

# GUT FEELINGS

C.G. Moore

Illustrated by Becky Chilcott

UCLan Publishing

Paperback, 420PP, £7.99

ISBN 9781912979431

## Themes

- Chronic illness
- Coming of age
- Body image
- Mental health
- Family
- Sexuality
- LGBTQ+ story

## Summary

*At school,  
I learned that words,  
More than weapons,  
Could destroy bodies,  
Could break hearts  
More than fists or fury.*

This is the story of Chris, what happened to him at age eleven and how that would change the rest of his life. A life-affirming and powerful coming-of-age verse novel that shines a light on chronic illness, who we are and how we live.

**Judges' Comments** Told through free verse, this is a powerful coming-of-age story about Chris who, at eleven years old, is diagnosed with a rare genetic illness that shapes his life in ways he never imagined. Moore draws upon his own experience to create an engaging narrative filled with darkness and light, despair and hope, fear and desire, and love and trust. Told with insight and honesty, this is a bold and complex portrayal of living with chronic illness, of sexuality, of body image, of health and wellbeing and of growing up.

**About the Author** C.G. Moore has a BA in English literature and an MA in publishing and creative writing. He is also a freelance editor and marketer and currently teaches on the MA in publishing programme at the University of Central Lancashire. When he is not writing or teaching, Moore can be found in the kitchen baking, doing aerial acrobatics or playing with his Jack Russell, Ruby. His debut book, *Fall Out*, was published in 2020.



*This title deals with a number of sensitive issues. Children's Books Ireland is aware that this content will not be suitable for some readers, and advises Junior Jury leaders to be aware of this content before selecting the book to read with your group.*

**About the Illustrator** Becky Chilcott is a freelance graphic designer with over fourteen years' experience, living and working in London. She has extensive knowledge of the publishing industry and particularly enjoys book design with a solid grounding in collaborating with illustrators and photographers to produce fresh and exciting imagery fused with a confident use of typography. She voluntarily curates the events programme at the St Bride Library in London and teaches part-time on the Publishing MA course at the University of Central Lancashire as Lecturer in Production and Graphic Design.

# QUESTIONS

## BEFORE YOU BEGIN

1. Look at the cover. From the cover image, what do you think this book might be about? Do you find the cover appealing or unappealing? What does the title *Gut Feelings* suggest to you? Is this a book that you would pick off the shelf at the library or bookshop?
2. Read the blurb. What do you think of the description of the book? Can you guess some of the themes of this book? What do you think might happen to Chris in this story? Have you read any other books by the author C.G. Moore?
3. The book is described as a 'powerful coming-of-age verse novel'. What do you think usually happens in coming-of-age stories? Have you ever read a verse novel before? Do you think the fact that this novel is written in verse might change how you read it? If so, how?
4. *Gut Feelings* is a story about chronic illness. Do you know anything about conditions considered to be chronic illnesses? What do you think life might be like for a young person living with a chronic illness?

## AS YOU READ

### Part 1 – Diagnosis

1. Chris is diagnosed with familial adenomatous polyposis, something that has also affected his mother and grandfather. Have you heard of this condition before? How is Chris's experience of being eleven changed by his diagnosis? How do his family react to his diagnosis? Throughout this section, how is Chris's mental health challenged by his diagnosis?
2. How do Chris's relationships with his mother and with his father differ? Do you agree that Chris's mother is a 'warrior'? How does Chris's mother cope with all of the medical issues affecting the family? How does Chris try to bond with his father? Why do you think their father-son relationship is so difficult?
3. We learn that Chris is often teased at school. Why do you think Chris is being bullied? Chris does not seem to have any friends to confide in about his diagnosis. How do you think having a close friend might have changed this experience for Chris?
4. Chris's father is hospitalised. How do the family and their wider circle of friends and relatives cope with this shock event? How does this event change Chris's view of his father? There are a lot of biblical references in this chapter to 'divine miracles', 'praying' and 'Padre Pio's Gloves' – why do you think this is? Chris's father has an acquired brain injury – how will this change his life and the lives of his family?

5. 'I want to scream but I have no voice. My body fails to respond. No one can see my pain.' Is it easy for others to understand what Chris is going through? Some of the procedures Chris experiences feel very invasive and distressing for him. How do you think the adults around Chris handle explaining his illness, the procedures and his treatment to him? What do you think of Chris's experience at Crumlin Children's Hospital?

### Part 2 – Treatment

1. Did anything surprise you about Chris's level of pain or his recovery from his total colectomy? During his recovery Chris uses a number of images to describe how he feels – which one did you think was most effective? How do you think Chris's life will change following this operation? How does Chris's illness affect his education? Do you think it is fair that Chris still has to sit regular Junior Cert and Leaving Cert exams with a chronic illness?
2. How does Chris's relationship with his body, his appearance and his scar change throughout this section? How does Chris's procedure change his relationship with food and his weight? Were you surprised that Chris dressed facing away from the mirror and preferred not to go swimming in public? Why do you think Chris is drawn to modelling?
3. Chris's dad returns to live in the family home. How do the family dynamics change over time? Why do you think Chris describes his home life like a tug o' war? Chris notes that his body has changed while his father's mind has changed – why do you think Chris finds it so difficult to be patient with his father? Chris's condition is very rare and was passed to him rather than his sister. Although Chris says he is glad to 'take the bullet' for her, how do you think this affects their relationship?
4. In this section we learn more about Chris's experience with his sexuality. Why does Chris pursue a relationship with Lynn? How do you think Chris's experiences of homophobic bullying affect his self-acceptance? Why do you think Chris is so afraid of people finding out who he 'really' is? How does Chris's view of himself and his classmates change over the course of this section?
5. Chris receives his date for his next surgery; this procedure will leave him with a stoma and ileostomy bag. How has waiting four years for his next surgery affected Chris? How are Chris's experiences of the procedures of his second surgery and the recovery afterwards similar and different to his first surgery? How does Chris's mother help him through this experience? Do you think having a stoma and ileostomy bag will be a bigger adjustment for Chris? Did anything surprise you about his experiences this time round?

## Part 3 – Aftermath

1. Chris adjusts to life with a stoma and ileostomy bag. How does this affect his life as a young person in terms of college, work, dating and socialising? Before reading this did you have any understanding of the practicalities of life with a stoma and ileostomy bag? What are the ways that Chris tries to hide how his illness is affecting him? Why do you think the author gives less details about Chris's third surgery for his ileostomy reversal in comparison to his previous operations?
2. In this section, Chris comes out to his family and explores dating and romantic relationships. Were you surprised by Chris's parents' reactions to his coming out? Why do you think they react in this way? Were you surprised by the complications Chris's illness could potentially cause him when it comes to exploring his sexuality? How do you think Chris's romantic partners deal with his illness? Why do you think it is difficult for Chris to accept love and affection?
3. Chris continues to struggle with his mental health and self-acceptance. What are the 'anchors' that help him in these darker moments? How does Chris's mental health impact his body confidence? How does Chris's surgery to repair his scar affect him? How does Chris try to limit or control how people around him see him? By the end of this novel Chris has come to a better sense of self-acceptance. Why do you think he is eventually able to embrace all the different parts of his journey that make him who he is? Do you think this was an easy or difficult thing to do?

## AFTER YOU HAVE READ

1. Did you enjoy reading this novel? What were the most enjoyable parts to read? What were the most difficult parts to read? Is there anything you would change about this book? Did reading this book change your perspective on anything or help you to learn anything new?
2. What did you think of the ending of Chris's story? When Chris reveals his full name to be Christopher George Moore, the reader realises this is an autobiographical story from the author's own experience. What did you think of this revelation? Did you suspect this story was autobiographical as you read? Does this change your reading of this story?
3. Throughout this book, and in the first section in particular, Chris defines and explains a lot of medical terms such as polyps, enema, colonoscopy, carcinogens, dysplasia, total colectomy, stoma and so on. How many of these terms had you heard of before reading this book? How do Chris's definitions of each of these words differ to his feelings about them? Chris lists things he

associates with the word 'cancer' – what do you associate with this word? How do you feel about reading about these topics? Why do you think writing about some of these topics is considered 'taboo'?

4. Read 'Invisible Illness' on page 382 and 'ABCS' on pages 383–4. Chris's condition is a chronic illness, which means that surgery can help but he will continue to be affected in his everyday life by his diagnosis. Do you think there is enough understanding about how having a chronic illness can affect someone's day-to-day life? Can you think of examples throughout the book where others misunderstood Chris's illness or treated him with unkindness not realising he had additional needs? Chris is reluctant to admit he has a disability and unsure when to tell people about his condition – why do you think this might be?
5. In this novel we move from Chris being eleven to twenty-one years of age. How does the author handle this passing of time? Was it easy to follow this transition of time as a reader? Did you notice any changes in Chris's personality? Does Chris's confidence change over this time and why do you think this is?
6. This is a verse novel with a lot of visual elements, illustrations and unusual formatting. Did you like reading this style of book? What do you think of the placements of the poems throughout the book? Did you enjoy the illustrated elements? How do these parts add to your understanding of Chris's story? How are fading ink in the text, font and blank spaces used throughout the book? Do any particular poems and images stand out to you?
7. Chris uses the word 'normal' a lot throughout this story. What does the word 'normal' mean to you? In what ways does Chris feel 'not normal' compared to those around him? What are Chris's biggest struggles about feeling as though he does not belong? How does this affect his mental health? How tolerant do you think you, your school or your community are to people who are perceived as 'different'?

## ACTIVITIES

- Chris has an invisible illness that causes disruption for him at school, college, work and in his social life. One of the problems he encounters is using disabled spaces such as toilets, as he ‘appears healthy’. With your class, do a schoolwide audit of the facilities available to students with visible and invisible disabilities. Speak to students who use these services or features, and if you use them, note your own thoughts. From your learnings, are there any ways these could be improved? If so, what could you do in practice to help those with visible and invisible disabilities in your school?
- Hold a fundraiser. Raise awareness in your school or local community about invisible illnesses and disabilities like FAP. You could fundraise through a bake sale, no-uniform day, car-wash day, raffle or auction day and donate the proceeds to a worthy cause or charity of your choice that supports or advocates for people with invisible illnesses.
- Chris is often bullied at school, where he feels it is not safe to be different. Does your school feel like a welcoming space for someone who feels different? Read the poem ‘I Am’ on pages 417–20. Here Chris writes a free-verse poem about all of the things that make him who he is. Write your own poem like this about all of the things that make you who you are. You can add your name or keep it anonymous. Have the whole class display their poems somewhere prominent in your school to highlight the fact that there is no such thing as ‘normal’.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

- Read this interview with C.G. Moore on Writing.ie on *Gut Feelings*: <https://www.writing.ie/resources/gut-instincts-writing-about-chronic-illness-by-c-g-moore/>
- Visit C.G. Moore’s website: <https://cgmoore.net/>
- Read more about C.G. Moore’s first novel, *Fall Out*, on the UCLan Publishing website: <https://uclanpublishing.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Fall-Out-Reading-Group-Guide.pdf>
- For more information on living with Crohn’s disease, colitis or inflammatory bowel disease as a teenager, see:
  - Irish Society for Colitis and Crohn’s Disease: [https://iscc.ie/about/iscc/#:~:text=Our%20Vision&text=The%20Irish%20Society%20for%20Colitis,Inflammatory%20Bowel%20Disease%20or%20IBD\).](https://iscc.ie/about/iscc/#:~:text=Our%20Vision&text=The%20Irish%20Society%20for%20Colitis,Inflammatory%20Bowel%20Disease%20or%20IBD).)
  - Gutsy Kids: <https://gutsykids.ie/>
- For further reading on the following topics, check out these recommended reading lists from Children’s Books Ireland:
  - LGBTQ+ stories: <https://childrensbooksireland.ie/our-recommendations/rainbow-reads>
  - Illness: <https://childrensbooksireland.ie/our-recommendations/illness>
  - Celebrating difference: <https://childrensbooksireland.ie/our-recommendations/celebrating-difference>
  - Body confidence: <https://childrensbooksireland.ie/our-recommendations/body-confidence>
- Hannah Witton is a YouTuber, sex and relationships educator and young person who lives with a stoma and ileostomy bag due to inflammatory bowel disease. Watch her playlist of YouTube videos on her journey of adjusting to life with a stoma: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFNN8Se99Y&list=PLg3ISyIIul8dgcjY3eUprriL3vtQpmq&index=30>
- LGBTQ+ resources for teens and young people:
  - BeLonG To: <https://www.belongto.org/>
  - ShoutOut: <https://www.shoutout.ie/>
- For help and support with your mental health or bullying:
  - Childline: <https://www.childline.ie/>
  - SpunOut: <https://spunout.ie/category/mental-health>