

CHRIS LYNCH

on writing

HIT COUNT

When I sat down to work on **HIT COUNT**, I knew from the start I was going to write about the growing scourge of the quasi-sanctioned brain trauma America's teen athletes absorb for the entertainment and furious bloodlust of the rest of us. I was prepared for that. I was, smugly, the right guy, writing the right book, on the right (wrong) issue—and bang-on the right side of history as far as how this topic was trending.

Until the blindsiding. As with all blindsidings, I never saw it coming. I was committed to writing a book that pointed a finger at the dubious morality of the willfully violent state of mainstream sports. It was indefensible to be offering up our young people on a weekly basis in maim-a-thons that can sometimes make Christians vs. lions seem like just a further extension of what nature wants us to do. How could this assignment fail to be a snap?

But, then, that blindsiding. Only after I got embedded in the writing did the big hit drill me, right in the numbers.

Content, was I? Superior? Bringing civilized enlightenment to the masses? Would I have the wordpower to convince lifelong diehards that in our support of organized tournaments of grievous bodily harm we were embracing the basest part of human nature? Could I be the man to make this case? Of course I could be that man. I was that man.



Jules Chester

CHRIS LYNCH is the author of many acclaimed young adult novels, including *Little Blue Lies*, *Pieces*, *Angry Young Man*, the National Book Award Finalist *Inexcusable*, and the Printz Honor Book *Freewill*. Chris is on the faculty of the creative writing MFA program at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. When he's not teaching or visiting with family in Boston, he lives in Scotland.

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Like hell I was.

What I was, when put to the test, was complicit in the whole bloody mess. What I was, was just as in thrall to the big life-threatening collision as I had been when I was nine and smash was the quality that made every single moment of physical existence better by a factor of approximately a million. I loved the clotheslines, the crackback blocks, the quarterback driven into the turf like a flagpole.

See, the game, the games, football, hockey, boxing in particular, were pure then. Right? They, and sport generally, had not been polluted yet by the invention of concussions, paralyzing neck and spine injuries, and all those syndromes which wouldn't even dare to present themselves to Bronco Nagurski or Deacon Jones.

Of course I saw things. I saw Daryl Stingley. The uniquely beautiful Daryl Stingley gliding gracefully downfield to get to balls no previous Patriot receiver would have had a chance at. The joy of hangdog Pats fans finally watching such a marvel on a regular basis was a good example of what sport at its best can do for the human spirit.

And then I saw Jack Tatum. Stingley saw him too, for a microsecond, his final microsecond of pre-quadruplegic existence. I loved Daryl Stingley, who was grace itself. I hated Jack Tatum, who was vicious, fearsome as a hitter, and merciless. Who was the prototype safety every NFL team lusted after. He did his job frighteningly well.

When Jack Tatum paralyzed Daryl Stingley for the rest of his life, the play was not even called for a penalty. Tatum did what he was supposed to do, what he was trained to do, what everybody in every stadium in America expected him to do.

I continued to love the game.

For HIT COUNT, I went back to footage from the heyday years of my sports experience. Stuff I had already seen countless times. Blood, broken bones, (now) instantly recognizable brain trauma. Stuff I clearly remember cheering maniacally at (as long as the right guy was getting the pasting). This time it was different. The thrill was not gone, I cannot lie. But the thrill was an altogether sadder and scarier one. I watched, finally, the replay of the 1982 fight between Ray "Boom Boom" Mancini and Duk Koo Kim. Hell of a fight. The very stuff one watches boxing for. It felt as immediate as the day I watched it live and loud. And just as before, I watched to the very end, watched Mancini knock Kim out in the fourteenth round. This time knowing that Kim collapsed and died from his injuries. Knowing that both the referee and Kim's mother committed suicide shortly thereafter.

But like every other time, I was riveted. I never looked away, never shrank from what I was seeing.

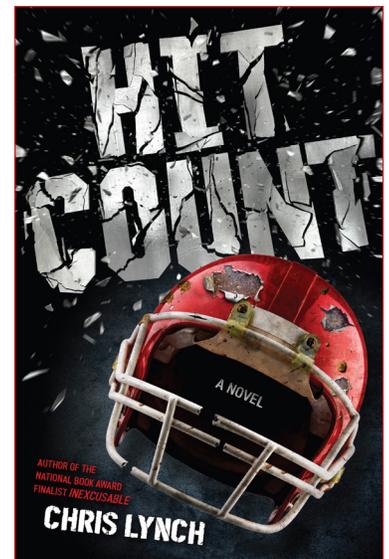
And it was not because of this assignment.

I am complicit. I am part of it. And I am wrong. We are capable of much better than this.

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