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Reflections: A Student Response Journal



Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes
Chris Crutcher

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Response Journal

To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

Chapter 1

1. Eric mentions that when people ask “What went wrong?” with him, they usually attribute the “problem” (his weight) to his mother’s spoiling her son as a means of compensating for his father’s absence. Why do you think people ask what went wrong when they see an overweight person? How much control do you think parents have over how much their kids eat (or whether they smoke, et cetera)? If you have children, will you consider it your responsibility to keep them slender?
2. Why a woman as beautiful as his mom would have fallen for a “tub of lard” like his dad baffles Eric. What is your reaction—and what are your assumptions—when you see a couple that seems very unevenly matched in terms of physical attractiveness? Do you respond differently when seeing an attractive woman with an unattractive man than you do when you see an attractive man with an unattractive woman? Explore these questions in a paragraph or two.
3. Eric calls swimming a “thinking man’s sport,” but doesn’t explain what the term indicates to him. What do you think is meant by a phrase like “thinking man’s [or woman’s, for that matter] sport”? Do you agree that swimming is one? How about soccer? Tennis? Gymnastics? Baseball? Write a page or so about what the phrase means to you, naming at least three sports you consider “thinking persons’ sports” and giving your reasons why. In addition, name at least one sport you do *not* consider a thinking person’s sport and explain why.
4. What do you think of Sarah Byrnes’s decision to make everyone call her by her full name? Would you have done the same in her position? Why or why not?
5. Mind roaming as Mautz chews him out for his underground newspaper, Eric imagines a “self es-steam room” next to the steam room at his mother’s fitness club. You go in, come back out, and *voila!*—whatever it is that most keeps you from having soaring self-esteem has been taken care of. If the room really existed, would you use it? If not, why not? If so, in what way would you be different when you emerged?

Chapter 3

10. What would be your gut reaction if you saw Ellerby's "Christian Cruiser" cruising around your neighborhood? Would you find it blasphemous? Hilarious? Mildly annoying? Maddening? In a paragraph, describe how you think you'd feel and why.
11. Eric pushes himself at swim practice not just for his own sake but out of deep respect for his coach. As he phrases it, "[W]hen somebody puts as much into us as Lemry does, I'd die before wimping out on her." Describe someone who inspires you in this way—someone you'd "die" before letting down, not out of fear but out of respect. It doesn't, of course, have to be a coach—or even an adult.
12. Brittain's self-righteousness grates on Ellerby's nerves. Mark is a "plastic God Squadder," he says, and continues, "Sometimes I wish I could have religion their way. You know, no responsibilities in life but to cut down people who don't think the way you do."

Whether it's true in Brittain's case or not, religion (most forms of it, certainly not just Christianity) does occasionally get misappropriated by people who want to use it chiefly as a means of condemning others. Describe a time when you've seen that happen—whether in your community or on TV. Why do you think it happens?

13. Eric tells Sam that Dale Thornton was "kind of a friend and kind of an enemy" to Sarah Byrnes. Bizarre as it sounds, most of us have had a relationship like this. Write about yours or, if you prefer, speculate on how you think Sarah Byrnes and Dale Thornton might become friends after she she's already blasted him in *Crispy Pork Rinds*.
14. Author Chris Crutcher comes up with some weird and wonderful comparisons (or similes) in *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*. One of Chapter 3's finest occurs when Eric describes himself "breathing soft as a man passing a township of killer bees at night." Write at least five additional intriguing ways in which Eric could have described this action. You don't have to use "soft as"—change it up if you want to—but do keep it quiet.

Response Journal

22. Ellerby becomes ashamed over ever having laughed at a joke someone else made about Sarah Byrnes. If you had gone to school with Sarah Byrnes for twelve years—that is, since first grade—do you think you would have laughed at a joke about her at least one time? Be honest with yourself; then explain your answer.
23. At the end of the chapter, Ellerby tells Ms. Lemry that the topic of his class presentation will be “shame.” Brainstorm and create a list of ten or more things you might look into or address if you yourself were giving a presentation on this topic.

Chapter 6

24. Eric’s description of Virgil Byrnes is vivid and razor-sharp. He tells us not only what Byrnes is wearing, but how Byrnes wears it—and even how Byrnes’s lips move when he talks. In addition, Eric gives us a number of images that we *have* seen to enable us to more clearly envision Byrnes, who we have not: a hawk, “the kind of man a dog circles warily,” “one of those shadowy people you can’t imagine ever having been a kid” are examples. Now, summon up the image of the most threatening, frightening person you have ever seen. It doesn’t have to be someone as glaringly evil as Virgil Byrnes; it could be someone who looks harmless but makes you feel uneasy (even a dentist.) Write a description that rivals Eric’s in terms of intensity and attention to detail—a description that will make anyone who reads it feel the way you felt when you saw this person.
25. Do you think Dale has hit on the truth about Sarah Byrnes’s scars? How does the way Sarah Byrnes acts when Dale mentions it affect your answer?

Response Journal

40. Was Carver out-of-bounds when he sent Jack Callum out of town in order to get closer to Eric's mom? How would you react if you found out that the person you're dating had done something similar? Explain your answer in the form of an "advice letter" to Eric's mom, giving her your opinion on the degree to which Carver's disclosure should affect their relationship.
41. Eric refers to Jack Callum as an "adjusto" and has used the same word to refer to Dale Thornton. Crutcher never defines "adjusto," though, so it's up to us to pick up possible meanings through the context in which it's used. What do you think "adjusto" means (assuming you don't use it)? List at least three other words people at your school might use to get at the same idea.

Chapter 11

42. In a way, it has helped Sarah Byrnes to meet kids in the hospital that have been through as much as—or even more than—she has. As she puts it, "I'm not the only one in the world who hurts, or even the person who hurts the worst. If the ones who hurt the worst stay, then I can, too."

Suppose that, after meeting the other kids at the hospital, Sarah Byrnes honestly found that she *was* the worst off and *did* hurt more than anyone else. How do you think that would affect her thinking and her letter to Eric? Explain your answer.

Put another way: Is it fair or wise to rely on others' pain to help lift us out of our own?

43. Sarah Byrnes admits that, when they were younger, she kept Eric around because he was an "easy friend." Who are your easy friends? Why are they "easy"? Do you value them more or less than the friends you do not consider "easy"? Whose "easy friend" are you? Is it somehow insulting to be considered someone's easy friend? Are more challenging friendships more solid or real? Explore these questions in a page or so.