

# Whale Talk

by Chris Crutcher

## Teacher's Guide

Written By Laurie Rozakis, Ph.D.

PERMA-BOUND  
THE STRONGEST BOOKS YOU CAN BUY

CLASSROOM  
FAVORITES

whale talk

A Perma-Bound Production

*Whale Talk* This guide was prepared using the Dell Laurel Leaf (a division of Random House), ©2001. Other editions may differ.

## Synopsis

### Chapter 1

The story is narrated through the eyes of T.J. Jones, a teenage boy of mixed ancestry (black, Japanese, and white) who lives in Spokane, Wash. His given name is The Tao. T.J. was two years old when his crack-addicted birth mother, Glenda, abandoned him. His adoptive mother, Abby Jones, a lawyer, and his father John Paul Jones, a motorcycle enthusiast, are decent, loving ex-hippies. Despite his natural athletic ability—at thirteen, he qualified for the Junior Olympics in two swimming events—T.J. has avoided organized sports until his senior year, when Mr. Simet, his favorite teacher, implores him to help form a school swim team. T.J. runs into Chris Coughlin, a brain-damaged fellow student. Chris's older brother Brian, killed in a freak accident, was a sports legend and a fine human being. When racist linebacker Mike Barbour bullies Chris for wearing his dead brother's athletic letter jacket, T.J. rescues Chris.

### Chapter 2

T.J. agrees to create the swim team, seeing an opportunity to get revenge on the establishment. The first to respond is Daniel Hole, a verbose student unwilling to commit to the team. The next to call is Tay-Roy Kibble, a bodybuilding musician. T.J. is astonished when Coach Benson says that Chris should not be allowed to wear his brother's letter jacket because he didn't earn it. T.J. gives Chris a new jacket so he doesn't get attacked and convinces Chris to join the swim team and thus earn his own jacket.

### Chapter 3

This chapter opens with a flashback, as T.J. fills in background about Rich Marshall. An alumnus who heads the Wolverines Too, the Cutter High School booster club,

Rich controls the lucrative Marshall Logging Company. A bigot and a bully, Marshall shot a doe and tried to circumvent the law to bring in the fawn. T.J. freed the fawn and threw his body over it, but Rich killed the animal anyway. Then he beat T.J. bloody. Simet found him staggering on the road and brought him home. In the present, T.J. begins his swimming workouts at the local gym, where he meets Oliver Van Zandt. Since he can't afford both his son's college tuition and housing, Oliver lives at the gym, sleeping in different spots during the night.

### Chapter 4

Other "losers" join the team: 300-pound Simon DeLong, Jackie Craig, angry Andy Mott. In a flashback, T.J. recalls how his therapist, Georgia Brown, helped him overcome his rage. T.J. is in love with Carly Hudson, an athletic girl with integrity and a bad family.

### Chapter 5

In a flashback, T.J. explains the central fact of his father's life: On July 27, 1968, while working as a trucker, John Paul ran over and killed a child, an accident he has never recovered from. Since that day he

has never harmed any creature or been able to work full-time. John Paul restores motorcycles and helps abused children. Meanwhile, the swim team works out. T.J. tells Simet that he wants his swimmers to earn athletic jackets, so they come up with a way to gather points. T.J. stops by Georgia Brown's house, where she is working with Heidi, a badly traumatized biracial girl. T.J. participates in the play therapy with the child. Heidi is the product of Alicia Marshall's affair with a black football player. After the athlete's death, Alicia married Rich Marshall, who abuses the child.

### Chapter 6

Rich Marshall threatens T.J. for getting involved with Heidi and Alicia. The swim team practices and continues to improve.



## Chapter 7

Andy Mott finally shows up for practice and reveals that he is missing one leg. The seven-man team now has “a swimmer of color, a representative from each extreme of the educational spectrum, a muscle man, a giant, a chameleon, and a one-legged psychopath.” Chris’s aunt thanks T.J. for being kind to Chris and taking him on the team.

## Chapter 8

T.J. gets Simet to agree that any swimmer who hits his best time will get an athletic letter jacket. The team competes in its first meet and does well. On the way home, the team gets marooned on the side of the road during a snowstorm and Mott reveals that he was sexually abused by his step-father, which accounts for part of his rage and anti-social behavior.

## Chapter 9

The school newspaper writes a hyperbolic account of the meet and Simet gets the letter jacket requirements through the Athletic Council. The team does even better at their second meet. The really important thing, though, turns out to be the long bus rides to and from meets, which become a safe place to share the hurts that have made them who they are. Georgia brings Heidi to T.J.’s house when Alicia can’t care for her. In a drunken rage, Rich comes to the house and threatens T.J., believing that T.J. is having sex with Alicia.

## Chapter 10

T.J. and John Paul talk about how whales communicate and John Paul’s difficulty in dealing with the accident. On the way home from their next swimming meet, Mott starts to explain how he lost his leg, but does not finish the story.

## Chapter 11

Back at school, Kristen Sweetwater tearfully explains how Mike Barbour tried to rape her. T.J. goes after Barbour, but a police officer tickets him for speeding. Back home, T.J.’s mother wisely counsels him to exercise caution and recounts stories of the horrific abuse he endured at his mother’s hands. Later, T.J.’s father adds his own wise council.

## Chapter 12

Principal Morgan calls T.J. to his office, having heard of the problems between T.J. and Rich Marshall. The principal takes Marshall’s side, stating that he and Alicia are back together and T.J. is trying to destroy their relationship. At the conference meet the team excels. Now

everyone qualifies for a letter.

On the way home from the meet, Mott explains how he lost his leg. When Mott was a small child, Rance Haskings, a man who killed an eighteen-month-old infant for peeing in his pants, was dating his mother. Rance tied Mott to a pipe and his mother didn’t come home for 24 hours. The circulation in his leg was cut off and the leg had to be amputated.

## Chapter 13

The Athletic Council tries to cancel the agreement about the swim team receiving letter jackets, but Simet stalls for time. Rich threatens T.J. and his family. T.J. competes in the state swim meet at the University of Washington. He makes a deal with Benson: if he beats both Seattle Heights swimmers, Benson will vote in favor of the team’s letter jackets. But Benson has already betrayed the team.

## Chapter 14

On the ride home, T.J. muses about starting another team with the same players. At the Athletic Council meeting, T.J. reveals that he finished dead last in the two-hundred meter race, even though he was favored to win. He threw the race to punish the school officials who voted against the letter jackets. The Council decides that if Chris Coughlin can outlast Mike Barbour in the water, the swim team will get their letter jackets. Meanwhile, T.J.’s father tangles with Rich Marshall and his growing murderous rage.

## Chapter 15

Chris easily defeats Barbour in the race. The awards dinner is inspirational. Everyone but T.J. gets a letter jacket because he threw the state meet. Chris gives T.J. his brother’s jacket. The team forms the Slam-Dunking Mermen, a basketball team. They do well in the Hoopfest competitions, winning the last game 21 to 19. After the game, Rich walks through the crowd and aims a rifle at Heidi. John Paul blocks the shot with his body. As he dies, John Paul says the name of the baby he killed, “Tyler.” Stacey Couples was his mother. John Paul forces T.J. to forswear revenge on Rich. He dies in T.J.’s arms.

## Chapter 16

T.J. travels to New Meadows, Idaho, and meets Kyle—the result of John Paul’s one-night-stand with his mother the day that Tyler was killed. Like John Paul, Kyle works with motorcycles and admires whales. Kyle offers T.J. a job, which he considers. Rich is in jail for life; Heidi

and Alicia have settled with T.J.'s mother.

### Timeline of Current Events

- 1941** On December 7, the United States enters World War II.
- 1946** Chris Crutcher born.
- 1948** State of Israel founded.
- 1950** Korean War begins.
- 1952** Elizabeth II crowned Queen of England.  
Car seatbelts introduced.  
Polio vaccine invented.
- 1954** Supreme Court issues *Brown v. Board of Education*, making segregation illegal.
- 1955** Disneyland opens.  
McDonald's corporation founded.
- 1956** Sabin invents oral polio vaccine.
- 1957** Dr. Seuss publishes *The Cat in the Hat*.
- 1958** NASA established.
- 1960** First televised U.S. presidential debate.
- 1961** Peace Corps founded.  
Berlin Wall built.  
Alan Shepard is first American in space.
- 1963** President Kennedy assassinated.
- 1967** First Super Bowl played.  
First heart transplant performed.  
Israel defeats Arab alliance in Six-Day War.
- 1969** Neil Armstrong is the first human on the moon.
- 1974** President Nixon resigns.
- 1979** Sony introduces the Walkman.
- 1981** First woman appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court.  
Pac-man video game is very popular.
- 1983** Sally Ride becomes first woman in space.
- 1989** Fall of the Berlin Wall.
- 1990** Nelson Mandella freed in South Africa.
- 1991** Collapse of Soviet Union.
- 1997** Scientists clone sheep.  
China resumes control of Hong Kong.
- 1999** World population reaches 6 billion.
- 2001** *Whale Talk* published.  
Sept.11: al-Qaeda terrorists destroy World Trade Center in New York City.
- 2002** Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter wins Nobel Peace Prize.
- 2004** Huge tsunami in the Indian Ocean kills more than 280,000 people, one of the deadliest natural disasters in history.

**2005** Hurricane Katrina pounds Gulf Coast, destroying many parts of New Orleans.

### Author Sketch

Christopher Crutcher was born in 1946 in Cascade, Idaho, where his father worked as a county clerk. More than half a century ago, Cascade was a small town. Perhaps as a result, sports were key: a big game closed down the main street. Crutcher excelled in high school athletics, did well in college swimming, and began competing in triathlons after college. It comes as no surprise, then, that competitive sports figure heavily in his writing.

Crutcher earned his B.A. at Washington State College (now University) in 1968, majoring in psychology and minoring in sociology. Crutcher began his career as a high school social studies teacher in a tough, inner-city high school. Next, he ran an alternative school for inner-city kids in Oakland, California. Finally, he decided to help troubled teens on a more basic level, becoming a child and family therapist, like his fictional character Georgia Brown in *Whale Talk*. All these jobs gave Crutcher the hands-on experience he draws on in his writing.

As a result of his frankness in *Whale Talk* and other works, Crutcher's writing has been censored by librarians, parents, and teachers—even in his hometown. Some people object to the rough language and subject matter, including teen pregnancy, abortion, suicide, molestation, divorce, child abuse, and bigotry. Crutcher makes no apologies for his realistic portrayals. In November 1998, he received the Intellectual Freedom Award from the National Council of Teachers of English for his efforts in defending young adult literature against censorship challenges. Crutcher has said, "My mission is to write truths as I see them, reflect the world as it appears to me, rather than as others would have it. There are significant amounts of people who think kids should not be exposed in print to what they are exposed to in their lives."

Crutcher makes his home in Spokane, Washington.

### Critic's Corner

To date, all of Crutcher's young adult novels have been selected as ALA Best Books for Young Adults. He is the winner of two lifetime achievement awards: the Margaret A. Edwards Award for Outstanding Literature for Young Adults and the ALAN Award for Significant Contribution to Adolescent Literature.

Censorship issues aside, many critics admire Crutcher's novels. *Publishers Weekly* called *Whale Talk* a "gripping tale of small-town prejudice" and noted that Crutcher "delivers a frank, powerful message about social issues and ills." The critic concluded: "The book's shocking climax will force readers to re-examine their own values and may cause them to alter their perception of individuals pegged as 'losers.'"



Reviewing *Whale Talk* for amazon.com, Patty Campbell said: "Chris Crutcher ... here gives his many fans another wise and compassionate story full of the intensity of athletic competition and hair-raising incidents of child abuse." Kelly Halls in *Booklist* wrote: "The veteran author once again uses well-constructed characters and quick pacing to examine how the sometimes cruel and abusive circumstances of life affect every link in the human chain, and a heart-wrenching series of plot twists leads to an end in which goodness at least partially prevails. Through it all, as expected, shines Crutcher's sympathy for teens and their problems."

## Other Works by Chris Crutcher

### Books for Young Adults

*Running Loose* (1983, 2003)

*Stotan!* (1986)

*The Crazy Horse Electric Game* (1987)

*Chinese Handcuffs* (1989)

*Athletic Shorts: Six Short Stories* (1991, 2002)

*Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* (1993, 2003)

*Ironman* (1995)

(Contributor) Lisa Rowe Fraustino, editor, *Dirty Laundry, Stories about Family Secrets* (1998)

### Other

*The Deep End* (1991)

*King of the Mild Frontier: An Ill-Advised Autobiography* (2003)

Contributor to *Spokane* magazine.

## Bibliography

### Books

*Authors and Artists for Young Adults*, Volume 9, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1992.

*Children's Literature Review*, Volume 28, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1992.

Davis, Terry, *Presenting Chris Crutcher*, Twayne (Boston, MA), 1997.

*Twentieth-Century Young Adult Writers*, 1st edition, St.

James Press (Detroit, MI), 1994.

### Periodicals

*ALAN Review*, fall, 1994, "Chris Crutcher—Hero or Villain." *Booklist*, March 1, 1995, p. 1240; April 1, 2001, pp. 1462, 1463; April 15, 2003, p. 1469.

*Buffalo News*, July 12, 1998, p. F7.

*Denver Post*, April 15, 2001, p. F-01.

*Detroit News*, October 3, 2003, p. 05.

*Emergency Librarian*, January-February, 1991, pp. 67-71; May-June 1996, interview with Crutcher, p. 61.

*English Journal*, November, 1989, pp. 44-46; March 1996, 36.

*Horn Book*, May-June, 1988, p. 332; September-October, 1995, p. 606; May, 2001, p. 320; May-June, 2003, p. 368.

*Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, May, 2003, James Blasingame, interview with Crutcher, p. 696.

*Kirkus Reviews*, April 1, 2003, p. 532.

*Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service*, June 11, 2003, p. K1815.

*Lion and the Unicorn: A Critical Journal of Children's Literature*, June, 1992, p. 66.

*Los Angeles Times Book Review*, June 20, 1993, p. 3.

*New York Times*, May 18, 2003, p. 24.

*New York Times Book Review*, September 5, 1993, p. 17; July 2, 1995, p. 13.

*Publishers Weekly*, March 12, 2001, interview with Crutcher, p. 91; February 20, 1995, interview with Crutcher, p. 183; March 3, 2003, p. 77.

*School Library Journal*, February, 1996, p. 70; October, 1996, p. 78; January, 1997, p. 36; June 2000, interview with Crutcher, p. 42; May, 2001, p. 148; April, 2003, p. 176; October, 2003, reviews of *Ironman*, p.99, and *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* (audiobook review), p. S68; November, 2003, Carole Fazioli, review of *King of the Mild Frontier: An Ill-Advised Autobiography*, p. 82.

*Teacher Librarian*, October, 2003, p. 36.

*Tribune Books* (Chicago, IL), August 11, 1991, p. 6.

*VOYA: Voice of Youth Advocates*, April, 1983, p. 36; June 2002, p. 94.

## General Objectives

1. To analyze the American attitude toward athletic competition
2. To understand T.J.'s character
3. To assess each character's personality
4. To trace the sequence of events
5. To appreciate the author's creativity
6. To find examples of cruelty
7. To find examples of compassion
8. To laugh at the humor
9. To recognize the significance of setting

10. To describe the novel's ending

## Specific Objectives

1. To understand the primacy of sports in American high schools and the status athletic excellence confers
2. To evaluate T.J.'s heroism
3. To decide which characters are "losers" and which are "winners"
4. To assess the novel's melodramatic tone
5. To probe the effects of child abuse
6. To appreciate the mix of black comedy and tragedy
7. To celebrate the underdogs' success
8. To isolate examples of prejudice and racism
9. To grasp the effect of the first-person viewpoint
10. To understand how T.J.'s father achieves absolution by sacrificing himself to save Heidi

## Literary Terms and Applications

For a better understanding of Chris Crutcher's style, present the following terms and applications to the novel:

**Suspense:** the feeling of tension or anticipation an author creates in a work. Authors create suspense by unexpected plot twists. This keeps readers interested in the story and makes them want to read on to find out what will happen. *Whale Talk* is very suspenseful, as readers first wonder if T.J. will succeed in creating the swim team. When he does, the suspense only increases. Will the team earn enough points to get their letter jackets? Will the Athletic Council honor the deal they made? The conflict between Rich Marshall and T.J. also propels the plot. Readers know their confrontation is inevitable but wonder if it will lead to tragedy.

**Flashback:** a scene that breaks into the story to show an earlier part of the action. Flashbacks help fill in missing information, explain the characters' actions, and advance the plot. *Whale Talk* contains multiple flashbacks to explain how T.J. came to be adopted, how Alicia and Rich became a couple, and how members of the swim team were abused as children.

**Melodrama:** literature characterized by exaggerated emotions, stereotypical characters, and interpersonal conflicts. Originally, melodrama was a spoken text with a musical background, as in Greek drama. Melodrama was especially popular in the 18th century. Today, melodrama is ubiquitous on television and in the movies: it is evident, for example, in programs about diseases or

domestic violence, or the large number of hour-long television programs about lawyers, police officers, or physicians. *Whale Talk* is melodramatic, especially shown in the ending, which builds to a climax of emotions, as T.J.'s father saves a life and atones for past sins by diving in front of a bullet and dying in his son's arms. The melodramatic tone hammers home Crutcher's themes.

## The Importance of Setting

*Whale Talk* is set in Spokane, the urban commercial center of the eastern part of Washington and the northern part of Idaho. The city was originally formed as "Spokane Falls" (without an 'e' at the end), from the Native American "Spokanee," which means "Children of the Sun." Today, Spokane is the metropolitan center of the Inland Northwest. As of 2006, the city of Spokane was home to 201,600 people; the greater Spokane metropolitan area has more than half a million people.

Spokane is the distribution point for a major agricultural, lumber, mining, horticultural, and livestock raising region. The lumber industry figures in *Whale Talk* because it is the source of Rich Marshall's money and thus power.

Athletics are very important in Spokane. Gonzaga University's athletic team, the "Gonzaga Bulldogs," is best known for its successful men's basketball team, which has participated in the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament ("March Madness") since the late 1990s. High school sports are also important in Spokane, with local teams competing in the Greater Spokane League (GSL). In addition to the majority of contests played at school facilities, Joe Albi Stadium, an 18,000-seat city-owned venue, is the scene of many GSL football games. The Spokane Arena hosts a number of GSL basketball matchups, as well as other sports. The Spokane Arena is also the perennial host to the State "B" Basketball Tournament.

Spokane is the site of Hoopfest, the largest three-on-three basketball tournament in the world. It is held the last weekend in June with amateurs (kids, teens, adults) as well as former college and NBA players participating. Started in 1989 with about 300 teams, the event now annually averages more than 40,000 participants. The Lilac Bloomsday Run, a 7.46-mile race for walkers and runners held on the first Sunday in May, is the largest timed road race in the world, attracting between 50,000 and 70,000 participants. Athletic competition forms the

core of *Whale Talk*, as Mr. Simet convinces T.J. to create the swimming team. Later, T.J., his team, and his father, John Paul, participate in Hoopfest as well.

## Cross-Curricular Sources

### Fiction

Avi, *Perloo the Bold*  
Joan Bauer, *Squashed*  
Joan Bauer, *November*  
Nancy Butts, *The Door in the Lake*  
Robert Cormier, *Fade*  
Robert Cormier, *After the First Death*  
Robert Cormier, *The Chocolate War*  
Robert Cormier, *Beyond the Chocolate War*  
Mark Delaney, *The Vanishing Chip*  
Carol Fenner, *The King of Dragons*  
Vicki Grove, *Reaching Dustin*  
Jeanette Ingold, *Pictures*  
Gary Paulsen, *Brian's Winter*  
Gary Paulsen, *Hatchet*  
Sherry Shahan, *Frozen Stiff*  
Shelley Sykes, *For Mike*  
Zilpha Keatley Snyder, *And Condors Danced*  
Frances Wilbur, *The Dog with Golden Eyes*

### Audio Cassettes

*Athletic Shorts*  
*Ironman*  
*Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*  
*Whale Talk*

### Videos/DVDs

screenplay for *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes* in production.  
*Breaking Away* (1979)  
*Champagne and The Talking Eggs* (1997)  
*Future Fantastic* (1998)  
*Greystoke - The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes* (1983)  
*The Horse Whisperer* (1998)  
*Innerspace* (1987)  
*The Iron Giant* (1999)  
*Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989)  
*Microcosmos* (1996)  
*The Mighty* (1998)  
*Never Cry Wolf* (1983)  
*The Secret of Roan Inish* (1995)  
*Simon Birch* (1998)  
*Super Speedway* (1997)  
*Waking Ned Devine* (1998)  
*Walking with Dinosaurs* (1999)

### Internet

Chris Crutcher's Authorized Site,  
[www.aboutcrutcher.com/](http://www.aboutcrutcher.com/)

Learning about Chris Crutcher  
[www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/crutcher.html](http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/crutcher.html)

Author Profile: Chris Crutcher  
[www.teenreads.com/authors/au-crutcher-chris-2.asp](http://www.teenreads.com/authors/au-crutcher-chris-2.asp)

Chris Crutcher : Teacher Resource File Chris Crutcher  
[falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/crutcher.htm](http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/crutcher.htm)

An Adult Reads Chris Crutcher  
[scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/spring97/s97-10-Sheffer.html](http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/spring97/s97-10-Sheffer.html)

Chris Crutcher-Hero or Villain? [scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/fall94/Greenway.html](http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/fall94/Greenway.html)

Powells.com From the Author - Chris Crutcher  
[www.powells.com/essays/crutcher.html](http://www.powells.com/essays/crutcher.html)

CCPL: Chris Crutcher Author Feature Information  
[www.carmel.lib.in.us/ya/crutcher.htm](http://www.carmel.lib.in.us/ya/crutcher.htm)

## Themes and Motifs

A study of the central issues and situations in Chris Crutcher's *Whale Talk* should include these aspects:

### Themes

- athletics
- child abuse
- courage
- cruelty
- death
- humor
- kindness
- racism
- therapy
- redemption

### Motifs

- becoming popular through athletic achievement
- dealing with the effects of horrific child abuse
- showing bravery in the face of great adversity
- helping those who are less fortunate
- atoning for past mistakes
- discovering a half-sibling
- healing through the help of a skilled family therapist
- being considered a "loser"

- experiencing and showing kindness
- dealing with a bi-racial heritage

## Meaning Study

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have particular meaning in the book. Explain the meaning of each. Chapter and page numbers indicate the context from which the item is taken.

- In a burst of panic, Simet told Morgan he's been trying to get a swimming team going, since Cutter is one of only three high schools in the conference without one. (Chapter 1, p. 10)  
*(This is the novel's inciting incident: The principal, Mr. Morgan, has asked T.J.'s favorite teacher Mr. Simet to replace the assistant wrestling coach. In a panic because he does not want to be a wrestling coach, Simet proposes a swimming team. That the high school doesn't even have a swimming pool shows his desperation.)*
- And the symbol, the Shroud of Turin for Cutter High athletes, is the letter jacket. (Chapter 1, p. 13)  
*(T.J. explains the importance of earning a letter jacket for achievement in school athletics. The letter jacket is so important that the administration makes special allowances for those students who have earned it. T.J. starts the swimming team in part to repay Mr. Simet for his kindness and support but also to help Chris Coughlin, a brain-damaged fellow student, get a jacket of his own.)*
- So after several attempts, Roy leaned forward and said, "Arthur, when you're all alone, do you ever look up and say, 'Why me?'" (Chapter 2, p. 19)  
*(T.J. recalls a sports interview in which Roy Firestone of ESPN tried to elicit tears from tennis great Arthur Ashe, who was stricken with AIDS from a blood transfusion after surgery. Ashe's responses was "Why not me?" This incident summarizes the author's theme of assuming personal responsibility, not showing emotion in public, and standing up for others. It is very similar to Hemingway's theme of manhood, minus the emphasis on hunting and fishing.)*
- "I'm by God tired of living in a part of the country where you become a man by mounting some helpless animal's horns on the hood of the pickup your old man should have made you earn instead of dropping it on you like some Charlton Goddamn Heston rite-of-passage gift on your sixteenth birthday." (Chapter 3, p. 38)  
*(T.J. delivers this speech after Rich Marshall killed the fawn and doe and beat T.J. for trying to protect the doe. The speech shows T.J.'s philosophy of life, and by extension, the author's beliefs.)*
- "Me!" Heidi screams. "Yell it at me!" She turns to Georgia. "Make him do it right!" (Chapter 5, p. 68)  
*(In this searing incident, T.J. and Georgia act out the horrible racist abuse that Rich has inflicted on Heidi. The powerful scene sets the stage for the escalating violence. The language and violence also show why the novel has become a lightning rod for controversy and censorship.)*
- You should have to be a lot more than decent to be a kid's hero. (Chapter 7, p. 95)  
*(Chris Coughlin's aunt took him in after his stepfather tried to suffocate him. She has coped with her nephew's brain damage and the abuse he suffers from his fellow students. In this scene, she thanks T.J. for being kind to Chris and protecting him from the school bullies. T.J. is embarrassed that his simple acts of kindness are so rare and thus deserve thanks.)*
- You should have been a whale. (Chapter 11, p. 150)  
*(Earlier in the novel, on p. 130, John Paul explains his fascination with whales and their methods of communication. At that point in the novel, John Paul is angry at his parents, relatives, and teachers for not warning him that extreme pain exists in the world and for not preparing him to deal with it. He wants to be a whale because their songs carry for hundreds of miles. This means that everyone's communication—their joy as well as their pain—is heard by everyone else. Later, John Paul says that his son should have been a whale because he speaks the truth.)*
- "It's ... I don't know what I'm going to do when this is over." (Chapter 13, p. 184)  
*(Andy Mott has gained a family and a sense of belonging by being on the swimming team. He is terrified of losing that closeness when the season ends. As with most of the other "losers" on the team, he is shunned by the rest of the school.)*
- "And did you finish sixth?" "Dead last," I say. (Chapter 14, p. 189)  
*(T.J. stands an excellent chance of taking the state championship in swimming. Instead, he throws the last race and deliberately loses. He does so because the Athletic Council has refused to grant letter jackets to the swimmers. Crutcher greatly admires anti-heroes who act from the strength of their convictions rather than following the crowd.)*
- "My brother would of been glad if I gave you this," Chris says. "So I did." (Chapter 15, p. 205)  
*(In a highly emotional moment, Chris Coughlin gives T.J. his most treasured possession: his late brother*

*Brian's letter jacket. Brian was a fine athlete and a fine human being. By giving Brian's jacket to T.J., Chris is elevating T.J. to the same saintly status as his beloved brother.)*

## Comprehension Study

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the book.

### Questions 1-5 (Literal Level)

1. What is T.J.'s full name?  
*(The Tao Jones. He is named after one of the most influential books in history, the Tao Te Ching (loosely translated, The Way of Virtue) by the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu. Among other things, it stresses truth, humility, simplicity, freedom from envy, and living in harmony with all life.)*
2. What is T.J.'s racial/ethnic background?  
*(He is black, Japanese, and white.)*
3. Why does T.J. agree to help start the swim team?  
*(He wants to get back at the sports establishment at school and to help Mr. Simet.)*
4. What accident has affected John Paul's entire life?  
*(He ran over and killed a child, a little boy named Tyler.)*
5. How does John Paul die?  
*(Rich Marshall tries to shoot his step-daughter, Heidi. John Paul shields her body with his own and the bullet kills him.)*

### Questions 6-8 (Interpretative Level)

6. What do whales represent in the novel?  
*(They stand for truth and communication. Whale talk carries for hundreds of miles, which increases the possibility of the truth being known.)*
7. Why does John Paul take Heidi into their home?  
*(It appears likely that taking in the battered little girl eases his lifelong guilt over his role in the accidental death of a baby.)*
8. What is the theme or main idea of this book?  
*(The theme is the importance of standing up for yourself. There is no act of heroism which does not include standing up for yourself. Another theme is the damage we do as a society by creating unreal expectations for ourselves and for perfect lives.)*

### Questions 9 and 10 (Critical Level)

9. Is T.J. a believable character? Why or why not?  
*(Students who agree that T.J. is a believable character will argue that they have met similarly heroic and*

*self-assured people. Students who do not agree that T.J. is a believable character can say that he is witty, self-assured, fearless, intelligent, and wise beyond his years. In fact, he has all of these qualities in such abundance that he's not an entirely plausible character.)*

10. What parts of this book did you find surprising? Why?  
*(Students could cite John Paul's death at the end of the novel.)*

### Questions 11-12 (Creative Level)

11. Hold a roundtable discussion in which you discuss why people worship athletes.
12. Write an alternate ending, in which Rich does not kill John Paul.

## Across the Curriculum

### Language Arts

1. T.J. Jones narrates the novel from the first-person point of view. Recast a chapter from the point of view of any other character. In a brief essay, analyze how the change in point of view affects your understanding of the novel.
2. T.J. has an unusual name: "The Tao." Give yourself a new name that reflects your personality. Explain its meaning and how it suits your personality.
3. English has different names for male, female, and baby animals. On a chart, show the names for at least ten different animals, such as deer, antelope, fox, giraffe, and sheep.
4. Reviewing the novel for School Library Journal, Todd Morning wrote: "The novel's ending sweeps to a crescendo of emotions, as T.J.'s mentally tortured father saves a life and atones for past sins by diving in front of a bullet and dying in his son's arms. Young adults with a taste for melodrama will undeniably enjoy this effort. More discerning readers will have to look harder for the lovely passages and truths that aren't delivered with a hammer." Agree or disagree with this assessment in a critical review of the novel.
5. Writing as Rich Marshall, give your side of the story. Justify your actions.
6. Read some of the Tao Te Ching and explain why it does or does not fit T.J.'s personality.

### Art/Music

1. Using scenes from the novel, create a mural of the main events.
2. Imagine that you are creating a movie of *Whale Talk*.



Choose background music for three especially dramatic scenes.

3. Make a poster or flyer to convince students to join the swim team.
4. Design an athletic letter for your school. If possible, create the letter from felt or another fabric and sew it on an athletic sweater or jacket.
5. Draw or paint a poster for a movie version of *Whale Talk*.

#### History/Social Studies

1. T.J. Jones compares himself to Superman because both were adopted. Trace Superman's origin and explain how Seigel and Schuster's creation reflected the 1930s, the time in which the Man of Steel was created.
2. T.J. has an unusual name: "The Tao." Explain the allusion.
3. Write a biography of tennis legend Arthur Ashe.
4. Explain who Shoeless Joe Jackson was and why he is famous. See Chapter 13 of *Whale Talk* for the reference.
5. Working with a group of classmates, teach the class about Spokane, Washington.

#### Speech/Drama

1. On the first page of the novel, T.J. Jones talks about *Ishtar*. Watch this movie and write a critical review of it.
2. T.J. has difficulty dealing with racism and hate. In a roundtable discussion, explore ways to bring about harmony among people of different backgrounds and beliefs.
3. The principal will not allow T.J. to wear a T-shirt with a potentially disruptive slogan. Research the First Amendment and see if it applies in this case.
4. T.J. throws the race at the State Meet to punish school officials for voting against letter jackets for the swim team. With a group of classmates, debate whether or not you agree with his decision.
5. Role-play the first meeting between T.J. and his father's birth son Kyle.
6. Debate whether or not *Whale Talk* should be mandatory reading at your grade level.

#### Mathematics/Science

1. Make a chart showing the number of people who hunt in your state or in the nation. Show how many of those people hunt for sport and how many hunt for food.
2. T.J. is adopted. Chart the number of children who are adopted every year in America.

3. Logging is an important business in the novel. Find out the top five industries in your state. Show your results on a bar graph.
4. Mott lost his leg to gangrene. Explain what gangrene is and its causes.
5. Chris suffered brain damage when his stepfather suffocated him. Make a diagram showing how oxygen travels through the body and is delivered to the brain.
6. John Paul discusses how whales communicate. In a PowerPoint presentation, share the latest findings about "whale talk."

#### Health

1. Learn to swim, if you do not already know how.
2. Start an intramural athletics team in your school.
3. Join a school team or a community sport, such as bowling.

### Alternate Assessment

- 1 Working with a small group of friends, hold a TV panel discussion interviewing the different characters about their experiences. Take turns being the characters and the interviewers.
2. Suppose you are Alicia. Write three journal entries explaining why you stayed with Rich Marshall.
3. Read another book by Chris Crutcher and compare and contrast it to *Whale Talk*. Which one did you prefer and why?
4. With a partner, role-play a scene in which the characters are reunited five years after the novel closes.

### Vocabulary

Complete the crossword puzzle with the following words from *Whale Talk*.

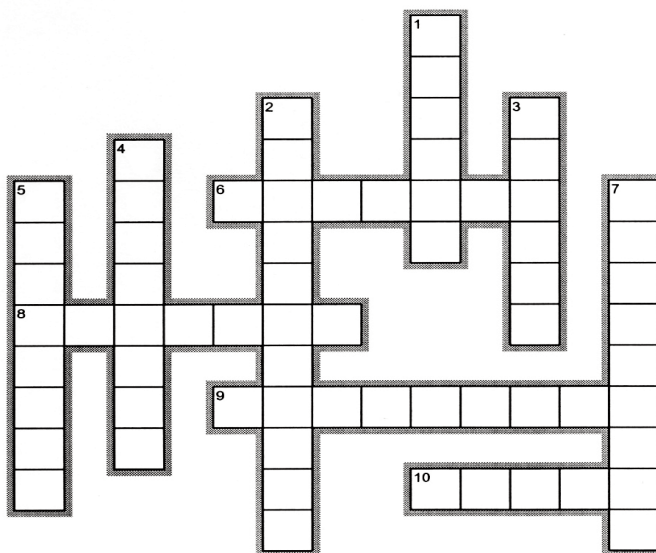
**Word Bank**

quest  
nondescript  
thespian

monicker  
resort  
impulse

interim  
frivolous  
damsel

diversity



**Across**

- 6. Intervening time; temporary
- 8. a sudden desire or tendency to act without reflection
- 9. not serious; trifling
- 10. a search or journey

**Down**

- 1. a specific place or alternative
- 2. lacking distinction; drab
- 3. a young, unmarried woman
- 4. an actor or actress
- 7. a different kind; variety

## Comprehension Test A

### Part I: Matching (20 points)

Match each description with a name from the list. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at left.

- |                     |                   |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| A. Mr. Simet        | F. T.J.           |
| B. Glenda           | G. Abby Jones     |
| C. Heidi            | H. Chris Coughlin |
| D. Oliver Van Zandt | I. Rich Marshall  |
| E. Georgia Brown    | J. John Paul      |

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. T.J.'s birth mother
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. The developmentally disabled teenager on the swimming team
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. T.J.'s adoptive father
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. The novel's narrator
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. The man who lives in the gym and coaches the team
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. T.J.'s English teacher
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. The sadistic bully who beats Heidi
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. The therapist who always gives T.J. cookies
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Alicia's daughter
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. A lawyer; T.J.'s adoptive mother

### Part II: Identification (20 points)

Briefly describe each person, place, or thing and explain why it is important in the novel.

- 1. a letter jacket
- 2. whales
- 3. hunting
- 4. bus rides
- 5. Brian Coughlin

### Part III: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either **T** for true or **F** if a part is false.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. T.J.'s real name is Thomas Jeffery.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. T.J. has little or no natural athletic ability, but he trains with diligence.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. A bigot and a bully, Marshall shot a doe and tried to circumvent the law to bring in the fawn.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. July 27, 1968, while working as a trucker, T.J.'s father ran over and killed a child.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Christine is the product of Alicia Marshall's affair with a black football player.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Unfortunately, the team does not win a single meet and none of the athletes earns any points.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Mike Barbour tries to sexually assault Kristen Sweetwater.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Principal Morgan calls T.J. to his office and takes Marshall's side, agreeing that T.J. is trying to break up the couple.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Rance tied Mott to a pipe and his mother didn't come home for 24 hours. The circulation in Mott's leg was cut off and the leg had to be amputated.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. In a surprise victory, T.J. wins the state meet and the entire state championship.

**Part IV: Essay (40 points)**

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Which character in the novel did you admire the most? Why?
2. Summarize the events in *Whale Talk*.
3. A critic remarked that "T.J. himself is witty, self-assured, fearless, intelligent, and wise beyond his years. In fact, he has all of these qualities in such abundance that he's not an entirely plausible character." Agree or disagree with this assessment.
4. Explain what the title *Whale Talk* means and how it does or does not fit the novel's theme.

## Comprehension Test B

### Part I: Fill in the Blank (20 points)

Circle the term that best completes each of the following statements.

1. T.J. Jones's real name is (**Timothy James, The Tao**).
2. T.J. agrees to create a (**football team, swim team**), seeing an opportunity to get revenge on the establishment.
3. John Paul works (**as a lawyer, restoring motorcycles**).
4. The team T.J. forms has (**seven, seventeen**) athletes.
5. T.J. and his father talk about how (**deer, whales**) communicate over great distances.
6. On the way home from one of the athletic meets, Mott explains how he lost his (**arm, leg**).
7. (**John Paul, The Athletic Council**) tries to cancel the agreement about the swim team members receiving letters, but Simet stalls for time.
8. T.J. competes in the state meet at the University of (**New Mexico, Washington**).
9. John Paul forces T.J. to forswear revenge on (**Willis Stack, Rich Marshall**).
10. T.J. travels to New Meadows, (**Idaho, Alaska**) and meets his father's birth son.

### Part II: Quote Identification (20 points)

Briefly describe each quote and explain its importance in the story.

1. At Solomon's Pizza, Simet tells me that Mr. Morgan, the principal, asked him to replace Mr. Packenbush as assistant wrestling coach.
2. Whale talk is the truth.
3. So after several attempts, Roy leaned forward and said, "Arthur, when you're all alone, do you ever look up and say, 'Why me?'"
4. I unfold the jacket, and my throat closes over. Across the back it says, COUGHLIN, on the front it says, BRIAN.
5. "And did you finish sixth?" "Dead last," I say.

### Part III: Matching (20 points)

Complete each of the following descriptions with a name from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at left. Use each name only once.

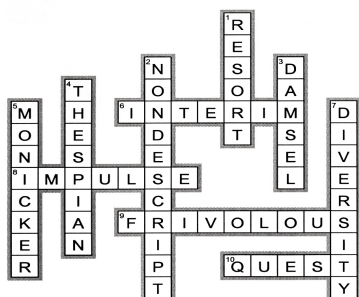
- |                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| _____ 1. Mike Barbour    | A. angry, hostile swimmer considered psychopathic     |
| _____ 2. Tyler           | B. a student who never uses one word when ten will do |
| _____ 3. Kyle            | C. a brain-damaged swimmer                            |
| _____ 4. Daniel Hole     | D. T.J.'s girlfriend                                  |
| _____ 5. Tay-Roy Kibble  | E. a racist linebacker on the football team           |
| _____ 6. T.J.            | F. the baby that T.J.'s father ran over and killed    |
| _____ 7. Simon DeLong    | G. the 300-pound swimmer                              |
| _____ 8. Andy Mott       | H. John Paul's birth son                              |
| _____ 9. Carly Hudson    | I. a body building musician on the swim team          |
| _____ 10. Chris Coughlin | J. the adopted bi-racial narrator                     |

**Part IV: Essay (40 points)**

1. T.J. Jones voices a darkly ironic appraisal of the high school sports arena. Based on your own experiences, evaluate his vision. Is it accurate or not? Explain.
2. Who are the “losers” and the “winners” in this novel? Give at least one example of each.
3. What is the author’s message about racism and prejudice in *Whale Talk*?
4. Identify two characters that you believe were heroic in the novel. Give specific reasons from the book to justify your choices.

## Answer Key

### VOCABULARY



### COMPREHENSION TEST A

#### Part I: Matching (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. B | 6. A  |
| 2. H | 7. I  |
| 3. J | 8. E  |
| 4. F | 9. C  |
| 5. D | 10. G |

#### Part II: Identification (20 points)

- T.J. calls a letter jacket “the shroud of Turin” for high school students. It is the very coveted reward for athletic excellence. T.J. manages to get letter jackets for his swimmers; indeed, it is one of the main reasons he agrees to start the team and lead it.
- Whales represent communication and honesty. “Whale talk,” then, stands for the ability to speak the truth and be heard by others.
- Hunting becomes a symbol for murder. Rich Marshall, the abusive husband and father, hunts deer.
- The bus rides to and from the swim meets, rather than the competition itself, is what draws the team members together and allows them to voice their pain and humiliation.
- Brian Coughlin is the symbol of pure goodness. He was Chris’s brother and protector.

#### Part III: True/False (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. F  |
| 2. F | 7. T  |
| 3. T | 8. T  |
| 4. T | 9. T  |
| 5. F | 10. F |

#### Part IV. Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.

### COMPREHENSION TEST B

#### Part I: Fill in the Blank (20 points)

- |                          |                         |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. The Tao               | 6. leg                  |
| 2. swim team             | 7. The Athletic Council |
| 3. restoring motorcycles | 8. Washington.          |
| 4. seven                 | 9. Rich                 |
| 5. whales                | 10. Idaho               |

#### Part II: Quote Identification (20 points)

- This is the novel’s inciting incident: The principal, Mr. Morgan, has asked T.J.’s favorite teacher, Mr. Simet, to replace the assistant wrestling coach. In a panic because he does not want to be a wrestling coach, Simet proposes a swimming team. That the high school doesn’t even have a swimming pool shows his desperation.
- John Paul explains his fascination with whales and their methods of communication. He is angry at his parents, relatives, and teachers for not warning him that extreme pain exists in the world and for not preparing him to deal with it. He wants to be a whale because their songs carry for hundreds of miles. This means that everyone’s communication – their joy as well as their pain—is heard by everyone else. Here, John Paul says that T.J. should have been a whale because he speaks the truth.
- T.J. recalls a sports interview in which Roy Firestone of ESPN tried to elicit tears from tennis great Arthur Ashe, who was stricken with AIDS from a blood transfusion after surgery. Ashe’s responses was “Why not me?” This incident summarizes the author’s theme of assuming personal responsibility, not showing emotion in public, and standing up for others. It is very similar to Hemingway’s theme of manhood, minus the emphasis on hunting and fishing.
- In a highly emotional moment, Chris Coughlin gives T.J. his most treasured possession: his late brother Brian’s letter jacket. Brian was a fine athlete and a fine human being. By giving Brian’s jacket to T.J., Chris is elevating T.J. to the same saintly status as his beloved brother.
- T.J. stands an excellent chance of winning the state championship in swimming. Instead, he throws the last race and deliberately loses. He does so because the Athletic Council has refused to grant letter jackets to the swimmers. Crutcher greatly admires anti-heroes who act from the strength of their convictions rather than following the crowd.

**Part III: Matching (20 points)**

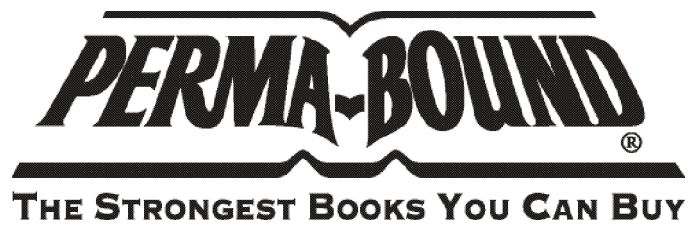
- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. E | 6. J  |
| 2. F | 7. G  |
| 3. H | 8. A  |
| 4. B | 9. D  |
| 5. I | 10. C |

**Part IV. Essay (40 points)**

Answers will vary.







**Perma-Bound**

617 East Vandalia Road • Jacksonville, Illinois 62650  
Toll Free 1-800-637-6581 • Fax 1-800-551-1169  
E-Mail: [books@perma-bound.com](mailto:books@perma-bound.com)

**Perma-Bound Canada**

Box 868, Station Main • Peterborough, Ontario K9J 7A2  
Toll Free 1-800-461-1999 • Fax 1-888-250-3811  
E-Mail: [perma-bound.ca@sympatico.ca](mailto:perma-bound.ca@sympatico.ca)

Visit us online at [www.perma-bound.com](http://www.perma-bound.com)