library Journal* (starred review)

- ALA Best Book for Young Adults
- *School Library Journal* Best Book
- *American Bookseller* Pick of the Lists
- California Young Reader Medal
- ALA Best of the Best Books for Young Adults

Ironman

Tr 0-688-13503-X • \$16.99 (\$25.50)
Pb 0-06-059840-9 • \$6.99 (\$8.99)

- ★ "Crutcher has consistently penned exceptional reads for YAs, and *Ironman* is one of his strongest works yet."
—*School Library Journal* (starred review)

- ALA Best Book for Young Adults
- ALA Quick Pick for Reluctant Young Adult Readers
- New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age
- *School Library Journal* Best Book
- *American Bookseller* Pick of the Lists
- California Young Reader Medal
- ALA Best of the Best Books for Young Adults
- *Horn Book* Fanfare

Whale Talk

Tr 0-688-18019-1 • \$16.99 (\$23.99)
Lb 0-06-029369-1 • \$16.89 (\$25.89)

- ALA Best Book for Young Adults
- New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age
- ALA Top 10 Best Book for Young Adults
- ALA Popular Paperbacks for Young Adults
- Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award
- Washington State Book Award

King of the Mild Frontier: An Ill-Advised Autobiography

Tr 0-06-050249-5 • \$16.99 (\$25.99)
Lb 0-06-050250-9 • \$17.89 (\$26.89)
Pb 0-06-050251-7 • \$6.99 (\$9.99)

- ★ "Full of heartbreak, poignancy, and plenty of hilarity. This honest, insightful, revealing autobiography is a joy to read. Crutcher's fans will relish this intimate glimpse of the author, and the book may win some new readers for his fiction."—*ALA Booklist* (starred review)

- ALA Best Book for Young Adults
- New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age

The Sledding Hill

Tr 0-06-050243-6 • \$15.99 (\$21.99)
Lb 0-06-050244-4 • \$16.89 (\$23.89)
Pb 0-06-050245-2 • \$6.99 (\$8.99)

- ★ "Clever, spirited. An involving story."
—*School Library Journal* (starred review)

For exclusive information on your favorite authors and artists, visit www.authortracker.com.

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