

TEACHERS' RESOURCE KIT

Longacre Press Biography

One Stroppy Jockey

THE CHRISTINE LAWN STORY
WITH SANDY MCKAY

'One minute there you are cruising along just fine and the next minute everything's changed forever.'

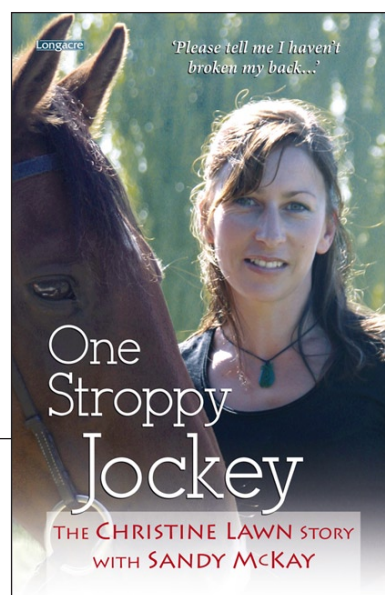
FEISTY, strong-willed and plucky: that's how friends describe jockey Christine Lawn. Drawn by her love of horses to first work as a stable-hand and later as an apprentice jockey, Christine rode nineteen winners – until 2002. That year she fell from a horse during a race at Wingatui. The accident brought her riding career to an abrupt end and left her confined to a wheelchair. She was told she'd never walk again.

This is the story of Christine's courageous struggle in the Burwood spinal unit, her determination to find a new independence, and her spirited resolve to walk again. She is an inspiration to us all.

Christine's story is told here by writer Sandy McKay. Sandy cleverly weaves Christine's own words into the fabric of this remarkable biography. From the very start there's a compelling expressiveness and urgency to Christine's determined struggle.

'The thing about Burwood hospital is that you didn't have to look far to find someone worse off than yourself... Some of them thought they'd won Lotto if they managed to feed themselves.'

McKay brings the full drama of Christine's life to her readers. There's the buzz of excitement at the start of a race, but this is one rough ride. And this is one stroppy jockey!



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RESOURCE KIT CONTAINS:

Discussion topics on:
life philosophy, Christine's personality,
disability, wheelchairs, inspiring people
and horse-racing.

Debate topics, Media and Writing ideas.

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Reg Graham

Preface from *One Stroppy Jockey*

I FIRST MET Christine Lawn in September 2004 when I was approached to help write a book about her life. Most of what I knew already had been gleaned from the 20 pages of her story that she had recently sent to Longacre Press.

I knew from these that she was a jockey from Ashburton, in her early thirties, who had come off a horse at Wingatui, near Dunedin, in 2002. I knew the accident had brought her riding career to an abrupt end and had left her confined to a wheelchair. I also knew she was a person with a ton of courage. You could tell that from the very first page.

Her writing style was direct and lively, giving the impression of a feisty, determined woman who swore like a trooper and would never call a spade a shovel. I looked forward to meeting her. Oh, and to make things even more interesting, we had recently learned that Christine was expecting a baby.

On first impressions Christine seemed a more mellow character than I'd expected. She also came across as good-natured and articulate.

Christine glided confidently round the kitchen in her chair and if she was nervous it certainly didn't show. She made us a cup of tea and the afternoon sun streamed into the cosy dining room as we quietly set about getting to know each other.

Then she hauled out a folder bulging with press clippings — her life story in newsprint.

'Back in the saddle', 'Hoping to realise a dream', 'Dreams trampled on the track', flashed the headlines.

Articles from both before and after the accident were meticulously filed and dated. We browsed through the scrapbook before heading into the lounge to watch the 'Trackside' video: the video containing footage of the accident that left Christine paralysed.

'How can you bear to watch it?' I asked, feeling queasy already.

'I've never had a problem,' she answered, without hesitation. 'And, to begin with, I really needed to see how it all happened.'

She pressed 'play' and took us to Wingatui, near Dunedin. It is February the 9th, 2002.

... The jockeys crouch low over their horses — urging them forward with whips, hands and heels; the crowd cheers; the commentator is shrill with excitement. And the fact that there is money involved certainly adds to the drama. But today, amidst it all, disaster is about to unfold.

I watch anxiously as a rider is thrown from a horse. Thwack. Like a parcel falling from the back of a truck it plonks to the ground, bounces along the track, and then stops, dead still. The race carries on ... the horses cross the line ... the winner is proclaimed ...

Back in Ashburton, Christine paused the video with her remote control before zooming up close.

'That's me,' she said matter-of-factly, pointing to the small heap on the track. 'Right there.'

Life Philosophy:

Accidents, death, and traumatic events often make people reassess their lives and ask searching questions, such as:

Is there any meaning to my life?

Is there a God?

How should I live?

What do I believe about life?

- How would you answer these questions for yourself?
- Describe Christine's philosophy of life, both before and after the accident.
- At the end (p. 189) she states that 'Shit happens... Get over it and get on with it.' Explain this philosophy, relating it to 'bad' things that happen to people. Do you agree with it?
- Christine's boss had the philosophy that 'you gotta be tough to make it in this world'. (p. 66) What do you think of this philosophy? Did it help Christine?
- 'We have to remain philosophical,' says Jan Hay in response to Christine's accident. (p. 108) What does the word 'philosophical' mean in this context? Does it imply that accidents should be accepted? Is it possible that some people attract accidents?
- 'He wasn't bloody well watching over me very well,' says Christine about God. (p. 20) Would a God 'allow' bad things to happen to people?
- 'Fate' is referred to in this story, for example, the feeling of being saved from the fatal ride on True Justice (p. 32); and later 'fate' put an obstacle in Christine's path. (p. 170) What is fate? How does it differ from 'luck' or 'chance'? Why does the writer characterize it as an active force (creating obstacles)? Do you believe in fate? Are some events meant to happen? What other concept do people understand instead of 'fate'.

Debate Topics:

- Life is one big accident.
- Fate, not chance, rules our lives.
- You can make your own luck.

Christine's Personality:

- Foreword: what do the JCA.'s comments reveal about Christine's personality? Is stroppy the right word for her?
- Define the words 'stroppy' and 'proactive'. Christine is not a passive personality. She is described as feisty, stroppy (p. 9) and proactive; with an 'unwillingness to conform or be controlled in any way'. (p. 51) How was this a problem during her schooling? Why do schools require conformity? How was her rebelliousness later an asset?

How do the following events illustrate Christine's control of her world:

- the immunisation needle (p. 42);
- the homework book (p. 44);
- getting out of hospital early;
- not accepting the doctor's verdict (p. 115)?

Why are her stroppy character traits attractive to readers?

- Christine seems to be accident prone. (eg. p. 58) Why? What does it suggest about her interaction with the world? And the level of risk-taking in her life?
- How did childhood farm experiences influence her?
- How is Christine's 'toughness', optimism, and sense of humour revealed under extreme pressure? (p. 16, 17, 21)
- Why didn't she feel sorry for herself? (p. 30) How did Christine's anger and determination help her? (p. 134, 135) How did her 'bull at a gate' attitude inspire others?
- How did her parents handle her rebellion? (p. 52)

Disability:

- When Christine was told she would not walk again she said, 'I'm fucked'. How would you react to being told you might be paraplegic?
- Why does paralysis often involve the grieving process? (see p. 36) The stages people often go through when grieving are: denial, anger, avoidance, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Give examples of each stage from Christine's experiences.
- What are the things we take for granted about daily life/movement? (pp. 116, 117) Imagine being dependent on other people.
- What privacy has to be given up when a person is paraplegic? (p. 121, 122)
- The language used to describe disability is very important. What is the difference between being a 'mum with a disability' and a 'disabled mum'? Why is correct language of concern to people with disabilities? How does it influence the way they are treated? What is Christine's final advice to other people with disabilities and difficulties? (p. 189)
- Research the organisation RDA. What is their philosophy? (p. 156)
- Stem cell research (p. 186) offers hope, but raises ethical questions. What are they?

Wheelchairs:

- How are people in wheelchairs sometimes treated? (p. 124) Why is a stigma attached to them?
- Christine says 'she felt defined by her wheelchair' (p. 150) and that she felt like 'a second-class citizen'. What did she mean?
- What is the world of the wheelchair-bound like? (p. 149)
- What depressing truths did she learn about people's reactions to disability? (p. 152–154)
- Compare Christine's experience to those of the sports-people in the documentary *Murderball* (on DVD). What are the similarities?

Inspiring People:

- Read Mark Inglis inspiring account of his challenges in *To the Max* (Random House). Mark Inglis's theory of the 'risk seesaw' is outlined on page 161. Explain it. Have you found this to be true in your life? Give an example.
- How did Sheila Laxon inspire Christine? (p. 138)
- Find out about other famous people who had disabilities, for example Lance Armstrong, Christopher Reeve, Douglas Bader, Helen Keller. What did they achieve in their lives? What personality traits did they share?
- 'There's always someone worse off than you are.' (p. 146) Why is this called a cliché? Is it true? Is it helpful?

Media:

1. How did the woman's magazine portray Christine? (p. 10) Was it fair? What was Christine's reaction to the article? How can we get a false impression of people from short 'sound bite' articles? What was the real Christine like?
2. Read the newspaper 'opinion' article on p. 34. How is the tone of this article different to a news report? What is the effect of words like 'greed' and 'indifference'?
3. Why did Christine's have a love/hate relationship with the press? (p. 11)

Horse Racing:

- Before reading the book, list the possible risks and rewards involved in horse-racing.
- The qualities of a jockey are described as 'strength, balance, judgement, fitness, nerve, and a competitive instinct'. Give an example that shows how each one contributes to being an effective jockey.
- What's the significance of weight control for a jockey? (p. 14, 63) How did Christine achieve it? What are diuretics? What's the danger in using them? (p. 75)

- There is still debate over the crash. What is revealed about Christine's race that casts new light on the risks? (p. 34) The steward's view is different again. (p. 35) How could the evidence be assessed?
- What's the attraction in horse-racing for the spectator? Is it the risk involved, or the gambling, or something else?
- Why is horse racing 'erratic and unpredictable'? (p. 91) Does racing strike you as a risky sport after reading this book? What are the safeguards? How does the judicial room act as safeguard for jockeys? (p. 33)
- What qualities of a horse make them fascinating to humans? (p. 38, 39)
- The role of women in horse racing is examined. (p. 60–62) Why were women not accepted for so long? Do the arguments of physical demands and marriage still apply? Are there other sports where this is true? What happened in 1977 to change things for women jockeys?
- Is the 'conservative' racing industry less male-dominated now?
- Watch the movie *Sea Biscuit*. (p. 140) How would it have inspired Christine?

Writing:

- Imagine you have a physical disability. Write a story about going to school and coping with your disability.
- Write a letter to Christine saying how you felt about her story.
- Write a critical review of the book. Comment on the quality of the writing, layout, photographs and information.
- What suggests this is a 'warts and all' biography? (e.g. p. 111)
- Read pages 28–32 and write a newspaper report of events from the point of view of an observer. Make sure your account is fair and does not make uninformed guesses.
- Who are your real life heroes? Who are the people (famous or not) that inspire you or encourage you in life? Write a short description of your hero.

