

Caulder's Story: *Chinese Handcuffs* and The Untold Story of the Vietnam War

Thomas Phillion

For most people, the Vietnam War is a distant memory. Living now over twenty five years after the end of the conflict, it is easy to forget the significant impact that this war had on American society and the lives of the people who were most involved in it. Contemporary films and books occasionally remind us of this impact, as do the occasional forays of the United States government and military into conflicts in other parts of the world, but for the most part the Vietnam War—like war in general—has remained largely out of sight and mind. People are more aware of conflicts in athletic arenas and in their own homes and workplaces than they are of the Vietnam War.

This distance is particularly true of adolescents. Increasingly, teenagers are being raised by parents who have no direct recollection of the Vietnam War, and who have been educated about it—like their children—only through film and television. Like most teenagers throughout history, today's teenagers are more attentive to peer relationships, fashion, sports, and popular culture than they are to history and political matters. Although they are curious about the Vietnam War and other events from the 1960's, today's teenagers are likely to view this era as an historical artifact with no substantial connection to their own lives and interests.

Given these circumstances, high school teachers need to be especially creative in introducing the Vietnam War to their students. In this essay, I will examine a heretofore unappreciated resource that English and history teachers might use for this endeavor. The resource of which I speak is the young adult novel *Chinese Handcuffs* (1989), by Chris Crutcher. Although *Chinese Handcuffs* has been broadly recognized by critics, writers, and teachers for its therapeutic value, the quality of its storytelling, and its powerful connection to contemporary teenage and adult voices and concerns (Spencer, 1989; Bushman, 1992; Sheffer, 1997; Davis, 1997), I will suggest that an additional value of Crutcher's novel is that it opens up opportunities for teenagers to use their understanding of sports psychology, peer relationships, and contemporary adolescent issues and problems to build bridges to the culture and events of the Vietnam War. More to the point, I will argue that Crutcher embeds a figurative narrative about the Vietnam War within the sports/suspense/problem novel that he weaves. By incorporating *Chinese*

Handcuffs into high school English and history curriculums, and by pairing it up with other texts about the Vietnam War such as Walter Dean Myers's *Fallen Angels* (1988), high school English and history teachers might encourage teenage readers to identify more closely with the experiences of soldiers who fought in Vietnam, and to re-think their assumptions about the disconnection between their own contemporary world and the events of this era.

Plot Synopsis

The plot of *Chinese Handcuffs* is likely familiar to many readers of this journal. Through first person letters and third person vignettes, Crutcher creates a multifaceted narrative about three teenagers who are grappling with painful issues in their homes and lives in contemporary America.

The protagonist of *Chinese Handcuffs* is Dillon Hemingway, a star high school athlete who, readers learn at the beginning of the novel, has characteristically rebelled against his football coach, quit the team, and dedicated himself to managing the girls' basketball team and to triathlon training. Even though he is only a junior in high school, Dillon has endured a great deal of pain in his very short life.

At the very beginning of the novel, readers learn that Dillon's mother and father are divorced; more significantly, Dillon reveals that his brother Preston committed suicide. Dillon attempts to make sense of his brother's suicide through private letters that he writes to his brother; in addition, through third person vignettes, readers learn about the exact events that contributed to Preston's death. Readers learn, for example, that Preston experimented with drugs and alcohol, and later became a member of a motorcycle gang—a decision that eventually resulted in the loss of his legs, his descent into heavy narcotics use and gun trafficking, and his participation in a gang rape. Dillon is torn up over the suicide of his brother because he feels that he somehow could have prevented it (Preston shot himself in the head on a Saturday morning, in Dillon's presence). Furthermore, Dillon feels guilty because of his own success in sports and school, his insensitivity to the depth of his brother's depression, and because he still has strong romantic feelings for Preston's girlfriend, Stacy.

Although Stacy is a minor character in *Chinese Handcuffs*, she is important because of her influence upon Dillon and

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because she grapples with her own difficult issues and problems. Like Dillon, Stacy feels a great deal of guilt as a result of Preston's suicide. More importantly, Stacy has to decide, over the duration of the novel, whether or not she wants to reveal the fact that she has given birth to a child that Preston fathered. Initially, Stacy is reluctant to reveal this secret. However, through talk and reflection, Stacy eventually moves toward an alternative perspective.

The third adolescent character whom Crutcher spotlights in *Chinese Handcuffs* is Jennifer Lawless. Like Dillon, Jennifer is a star athlete; however, she is not a rebel. Jennifer is the dominant player on the girls' basketball team at Chief Joseph High School, and she is a National Merit Scholar finalist who never lets anything rattle her visibly. The secret or problem that Jennifer is dealing with is that she is a long-time victim of sexual abuse in her home. Up to the point that Dillon encounters her, Jennifer has never revealed her abuse to anyone, and she has perfected methods of covering up her pain. As Jennifer and Dillon become increasingly involved, though, she no longer is able to maintain the control that she heretofore has manifested. One evening, Jennifer too attempts suicide.

Dillon cannot again bear to see someone whom he loves go this route, and so he intervenes and stops her. Over the remainder of *Chinese Handcuffs*, Dillon must find a way to resolve his own sexual feelings for Jennifer and stop the abuse that Jennifer is receiving from her stepfather, T.B.

Chinese Handcuffs and the Untold Story of the Vietnam War

On the surface, this complicated fictional account of the lives of three contemporary American teenagers has absolutely nothing to do with the Vietnam War. However, embedded within this complex narrative are several direct and indirect references to it. A critical examination of these references reveals another story of physical pain and emotional abuse that is never directly articulated over the duration of the novel: the story of Dillon's father, Calder Hemingway.

Dog Soldiers

In the Prologue to *Chinese Handcuffs*, Dillon competes in a triathlon race. This scene introduces Dillon to readers and helps them to develop an understanding of some of his core characteristics. Crutcher writes that Dillon uses a technique drawn from the novel *Dog Soldiers* (1973) to endure the pain that he feels as he completes his race: "he envisions a perfect triangle in the back of his skull, then scans his body for pain, visually placing it within the borders of the triangle to make it tolerable" (*Chinese Handcuffs* 2). The novel *Dog Soldiers* received the National Book Award in 1975 and discusses, among other things, the influence of the Vietnam War on American life; in it, one of the key characters, a former Marine, uses this same technique (learned in the military) to endure horrible pain. Although this reference to *Dog Soldiers* is quick and minor, it is an initial clue that Dillon, in a sense, is a soldier who has developed some useful short-term strategies for displacing the terrible physical and emotional pain that he feels.

Charlie the Cat

A more significant reference to the Vietnam War is a key scene at the very beginning of the novel involving Charlie the Cat. In his suicide note, Preston tells Dillon: "The time with the cat. Don't ever forget" (*Handcuffs* 7). Although Dillon is skeptical about the connection between this episode and Preston's suicide, Crutcher's placement of it at the very beginning of the novel indicates the weight that it carries not only as a commentary upon Preston's suicide, but also upon the novel as a whole.

In the Charlie the Cat scene, Preston and Dillon team up to kill a three-legged cat named Charlie. Charlie the Cat is a highly unattractive creature, a "three-legged alley tom with a face like a dried-up creek bed and the temperament of a freeway sniper" (*Handcuffs* 10). One day, Charlie gets a hold of Preston and Dillon's dog Blitz (short for Blitzkrieg)

and slices him across the nose. Although the boys are outraged (they are ten and eight, respectively), Charlie's owner, Mrs. Crummet, is merely amused and warns the boys to keep their dog out of her yard. Not surprisingly, the boys decide to take matters into their own hands. Later that evening, Preston and Dillon lure Charlie into their garage, and wrap him up in a gunny-

sack and begin to abuse him. But Charlie breaks through the sack and slashes Preston's hand. Outraged, Preston beats the sack wildly against the ground, and orders Dillon to grab a tire iron. Dillon obeys, and several swings later, the cat and the bag stop moving. The boys bury Charlie in the dirt next to their garage, and swear never to tell anyone what happened.

On the one hand, this episode helps readers to appreciate Preston's capacity for violence, his lack of self-control, and his inability to forgive himself for poor decision-making. Correspondingly, readers perceive Dillon's more balanced perspective. On the other hand, this scene can be read figuratively as a metaphor for events such as those that occurred at My Lai during the Vietnam War. "Charlie" was a well-known nickname for the North Vietnamese guerrillas who fought against U.S. soldiers; the physical and psychological attributes that Crutcher gives to Charlie, Mrs. Crummet, and the boys are broadly consistent with popular perceptions of Vietnamese and American forces. Through the Charlie the Cat episode, readers obtain further insight into the "war" experiences of the "dog soldiers" Dillon and Preston. They learn that in social conditions infested with distrust, violence, fear, arrogance, and lack of communication, it is very easy for atrocities to occur.

Chinese Handcuffs

Immediately after the Charlie the Cat episode, Dillon recalls another incident involving Preston's girlfriend, Stacy. The incident is the one from which the novel derives its name: at a carnival, Stacy surprises Dillon and invites him to put his finger in "Chinese handcuffs," or a trick straw from which Dillon and Stacy can only release themselves by not pulling away from one another (*Handcuffs* 49-52). On the one hand, this scene represents the complicated nature of Dillon's relationship to Stacy, and by extension to Preston and Jennifer; simultaneously, it symbolizes the acts of "letting go" of se-

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crets and trusting others that all of the adolescent characters in this novel need to experience in order for healing to occur. However, this scene and the title of the novel also evoke the Vietnam War. Over the duration of the war, a fear of China and communism led the United States to search for violent and self-defeating ways of obtaining the security that it desired. Just as all of the adolescent characters in *Chinese Handcuffs* have to let go of the insecurities that dominate and stifle their existences, so too the American government had to relinquish itself of the unproductive mindsets and behaviors that caused so much death, trauma, and tragedy.

Preston's Suicide

At the core of *Chinese Handcuffs* are two singular acts of violence: Preston's suicide and the abuse of Jennifer Lawless. Immediately after reflecting upon Stacy and the Chinese handcuffs, Dillon explores the events related to Preston's suicide (*Handcuffs* 55-65). In a third person account sandwiched

between Dillon's reflections, readers learn how Preston arrived home at 6:30 AM on a Saturday morning, invited Dillon to shoot tin cans in the Three Forks cemetery, and used his grandfather's WWII German luger to toy with Dillon and to shoot himself in the head. Furthermore, in subsequent sections, readers learn that Preston became a quadriplegic as a result of a motorcycle accident, that he joined a motorcycle gang called the Warlocks and began abusing drugs and selling guns, and that he participated in a gang rape of a young woman the night before his suicide. Readers also learn that Dillon poured Preston's cremated remains into the engines of the Warlocks' motorcycles immediately after Preston's funeral, and that the Warlocks came looking for Dillon at Chief Joseph High School before finally chasing him down and threatening him with the loss of his life should he ever go near their gang again.

Once again, these events can be read literally and figuratively. Literally, they drive the narrative action, and account for the psychological conflicts that Dillon writes about over the duration of the novel. Figuratively, they develop the embedded narrative about the Vietnam War. Perhaps coincidentally, Preston's suicide echoes the suicide in *Coming Home*, a popular film from the 1970's that starred Jane Fonda and Jon Voight. In this film, a Vietnam veteran commits suicide after apprehending the romantic relationship between his wife and a quadriplegic Vietnam veteran. More significantly, through Preston's suicide and related events both before and after it, readers see how guns, violence, and lack of communication are an intrinsic feature of everyday life in Three Forks and, by extension, the United States. The biker gang, the guns, the rape, the references to Chief Joseph and a WWII luger (as well as the dog Blitzkrieg and the Hemingway name)—all of these serve to place Preston's suicide and the Vietnam War (as expressed through the Charlie the Cat scene) within a larger cultural context that values aggression and individual achievement more than non-violence and the development of community. Like many Vietnam War veterans

(including the tragic veteran depicted in *Coming Home*), Preston is unable to reconcile the conflicting ideals and commitments engrained in his environment, and so he is unable to create a productive identity for himself once he loses his legs and therefore his identity as a "soldier."

Jennifer Lawless

The abuse of Jennifer Lawless is as important an act of violence in *Chinese Handcuffs* as Preston's suicide. Through the story of Jennifer Lawless and her step-father T.B., readers are held in suspense until the end of the novel, and they acquire a powerful understanding of the physical and psychological trauma that the Vietnam War—and war in general—inflicts upon soldiers and innocent civilians.

Throughout *Chinese Handcuffs*, Crutcher inscribes many scenes of Jennifer's sexual abuse. Although all of these scenes are sensitively constructed, and convey powerfully the constant tension that circumscribes Jennifer's existence (a tension

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comparable to the tension soldiers in Vietnam felt as they waited in anticipation of the arrival of their enemies), the one that I will focus on here occurs at the end of the novel when Dillon uses an infrared camera to record and then watch T.B. sexually abuse his daughter (*Handcuffs* 204-208). Although some readers may perceive this plot development as implausible, the use of an infrared device is entirely consistent with other narratives about the Vietnam

War (see Walter Dean Myers's *Fallen Angels*, and Tim O'Brien's *If I Die In A Combat Zone*, for example). In addition, Dillon's description of the effect that watching this video has on him evokes descriptions of night patrol recorded by many Vietnam War novelists (see, for example, the chapter "Night Life" in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*). Metaphorically, Dillon's second-hand observation of T.B.'s abuse of Jennifer enables insight into all of the "bad dreams" (*The Things They Carried*, 220) that Vietnam veterans and innocent civilians carry around with them as a result of their war experiences.

Caulder Hemingway

Ultimately, *Chinese Handcuffs* is a novel that encourages teenagers and other readers to use written and oral language to resolve or at least to negotiate difficult and painful issues and experiences. Through the examples of Dillon, Jennifer, and Stacy, Crutcher models how critical discussion of life problems can temporarily heal pain and provide a springboard for the achievement of a better life.

Aside from Preston, the one character in *Chinese Handcuffs* whom Crutcher does not have speak or write about his painful teenage experiences is Caulder Hemingway, the father of Preston and Dillon Hemingway. Early in *Chinese Handcuffs*, readers are told that Caulder Hemingway is a Vietnam veteran and amateur historian (9), and toward the end of the novel Caulder explains that "there's been a rule in this house since 1971 that I don't talk about the [Vietnam] war" (195). Even though Caulder does briefly discuss his war experiences with Dillon at the end of the novel, he does not go into detail. Hidden from readers is the full story about

Caulder's war experiences, his return home, and his subsequent divorce.

One possible explanation for this silence—beyond the explanation that Caulder is an adult and therefore his story is not relevant to the narrative (an explanation that I reject because Crutcher is on record repeatedly as saying that he writes for both adults and youth)—is that Crutcher is attempting to provide his readers with an indirect means of making sense of a story that has a very important relationship to the other teenage stories in this narrative. By telling Caulder's story about his experiences in the Vietnam War through figurative language, Crutcher does not overemphasize this adult story; instead, he provides his teenage readers with the independence and freedom to read what they like into his narrative. In addition, he creates a situation wherein teenager readers might use their empathy for Dillon, Jennifer, and Stacy to make connections to the issues and problems experienced by a previous generation. Crutcher shows, in other words, how the language of personal trauma and violence can be used to tell a broader historical narrative about war, tragedy, and reconciliation or renewal.

Instructional Strategies

By unearthing the Vietnam War narrative embedded in *Chinese Handcuffs*, I mean to call attention to an important instructional resource that high school English and history teachers can use to engage their students in critical thinking about the Vietnam War. On the one hand, teachers might invite their students to imagine what they would have done in situations like those represented in *Fallen Angels* and other realistic accounts of the Vietnam War, and to discuss what decisions they would make if presented with similar situations today. On the other hand, the above figurative reading of *Chinese Handcuffs* suggests that teachers might also ask their students to explore conflicts and issues that they face in their own contemporary world, and to examine how their responses to these conflicts and issues mirror those of teenagers who lived during the 1960's and who found themselves inevitably entangled in the conflict in Vietnam. Although the first instructional approach is very effective, the second is attractive because research has shown that when students use their schemas and personal experiences to make sense of educational materials, they remember their lessons for a longer period of time and develop more powerful insights into instructional materials and themes (Rosenblatt, 1983; Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith, 1995; Langer, 1995).

Teachers who choose the second route face a number of obstacles. Figurative reading is hard for adults and teenagers alike, and so discussion of *Chinese Handcuffs* needs to be undertaken very carefully. Teachers cannot push too hard the figurative reading that I have outlined here, but they ought not to let a figurative reading of *Chinese Handcuffs* go unsaid. My suggestion is to invite students to read *Chinese Handcuffs* at the end of a unit on the Vietnam War or a theme that would allow for the reading of a realistic Vietnam novel such as *Fallen Angels*. Only at the very end of such a unit, after students have had a chance to discuss *Chinese Handcuffs* and explore it in relation to more obvious themes (com-

ing of age, heroism, social conflicts, decision-making) would I ask students to try to make connections between *Chinese Handcuffs* and historical or fictional material about the Vietnam War.

Listed below are some of my best suggestions for undertaking the sort of post-reading critical examination of *Chinese Handcuffs* that I am advocating here. A good text to consult for other instructional ideas and strategies is Larry Johannessen's *Illumination Rounds: Teaching The Literature of the Vietnam War* (1992). Johannessen's book is an invaluable resource for any teacher who wants to explore the Vietnam War through literature.

Some Ideas for Helping Teenagers to Make Connections between *Chinese Handcuffs* and the Vietnam War

1. Ask students to re-read the section of *Fallen Angels* where Perry kills for the first time; alternatively, have them read soldiers' diaries or review transcriptions of testimony about what happened at My Lai. Invite students to explore in writing the connections they see between these accounts of brutal behavior and Dillon and Preston's behavior in the Charlie the Cat scene. Invite them to reflect upon their own experiences with social conflict and acts of violence.
2. If students are reading *Fallen Angels*, ask them to re-read the section at the end of the novel just before and after the successful mission to save Monaco, and especially the paragraph in which Perry reflects: "I looked around. Nothing. What the hell was wrong with this damn war. You never saw anything. There was never anything there until it was on top of your ass, and you were screaming and shooting and too scared to figure out anything." Compare Perry in this situation to Jen in *Chinese Handcuffs*—How are their situations similar? Who is more like Jen, Monaco or Perry?
3. If students see or understand the above psychological connections between the Vietnam War and *Chinese Handcuffs*, ask them to search for other references in *Chinese Handcuffs* to soldiering, the Vietnam War, and other conflicts in US history. Ask students to reflect upon the connection between the title of Crutcher's novel and what they know about the history of the Vietnam War from their study of *Fallen Angels* or historical texts. In what ways was the US "handcuffed" by the Chinese during this conflict? To what extent is oppression and social conflict an engrained feature of American society?
4. Ask students to speculate as to why Crutcher included so many indirect references to the Vietnam War. Ask students to make a chart representing the different stories of individual characters in *Chinese Handcuffs*—Whose stories get told? What stories remain unspoken?
5. Ask students to reflect upon the advantages and disadvantages of the different approaches to storytelling that Myers and Crutcher use in their novels (or substitute another author for Myers). In what ways is realistic historical fiction powerful and compelling? What are its limitations? What potential or advantage lies in figurative language? What disadvantages?

Conclusion: Integrating *Chinese Handcuffs* into High School English and History Classrooms

In high school English and history classrooms, *Chinese Handcuffs* is rarely read and appreciated. Like other Crutcher fiction, *Chinese Handcuffs* is provocative in nature because of language issues and its strikingly dramatic content. That *Chinese Handcuffs* is a "sports" and "suspense" novel also limits its appeal for some teachers. Teachers are reluctant to teach a text that contests prevailing notions of literary quality and merit and that has the potential to catalyze questions from parents.

Implicit in the above examination of *Chinese Handcuffs*, however, is the argument that this is a novel that deserves serious re-consideration. Throughout his career, Crutcher has been a strong advocate of the notion that young adult literature is literature that anyone—adults, as well as teens—can appreciate and learn from (Monseau, *Responding to Young Adult Literature*). In *Chinese Handcuffs*, Crutcher is most successful in writing in ways that integrate adolescent and adult concerns and storytelling.

In several years of teaching *Chinese Handcuffs* to prospective and practicing English teachers, I have not once encountered a reader who has volunteered the above figurative reading; yet, when I present the ideas that I have outlined here, my students—undergraduate and graduate—almost always are persuaded by this interpretation. This response tells me that *Chinese Handcuffs* is a unique young adult novel in that it has the ability to "surprise" adult readers with readings that stretch beyond the literal. Like some of the finest classic works in world literature, *Chinese Handcuffs* possesses a complexity that challenges readers and enhances enjoyment.

For these reasons alone, *Chinese Handcuffs* ought to be more often taught in high school English classrooms. But the fact is that *Chinese Handcuffs* has not been given the critical attention that it deserves, and so it is unlikely to become as popular a choice in high school curriculums as, say, *Fallen Angels*. Given this unfortunate state of affairs, perhaps a more productive use of *Chinese Handcuffs* might be to use it to call attention to the blinders that adults and many teenagers often bring to their readings of young adult novels. While *Chinese Handcuffs* may not ever become required reading in American literature courses, it does have the potential to push readers who typically do not read young adult literature to take a second look at this genre and to ask themselves what else they have been missing.

Within the context of high school history classrooms, the goal can be conceived along the same lines. *Chinese Handcuffs* can teach adolescents that there is more than one way to render history, that realistic accounts of war and violence have their limitations, and that the emotional and psycho-

logical effects of history are as important as the economic and political. Or, to quote a popular bumper sticker, teens can learn that the personal is political, and the political is personal.

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Thomas Phillion is an Associate Professor in the College of Education at Roosevelt University, and Director of the Chicago Area Writing Project. He has published articles in Illinois English Bulletin, English Journal, and has had several monographs published by NCTE. Currently, he is working on a research project about the oppositional practices of urban literacy educators.