

What do you think?

Sometimes turning points happen when we least expect them.

Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	

DOING TIME

Short Story by Christine Harris

VOCABULARY

cricket: a team sport played with a ball and bat

paddock: a field or meadow, usually on a farm

sniggers: snickers; disrespectful laughter

Vocabulary Tip

Sports and hobbies may use specialized terms or jargon. It sometimes helps to search online for jargon when a selection contains terms you are unfamiliar with.

One wheel clips the door and Sebastian jerks sideways, his head bouncing a little. This thing's worse than a supermarket trolley.

"Thanks. I can manage now," he says.

Fine. I stand back. I don't want to spend my afternoon pushing him around.

"I have to go to the toilet first." He turns his head to look at me over his shoulder.

I flinch. "I don't do toilets."

Sebastian half-smiles. "Who's asking?"

He pushes himself over to the wide door across the foyer.

Arms folded, I wait, wishing I was anywhere else but here. With two hands, I smooth back my hair. When my fringe flops down onto my face, it makes me look younger.

I sigh. This is not how I want to spend a Saturday afternoon.

I hate sports.

Cricket? It takes days to finish one game. If you can make yourself stick it out to the bitter end, you'd be smart to take a tent and a trailer-load of food.

And playing is even worse, especially when you're batting. It's like waiting for a cannonball to rearrange your face, your fingers, or something more painful. Totally uncool to roll around on the grass, curled up like a caterpillar, wondering if you'll ever be able to walk again.

Rugby? There's no fun in a bunch of meatheads tackling each other in the mud, unless you're into dirt and pain. Football? The shorts are so tight that if you make the mistake of bending over, you walk off in two halves. Table tennis? What's the point in tapping a puny lump of white plastic across a table for hours? In my one go at table tennis I was wiped out by a snotty-nosed kid half my size. Lucky for him a table tennis bat doesn't do much damage.

Then there's ten-pin bowling. The shoes are so dorky, and you don't know who's been wearing them or what's festering on their feet. And the stupid balls are so heavy that your arms are longer each time you come out of there. I cringe as I remember swinging my arm and dropping the ball with a loud *crack*. It rolled backward at the speed of light. Wide-eyed people jumped left and right, except for the blonde in the stretch jeans with the loud voice. The bowling ball trundled over her left foot. And she wasn't happy, I can tell you.

Sports? No way. I shudder at the thought.

Finally Sebastian returns and I follow him outside, trotting behind like a puppy dog. His sneaker-clad feet are awfully small. The back of his red Mambo T-shirt has a picture of a devil with horns. Yeah. Right. If he's a devil, then I'm the pope.

We move onto the oval, where a group of kids and three adults in tracksuits are gathered on the grass.

There are two metal chairs, like highchairs, with blue nylon straps pegged to the ground.

"Sebastian," calls a woman in a tracksuit—must be the coach because she's dishing out equipment and instructions like there's no tomorrow.

"That's us," he says to me.

"That's you, you mean."

He looks sideways. "You're helping, aren't you?"

I shrug.

The coach holds a silver ball in her right hand.
“Two k, Seb?”

He nods and wheels himself over to the funny-looking chair. Pushing himself up with his hands, he tries to get out of his wheelchair and onto the higher metal one and fails.

Am I supposed to lift him or leave him?

With a grunt, he tries again and heaves his body upward: made it.

The coach eyeballs me. “Here ... er ...”

“Joel.”

“Joel,” repeats the coach, “hold this for a second, will you?”

Abruptly, she hands me the ball and it almost rips my arms from their sockets. “Ow.” I quickly check if anyone is watching, but they’re not.

“How much does this thing weigh?”

They both grin as she straps his legs into place. “That shotput’s only two kilograms, isn’t it Sebastian?”

Only?

She takes it from me and hands it to Sebastian. He leans back, his left hand gripping a metal bar, and one ... two ... three ... he hurls the silver ball into the air.

It lands with a dull thud.

I make like a tree and stand still; silent. There’s no way I could throw a shotput that far. But I’m not going to tell them that.

The coach goes over to retrieve the shotput.

“What’d you do, anyway?” Sebastian asks me.

“I hit someone.” I make my voice sound hard so he won’t ask any more stupid questions. “With a cricket bat.”

He doesn’t take the hint. “Why?”

“Because I couldn’t find a shotput,” I smirk.

Looking down at him, I feel too tall, almost gigantic. His brown eyes are friendly, curious.

“I don’t do conversation,” I say, shutting the door on further revelations.

“That was a good shot, Sebastian.” A girl with braces pushes herself up close. Her wheelchair is psycho with colour; looks like she whizzed through a paint shop. Then she pushes off to peer at a peacock-blue chair, then a red one. What does she think this is, a chairmart?

If Sebastian can ask nosy questions about my community service hours, I can ask him something. “What’s the matter with you anyway?”

He looks at me sideways. “Don’t worry, nothing contagious.”

I squat beside him so he can see I’m not scared of germs. Besides, I feel guilty towering over him on my legs.

“I’ve got spina bifida.” He sees that I haven’t got a clue what he’s on about. “My brain doesn’t give messages to my legs, so they don’t work.”

A little way off, the coach is waylaid by a kid complaining about a javelin. “It’s a boomerang. The thing’s so bent it comes back by itself. It bends if you look at it.”

In a soft voice, the coach shows the kid how to hold it properly. “It’ll stick in your hand if you grip it like that. Why don’t you get out in the paddock at home and practise with a broomstick?”

A fair-haired woman, probably his mother, yells out, “He’s got a javelin. It’s under his bed.”

With a laugh, the coach pats his shoulder. “Is that where you keep your shotput?”

The kid laughs; the mother laughs; the coach laughs. I yawn. I look at Sebastian, perched precariously on the metal chair, then at some of the other kids. “You ever fall out of your wheelchair?”

He nods. “Sometimes.”

“Backward or forward?”

“Backward, forward, and sideways.”

His eyes are alight with amusement, whether at himself or me, I’m not sure.

“How can you fall sideways?”

“Some kids at school pressed the buttons on my wheels.”

I look at the wheels on his vacant chair—can’t see anything special. “Is that the brake?”

He shakes his head. “No. If you press the button in the middle, the wheel comes off. So you can put the chair in the car. These kids pressed the button and I didn’t know. When I tried to move my chair, the wheel fell off, and so did I.”

Indignant on his behalf, I think how humiliating it would be to crash in a heap like that, especially if you couldn’t get back up again without help.

“Did you get those kids back?”

"Nah. They're my friends. And once I was doing an obstacle race at the junior games and I hit a piece of wood and went for a six. Got a beaut egg on the back of my head."

This I can't work out. "Why do you keep doing this then?"

Without looking at me, his voice steady, he says, "I want to win."

There is a small silence between us.

"But you can't always win," I say. "What if you mess up?"

"I have another go," he answers with a shrug.

At last the coach returns with the heavy shotput and Sebastian chucks it a second time. It goes a little farther.

"Don't you want it?" the coach jokes. "Every time I give it to you, you throw it away."

Her sense of humour is really bad. I don't know if Sebastian laughs because he thinks it's funny or because he feels sorry for her.

I pluck at a blade of grass. "Are you any good at this stuff?"

"I've got six medals. I eat vegetables, so I'm fairly strong."

Medals? What use are they? You wouldn't get much for them. Also, I hate vegetables, and tell him so.

"Me too, but I meant that I can eat vegetables." He nods toward the other kids. "Some of them can't swallow properly."

For a second, I feel really stupid.

"You're lucky, you know," he says.

For a moment, I assume he means about my legs.

Then he adds, "I read about someone who had to do community service in a chicken factory. He plucked feathers from an eagle at a zoo. The judge said if he liked feathers so much, he could have all he wanted."

I suppose a month helping out at wheelchair sports is better than doing time in a chicken factory. Actually, I didn't really hurt the guy I thumped—only his pride. He'd had bruises before, much worse than the one I gave him. And he'd started it. Giving me heaps like that, especially in front of Jane-Marie Yates. The sound of her sniggers lit a fire inside me that only went out with the sound of wood connecting with his skull.

Sebastian's cough brings me back to the present.

"You want a rug or anything?" I ask, wondering if he feels the cold. "A drink or ...?"

He turns his eyes on me, and says in a good-natured way, "Chill out."

My mouth falls open.

"Don't pamper me. I'm not a poodle. It reminds me that I'm in a wheelchair ..."

How could he forget he's in a wheelchair?

"Anyway ... being polite doesn't suit you. Just be normal."

Ha. If I was being "normal" I wouldn't be here. I'd be down at the mall, checking out babes.

"Good on ya, Tony!" The whole bunch clap and shout as the tape measure comes out and a boy with thick glasses grins like his face will split in half.

"He's a new kid," says Sebastian and without pausing, adds, "want a ride?"

Astonished, I blink. "In the chair?"

Sebastian nods. "It'll cost you though."

"What?"

"Five dollars."

As if I'd pay some guy to slip into his warm chair for a burn around the oval.

Sebastian says, "When I was in primary school, I got heaps of money from the others. Then the teacher made me stop because kids were losing their bus money."

I shake my head. "I don't do chairs."

What if someone saw me? I have a reputation to worry about.

But I guess there would be some benefits to a wheelchair. You could get away with a lot. People would feel sorry for you—and you wouldn't get a judge giving you dumb community service.

"You ever walked?" I ask.

"Sometimes I dream about it." He shrugs just once, his face a mixture of puzzlement and yearning. "I can't feel it, though. It's like a movie, only I can see myself. I just wish I could feel it. You tell me, what's it like to be an upright?"

I'd been calling him a wheelie in my head, but it gives me a start when he calls me an upright. It makes me sound like a hairy shuffling animal that's escaped from a science lab. What's it like to walk? I find I can't describe it. It's just something you do. You never think about it.

"It feels ... tall." I'm not satisfied with my answer but it's all I can think of.

He nods as though I've said something really profound.

I shift uncomfortably, then sit on the grass, hoping I won't get green stains on my new jeans.

A breeze rushes across the oval. I brush back my hair. "How about javelin now?" asks the coach.

So that the kid with the thick glasses can use the special chair, Sebastian struggles back into his wheelchair. It's easier going down than up.

He points to the javelin and I pick it up for him. He tests the weight in his right hand and grips it near the centre. "You can't look at the ground, or it falls short. You have to look up at the sky and imagine the javelin flying over the top of the trees."

Sebastian's face is full of concentration. Is he imagining the javelin, or himself, flying over the trees?

One ... two ... three.

With a sudden swing of his arm, he hurls the javelin. Up, up it flies toward the sky, then arcs down and the tip stabs the earth, wobbling a few times before it's still.

Way longer than all the other throws, it's a ripper.

"Yay." I start to clap, then falter, embarrassed at my show of enthusiasm.

I feel my face go red and I try to look bored. But still, a little knot of excitement stays in my stomach. That javelin flew like a bird.

"Well, you going to get it for me, or what?" We exchange glances and I know he's trying to distract me from my awkwardness.

I fetch the javelin, feeling its sleekness in my hand.

"Have a go," he says.

"No ..." I want to say more but can't.

"Go on."

All these people here—what if I look stupid?

I shake my head. "I'll mess up. I always do."

Sebastian, chin resting on one hand, looks up at me from his wheelchair. "So?"

He's got a bung back; he's on wheels; he has to chat up girls from a sitting position—but I'm the one that feels clumsy.

Sebastian's brown eyes dare me to try. I remember how I felt watching his throw.

"Did it hurt when you fell out of your chair in the obstacle race?" I ask.

"Like hell." Sebastian faces the oval. "But I don't care too much if I fall over. The crowd's going to be cheering when I win. Now, you aim for that tree over there." He points to a huge gum tree on the far side.

"Oh sure." I roll my eyes but I don't put down the javelin.

I aim for the sky just above the tree and hurl the javelin with all my strength. It barely gets any air under it and, instead of soaring majestically upward, skims over the ground and flops.

"You looked at the ground," says Sebastian.

Hands on hips, I glare at him. "Did not. I looked at the top of the tree, like you said."

He laughs at me, and I don't mind, which surprises me. His chuckles are kind of friendly.

"First time I threw a javelin I forgot to look behind and when I drew my arm back, I hit a kid on the head. Lucky it only grazed him. Gave him a fright, though. Don't worry. You'll get better with practice."

An image of a bowling ball rolling backward flashes through my mind.

I avoid his eyes so I don't start laughing, too. "I don't do practice," I say.

But this time I don't really mean it.

eBookExtra

Responding

What Do You Think Now? "Sometimes turning points happen when we least expect them." How do you respond to this statement now that you've read the story?

Understanding Short Stories: Which short story elements did you find worked most effectively in "Doing Time"? Support your answer with examples from the story.

Making Inferences: Based on how Joel behaves, what can you infer about his past experiences?

Critical Literacy: What biases does Joel have? Do you think the author shares these biases? Explain your thinking.

Reading Like a Writer: Christine Harris creates distinctive voices for her two characters. Describe each voice. Support your answer.

Metacognition: This story is set in Australia and written by an Australian writer. Did you find any of the vocabulary difficult to understand? If so, how did you overcome this challenge?