

Written by Mike Schulz

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Chris Crutcher, the author of more than a dozen books and short stories featuring teenage protagonists, has earned a bevy of awards and accolades over his 26-year writing career, with eight of his works named "Best Books for Young Adults" by the American Library Association, and *Teen Book Review* hailing 2007's *Deadline* as "a brilliant, well-written, thought-provoking, and, to put it simply, truly amazing novel."

So why do so many people seem so *angry* at him?

On April 14 and 15, the writer will participate in Quad City Arts' biennial "Super Author" program, sharing his young-adult-lit experiences in a series of public lectures, workshops, readings, and discussions. Yet in addition to being an author, the Spokane, Washington-based Crutcher also serves as a therapist for children and families, which might help explain why his published works engender such debate: They deal with serious issues, and frequently discomfoting issues, that Crutcher himself has addressed as a therapist.

In the author's 1983 debut novel, *Running Loose*, a high-school football star must contend with a racist coach and the unexpected death of his girlfriend. 1993's

*Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*

features a classroom discussion on abortion and a title character who, at age three, was violently abused by her father. The protagonist in "A Brief Moment in the Life of Angus Bethune" - a short story published in the 1991 collection

*Athletic Shorts*

and adapted into the 1995 movie

*Angus*

- is growing up with not one but

*two*

sets of gay parents. And other Crutcher works deal either specifically or tangentially, but always forthrightly, with themes that include religious bigotry, parental neglect, and suicide.

Topics such as these, it should go without saying, have netted the author more than his share of controversy, leading to encounters with parents and school groups that have publicly challenged his books, and have even fought to have them banned from library shelves. Fittingly,

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Crutcher's area speaking engagements find him speaking on the theme of "Controversy, Censorship, & Critical Thought," and during our recent interview, the author admits to *embracing* his role as provocateur.

"There are groups who believe that if we can keep our children innocent, we can keep them safe," says the 62-year-old author. "But I use a different 'I' word - I think they mean if we can keep them *ignorant*, we can keep them safe. And no one has ever been able to tell me when innocence turns into ignorance. I mean, I tell people all the time: If you're five or six years old and you believe in Santa Claus, you're cute; if you're 14 and you believe in Santa Claus, you're gonna get a bloody nose."

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### A Double Dose of Adolescence

Born in Dayton, Ohio, Crutcher was raised in Cascade, Idaho - "a really small town," he says, "and real conservative, with philosophies that were absolutely black-and-white."

Though active in athletics ("I went to a school where everybody played, or there wasn't enough for a team"), he admits that he wasn't what anyone would call a model student in high school. "I had an attention span of about 15 seconds," Crutcher says with a laugh. "School just didn't ... . It didn't work for me. It was partly that I was somewhat rebellious. I had maybe a double dose of adolescence going for me."

After graduating high school in 1968, however, Crutcher - a self-described "child of the '60s" - found his interest in learning piqued after entering Eastern Washington State College. "I got into sociology first," he says, "and my first discovery was that things *weren't* black-and-white, and that institutions were more interested in keeping themselves alive than they were in telling the truth. I got interested in having been *fooled*, and trying to find out if there *was* a truth, what it was."

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Crutcher earned his BA in sociology and psychology, received a subsequent teaching credential, and taught primary and secondary education in Washington state and California throughout the 1970s. He went on to serve as the director of Oakland, California's Lakeside School - an alternative program for at-risk youth - and establish a private therapy practice in Spokane. Yet by the early 1980s, Crutcher was feeling the urge to write.

"At some level, I always knew that I could be good at it," he says. "That I could manipulate words well. I mean, one of the reasons I didn't have to do a whole lot of work in high school is I could bluff my way through. I think I had probably a natural writing skill and a natural communication skill; I didn't relate those to academics, but I could ... you know, I could cover my butt."

And given his years of working with troubled youths, Crutcher felt he had a unique vantage point from which to *write* about youths.

"I think what's scary about adolescence, sometimes, is so intense that there's a natural move toward *forgetting* it," says the author. "You know, it's real easy to say about the first time you were in love, 'That's not real love, that's *puppy* love.' But the reality is it feels *exactly* the same way it feels when you're older, you do as many stupid things both times, and it has the same effect. You can't pooh-pooh it.

"We tend to want to go back and say, 'Well, anything that happens when you're a teenager, it's not real. That's *practice*.' But your feelings are just as intense, you know? Everything's intact. And when you're a teenager, it's intact *cubed*."

Beginning with *Running Loose*, a first-person narrative by a distressed high-school football star, Crutcher's goal in writing was to deal realistically with teen issues, and to do so from a teen's perspective. Yet the author says that, from the start, finding his "inner teen" was never as difficult as some might imagine.

"Any writer knows that whether it's fiction or nonfiction, you have to find your writing voice," says Crutcher, "and once you do, you tell your story in that voice. So if I go back and find my teenage voice, or a voice much like it, then I'm saved.

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"I have writer's block two or three times, maybe five times, with every book," he continues, "but what it usually is is writer's *glut*. There are so many things you want to write, and your mind is popping around so much, that you don't know what direction to go. It paralyzes you. And all of a sudden, it seems like you don't have anything to say."

Though his works have been categorized as young-adult literature, Crutcher says he never wrote with a genre in mind. In truth, he says, "I didn't know there was such a *thing* as young-adult literature. I wrote a story about a kid who was 18 years old, and that's just where it *went* . I just figured out the stories I wanted to tell, and let the marketing people decide what they were.

"If *Catcher in the Rye* were written today," he adds, "they'd have to at least *focus* it on that genre."

Yet while reviewers were impressed with Crutcher's literary talents - *Publishers Weekly* called *Running Loose* "a tightly plotted, compelling tale that's compassionate, funny, and sensitive" - the author quickly discovered that the book's explorations of teen dating, racism, sex, and death weren't being embraced by *everyone* .

"I look at things in a different way than a lot of people would *like* me to," he says with a laugh. "The black-and-white morals that come with almost any fundamental kind of belief get knocked around pretty good in my stories."



**Something Other Than Fear**

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One of the most common complaints against Crutcher's novels is his use of profanity, as the author is determined to write the way teens actually talk - a choice that his critics have argued is irresponsible in books directed toward teenagers. (The "F" word, the "S" word, and the "S.O.B." phrase are routinely employed in Crutcher's works.)

"It's an easy out," he says of the issues some take with his works' frequently salty conversation. "They don't have to get in the discussion of why they *really* want the book banned. One of the things I did with [2005's] *The Sledding Hill*

, which I haven't done with any other book, is I purposely scoured it for bad language. If somebody wanted to go after the book" - which, ironically, climaxes with a town-hall meeting on the subject of book-banning - "I wanted them to not be able to hide behind 'There are some bad words in there.'"

But Crutcher's themes would seem to give his critics no end of ammunition, and the author says that nothing seems to engender more debate than his nonjudgmental depictions of homosexuality in such works as *Athletic Shorts* and 1995's *Ironman*. "The whole gay thing is where the racial thing was 20 or 30 years ago," says Crutcher. "If you're looking for something that's just blatantly bigoted that people look *past* all the time, that's it."

The author refuses, though, to let squeamishness over the subject prevent him from addressing the issue. "When I was working full-time as a therapist, I worked with some kids who were gay, and I discovered *why* there's such a high suicide rate, and *why* there's such a high attempted-suicide rate, and *why* there's such a high rate of depression among those kids - because they feel they *can't* tell the truth. And that's dangerous."

Crutcher has also received his share of criticism for his characters' inquisitive, uncommitted attitudes toward religion, and his casting of devoutly religious characters - such as *The Sledding Hill* antagonist Dan Mulke - as the most closed-minded figures in his books. "As much as conventional Christianity or Islam or any of the major pool of religions are meant to be comforting," he says, "they operate on fear. If you don't behave right, some real bad stuff is gonna happen to you."

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"And burning in hell doesn't *sound* great," says Crutcher with a laugh. "Eternity's a *real* long time. So the idea that we need to find something other than fear to operate from makes a lot of sense to me.

It's impossible not to imagine many of Crutcher's own beliefs being echoed through his characters' dialogue; in an amusingly meta subplot in *The Sledding Hill*, the author even introduces Chris Crutcher as a character

*in*  
the story, invited to a public discussion on the censorship of his own books. (Interestingly, the "character" actually chooses not to speak once he arrives - he decides to let the book's central character speak  
*for*  
him.) And Crutcher makes no bones about his characters oftentimes serving as a personal mouthpiece. "There's no question that if you read my books," he says, "you get a pretty good sense of what my politics are. And my belief that a lot of kids who exist in isolation don't  
*have*  
to, and if we knew them better, we wouldn't  
*allow*  
it."

Yet Crutcher says he has always been prepared for angry complaints against his themes and style. He admits, though, that he's still shocked when parents and organized groups want to take their anger to the next level, and prohibit his works from schools and libraries.

"You know, coming out of the free-speech movement in the early '60s, and the hippie generation, I thought it was *done*," says Crutcher of literary censorship. "I was real surprised when my first book got challenged and then banned in a middle school. And that was in the '80s  
. I mean, I thought we  
*fixed*  
this, you know? I thought it was  
*shameful*  
to want to ban a book."

As Crutcher well knows, he's certainly not the only young-adult-literature author to see his or her works embroiled in controversy.

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"I was talking with Judy Blume," he says, "and I used to do some banned-books events with Robert Cormier, and it always seemed to me like they were *wounded* by the attacks that were made on them. Judy Blume was completely blindsided. She thought she had written a book that was really gonna help girls" with her youth classic *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*.

'  
"and then she got  
*hammered*  
. She didn't see it coming."

Crutcher, though, says he refuses to take the attacks personally, and makes no apologies for the potentially frightening subjects he explores. "Every story I've ever written has a source of reality in a kid's life," he says. "So I know I'm talking about something that's *real*, and I feel totally comfortable with my work.

"I always said there were two places in my life where I'm fearless: I would go anywhere with a client [in therapy] - there's no place I'd block off - and there's nothing I wouldn't write about. Beyond that, I've had every human failing and fear there is. But you have to *acknowledge* fear, and if you can articulate it, it's less scary. A monster out of the closet isn't as scary as a monster *in the closet*."

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### I Thought It Was About Me

Crutcher's acceptance of his works' controversial nature, however, doesn't keep them on public bookshelves, and the author has attended numerous book-banning rallies over the years at which he's been called upon to defend both his books and those of fellow writers.

"Even in conservative communities, there really aren't *that* many people who would ban a book," he says. "They do understand freedom. And they understand that they need to have control over their own families and their own immediate arena, and that other people have to have control over theirs.

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"But then there will be a group," he continues, "and it's usually a fundamental-Christian group, that will start with a complaint from a parent with a kid in school or whatever, and then it moves out to the church. And if there's a picket line somewhere or a school-board meeting, those folks will *be* there. They're *very* vocal, and they believe what they believe, and they come with fire."

Yet through his years of defending young-adult literature against threatened banning, Crutcher has discovered that no arguments made by authors, teachers, or librarians prove nearly as effective as those made by students. "If it's a school-board meeting, or some formal meeting where they're discussing the book, the best antidote to it [banning] is those kids who line up at the microphone to tell the school board why they like the book. What the book *did* for them.

"I saw a kid defend *Fallen Angels*, Walter Dean Myers' story of a young kid who goes to Vietnam right after high school. The kid got up there and he said, 'I'm a straight-A student. I could go to any university I want. But I'm going into the service, and in a year, I could be in the same place that Walter Dean Myers' character is, only it'll be sand instead of a jungle. But I'm a pretty good writer, so if I come back here and write what I know, do you mean you guys would *ban* me?' And it was *done*.

"You know," Crutcher continues, "A book is sometimes even better than it had a right to be because of the history the *reader* brings to it. I mean, I've got my philosophy, others have their philosophy, and off we go. But if you get kids up there saying, 'I read this book and I thought it was *about* me,' that's something that most school boards won't take on."

And Crutcher believes that such personal involvement might begin occurring with even greater frequency, given the staggering popularity - and not just among teens - of recent books and series directed at the youth-lit market.

"My agent was telling me the other day that right now the big paydays are coming in young-adult literature," says Crutcher, "and not just for the [J.K.] Rowlings and [Stephenie] Meyers. There are just a lot more people reading books about kids," which the author finds

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unsurprising considering the genre's current wealth of talent.

"I do think that, overall, the quality of writing that you see in young-adult literature right now is matchless," he says. "Walter D. Myers. Christopher Paul Curtis. Laurie Halse Anderson is just putting out some *great* stuff. God, I read a book by Elizabeth Scott not too long ago that is probably the edgiest book I've ever read of *any* kind. It's called *Living Dead Girl*

, and it's a story about a girl who was kidnapped by a pedophile when she was eight, and now she's 15. It's not a book you can't put down; it's one you *keep* putting down, but then you keep picking it back up.

"Alex Sánchez is another," Crutcher continues. "And there's John Green. And Chris Lynch is another who has this *huge* range. I mean, there are a lot of really, *really* fine writers out there."

Plus, of course, there's Rowling and Meyer, and Daniel Handler, too. "Books like Harry Potter and the *Twilight* series and Lemony Snicket," says Crutcher, "one of the things they've done is they've made it *cool* to carry a book. When I started writing young-adult literature, it really was the red-headed stepchild of *real* literature.

"And it still is, to some degree," he adds with a laugh, "but that mostly comes from people who write adult literature."

The author realizes, though, that no matter their acclaim and popularity, he and fellow young-adult-literature writers will likely continue to fight against censorship, which Crutcher believes "comes from a place of fear, but to people's credit, it also comes from a place of *protection*

"We say a stupid thing as adults," he continues, "and we say it all the time: 'I don't want you to make the mistakes *I* made.' What people forget is that what we have in common with teenagers is that we're always as old as we've ever been; we have what we don't know ahead of us, and what we do know behind us.

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"The only real teacher is experience. And the only way you can make *words* experience is to get them into the imagination. Otherwise it's just a lecture."

*On Tuesday, April 14, author Chris Crutcher will appear at the Friendly House of the Quad Cities at noon, the Moline Public Library at 4 p.m., and the Bettendorf Public Library at 7 p.m.*

*On Wednesday, April 15, Crutcher will appear at the Midwest Writing Center at noon, the Davenport Public Library Fairmount Branch at 4 p.m., and the River Music Experience at 7 p.m.*

*For more information on Crutcher, visit [ChrisCrutcher.com](http://ChrisCrutcher.com) . For a schedule of the author's local appearances and information on Quad City Arts' "Super Author" program, visit [QuadCityArts.com/literarysuperauthorevents.asp](http://QuadCityArts.com/literarysuperauthorevents.asp)*