

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Chinese Handcuffs

by  
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## Book Information

Chris Crutcher, Chinese Handcuffs

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Interest Level: UG

Still troubled by his older brother's violent suicide, eighteen-year-old Dillon becomes deeply involved in the terrible secret of his friend Jennifer, who feels she can tell no one what her stepfather is doing to her.

**Award:** ALA Notable/Best Books; Margaret A. Edwards Award

**Topics:** Adventure, Survival; Community Life, Child Abuse; Community Life, Suicide; Mysteries, Secrets

## Main Characters

Annie Hemingway Dillon and Preston's mother, who left her husband after Preston's suicide

Caulder Hemingway Dillon's father, who keeps his grief about his wife and son to himself

Christy Hemingway Dillon's younger sister, who lives with his mother

Coach Sherman the girls' basketball coach, who helps Dillon sort out his feelings

Dawn Lawless Jen's sister, who relies on Jen for security

Dillon Hemingway an athletic sixteen-year-old boy who comes to terms with his brother's death and helps a friend deal with her abusive stepfather

Dr. Newcomb a psychologist who is one of the leading authorities on child abuse; he gives Dillon advice about Jennifer's situation

Jennifer Lawless a star basketball player who is sexually abused, first by her father and then by her stepfather

John Caldwell the principal of Dillon's school

Linda Lawless Jennifer's mother, who is beaten by her husband and does not stop his molestation of her daughter

Preston Hemingway Dillon's brother, who committed suicide

Ryan Stacy and Preston's young son

Sarah a social worker and counselor who helped Jennifer when she was a child

Stacy Ryder Dillon's friend who is the mother of Preston's child

Terrence Martin (T.B.) Jennifer's abusive stepfather

## Vocabulary

**breaststroke** a swimming movement that includes a frog-like kick

**capricious** impulsive and unpredictable

**concussion** an injury of the brain resulting from a violent blow

**masochist** one who derives pleasure from experiencing physical or emotional pain

**triathlon** an athletic event that involves running, biking, and swimming

## Synopsis

Dillon Hemingway is a very athletic sixteen-year-old boy who is trying to qualify for the Ironman competition in Hawaii. He is driven and focused in his sport, yet his personal life is troubled by his brother Preston's recent suicide. Dillon begins writing letters to the deceased Preston as a way to work out his grief.

Preston was once involved in selling drugs for a local motorcycle gang. During his initiation, he crashed while performing a dangerous maneuver on his motorcycle, leaving his legs crippled. He gradually became more depressed, worrying his girlfriend Stacy and his brother Dillon. One day, after he participated in a rape at the gang's hangout and then learned of Stacy's pregnancy, he drove out to the cemetery with Dillon and killed himself.

As Dillon is trying to come to terms with his brother's death, his close friend Jennifer has problems of her own that she is trying to keep hidden from her friends. As a young child, Jennifer was abused and molested by her father. Her mother remarried, but

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she is now sexually abused by her stepfather. Like Dillon, she has learned to turn her suffering into athletic success and is the best basketball player in the city.

Dillon is confused over his relationships. He has always loved Stacy, who was in love with his brother, and he really likes Jennifer, but cannot seem to be romantic with her. He decides to introduce his two friends over dinner, but it ends up being an uncomfortable evening. On the way to the restaurant, Jennifer tells him that her stepfather molests her. Dillon is outraged, but Jennifer tells him not to say or do anything because she fears her stepfather will harm her little sister if provoked. When they meet Stacy at the restaurant, Stacy admits that the new baby in her family is hers and that Preston was the father. Dillon returns home with a lot to think about.

At the first playoff game for the girls' basketball state championship, Jennifer dominates the first quarter but then unexpectedly runs out of the gym. Dillon pursues her and catches her just before she is about to jump off a high bridge. Jennifer had decided to kill herself, but Dillon is not going to let another close friend die that way.

When Dillon is sure Jennifer is safe from harming herself, he begins to concoct a plan to help her. He sees a local psychologist to learn about people like Jennifer. He even contemplates murder and asks his father, a veteran of war, what it was like to kill a person. Ultimately he decides not to resort to violence, but instead visits an undercover journalist and asks to borrow his video equipment. Dillon sets up a camera in Jennifer's room and catches her stepfather molesting her on tape. He then shows the tape to her stepfather and demands that he leave the state or else Dillon will go to the police. Jennifer's stepfather leaves, and later she gathers the courage to bring the tape to the police anyway and her stepfather is sent to prison.

At the end of the story, Dillon has found a way to move past his brother's suicide, Stacy is proud of her child, and Jennifer has begun the first steps towards finding peace and security in her life.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

In their youth, Dillon and Preston violently kill Charlie, a neighborhood cat. Based on what you know of each of their characters and personalities, what, in your opinion, motivated the boys to commit such a heinous act?

*At the time of the killing, the boys seemed to feed off each other's emotions. They enjoyed being in control of the situation and showed no respect for Mrs. Crummet, the older woman who owned Charlie. They were also protective of their dog, who that cat had scratched. The boys worked themselves into a frenzy as they killed Charlie. Though they realized what they were doing was wrong, they did not stop.*

### Literary Analysis

There are two main characters in this novel, Dillon and Jen. Which of the characters do you relate most to and why?

*Many of the students will relate to Jen because she is focused and athletic. Jen is a good friend to Dillon and a good sister to Dawn. Though most students will not have suffered abuse like she has, there may unfortunately be some students who identify with Jen's pain. Some students may also identify with Dillon because of his loyalty to his friends. Dillon is also a good athlete who learns to focus emotional pain into athletic prowess. Death is an issue that nearly everybody will have to face in their lives, and many students will be able to relate to Dillon's feelings of loss.*

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## Inferential Comprehension

In the story, Stacy explains that Ryan is Preston's son. Why did Stacy try to get pregnant? How do you feel about this action?

*In the novel, Stacy explains that she got pregnant on purpose. She felt that Preston was "so far gone" that she would lose him forever. To have his baby meant to have a part of the man she loves. She was aware that he would be a bad father, so she most likely intended to raise the child herself.*

## Constructing Meaning

According to Sarah, "...kids have an inalienable right to unconditional care, and parents who don't give it are breaking a spiritual law." How do you feel about Sarah's belief? Do you agree or disagree? Explain.

*Most students will agree with Sarah's belief. Since the students who read this novel most likely live with their parents, they probably feel that their parents should provide and care for them without question.*

write a response explaining their personal experiences with this technique and how they believe this technique may have helped Dillon in the triathlon.

**Responding to Literature** Dillon often writes to his brother, Preston, just as the main character in *The Color Purple* writes to God. Ask your students to choose someone to write to for one week. They could choose a celebrity, a deity, or a deceased friend or family member. Their letter should contain their thoughts and feelings about their lives, much like Dillon's letters did.

## Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Feelings** When Sarah counseled Jen, she and other small children played games in order to express their feelings of fear and anger toward their abusive parents. Ask your students to consider how they felt when they read this section of the book. Then ask them to write a short response which describes their feelings.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** In their youth, Preston and Dillon kill Charlie, a neighborhood cat. Ask a local Humane Society spokesperson to come to your class to discuss animal abuse. Then ask your students to create posters that encourage people to treat animals humanely. These posters could be put up in your school and community.

**Extending Meaning** In the story, Dillon reads the book, *Dog Soldiers*. From reading this book, Dillon learns how to place the pain in an imaginary triangle. Discuss Dillon's description of this technique with your students. Then ask them to try this technique while exercising. Have them