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**Students See Their Reflections in Author's Pages**

Written by Preston Williams (Thursday, October 2, 2008)

Here's all you need to know about Chris Crutcher, whose young-adult fiction is set against a high school sports backdrop and is a hit with jocks and non-jocks alike, not to mention readers and supposed nonreaders:

During the morning sessions of an all-day appearance last week at Strasburg (Va.) High School, students approached Crutcher on three occasions and paused while tears welled in their eyes as they talked to him. That's how much his books reflect their lives.

Although Crutcher, 62, has no children, he said that knack comes in part from years of working as a director of an alternative school and as a family therapist dealing with child abuse and neglect cases. And, as he says, "I can get back into my own adolescent head pretty quickly."

He is listed eighth on the American Library Association's list of most frequently challenged authors for 2007 -- Mark Twain is third -- for writing books with hard language and blunt themes such as abusive parents, molestation, racism, substance abuse, death, abortion and homosexuality.

His books are written in a descriptive, surprisingly funny and easily digestible style. Five of his works were on an ALA list of the best books for young adults from 1966 to 2000.

Strasburg students have checked out Crutcher books 600 times since the spring, school library media specialist Clarisse Bushman said, sometimes for class projects but also for enjoyment. "Besides the Harry Potter books from when the kids are in younger grades," said Katy Ferrell, who teaches a "reluctant readers" class at Strasburg, "I haven't seen anything like this before."

One could make the case that Crutcher has enhanced far more young lives sitting in Spokane, Wash., writing for strangers, than he did in years of working face-to-face with troubled kids. He said it's a case of readers "bringing their own history to the story."

Shadowing the author on his visit to Strasburg, Varsity talked to several athletes in the school library to learn just what it is they get out of Crutcher's books. Here's a sampling:

"You feel like it's about you," said senior Cassandra Frye, the Virginia A state discus champion, citing in particular Crutcher's "*Stotan*," about a swim team.

"He's not afraid to write about rape or drug abuse," said junior Tanner Orndorff, who plays football and baseball. "That's really what happens in real life."

"It touched on a lot of issues that teams go through, and I felt some sort of relation to that," said junior football player Jared Sine in regard to "Running Loose," a football story. "It goes from one emotion to the next in a flash. I thought that he really knew what he was talking about." (Sine is juggling Crutcher's "*Deadline*" and "*Chinese Handcuffs*." He reports seeing students sneaking peeks at Crutcher books in geometry class).

"He has a lot of views that a lot of people don't touch in their books because it's kind of a shaky subject," senior swimmer Dara Dillman said. "He does real-life high school."

"I wasn't really into reading before this," said junior Derek Buckley, who plays basketball and baseball. "But once I started reading these, I got into them. They're really edgy. He tells a good story. You get attached to it."

*I wasn't really into reading before this*. That's a big kick for Crutcher, because that's how he grew up in Cascade, Idaho, a splinter of a logging town. He would reword his older brother's book reports to avoid reading the material himself. Not until he picked up Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird" did he realize what he had been missing.

"Dweeby beyond redemption" in high school, Crutcher was no stud athlete, he said. "Don't embarrass yourself," his basketball coach would sagely offer. But Crutcher played sports, because that's what you did when your graduating class (of 1964) numbered 15 strong. When he spins yarns for students about his Mayberry-esque hometown, he jokes that he is best remembered for having teeth knocked out in two sports.

There are good guys and bad guys in Crutcher's worlds, and a season or school year that provides a book-ended time frame. But his main objective is honesty. When he reached his 20s, Crutcher said, he realized his upbringing "sugarcoated" the world instead of preparing him for it. He wants young readers to be exposed to the kind of sticky life situations from which he was sheltered.

That sometimes gets him in trouble with censors, although a ban from adults is pretty much considered a seal of approval by young readers. In Strasburg teacher Erin Hubbard's English 10 honors class, students read two of Crutcher's books that were challenged or banned and then, in a series of projects, debated the merits of doing so.

All censorship does, Crutcher told the Strasburg students, is give adults and kids another reason to not talk to each other. He said he thinks identifying with one of his characters empowers readers and gives them the "insulation" they need to talk about their problems.

Crutcher likes to quote one of Pat Conroy's line from "*The Prince of Tides*": "You can't fix a broken childhood, but you can make the sucker float."

"You'd get the argument all the time: Well, not all kids go through that," Crutcher said about some of the wrenching lives his characters’ lead. "No, but all kids sit in a classroom with kids who have, and there's a way to find compassion if you know what's going on. If I know that that kid over there would rather show me his rage than his fear, then maybe I'll have a little more compassion for his fear."

Crutcher said he visits about 30 high schools a year and enjoys chatting with students. He said the talks help him keep his antennae up for teen dialogue. But when he gives talks at public libraries, he said, about 90 percent of his audience is adults who want to know where these stories where when they were kids, and who say they would have been helped by them.

"Boy, it takes them back," Crutcher said. "High school is a pretty hard time. It's developmentally a struggle. It's meant to be."

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