

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes

by Chris Crutcher

written by Emily Lloyd

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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 *voilà!*—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?

Response Journal

6. Eric and Sarah Byrnes call their underground newspaper *Crispy Pork Rinds*, a name which had personal significance for them and which Eric later finds himself explaining to Ms. Barker, the school secretary. If you and your best friend/s were to create an underground newspaper, what would you name it? What three school issues would you address in your paper's first edition?

Chapter 2

7. In his Contemporary American Thought class, Eric uses Sarah Byrnes's story in an attempt to prove that the world is a bad place in which to live. He's countered by Kathy Gould, who insists that Eric only proves that the world is a bad place for *Sarah Byrnes* to live in, not everyone.

In a paragraph or two, write about a person (it could be yourself, if it seems relevant) for whom you think the world is a bad place in which to live. Back up your assertions with reasons. In a second paragraph, write about a person (again, it could be you) for whom you think the world must be a good place in which to live. Back this up with examples as well.

8. Now, offer your opinion on the argument that Lemry and the students in Contemporary American Thought never quite manage to resolve: Is the world a bad—or is it a good—place for the *majority* of those that live in it? Try to support your assertion with reasons so tight that they'd pass even Lemry's inspection.
9. When Eric almost allows a bully to take his money, Sarah Byrnes sneers, "Every time you let somebody take your stuff, or let them see you hurt, you get killed." Respond to Sarah Byrnes's philosophy in a paragraph or two, using examples from your own life.

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.

Chapter 4

15. Eric and his mother are dismayed that they can only think of two people—one Eric himself—who could be called friends of Sarah Byrne. What's the minimum number, in your opinion, of friends that a person should have? Would you rather have many friends, or are a close one or two enough? Freewrite on this topic for half a page or so.
16. In junior high, Sarah Byrnes told Eric, "You have to always think about survival, Eric. Trust me." What does this tell us about the 13-yr-old Sarah Byrnes? If a 13-yr-old girl said this to you, would what you think? Would you ask any questions? Imagine that you are Eric, and respond to Sarah Byrnes's comment in about a page of the dialogue you might have with her at this point. Be sure to write what you think Sarah Byrnes would say, too.
17. Not yet used to the Calhoun family, Carver is embarrassed about the openness with which Eric and his mother talk about sex. Do you consider it desirable or undesirable for parents and children to talk as openly as Eric and his mother do? Would you prefer to be part of a family in which sex was discussed this openly, or part of one in which it was rarely or ever mentioned? Explain your answers.

Chapter 5

18. Even though his mother shows Eric how to create a secure, private journal on his computer, he still feels as though it is too risky to write down his thoughts about himself and others. He's afraid that someone, somehow, will chance upon his his words. Many of us are also reluctant to write personal things down because it makes whatever we write seem *final*, as if we can't take it back or change our minds.

Does writing something down help clarify your thoughts on personal matters or seem to solidify them more than you're comfortable with? Are some things too personal to write down even if you're sure you're the only one who will see the writing? Explore your feelings about these issues in a paragraph or two.

19. Because of his fear of embarrassment, Eric finds it nearly impossible to admit to others what he finds important or to let them get "up close and personal with [his] emotional self." What impact does the dread of embarrassment have on the way you live *your* life? How far would you go to avoid embarrassment? Would you, for example, lie about (or make an effort to conceal) your feelings or beliefs? Explain.

20. If a class like CAT was offered at your school, would you sign up for it? Why or why not?

21. Are there any issues that you think should not be discussed or debated in a high school classroom? If you don't think there are, explain why a classroom should be an open forum for all topics of discussion, however controversial. If you *do* think certain issues should be avoided, which issues and why?