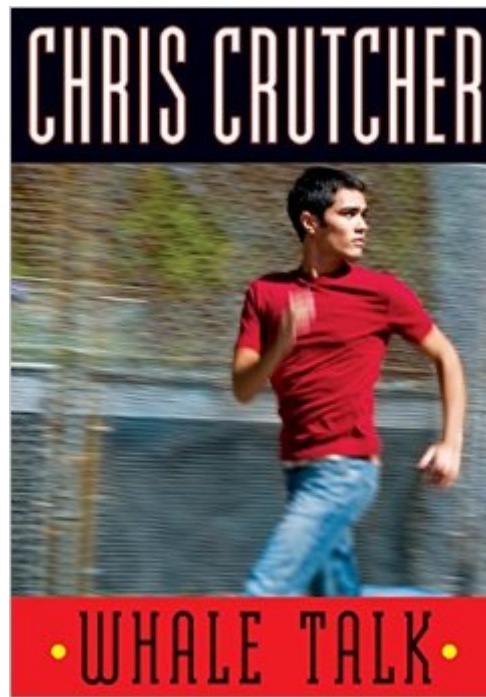


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Whale Talk



Synopsis

A varsity letter jacket: it's exclusive, nearly unattainable, revered . . . and everything that's screwed up about Cutter High, as far as T. J. Jones is concerned. That's why T. J. is determined to have the Cutter All Night Mermenâ "the unlikelyest swim team a high school has ever seenâ "earn letter jackets of their own. It won't be easy. For one thing, they don't even have a pool. They will fight for their dignity, they will fight with each other, and sometimes they will just fight. And then they will realize that a single moment can bring lifelong heartache or lifelong friendship. For T. J. and his crew of misfits, the quest may be far more valuable than the reward.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A good book rises above its own premise. Reading a short synopsis of this story without knowing anything about it beyond its plot could easily suggest to the average viewer that it's going to be awful. Think about it. A multi-racial protagonist and his motley crew of rag tag misfits puts together an unlikely swim team and everybody learns a little bit about what it's like to walk in another person's shoes. Bleaugh! That's the kind of After School Special plotting that can get a book seriously ignored by its intended audience. Now I had never read a Chris Crutcher book coming into this. Frankly, I know the man has a reputation for producing darned good books. Then I read "Whale Talk" and found, to my incredible relief, that this was not really a book about a swim team. It's about the circle of abuse and the amount of control an individual has over his or her own actions. It's about hurting other people and what the cost of that can be. In short, the book takes amazingly gigantic

themes, renders them bite size, and gives them humanity and humor. It's the humor part that really impressed me. T.J. Jones (actual name The Tao Jones... pronounce it, I dare you) is probably one of three people of color in his small Washington town. Adopted by his parents when he was a seriously abused toddler, T.J.'s a pretty well put together kid. That's probably in no small part due to his amazing mom and dad and his fantastic (some might say godlike) child therapist, Georgia. Which isn't to say that T.J.'s life is bereft of odd problems. His favorite teacher, Simet, is trying to lure T.J. into helping him start a school swim team. There are a couple problems with this plan. For one thing, T.J. refuses to join any organized sports. Cutter High School is run by and for its jocks. These jocks have been trying for years (unsuccessfully) to get T.J. onto one of their teams. Also, the school has no swimming pool. So T.J. isn't exactly thrilled about the idea of getting roped into this situation until he sees some of the local heavies beating up a mentally handicapped kid because he refuses to stop wearing his dead jock brother's letter jacket. Suddenly our hero has a mission, and the mission is clear. To create a swim team comprised of the kind of guys who otherwise could never be able to get involved in an organized sport. Even better, he's going to get each and every one of them a letter jacket. This is just the barest of outlines describing this book. T.J. has a lot going on in his life and this includes his father's guilt about accidentally killing a toddler some thirty years before, a girl who tries continually to wash her skin clean of pigment, her psychotic father who is both a wife abuser and T.J.'s enemy, and a team that becomes closer as their problems become clearer. This is truly a book written about a man for men. Which isn't to say that girls won't love this tale, or that it's bereft of strong female characters. In fact, Crutcher is especially good at balancing women who've been abused in the past with their far stronger counterparts. No, when I say that this is a boy book, I'm referring to the fact that the central focus of this story rests squarely on the male swimming team. Sure, T.J. has a girlfriend but her presence in this story is probably just to prove to the viewer that he's a well adjusted guy with a well adjusted gal. Honestly, his relationship is not the focus of this tale. And that's kinda refreshing. I think what I liked best about this book was that it recognized that behind every crazed idiot, there's a reason they act the way they do. Crutcher isn't the best young adult writer that knows about abuse (that honor belongs squarely to Alex Flinn) but he comes close. A person could learn more from reading this book about the cyclical nature of violence than they would from almost any other source. I'm praising the book, but it's not without the occasional flaw. Consider, for example, the character of Tay-Roy. This is a bodybuilder that joins the team and has, basically, no real personality. As far as I could determine, everything Tay-Roy does could have been accomplished by T.J. They're similar in every respect, except that Tay-Roy's white and slightly better looking. It's odd that Crutcher would have kept himself from omitting

extraneous characters like this one, but as flaws go, this one's pretty minimal. The worst I can say is that it slightly derails the flow of the text. Big whoop. What Crutcher has as a writer that puts him heads and tails above and beyond his peers (some, at any rate) is his sense of humor. You cannot dislike a book where the main character is named The Tao Jones. You just can't. I mentioned that I think that Alex Flinn is the all-powerful guru of abused teens, but what Crutcher doesn't have in superior knowledge he makes up for in funnies. I'm sick and tired of all the deadly depressing books out there. If every writer could fill their texts with half as much pleasurable writing as Mr. C, I'd have a heckuva harder time figuring out which book to read next. In the end, "Whale Talk" accomplishes that mighty difficult task of being a good book about a near impossible subject. Abuse. Whether or not you agree that Crutcher wrote about this topic with the correct amount of respect, you have to admit he wrote about it well. I tip my hat to the man who's books I will now have to devour one by one to satiate my now uncontrollable young adult literature craving. Such is life.

Whale Talk is a book that takes the reader on a roller coaster ride of emotions. The book warms the heart, infuriates, teaches, and opens the eyes of any reader that picks this book up. The Tao Jones is a mixed race character who is adopted from a drug-addicted mother. Tao is taken in by a truck driving dad and lawyer mother who are just about the coolest parents on earth, but they aren't without their own baggage. Whale Talk is a masterfully woven tale that traces Tao through his struggles in a racist society that is also a little elitist. Tao, like most of Crutcher's protagonists, is a great athlete with a strange sense of humor. Tao enjoys getting even with those who single out he, or any other character in the high school that is different, by using the predators' ignorance against them. All in all, this is an honest portrayal of a complex mix of race, family secrets and small town routines held up by the Good Ol' Boy system along with serious developmental psychological issues. This book will make you laugh, it will make you cry, but most importantly, it will make you examine your inner-most being in ways that will surprise you. Chris Crutcher is the undisputed King of YA Literature, which he proves with his most powerful YA novel to date.

Chris Crutcher, *Whale Talk* (Dell, 2001) It's always the best books that poke their heads up over the radar, only to have them lopped off by people who just don't get it. *Whale Talk* is listed by the American Library Association-- the folks who put out those neat lists of books that inbred know-nothings feel the need to attack in school libraries (aka the lists of "this is what I'll read next" for thousands upon thousands of American high-school kids)-- as one of the ten most challenged books of 2005. This makes perfect sense, because *Whale Talk* is probably the best young adult

novel I've read since I first discovered Philip Pullman's wonderful (and similarly challenged) trilogy *His Dark Materials*. T. J. Jones is a mixed-race high-school student in the Pacific Northwest, and he's also got something of an attitude problem. He's athletic, but ignores organized sports at his competition-rabid school until he sees the younger brother of a now-dead local hero getting pushed around for wearing his brother's letter jacket. Jones decides to retaliate by starting a swim team-- at a school that doesn't even have its own pool. He recruits a number of misfits (including Chris, the pushed-around, mentally challenged kid), lines up a coach, and sets out to, if not humiliate the sports freaks around him, at least show them that the outcasts can perform, too. What he doesn't expect is that the long bus rides to swim meets around the region will create a sense of camaraderie among them. The most important thing that makes this book so good is the characterization. Crutcher has filled his book with well-drawn, memorable, interesting characters who will keep the reader entertained for its duration. Dropping them into an amusing David-and-Goliath plot helps, but the real kick with the plotline is the way Crutcher drags in portentous events and makes them unpredictable; we expect some sort of great revelation, for example, when Crutcher dumps his busful of kids off the road in the snow, but instead gives us the far more practical outcome of a tow truck. It's little pieces of realism like this that keep the ball rolling along as well as it does. Yes, there is bad language. And yes, there is racism. It's not surprising when you're dealing with the only mixed-race student in an entire high school (especially one who refuses to play football or basketball). But then, that's one of the novel's big points-- that the racism T. J. encounters is not just the overt uses of the N-word, but the pervasive attitude that surrounds him. It's exceptionally well-done, which may be the root of the reason why the moronic contingent seems so scared of this novel. After all, the better you get your point across, the more that point is likely to scare those who fear your point. And in this case, Chris Crutcher has done a truly exceptional job. This one's likely to end up on my ten best reads of the year list. ****

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