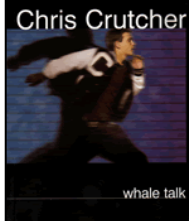


**Whale Talk by Chris Crutcher : Book Discussion Guide**



T.J. Jones organizes a motley crew of swimmers to earn the coveted Cutter High Letter Jacket. As they practice, they learn how to respect themselves and each other. Combining comedy and tragedy, *Whale Talk* takes an uncompromising look at sportsmanship, abuse, racism and the true meaning of honor.



**Discussion Questions**

1. Did you like T.J. as a narrator? What motivates him in the book? Do you think T.J. is a **typical** teenager? How would the story be different if one of the other characters, like Mott or Barbour, told the story?
2. How would you characterize T.J.'s relationships with the other boys on the swim team? Are they his friends? Apart from the swim team, does T.J. have any friends at Cutter High?
3. One of the themes of the book is the danger of stereotypes. Do you think Crutcher was able to develop characters that existed beyond stereotypes? How were female characters in the book represented? What about the other members of the Cutter All-Night Mermen?
4. Chris Crutcher is a family therapist and child protection specialist. Where in the book did the therapist side of Crutcher appear to take over? Do you think that this insight helps to develop the characters, or does it come off as preachy?
5. Based on the definition given by T.J.'s father, and by the explanation given by Crutcher himself, what are all the instances in the book where characters communicate through **whale talk**?
6. How does the setting of the story in rural Washington add to the plot? Could the novel take place in another rural area? How would it be different if it took place in an urban area?
7. How are families represented in this book? What can we learn from the different family types that appear in the novel?
8. What types of students do you think this book would appeal to?
9. There are many tragedies in the book, but it manages to remain upbeat. How does Crutcher combine humor and tragedy throughout the book?
10. Is T.J. a rebel in the mold of Huck Finn and Holden Caulfield? Is he heroic or a threat? How would you respond to T.J. if he were a student in your class?

**WHERE DID THE TITLE "WHALE TALK" COME FROM?**

*"It's a metaphor for telling the truth. The main character's father talks about how, when a whale experiences anguish or joy, his "talk" or sounds can be heard for hundreds or even thousands of miles, and every whale who runs into those sounds knows the truth. That's pretty much the opposite of how humans do things."*  
 - Chris Crutcher



**MAJOR THEMES IN WHALE TALK**

- "Society" vs. the "individual"
- Abusive relationships
- Adoptive/Foster families
- Civil disobedience
- Eastern philosophy
- Overcoming loss
- Physical or mental disability
- Racism
- Role of "fate"
- Social structures in life and school.
- Sportsmanship

Chris Crutcher grew up in Cascade, Idaho, "a town so small that a local athletic competition would bring business to a standstill." Just like the characters in his books, Crutcher's life was full of athletic competition, including swimming, which he participated in at the college level.

According to his autobiography, Crutcher often questioned authority, underperformed in school, and grew up with

a violent temper. Perhaps because of these challenges, Crutcher pursued a degree in psychology with a minor in sociology, and eventually became an educator. In addition to his jobs as a high school social studies teacher, a school administrator, and a mental health therapist, Crutcher also taught in urban and alternative schools for at-risk youth, before he became a child and family therapist.

## S E L E C T E D   B I B L I O G R A P H Y

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>The Sledding Hill</i> (2005)</li> <li>▪ <i>King of the Mild Frontier: An Ill-Advised Autobiography</i> (2003)</li> <li>▪ <i>Ironman</i> (1995)</li> <li>▪ <i>Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes</i> (1993)</li> <li>▪ <i>Athletic Shorts</i> (1991)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>The Deep End</i> (1991)</li> <li>▪ <i>Chinese Handcuffs</i> (1991)</li> <li>▪ <i>The Crazy Horse Electric Game</i> (1987)</li> <li>▪ <i>Stotan!</i> (1986)</li> <li>▪ <i>Running Loose</i> (1983)</li> </ul> |
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## F O R   M O R E   I N F O R M A T I O N   &   P L A N N I N G   I D E A S

NOTE: Discussion Questions adapted from: Ann Wilder, "Whale Talk," *Novelist*, Ebsco Publishing, 2002, <http://novelist3.epnet.com>, "Multnomah County Library Whale Talk Book Discussion Guide," and "Whale Talk by Chris Crutcher – A Unit Plan."

- Chris Crutcher's Authorized Website**  
<http://www.chriscrutcher.com>
- Author Profile: Chris Crutcher**  
[www.teenreads.com/authors/au-crutcher-chris-2.asp](http://www.teenreads.com/authors/au-crutcher-chris-2.asp)
- Multnomah County *Whale Talk* Book Discussion Guide**  
<http://www.multcolib.org/talk/guides-whale.html>
- Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher, A Unit Plan**  
[http://www.viterbo.edu/personalpages/faculty/GSmith/Chris\\_Crutcher.htm](http://www.viterbo.edu/personalpages/faculty/GSmith/Chris_Crutcher.htm)
- Whale Talk* Book Discussion Guide Questions**  
<http://www.writinglife.org/eci5212002/disc5/00000078.htm>



***Whale Talk*** has won numerous awards, including the following ALA awards: **Popular Paperback for YA, Best Book for YA, and Top 10 Book for YA.** Chris Crutcher has also won the ALAN Award for Significant Contribution to Adolescent Literature, the National Intellectual Freedom Award, and the ALA Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement in writing for teenagers.