

Whale Talk Short Guide

Whale Talk by Chris Crutcher

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Overview

Whale Talk is the story of Tao Jones, better known as T. J., and a group of high school misfits who are brought together to form an unusual swim team for Cutter High School. At Cutter High, earning a sports jacket is the most prestigious of all symbols, the "shroud of Turin" as T. J. calls it. It also symbolizes discriminatory attitudes and close-mindedness that T. J. vehemently despises. In order to break the power this group has within Cutter High and to get revenge for the abuses he has suffered in life, T. J. makes it his quest to earn a letter jacket for every member of the swim team, a group of emotionally and physically handicapped teenagers.

While practicing at the All Night Fitness gym, T. J. discovers Icko, a man who actually lives in the gym. T. J. enlists Icko to be their swim coach. The gym becomes the team's own personal retreat where this group of students find the freedom to be who they really are, to put behind the prejudice and mistreatment they face daily, and, for the first time, to experience a sense of belonging. Through encouragement and cooperation, these young men not only attain the coveted Cutter letter jacket but gain personal dignity and respect.

About the Author

Chris Crutcher claims that he is the last person on earth that anyone in his hometown would have expected to become an award-winning writer. He admits that *To Kill a Mockingbird* was the only book he read all the way through in high school.

Chris Crutcher grew up in Cascade, Idaho.

His father was in the military during World War II, leaving his mother alone with two small sons. Crutcher's mother had a difficult time coping with her responsibilities, and she later became an alcoholic. Although Crutcher had a good relationship with his father, Crutcher's father was hard and distant, rarely showing approval. It was Crutcher's grandfather, Glenn, who gave Crutcher the guidance and attention that he needed. Crutcher credits his grandfather for having the greatest influence on his life and for the characters in his novels who learn to deal with pain and tragedy in a humorous way.

Crutcher graduated with a bachelor of arts in sociology-psychology from Eastern Washington State College in Cheney, Washington in 1968. He returned to college in 1969, earning his K-12 teaching certificate.

He taught for several years before becoming the director of Lakeside School in Oakland, California.

His first novel, *Running Loose*, which was first published in 1983, was written after he resigned from Lakeside School and was living on his savings while looking for work.

He says he started writing because he recognized the need for a creative outlet in his life, and he had always loved stories. So, he began to write. Many similarities can be found between *Running Loose* and Chris Crutcher's own life. Crutcher was a high school athlete, playing football, basketball, *Whale Talk 469* and running track. Louie, the main character in *Running Loose*, is a high school athlete.

Like Crutcher, Louie's homelife is difficult, but Louis has a close relationship with his girlfriend, Becky. The town Trout in *Running Loose* is very much like Crutcher's hometown of Cascade, small and near wooded areas where deer are frequently seen. And, like Louis, Crutcher's father appreciated independence and disliked persons who accepted ideas without questioning them. Louis questions the misplaced priorities of adults in his world and is forced to make some difficult moral and ethical decisions during the course of the novel.

After writing *Running Loose*, Crutcher worked as a child and family therapist and became the chairperson of Spokane's Child Protection Team. He knows, first hand, about the pain and suffering of children. Crutcher's experiences with families and children, as well as his own childhood experiences make him an outspoken child



advocate. His determination to make a difference in the lives of children serves as his motivation to continue writing.

Crutcher's stories are extremely realistic.

Crutcher has repeatedly stated that he feels it is wrong to hide the truth about life from children. In his own life, Crutcher's mother tried to protect him from the evil in the world because she did not want him to feel bad. She wanted him to believe that everything would be all right. However, as Crutcher has personally observed, things do not always turn out all right. Children face abuse, people are trapped in unhappy or unhealthy relationships, and couples get divorced. Crutcher maintains that children have a right to know these truths. This personal philosophy is strongly reflected in *Whale Talk* when the main character's father tells him that if one is protected from the realities of life, one never learns what it means to be human. Ironically, it is his commitment to revealing the truth that brings Crutcher the most criticism from adults. Because his works deal with such sensitive topics as child abuse, sexuality, racism, molestation, suicide, teen pregnancy, abortion, death, and divorce, some find his books offensive.

However, Crutcher's purpose is not to point out the negative side of life. Instead, Crutcher's novels provide models of adolescents who manage to overcome overwhelmingly difficult circumstances. Although many of the characters in his books suffer a great deal, there are always those who are sensitive to their circumstances and are willing to help. Terry Davis, a close friend of Crutcher, argues that Crutcher's characters capture the human spirit and emphasize how mankind is connected to one another.

Most of the characters in Crutcher's books are athletes. However, Crutcher carefully dispels the "dumb jock" stereotype; his athletes display great sensitivity, loyalty, and personal courage. The strength of his stories seems to be in his ability to depict the real world of adolescents, including the difficult moral and ethical choices they must make.

Despite criticisms from some adults, the novels of Chris Crutcher remain among the favorites of adolescent readers and have won many awards. Crutcher was awarded the Margaret A. Edward Award for lifetime achievement for his contributions to young adult fiction. His first six novels have been named the American Library Association Best Book, as well as receiving the ALAN Award from the National Council of Teachers of English. One of his short stories, "A Brief Moment in the Life of Angus Bethune," has been made into a film. *Ironman* and *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* have also been adapted into screen films.

Setting

Whale Talk takes place in three important settings. The primary setting is Cutter High School in Spokane, Washington. Crutcher vividly recreates the locker-lined hallways and gyms where adolescents struggle to establish an identity and often feel threatened by those who are different. Cutter High is dominated by those who wear the letter jacket, a sacred symbol of elitism. It is against a backdrop of "zero intolerance" and prejudice that T. J. and his fellow swimmers struggle to find a sense of belonging and develop a positive sense of self. Even more important than the swim team's quest to earn a letter jacket is their need to show that they each deserve respect and dignity.

The All Night Gym, where the newly formed Cutter swim team practices daily, becomes the team's private retreat. It is in the deserted gym that T. J. discovers Oliver Van Zandt, a kind, generous man who has given up his house to pay for his son's college education. Later, it is Oliver, nicknamed "Icko," who acts as assistant coach for the swim team. In the quiet seclusion of the pool, hidden away from the prejudice and intolerance of the Cutter athletes, the swim team forges a common goal and discovers a sense of belonging. In the pool, T. J. is free to demonstrate his full athletic capabilities, and Chris Conklin, a mentally handicapped young man, finds encouragement and acceptance. In the gym, Andy Mott finds the freedom to reveal his secret, a leg prosthesis, while Tay Roy finds relief from the stress of his previous sport. In the pool, the taunts and prejudices of classmates are forgotten, replaced by physical exertion and a personal sense of accomplishment.

The swim team bus also provides a sheltered environment where these adolescent boys can reveal their inner fears and the tragedies of their lives. In the bus, T. J. learns that he is not the only victim of intolerance and close-mindedness. While stranded in a snow storm, the boys unmask the abuse, deaths, and family difficulties which have so tragically affected their lives.

Sometimes venting their anger and frustration on one another, each gains a greater understanding of himself and others and finds the support and acceptance needed to face the obstacles in their lives. The bus acts as a sort of cocoon from which each of the boys emerges more mature.

Social Sensitivity

Crutcher's novel deals with serious issues including child abuse, racism, prejudice, and the mistakes that individuals make.

Crutcher does not attempt to present anything other than a realistic portrayal of how these situations affect individuals. While some may find some of the language offensive, its usage is authentic and does not detract from the plot and important themes of the novel. Crutcher's adherence to realistic dialogue and his refusal to avoid controversial issues reflects his purpose for writing: to reveal the truths about the lives of adolescents that are too frequently hidden and to make a difference in adolescents' lives. It is this adherence to realism that allows adolescent readers to find themselves in this story and to be inspired by the characters.

Literary Qualities

The power of Crutcher's stories lies in his vivid development of the characters and the lively dialogue which includes a great deal of humor and smart-aleck remarks. Dan's scholarly attitude is revealed through his polysyllabic conversation with T. J., but his pent-up anger is reflected when Dan gets three days of in-school suspension for giving the crowd a "double middledigit salute." The realistic interactions of the adolescents include conversations full of sarcasm, sexual references, slang, and mild profanity. T. J. emphasizes the ridiculous importance placed on the Cutter letter jacket by referring to it as the "Shroud of Turin" while his personal hatred for Barbour is shown when T. J. tells Barbour he has been "peed into the athletic gene pool."

The description of Chris's face as he watches Andy Mott remove his artificial leg reflects Chris's simple-mindedness as well as providing humor. The reader feels both anger and compassion when Heidi's counselor and T. J. help the little girl reenact her father's abuse using dolls. The realistic use of abusive language and profanity in this scene emphasizes the horror of Heidi's everyday existence and the irrational prejudice some individuals harbor. Through their private discussions, the characters examine the real-life questions adolescents have regarding sex, love and relationships, religion, personal values, and the developing sense of self. Each character's personal story raises serious moral and ethical concerns, including the inadequacy of the justice system, the unpredictability of life, the hypocrisy of adults, and the inequalities which persist in today's world.

Crutcher's plot is fast-paced and easy to read. He is able to weave together several different plot lines to add depth to his narrative and to emphasize his themes.

While readers observe the prejudice and intolerance present in Cutter High, they are also shown the intolerance and abuse frequently hidden behind closed doors. While the reader is filled with horror at the characters' private tragedies, we recognize the great resiliency of the human spirit. Through his characters, Crutcher inspires the reader to be more compassionate, to practice tolerance, to feel responsible for others wellbeing, to reach out to those in difficult circumstances, and to be more human.

One of the major symbols in this story is the Cutter letter jacket. To T. J., the letter jacket represents all that is wrong with the world and Cutter High. The jacket vividly depicts how man often places great value on outward displays of achievement while ignoring what is really important. In earning a letter jacket for each member of the team except himself, T. J. strikes a blow against injustice and creates a more equal playing field for all the students at Cutter High.



Themes and Characters

Like all of Crutcher's young adult novels, the themes found in *Whale Talk* reflect adolescents' struggle to overcome extreme obstacles and tragedies in life and to develop a sense of personal worth. The main characters in this novel, the Cutter swim team, are those students who are left on the fringe of high school because of mental or physical handicaps or as the result of the prejudice and intolerance of others. However, as the main characters struggle to carve out a place for themselves, they demonstrate strength of character and resiliency.

They clearly demonstrate how compassion and generosity can help others overcome tragic circumstances. These characters also illustrate the need of all human beings for respect and dignity. Another important theme is that life is not fair and that the quality of life depends on what one is willing to take from life.

These themes are first evident in the main character Tao Jones, or T. J., who clearly shows the struggle that teenagers from mixed heritages face in trying to establish a cultural identity. T. J. tells the reader that he is Japanese, white, and black, although he has never been to Japan or Africa and doesn't know which countries make up Northern Europe. Therefore, he defines his ethnicity as "mixed," "blended," "pureed," and "potpourri." He further points out that it is difficult to be "of color" in a country where racists are often given a clear voice. As T. J. so vividly describes, sometimes people don't run into racism; it runs into them. As a result of his experiences, T. J. places himself in direct opposition to the one group who so clearly represent the close-minded and intolerant—the elite who wear the Cutter High athletic letter jacket. He also makes himself the self-appointed defender of the downtrodden, including a mentally handicapped young man named Chris Coughlin.

T. J.'s compassion for fellow victims of prejudice like himself is most evident when Chris is harassed by Brian Barbour, the worst bully at Cutter High. When Chris is slammed against the locker for daring to wear his dead brother's Cutter letter jacket, T. J. quickly comes to Chris's rescue. T. J.'s sharp wit and defiant attitude save Chris but make Barbour a formidable enemy.

It is obvious that T. J. has a vision of how the world could be a place of fairness and equality. When Coach Simet approaches T. J. about forming a swim team for Cutter High, T. J. sees it as an opportunity to break through the elitism of the Cutter athletes.

T. J.'s efforts to recruit a swim team result in an unlikely group of misfits. Ironically, his first recruit is Chris Coughlin, whom T. J. sees helping a little girl with shriveled arms paddle a kickboard across the pool. Like T. J., even though he is the victim of intolerance, Chris is capable of great compassion toward the less fortunate. The rest of the team is comprised of Daniel Hole, a geek; Simon DeLong, a three-hundred-pound young man who looks nothing like an athlete; Jackie Craig, a totally non-descript young man who never speaks; Andy Mott, a swimmer with only one leg; and Tay Roy, a massive bench presser who is burned-out on wrestling. With this motley group, T. J.



intends to show up Barbour and others like him by earning a letter jacket for every member of the swim team.

The themes of the novel are developed through the tragic stories and relationships the characters build with one another. As the team begins practicing in the privacy of the All Night Gym, they find freedom to be who they really are and develop a sense of belonging. Each young man pushes the limits of his physical endurance and in so doing finds each has a great deal to offer.

They are bound both by their common goal and by their need for understanding and acceptance. Locked in the seclusion of the 472 Whale Talk bus while traveling to swim meets, one by one, the swimmers reveal their secret fears and the tragic circumstances of their lives that have made them outsiders and have made it so difficult for them to belong.

Chris talks of the pain he feels over the loss of his older brother, a great Cutter athlete.

Andy Mott reveals that he lost his leg at the hands of his mother's abusive boyfriend.

T. J. questions what sort of world allows innocent young children, like a little girl named Heidi, to suffer abuse at the hands of a racist stepfather. In the private world of the bus, they vent their anger and frustrations but also demonstrate unconditional acceptance and tolerance of those with different viewpoints. By the time they reach the end of the season, the team is transformed. Chris is greeting the cheering crowd with waves and confidence, Jackie stands unembarrassed before a crowd, Simon is swimming well and earning the respect of his school, and Jackie Craig actually speaks.

A self-confident Tay Roy reaches out to form a relationship with a girl, and T. J. feels the pride of accomplishing his goal— earning a letter jacket for his team.

The title of the story reflects the final theme of the story, what it really means to be human. As a young man, T. J.'s father was a truck driver who had a brief relationship with a widow who had a toddler son.

After spending one loving night, T. J.'s father returned home in his truck, only to discover that the toddler had crawled onto the axle of the truck while the lovers were together, and was killed when T. J.'s father drove away. T. J.'s father was unaware of the tragedy until hours later. His dad has never been able to forgive himself for his part in the death of the child and, as a result, has spent his life trying to do "penance" by living the life of a saint. However, years later, there are still times when he is completely overwhelmed by remorse.

One day, T. J. finds his father, depressed and alone in his room listening to a tape of whales talking to one another. His father explains that whales send messages which are not edited; whales do not attempt to protect other whales from the realities of life; whale talk is transmitted as it is felt to all whales for miles around. T. J.'s father explains that, consequently, whales know what it means to be a whale, unlike many humans who never discover what it is to be human. By the end of the story, when T. J.'s father is

killed by Heidi's vicious and abusive stepfather, T. J. has learned from his father and his experiences with the Cutter swim team what it means to be human, and his own sorrow transmits a bit of that lesson to Brian Barbour.



Topics for Discussion

1. Chris Crutcher has said that he wants his books to "seem so real that people will recognize something in their own lives and see the connections." Which characters in the book did you find most realistic? In what way does Crutcher make it possible to connect with his characters?

2. Discuss how prejudices are formed.

How do people form their personal value and belief system? What sources have the greatest effect on belief systems?

3. How does ethnicity affect one's selfimage? What does it mean to be "of color" today? What are the implications of the term?

4. Mr. Simet is a great influence in T. J.'s life. What person, other than a parent, has had a great effect on your life?

Explain how or why?

5. Find five examples of verbal irony in the novel. Explain how its use affects the story.

6. What is the relationship of the title to the book? Explain.

7. What are some of the major themes of the novel? Which ones are clearly stated, and which ones are implied?

8. What are the major conflicts in this story? Which ones are internal, and which ones are external?

9. The novel ends with a shocking climax.

Why do you think Crutcher chose to end the book in this way? What is the overall effect, and how does it relate to the rest of the story?

10. How do you think people could make high schools more tolerant and equitable? Give reasons.



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Conduct interviews with students regarding important symbols of achievement that are present in your high school. How do these recognitions affect the status of those achieving them?

Are they equally obtainable by females and males?

2. T. J.'s dad refers to communication among whales. Research and write a brief report on this phenomenon. How is whale communication different from communication between other animals?

3. Read another book by Crutcher, and compare the themes of the two novels.

4. Create an original poster which reflects the major social issues presented in *Whale Talk*. Be prepared to explain your poster.

5. Working with a partner, select a particular chapter from *Whale Talk* and rewrite it as a screenplay. You may include set design or casting in your directions.

6. Some adults want Chris Crutcher's books banned because they deal with sensitive topics and contain profanity.

Write an editorial defending Crutcher's book or advocating its banning from school shelves. Your argument should be well organized and contain clearly stated reasons. Support your argument.

7. The story surprises the reader with its tragic ending. Write the next chapter in T. J.'s life. How will he cope with his father's death? What will happen between T. J. and his newly discovered half brother?

8. Georgia is a child psychologist who helps T. J. as a young boy and later tries to help Heidi overcome abuse. Research this career. What sort of training does it require? What does the career involve?

What sort of techniques are frequently used in child counseling?

9. Write an original song or poem based on *Whale Talk* or about the lives of one of the characters.



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Related Web Sites

"Chris Crutcher Web Archive Reviews."



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