



Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes Discussion Questions

1. Author Chris Crutcher dedicated this book to “all those who finally stand up for themselves.” Which characters learn to stand up for themselves? What has to happen to get them there?
2. Sarah Byrnes has spent a lifetime standing up for herself but it hasn't made her safe or happy. What additional lessons or skills does she pick up in the course of the book?
3. Narrator Eric Calhoun (“Moby”) seems to think of himself as Sarah's only real friend. But super loser Dale Thornton is the person she tells what really happened when she was burned. Why do you think she chooses Dale to confide in?
4. Moby's dad left the family before Moby was born and Sarah's mother runs out on her daughter not just once, but twice. Yet there are several strong adults – parents, a teacher, a minister – who help the kids and who have their respect. What qualities do you notice in the “good” adults? Do they seem realistic?
5. Which of the characters in this book present a “false face” to the world? How do their words and actions differ from who they really are?
6. Which character do you think changed the most by the end of the book? What caused them to change? How did they change?
7. Sarah’s father was an abusive parent. In what ways did he abuse her? Do you think he really would have killed her in order to keep his secret?
8. Sarah’s scars are an outward sign of tremendous pain and suffering, both physical and emotional. But her classmates, for the most part, are not sympathetic to her plight. Why do you think people turn a blind eye to the suffering of others?
9. Do you think friends are obligated to keep secrets for one another? What if keeping the secret might place your friend in danger, or hurt them in some way later on?
10. *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* has been challenged and even banned in school and public libraries around the country. Why does this book elicit such a strong response? Do you think it is right for one person or group of people to attempt to dictate what an entire community is allowed to read?

About the Author

I grew up in Cascade, Idaho, a small lumber and logging town of about 950 people in the mountains of west central Idaho, a town that later became (tavern for tavern, service station for service station, make-out-spot for make-out-spot) Trout, Idaho, in *Running Loose*. Not many people, least of all anyone connected with my education, would have imagined – in their most psychotic moments – I would ever write.

My father was a smart and insightful man who read voraciously and indiscriminately. He was a World War II B-17 pilot who was as conversant with the latest private-eye novel as he was with the classics, as familiar with ancient biographies as he was with popular fiction. He loved the act of reading, of gathering information. My mother was a "word" person who wrote poems for birthdays and anniversaries, played Scrabble with a vengeance, and corrected my grammar like a woman possessed.

My response to their appreciation of the written word was to read a grand total of one book from cover to cover during my entire four years of high school, opting rather to invent titles for reports, as well as stories to go with them, and to choose my authors from the pages of the Boise telephone directory. Obviously I got into this storytelling business out of a definite and specific need.

I think it is no coincidence that the one book I did read in high school was *To Kill a Mockingbird*, because fifteen years after I graduated from college, became semi-literate, and decided to become a storyteller, stories like Harper Lee's were the only kind I had any desire to tell – stories about real life as I see it, about my sense of justice and injustice.

As is true for all writers, my work is colored by the parts of life with which I've chosen to surround myself. I spent nearly ten years in Oakland, California, as Director of a K-12 alternative school for inner city kids who for one reason or another couldn't make it in the public school system. *One More Last Chance High School* in *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* was drawn directly from my experiences there. I chose to leave urban America when I realized that about a third of my life was being spent standing in line, so I headed back to the Northwest, where I had been a sociology and psychology major at Eastern Washington State College fifteen years earlier. (In reality, and my GPA bears this out, I majored in swimming.) In Spokane, Washington, I took a job as a child and family therapist in a mental health center, where I worked for twelve years, focusing on families involved in child abuse and domestic violence. I continue as a chairperson for the Spokane Child Protection Team.

What I believe I have gained, and what I hope my writing reflects, from working these past twenty years with people in difficult situations is a sense of the connection between all human beings – the ghastly as well as the glorious, an awareness of the damage we do as a society creating unreal expectations for ourselves, and a different perspective on the true nature of courage. For me, those things are worth exploring and writing about.

