Chris Crutcher on Censorship and The Sledding Hill: An Interview with Pam B. Cole

Chris Crutcher broke through as a writer with his 1983 publication of Running Loose, a young adult novel written in longhand in The Egg Shop and Apple Press in Berkeley, California. Since that time, he has published ten young adult books, all of which illustrate his compassion and respect for adolescents. While older adolescents have been Crutcher’s primary audience, his latest novel, The Sledding Hill, is his first book for middle school readers. In the following interview, Crutcher talks about his new book, censorship (a central theme in the work), and his decision to write for younger adolescents.

Cole: Chris, I certainly enjoyed your newest book, The Sledding Hill. I was surprised by all the twists and turns. Just what was the catalyst for this book?

Crutcher: Actually there were two. One was the memory of the power of irrational fear of mortality that comes developmentally in early adolescence (more powerfully to some than others), and the other was my increasing exposure to inflexible censors trying to get my books out of classrooms and off school library shelves. The more I dealt with the latter, the more I became exposed to other writers’ books facing the same single-minded opposition. Censors, a.k.a. the religious right, have been “wearing down” teachers and librarians who want to stand up for intellectual freedom. So part of the plot of The Sledding Hill centers around book censorship coming from within the school. Just like the classic, “the terrifying phone call is coming from inside the house.”

Cole: This book is coming out on the heels of a number of challenges to your other books. Is that a coincidence?
**Crutcher:** Actually, it is. But it’s a chilling coincidence. The bulk of this book has been finished for almost a year, so there’s no way I could have added the experiences I’ve had in the past months in Michigan and South Carolina and Kansas and Alabama. Yet, the language used in challenging the books is eerily similar to the language I gave to the challengers in *The Sledding Hill*. And the sentiments also seem to be the same. I think we are, and have been, in an atmosphere that is dangerous to our intellectual freedom in this country, so this book couldn’t come out at a better time for me. I’m feeling pretty combative these days because I believe that good stories can lead to great discussions between adults and teenagers and because I believe that stories about hard times can make people in hard times feel less alone.

**Cole:** The antagonists in the book, those who promote censorship, are members of the Red Brick Church, which can only be described as a “right-wing Christian” church. Much of what your protagonists say about censorship is that it promotes bigotry. Do you make a connection between the conservative right, the Christian right, and bigotry?

**Crutcher:** Actually, I do. If your beliefs and policies cause you to diminish or denigrate a portion of our society and to lobby for lesser consideration—legal consideration—you are a bigot. You may build houses for the homeless in Mexico and send money to Habitat, take food to the food bank, and give a tenth of your income to the church for good works. But if you treat a part of the population as if it is inferior, say the ten percent that is gay, or whatever percent of any given nationality, you are a bigot. Much of my work—*Ironman* and *Athletic Shorts*, for example—gets challenged because of “gay characters put in a positive light,” and censors allow themselves that bigotry, saying homosexuality is a choice.

**Cole:** So you believe it’s not a choice?

**Crutcher:** What right does a heterosexual person have to even ask that question? What answer would we give if asked when we made the choice to be heterosexual? Do you think many people would choose homosexuality, knowing it will make them reviled by their peers and treated as second-class citizens? Do you think that huge percentage of gay teenagers who attempt or succeed in suicide would choose a lifestyle that makes them feel so desperate? I’m constantly accused of “promoting homosexuality” or “writing about things our children shouldn’t be reading.” Forget that *none* of those characters is portrayed in *any* kind of light because of their homosexuality. The point is the Christian right wants them censored simply because they belong to that segment of the population that is gay. There will be a time when we are ashamed of how our culture now treats the gay population as we are about how we treated blacks during the Civil Rights Movement of the fifties and sixties. When we have this censorship discussion, we should all leave our gurus at home—you leave Jesus and Mohammed, and I’ll leave Buddha and the Tao, and we’ll talk about morality issues as they apply to humans. I miss the Christians I knew growing up, the Christians who preached inclusion and understanding. I know they still exist. I just wish they’d stand up and give Jesus a better name.

**Cole:** A lot of people would say you can’t leave God out of a morality discussion.

**Crutcher:** And I would say you can’t put Him in. With God in the mix—*anybody’s* God—morality becomes a list of things to do or not do instead of a way to be. It then comes out of fear rather than respect and is...
reduced to behaviors, at which point it has no meaning.

**Cole:** You could have easily used one of your published books as the novel being attacked in *The Sledding Hill*. Why did you make up a book?

**Crutcher:** Because I could separate the real Chris Crutcher from the fictional Chris Crutcher that way and because it didn’t hold me to the issues in *Whale Talk* or *Sarah Byrnes* or any other single book. It also let me play with that line between fact and fiction. Chris Crutcher is a real guy, but his book in the story is fictional. I also put him in the throes of writer’s block, which may or may not be true.

**Cole:** When I got to the end of the story, I couldn’t wait to hear Crutcher speak, yet he doesn’t. Why doesn’t he?

**Crutcher:** Because if I put too much of me—the real me—into the story, I tend to preach about censorship and/or the spiritual aspects of the story. The fictional Chris Crutcher’s presence in the book is to some degree a “bit” or a gag. I did it because I’m most familiar with the complaints people have about my stuff as opposed to other authors’ writing. The big reason is I didn’t want to use the story as a soapbox. Also, you can hear Crutcher speak at a library near you, and you can go to my Web site. This story is about the characters, about Billy and Eddie. The censorship issue in the story needs to be figured out by the characters. In many cases when my books have been challenged, it’s the kids and the passionate teachers and librarians who fight the censors. It’s too easy to write the author off as having a vested interest, which maybe we do.

**Cole:** I’ve heard you say, “Censorship leaves kids behind.” Can you explain how that’s true?

**Crutcher:** I write stories about real kids, as do many authors of adolescent fiction. Many of us talk about 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. And they are 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:** *The Sledding Hill* isn’t just about censorship. It’s a story about loss as well. What were your thoughts about adolescents as you were writing the story?

**Crutcher:** My thoughts were that almost all humans suffer losses they don’t understand before the age of twenty. How we respond to those losses often influences our core mental health as we grow older. Most of us are told how we “should” feel and how we “should” believe as we’re growing up, rather than being helped through the “process” of grief.

**Cole:** You generally write for an older audience; however, this book targets younger adolescents. Can you talk about that?

**Crutcher:** The protagonist is about three years younger than most of my main characters, and it’s a shorter story. Part of that was in response to so many teachers and librarians over the years asking me to write something for younger kids. I had written *King of the Mild Frontier* and come up with material I liked from my early adolescence, and that sparked ideas. I also did something in this story I’ve never done before. I purposely kept all the “bad” language out. I did that because typically the censors attack the language (it’s an easy target) when they’re really offended by the issues. So if
they go after this one, they’ll have to show their true colors.

**Cole:** It’s true your books are often censored for “bad” language. Can you elaborate on that?

**Crutcher:** Censors love to take language out of context, purposely. On three different occasions, would-be censors have gone through *Whale Talk* and listed what they considered to be offensive words. One counted 128 words. I hope they were counting each usage. I don’t know 128 offensive words. The point is, language out of context can be made to look pretty disgusting, when in fact, most kids don’t even notice, or when they do, say it makes the story more authentic.

**Cole:** Did you encounter any particular problems/issues in writing the story with younger characters?

**Crutcher:** Yes. My natural “kid” storytelling voice is between seventeen and nineteen years of age. It’s harder for me to remember the developmental language of a younger kid, and I often had to check it against real kids or good readers. I was also aware of editors’ and educators’ sensibilities for stories for younger kids. I’m always angry at myself when I make that a consideration because it gets in the way of storytelling.

**Cole:** What did you struggle with most?

**Crutcher:** The voice of the deceased narrator. Once he was dead, he became very smart, and I tended to give him an adult voice. He is funnier and cleverer with his old voice. I also struggled with the issue of censorship because it was close to home, and I had to get it away from me to do it justice.

**Cole:** Why did you choose a deceased narrator?

**Crutcher:** Because I wanted the advantage of the vision of a third-person narrator, along with the voice of a first-person narrator. You get “all seeing” along with intimacy with the narrator.

**Cole:** Was there a particular part of this story that was easy to write?

**Crutcher:** The relationship between Eddie and Billy’s dad, for whatever reason, seemed most natural.

**Cole:** The reader doesn’t learn much about the character Warren Peece—a great name by the way. Are you thinking about using him as a character in a future book?

**Crutcher:** It’s a pretty good pun, if I do say so myself, and the possibilities are inviting.

**Cole:** What do you hope adolescents take from this book?

**Crutcher:** I want them to read a good story, and I want them to have fun discussing censorship. I also want them to take a good look at who the censors are, their motives and their world view.

**Cole:** What do you hope adults will take from it?

**Crutcher:** The same thing.

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