

Reading Group Gold

The Light Years

A Memoir

by Chris Rush



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The middle child of seven siblings, Chris Rush was born into a prosperous, seemingly conventional New Jersey family. But he was a decidedly unconventional little boy, possessing a colorful imagination and a highly tuned sensitivity that kept him aware of the raging emotional tensions running beneath the polished facade of his homelife. Dropping acid at age twelve, Chris found the ultimate escape, following his older sister Donna into the heart of 1960s counterculture. For the next ten years, Chris lived precariously among drug dealers and prophets, rebels and wanderers. In vivid scenes, *The Light Years* recounts a coming-of-age story marked by death-defying redemption and a perilous quest for love and kinship.

This guide is designed to enrich your discussion of *The Light Years*. We hope that the following topics will enhance your experience of this wrenching, wondrous journey of self-discovery and survival.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Chris Rush has six siblings: Chuck and Kathy (by 1967, both married with children), his mentor Donna, younger brothers Michael and Steven, and baby Danny. There is a span of two decades between the youngest and the oldest siblings. These children were, in a sense, born into different families, at different times of American history. How do you think this affected their paths in life? In what ways are they different; in what ways similar?

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2. Discuss Chris's parents, Norma and Charlie. How would you characterize them as parents, and how do they each influence Chris's character and life? Compare Chris's impulsiveness to his mother's sometimes manic nature—the constant shopping and vacations. Are mother and son similar in some ways? Also, consider Charlie's alcoholism and Chris's drug use. Are Chris and his father very different from one another—or do you see any similarities in their characters?
3. When Chris wakes up in an Albuquerque hospital, his mother wants him to come home with her to New Jersey, but she finally relents and lets him stay with Donna in Arizona. Why do you think she agrees to this? Is Chris's mother able to protect him at home? What would you have done for your son under similar circumstances?
4. Consider the various strains of religion and spirituality in *The Light Years*. Chris's father, Roman Catholic, makes a fortune off organized religion, building churches for the Diocese of Trenton. Vinnie, Donna, and their dealer friends are also devoted to God, though they praise a more psychedelic Jesus. Owen's family are lapsed Mormons, while Gabriel Green promotes a distinctly New Age view of life. How do these varieties of religious thought affect Chris's life? Discuss his spiritual path and evolution, as you see it, from Catholic school, to living with Christian hippie drug dealers, to his time praying alone in the desert, looking for UFOs. Ultimately, what do you think he is searching for?
5. Early in the book, Donna tells Chris, "Vinnie thinks Mom and Dad use their money to control me." Do you believe this is true? Later, Donna is willing to accept only three hundred dollars in pay from the drug dealer Lu, on a fifty-thousand-dollar transaction. Similarly, Chris goes from private-school luxury to being destitute—and then, when suddenly flush with cash from dealing, he continues to live in the desert. Discuss the concept of hippie antimaterialism, and the change in Chris's thinking when he starts to sell cocaine. Discuss the romantic ideals of the hippie world. Does Chris lose his romanticism by the end of the book?
6. How do Chris's sexual experiences with Owen compare to losing his virginity with Julie? Does his botched attempt to sleep with Oonagh, his nanny, affect his understanding of himself? How much do you think Chris's struggles with his sexuality play a role in the difficulties he finds himself in?
7. Did you find the scene of Donna giving birth to Jelissa beautiful or frightening, or both? Discuss Donna's journey from high school cheerleader to drug runner to young mother with two children. What does Donna want out of life? Does she achieve it?
8. Chapter 29 is titled "Do You Remember Your Past Lives?" In this section, Chris is subjected to a "past-life regression" by Gabriel Green. What does the information that comes out about Chris's "past life" tell us about Chris's current life and his family? What does Chris come to realize in this chapter about his father? Lastly, do you see Gabriel Green as a father figure? If so, is he a positive one for Chris?

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9. Discuss the progression of Chris's drug use, from so-called "God-approved substances" (LSD, marijuana) to heroin and cocaine. What drives Chris's drug use? Was he on a spiritual path, or simply self-medicating? Was there wisdom in Donna telling him to avoid certain drugs? Was Donna a bad influence or a fellow traveler who tried to watch out for him?
10. Discuss the themes of God and the Devil throughout the book. Do you think Chris was genuinely on a spiritual journey, or simply brainwashed? Are spiritual quests, by their nature, antisocial? Does Chris's spiritual quest put him in danger?
11. A light year is the distance light travels in one year (nearly six trillion miles). How does the metaphor of light traveling an extraordinary distance apply to Chris's turbulent youth? How does it apply to the experience of looking back on significant events that happened a long time ago?
12. How does Chris's memoir capture a specific era in America's cultural history? What seismic shifts took place in American family life during the 1970s? How does hippie drug culture compare to the modern-day opioid epidemic? What, if anything, has changed?
13. Tragically, Chris's father loses both of his brothers. Do you think that this is the cause of Charlie's instability and his troubled relationship with his children? Is there a connection between that tragedy and his alcoholism? Does Charlie's past affect how you feel about him? When his past is finally revealed, did he become a more sympathetic individual for you?
14. Discuss the various families in the book: Chris's original family; Chris's new family with Donna and Vinnie, Lu and Jingle; his time living with the Spoons; his family of fellow travelers, such as Sean and Julie. Compare these groups and what was good—or not so good—about them.
15. When Chris discovers Sean's history, he observes that the two of them were "the kind of boys people want to kill" (page 241). What does he mean? Discuss the evolution of Chris and Sean's friendship.
16. On page 365, Chris reflects on his near-deadly descent and writes, "I don't know why I was saved and others were lost." Why do you think he survived while others in his circle did not? Was he more vulnerable because he was an artist, or did that help him prevail? Discuss the final section, "One Hundred Pies," and how it compares to other recovery stories.
17. Is *The Light Years* a book about love? About drugs? Family? What was at the heart of this story for you?
18. How did the epilogue affect your understanding of fate and free will? When Chris paints his father's portrait, what does this reveal about their relationship? Has it changed? Has Chris changed?

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PRAISE FOR *THE LIGHT YEARS*

“As mythic and wild with love, possibility, and danger as the decades it spans; you’ll read *The Light Years* with your breath held. Brutal, buoyant, and wise to the tender terror of growing up, Chris Rush has written a timeless memoir of boyhood in the American wilderness.”

—Emma Cline, author of *The Girls*

“Brace yourself: to enter *The Light Years* you must be willing to be changed. It is, in the end, about the one question we all must ask ourselves—How does one live? In the end the answer is, always, love. You could wait until you are ready to read this radiant book, though how will you know when that moment arrives?” —Nick Flynn, author of *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*

“Darkly comic and told with fire and wisdom, *The Light Years* is an iconic American story, the mad love child of Jack Kerouac, Timothy Leary, and Augusten Burroughs.”

—Alexandria Marzano-Lesnevich, author of *The Fact of a Body*

“Chris Rush is a gorgeous, evocative writer—able to capture the stifling conventionality of suburbia but also the world of flower children drawn together by spiritual experimentation that all too easily gives way to heartbreak and violence. This moving book becomes a gripping story of resilience and, yes, hope.” —George Hodgman, author of *Bettyville*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Rush is an award-winning artist and designer whose work is held in numerous museum collections. *The Light Years* is his first book.

Guide written by Amy Clements