

Crenshaw
Katherine Applegate
2015

Crenshaw is Katherine Applegate's 2015 middle grade novel about Jackson, a young boy whose family is struggling with financial instability, and his imaginary friend, Crenshaw, a human-sized cat with a fondness for bubble baths and doing cartwheels. Narrated by Jackson in the first person, the story explores the impact of poverty on family and community, the need to reconcile fact and fancy, and how to face the unknown and unpreventable productively.

□□The novel is divided into three parts. Relevant quotes from Ruth Krauss's *A Hole is to Dig: A First Book of First Definitions*, Jackson's favorite childhood book, provide epigraphs for each part.□□The epigraph for Part 1 reads, "A door is to open" (1, italics in original). It speaks to what Part 1 explores: the re-emergence of Crenshaw in Jackson's life. Jackson has just completed fourth grade when he sees Crenshaw surfing at the beach. The sight troubles Jackson both because he has not seen Crenshaw since second grade and because he does not think of himself as "an imaginary friend kind of guy" (8). He hopes to be a scientist when he grows up and prefers facts over fancy, unlike his parents, who are musicians, and his sister, who loves stories. Her favorite is *The House on East 88th Street*, about a crocodile called Lyle who lives in a brownstone with a human family.□□For Jackson, facts feel tangible and can be measured, while stories are lies, and he does not like being told lies. Jackson worries that he may be going crazy and that Crenshaw's presence is a harbinger of trouble ahead. Crenshaw first came into Jackson's life when his family was homeless, and Jackson has begun to notice familiar signs: piles of unpaid bills, arguments between his parents, and not enough food to eat.

□□Part 2 begins with the quote, "Mashed potatoes are to give everybody enough" and is comprised of Jackson's recollections of being homeless (47). The displacement felt sudden to Jackson, who sees his parents working five part-time jobs between the two of them. He knew that his father had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and his mother was laid off from her job as a music teacher, but he was not aware of how dire their financial situation had become. One day, he was living in a house with a yard and swing set and the next in his family's minivan with his parents; younger sister, Robin; and their dog, Aretha. His father, Tom, and mother, Sara, disagree about seeking aid from social services. Tom wants to be able to provide for his family himself, while Sara recognizes that they need assistance. After fourteen weeks, Tom and Sara save enough money to move into an apartment. Jackson and Robin are able to return to school, but the experience leaves Jackson anxious about instability and fearful of the unknown.

□□Part 3 opens with the epigraph, "The world is so you have something to stand on," a reference to Jackson's emotional growth and acceptance of life's unknowns (143). In this section, Jackson's family prepares to sell all non-essential possessions at a yard sale in an attempt to raise enough money to pay their back rent. Jackson understands that his family is on the cusp of homelessness again, but they do not discuss what is happening to them. His parents try to lighten the burden by making jokes and being positive, but their approach amplifies Jackson's sense that he is being lied to. At the same time, he fears expressing how he really feels because he does not want to burden his family and finds himself using his parents' avoidance and denial tactics when Robin worries that they will have to live in their minivan

again. □□ What Jackson does not realize is that he and his parents both struggle to communicate openly with each other, each fearing hurting or burdening the other. Through Crenshaw, who urges Jackson to tell the truth, and Jackson's friend, Marisol, who encourages him to embrace the unknown, Jackson is able to confront his parents and express what he needs: to be told the truth. His parents explain their plan to him. They admit that unpredictable obstacles may yet appear, and that if and when they do, they will keep fighting. At the end of the book, Jackson is reconciled to Crenshaw's presence as a form of comfort. He understands his need for honesty while also acknowledging that a little bit of magic—whether music, love, or an imaginary friend—can lighten his burdens and anxiety.



Your Dog, 2002

Yoshitomo Nara

Fiberglass

(Likely to be on view soon)

Yoshitomo Nara's sculpture embodies the spirit of a child's playmate as well as that of a menacing creature, larger than life. Its huge scale reminds viewers how the world looks through the eyes of a child. Yoshitomo Nara is a Japanese artist best known for his paintings of children and animals that appear simultaneously sweet and sinister, as seen in his work *Do Not Disturb!* (1996). A contemporary of Takashi Murakami, Nara has been influenced by popular culture in both Eastern and Western society. His versatile practice explores themes of isolation, rebellion, and spirituality through printmaking, painting, sculpture, ceramics, and installations.

Connection:

Crenshaw is a larger-than-life cat that, though imaginary, is very real to Jackson, the main character of the book. And, though soft and furry and full of stunts, like surfing, floating through the air on an umbrella and skateboarding, his appearance is very unsettling to Jackson. *Your*

Dog, though appearing to be like a cartoon image of a child's "playmate" is meant to be somewhat menacing. Much of Nara's art contains child-like images, but with somewhat frightening allusions.

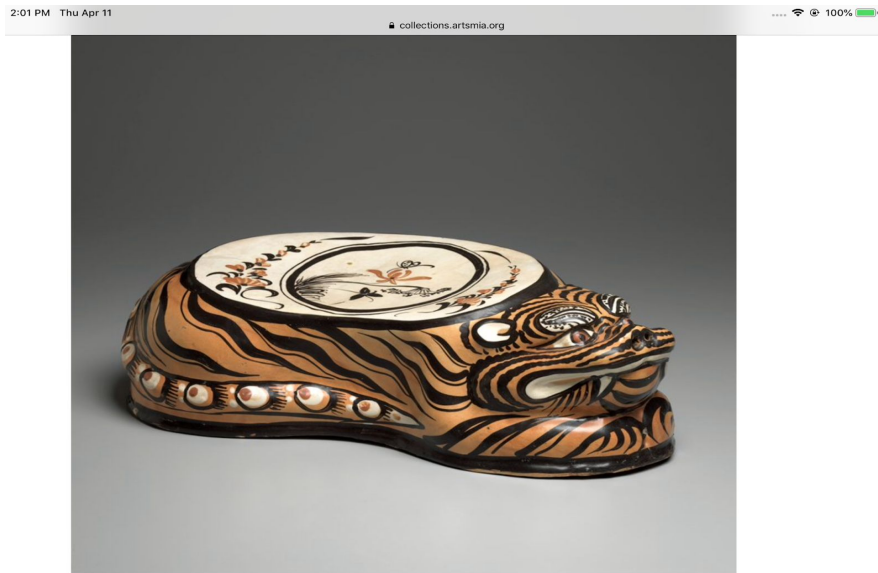
This artwork can spark a good discussion about what Crenshaw represents, and why he is with Jackson; and even though he is playful and friendly, Jackson is quite disturbed when Crenshaw re-appears, after an absence of several years.

Quotes:

P. 31 (when he was younger): "...I remember thinking how great it was to have a friend who liked purple jelly beans as much as I did."

P. 4-5 (when Crenshaw suddenly reappears, when Jackson is entering 5th grade);

"I glanced around me...I didn't see anyone looking at the floating, umbrella-toting surfer cat in the sky. I squeezed my eyes shut and counted to ten. Slowly. Ten seconds seemed like the right amount of time for me to stop being crazy...It was late June, nice and warm, but I shivered. I felt the way you do the instant before you leap into the deep end of a pool...you know there's no turning back."



Tiger Pillow

12th century China

Stoneware with Black and Tan glaze over a white slip under a clear glaze

G 204

Ceramic pillows like this were made at a time when pillows were thought to impart special qualities to a person during sleep. The tiger has been a powerful symbol in China since ancient times. One function of a tiger pillow was to scare off evil influences.

Connection: Though Jackson is eager to "be rid" of Crenshaw because he fears that he is too old for an imaginary friend, and people will think he is going crazy, he does take comfort in Crenshaw's presence, and actually receives plenty of wisdom from his discourse with Crenshaw throughout the novel. Pillows, like our tiger pillow appeared throughout Chinese folk tales; in one tale, a man's pillow could magically transport him to other places, in other tales, pillows could make white hair turn black and replace fallen teeth and restore hearing and sight. This

tiger pillow could protect a child from the demons that cause nightmares. Thus there is a real connection between the beliefs surrounding the tiger pillow and the value that Crenshaw provides to Jackson: Crenshaw comforts Jackson when he has a nightmare; Crenshaw seems to magically provide answers to life's problems when Jackson needs him to.

Quotes:

P.229 (and p.79) Crenshaw counsels Jackson: "Tell the truth to the person who matters most..." (He adds, "You." To let Jackson know that he needs to be honest with himself, as well as others.)

There are plenty of other quotes in which Crenshaw provides comfort to Jackson when he truly needs it. Eg: P.228 "I'll help", said Crenshaw, "I'll listen" (when Jackson awoke from a nightmare in which he was yelling for help and nobody would listen).

See p. 71 (Crenshaw sleeping in same position as Tiger Pillow). "When I didn't answer, he settled into a doughnut shape, tail wrapped around himself, and closed his eyes. He purred the way my dad snores...."



Star Path, 2017

Tom Hammick; Printer Tom Hammick; Publisher Hammick Editions, East Sussex, England:

Publisher: Peacock Print Studio, Aberdeen, Scotland

Color reduction woodcut, with jigsaw elements, laser cutting, and hand-coloring

G380

British artist Tom Hammick creates dreamlike, wistful worlds in painting and print. In this monumental color woodcut, he depicts the wondrous, dizzying feat of human space travel. A massive rocket ship dives toward the barren moon, leaving a verdant blue-green planet, the earth, behind. To represent the night sky, Hammick printed the grain of the woodblock support in dark blue, gouged with numerous small marks that stunningly evoke a vibrant firmament of shining stars. With its upside-down composition, gravity-defying rocket, and cold palette, Hammick conjures up a cold, dark, unnervingly silent and lonely world in outer space.

Connection:

This print depicts a rocket ship journeying through space, a scientific accomplishment which required that scientists, along the way, took leaps of faith and were willing to challenge old notions of what was or was not possible. So much of what Jackson struggles with, when Crenshaw comes to visit, and when he feels his parents are not admitting real facts to him, is how to reconcile his perception of himself as a scientific “I like facts” kind of guy (see pp.7-9) with the fact that he has an imaginary, gigantic cat spending time with him. He does not want to accept what seems like it is not possible.

Even his friend, Marisol, who also wants to be a scientist and knows a lot of facts about animals, perplexes him by saying that she likes magic.

Quotes:

P.40. “Not me. Scientists can’t afford to be optimists or pessimists. They just observe the world and see what is. They look at a glass of water and measure 3.75 ounces or whatever, and that’s the end of the discussion.”

P.213 (Marisol, discussing when Jackson figured out how a magician, that visited their school, was actually making a rabbit appear): “ ‘And then you told everybody (how he was doing it)?’ I grinned. ‘Figured it right out’. ‘But you took the magic away, Jackson. I liked thinking that little gray bunny appeared in a man’s hat. I liked believing it was magic.....just enjoy the magic while you can, okay?’ “

P.214. (Marisol speaking): “Fun fact, Jackson. You can’t see sound waves, but you can hear music.” (Believe in what may not seem tangible.)

P.245. “There had to be a logical explanation. There’s always a logical explanation. Meantime, I was going to enjoy the magic while I could.



Futamura Yoshimi

Black Hole No. 8, 2015

Stoneware with porcelain slip

G252

The earthquake and tsunami of 2011 in the Tōhoku region of Japan had a profound impact on Futamura Yoshimi. This is reflected in her recent work, in which she explores the notions of impermanence and natural disaster. She has described her post-2011 work as “represent[ing] a

fear of the uncertain, a force beyond our control which threatens to extinguish everything, even the desire for rebirth. The Tōhoku earthquake reminded me of how grateful I am to have grown up in Japan, as I could not be where I am today without its cultural influence.”

Connection:

Jackson wants to live in a world of certain facts where he can control things. Yoshimi’s sculpture, Black Hole, represents “a fear of the uncertain” and a “force beyond our control”. It seems to perfectly epitomize the feelings expressed in the following quote:

Quote:

P.188. “Still I felt twisted inside. Like I’d swallowed a knotted-up rope...What bothered me most, though, was that I couldn’t fix anything. I couldn’t control anything. It was like driving a bumper car without a steering wheel. I kept getting slammed, and I just had to sit there and hold on tight...were we going to have enough to eat tomorrow?...Were we going to be able to pay the rent?...Would I go to the same school in the fall?...Would it happen again?”



Dream Castle in the Sky, 1908

Maxfield Parrish

Oil on Canvas

G 334

Parrish brought together a harmonious group of elements: a nude figure with panpipes who gazes longingly at a castle perched on a craggy cliff across a lake. Parrish’s skillful lines and details gave his work a photographic quality and made him an incredibly popular painter and illustrator. But color was his secret weapon. He achieved his trademark luminous color, seen here especially in the lake and trees, by building up layers of colored glazes on the surface of the painting. It is said that at the height of his career, one in four American homes had a Parrish—usually a print, illustrated book, or magazine cover.

Connection: Jackson is frustrated because he feels his parents are dreamers and optimists that don't face facts (as he constantly does). He wants them to get their heads out of the clouds, stop treating him like an immature kid, face facts and provide some practical answers to the issues they face. Parrish's figure, who is a musician, gazing off at a dreamy image, is a good visual for the way Jackson perceives his parents.

Quotes:

Pp.37-38

“ ‘There's no such thing as magic,’ I said.

‘Music is magic,’ said my mom.

‘Love is magic,’ said my dad...

‘How about the smell of a new baby?’ Asked my mom...

They were still going at it when I shut the door.”

P.40...“I know this sounds like a good thing, but they were always looking on the bright side.

Even when things were bad—and they'd been bad a lot—they joked. They acted silly. They pretended everything was fine...But my parents were optimists. They looked at half a glass of water and figured it was half full, not half empty.”

P.42“I didn't ask any more hard questions after that. Somehow I just knew my parents didn't want to give me hard answers.”



Untitled, 1991

Ernest Whiteman

Steel

G261

In Ernest Whiteman's words: In the beginning, I didn't really have any idea that I was going to be doing rock writing images, but as a child, I used to go up to the mountains of Wyoming where there are rock writings. It felt like going into a large cathedral or a temple. And these images became something that started appearing in my work. I was working with neon, experimenting

with smaller images, and suddenly I said, "Why don't we try a large piece and see what happens." So these images have drawn me into them.

This image, made by an Arapaho artist who grew up on the Wind River reservation, contains a reference to rain falling, with the elongated shapes hanging from its outstretched left arm. It also contains a reference to food, in that its cupped right hand reaches forward to scoop up harvest from the earth (or...some have seen a reference to a fish...food from the sea). The long wavy line cut through the steel and illuminated by a bright neon light is the heart line. An important Native American symbol, the heart line connects the mouth of a person to its heart.

Connection: Though Jackson perceives his father as a dreamer, in fact, his father has to deal with some pretty cruel realities. This is vivid in the section in which he leaves his family in the van in which they have been forced to live while he goes out into the rain to play his guitar, hoping people will give him "gratuities" as they drive by, so that he will have money to buy food for his family. The connections to this artwork are several: the artist was a Native American forced to leave his home and live on a reservation...thus forced into a transient lifestyle, like Jackson's family; the rainfall imagery and the importance of food are paralleled in the figures two arms; finally the heart to the mouth...Jackson's dad uses the only skill he thinks he has left to use, his song, to try to provide for those he loves.

Quote:

P.123. "My dad set the sign down gently on the passenger seat. Then he opened the door and stepped outside. It was misty. Leaves were shiny and dripping. Mom says she's only seen my dad cry three times....I watched my dad lean against the hood of our car and cover his eyes with his hand. His face was damp, but I told myself it was probably just the rain."



Pacific, 1998

Tony Berlant

From Tzedakah Box series

Metal, plywood, steel brads.

G362

This Tzedakah box, used to collect money for the poor, homeless and those in need is made out of discarded TV trays, wastebaskets and old commercial signs. It is made in the shape of a house, an image that Berlant says is powerful because “...everyone needs to have their own place in the world.” He recognizes that shelter, privacy, security and comfort are basic human needs.

The imagery also contains references to other basic human needs, such as food.

Connection:

The obvious connection is that a home represents security and is a basic human need that Jackson and his family feel threatened they will lose. The poignant imagery of hunger (the game of “cerealball”; the stealing of baby food for Robin, Jackson’s sister, etc.) also are well connected to this artwork.

Another connection is that it was very hard for Jackson’s dad to accept charity...which is the true idea behind a tzedakah box.

Quotes:

P.52 “ ‘There’s everything wrong with asking for help,’ my. Dad snapped. ‘It means we’ve failed.’ His voice had changed, too. It was sharp and hard...

We *have* asked for help, Sara. We’ve been to that food pantry more times than I care to admit. But in the end, this is my—our—problem to solve,’ my dad shouted.”

P.112. “(The policeman) ...reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled twenty-dollar bill. ‘Give this to your dad,’ he said. ‘But wait until you’re in the car.’ I asked how come I had to wait. ‘Because otherwise he’ll give it right back to me,’ the policeman said.” (And he was right).



Marvin Cone

The Appointed Room

Oil on canvas

1940

G376

This painting of a bleak, empty room, with open doors is painted in somber shades of drab green, with shadows and an unbalanced orientation. Everything feels barren and askew.

Connection: Part One of the book is labelled “A door is to open”. In this section, a door opens in Jackson’s life and lets in several unnerving things: his old imaginary friend, a worry that his life will, again, be turned upside down by needing to leave his home, the fact that he is growing up and feels that he may need to take a lot of things into his own hands, the feeling that he can’t control things.

Also, the emptiness of the rooms and the accompanying feeling of isolation is reminiscent of Robin’s and Jackson’s rooms when they need to empty them out for the garage sale.

Quotes;

P. 35 “Emptied out, it didn’t look like Robin’s room anymore.”

P.73. “My room is scary without my stuff in it. Could you come read me Lyle?”

P.185. “That night I sat on my mattress, staring at what was left of my bedroom...Dents in the carpeting hinted at what used to be there. A cube where my nightstand should have been. A rectangle where my dresser once stood.”



Musical Still Life, 1931-1932

Theodore Roszak, American (born Prussia)

Mixed media

G376

A pyramid of shapes, set against patterned background form this abstract still life. Painted wood, chair caning, and plaster protrude from the frame in a work that is both painting and sculpture. Neither the forms nor the functions are interpretable, yet many suggest musical instruments. The artist was interested in the geometric properties of Cubism and the psychological aspects of Surrealism. He combined these approaches to express the abstract and improvisational qualities of modern music.

Connection: Music and guitars appear in the book as important images. Jackson and Robin are both named after guitars. When asked what keepsakes, or treasured objects, Mom and Dad would keep (when told to clear out everything he owned for the garage sale except a few keepsakes), Jackson was told their guitars would be at the top of the list. While his parents come across as guitar playing dreamers without practical skills, it is ultimately Jackson's dad's guitar, and his willingness to give up this treasured keepsake, that lead to a turn around at the end that keeps the family on decent footing.

Quotes:

P.201 "My dad held up his guitar. Sunlight darted off its smooth black body. 'It's a beauty', said my dad. 'Lotta history.' 'Dad, I exclaimed, 'you can't sell your guitar.' 'There's always another guitar around the bend, Jacks,' said my dad, but he wouldn't meet my eyes."

P.236. " 'Well, then here's another fact,' said my dad. 'Last night I called the guy who wanted to buy our guitars. He told me his brother owns that music store down by the mall. He needs an assistant manager. His brother also has a garage apartment behind the store that won't be occupied for a month. It'd give us a roof over our heads for a little while, anyway. Maybe some more work."



Marc Chagall

The Poet with the Birds, 1911

Oil on canvas

G377

Marc Chagall, a Russian native, traveled to Paris in 1910 for an extended stay. *The Poet with the Birds* dates from his second year there. A man in traditional Russian clothing seems to float

as he lazily daydreams, staring up at the white birds in the tree. With the new freedom Chagall found in France, his work became increasingly dreamlike, anticipating Surrealist art of the 1920s and 1930s. A movement in both literature and visual art, Surrealism aimed to tap into the subconscious mind, often through dreamlike imagery.

Connection: When Jackson lies outside, staring up at the sky with Crenshaw, he begins to almost forget some of his problems and relax. It is when he learns to trust others, relax, and not feel that he must always control things, that he begins to regain his sense of self. At the very end, Jackson says that he is going to enjoy the magic while he can. The dreamy, relaxed state of Chagall's carefree Surrealistic poet relates to this goal of Jackson's at the end of the book.

Quotes:

Pp. 215-216. "That evening, Crenshaw and I went out to the backyard...we lay there, me on my back, Crenshaw on his side...It felt good, talking as the night took over. It almost made me forget that we were leaving the next day. It almost made me stop feeling the anger and sadness weighing me down like invisible anchors."

P. 222 "Crenshaw rolled onto his back and closed his eyes. A good cat fact to know is that they only expose their tummies when they feel safe." (And in a few pages, we see Jackson open up to his Mom and Dad, and Robin, exposing some of his doubts and vulnerabilities...the result: he begins to feel a little safer and a little more willing to give in to the possibility of magic in his life.)

Other Works of Art/Connections

G322- Reminiscences of 1865, 1904, John Frederick Peto/ Door imagery (A door is to open) and worthless "keepsakes" and someone who was known for truth ("Honest Abe"), an important value/theme in the book.

G 376- The Promenades of Euclid, 1955, Rene Magritte/ What is truth and what is perception? Reality vs. imagination/illusion.

G375- Family Treasures, 1991 Sheila Hicks/. "Keepsakes" to take with them when emptying out their home; value of "things".

G375- I was a Hidden Treasure, Then I Wanted to Be Known, 2017, Igshaan Adams/ Value of self discovery; feeling like a "knotted rope" inside.

G 250 Harp, late 1800s, Nzakara artist, Democratic Republic of Congo/ Guitar imagery

G 210- Table Frontal, 14th-17th century, silk tapestry, China, Ming dynasty/ Imagery of imaginary animal: "qilin" and a bat hovering over= references to bat discussion in Jackson's Science class, and his subsequent nightmare. Symbolism of bats.

Any armor in the museum, The protective shell Jackson builds around himself by hiding behind facts, etc.

G379- Tatra- Jackson and his family had to live in their car. Not as sleek and stream-lined as the Tatra, but imagine how hard for a family of four, plus a dog to live for months in a vehicle.

G 371- Halloween Party, 1942, Philip Guston. Painting of children huddled together, intimidated by something unseen off the canvas...may suggest artist's own insecurities brought on by upheaval of relocation. Parallels Jackson's insecurities about the prospect of being displaced.