

*Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher  
Purpose & Ideas

***Purpose of CCHS Reads!***

The purpose of CCHS Reads is to promote lifelong readers by encouraging students to read and discuss and author's work before (and after) the author visits for an all-school assembly.

This is an optional activity, however we are hopeful students will be interested in reading the selection(s). Teachers SHOULD NOT test or evaluate students on their reading. Ideally, each teacher would find one or two topics from the book to tie into their curriculum. A lesson might include what you didn't like about the book - stereotypes, bad language or racism. This may be a unique opportunity for the faculty of CCHS to come together, agree to disagree, while modeling respect for different and difficult ideas.

The committee met on Feb. 28 and discussed adding a second Chris Crutcher book for incoming freshmen, *The Sledding Hill*.

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What Chris Crutcher says about the book:

From Chris Crutcher's web site:

<http://www.chriscrutcher.com/index.2ts?page=censorship>

**"The truth screams to be told in its native tongue."**

**Chris Crutcher**

*Whale Talk* is a tough book, but it is also a compassionate book, about telling the truth and about redemption. I didn't draw the tough parts out of thin air; they are stories handed to me by people in pain.

I think people who believe we can protect our children by keeping them ignorant of hard times and the language those times are told in, don't realize that by showing our fear of issues and language that are "everyday" to our children, we take ourselves off that short list of people to turn to in a real crisis.

Censors can make a case for zero tolerance in language. They can make the argument that since we don't allow our children to use that language in schools, we also shouldn't give them stories in which it is used. But that's an easy thing to deal with, and I've seen it done a hundred times. Teachers bring up the offensiveness of the language and talk about why it's used to make a story real. We don't have to use the language to talk about the story in the classroom, but we can certainly talk about the raw power of any good story told in its native tongue.

**Language***Good language?*

rainbow-coalition kid  
 soul stealer  
 articulation  
 insurmountable  
 phenomenal  
 relativity  
 pertinent  
 fruition  
 mentor  
 continuum  
 matriculating  
 discourse  
 apprised  
 derivative  
 viable  
 malevolent  
 arbitrary  
 digression  
 erstwhile  
 credible  
 dissipate  
 articulate  
 righteous  
 integral  
 quest  
 daunting  
 diversity  
 surly  
 indispensable  
 loquacious  
 redemption  
 judicious  
 confidentiality  
 vendetta  
 prosthesis  
 vitriol  
 Jesus  
 quorum  
 supine  
 God  
 apex  
 ambience  
 vortex

*Bad Language?*

simulates whacking off  
 God  
 shitty  
 hell  
 asshole  
 shithead  
 prick  
 nigger  
 chicken shit  
 asses  
 peed  
 fuck (s) (ing) (-up) (ed) (in)  
 damn  
 ass-wipe  
 hardass  
 whore  
 bitch  
 goddamn  
 Jesus  
 pissed  
 smartass  
 bullshit  
 prick  
 Christ's sake  
 butt  
 bastard  
 masturbation  
 retard

exonerate  
tenacity  
annihilate  
lemmings  
literal  
finesse  
beveled

**Teachable Moments** (Topics to incorporate)

Racism  
Quest – Grail  
Relativity (Mathematics)  
Temper  
Athletics  
What is a team?  
Hunting debate  
Homelessness  
Family Therapy  
Play Therapy  
Group Therapy  
Quest for redemption  
Spirituality  
How do you measure success?  
Women as victims  
Physical and mental disability  
Civil Disobedience  
Social Structures

Masculinity  
Abuse  
Adoption  
Anger management  
Benefits of sports  
Stereotypes  
Outsider  
Challenges  
See Page 131 – Whales – Humanity –  
Suicide -  
Atoms and connections  
Acceptance  
Symbolic Gesture  
Rules : Unwritten rules  
Perseverance  
Irony  
Little acts of heroism

**Allusions**

Tao  
Ishtar  
Jack Webb  
Dragnet  
Nick at night  
Randy Weaver (Ruby Ridge)  
OJ Simpson  
Mark Furman  
Aryan Nations  
Arthur Ashe

Chris Rock  
Bart Simpson  
Christian-gladiator  
James Garner  
Rockford Files  
Mother Teresa  
Jeffrey Dahmer  
1968  
Martial Plan  
Sambo

**Good lines** (*writing prompts?*)

I can't count on racism being loud when it runs into me [TJ p. 3]

Any story is only true in the moment [TJ p. 8]

Something inside me recoils at being told what to do [TJ p. 8]

I love athletics [TJ p. 12]

I remember what amazing solace I felt working out. Up until I started swimming in grade school, half my teachers wanted me medicated and the other half wanted me in reform school. It helped me focus, beveled the edges on my boundless, uncontrolled energy, dulled my rage. [TJ p. 12]

Things are black and white with him. [TJ p. 30]

Everything is Relative [TJ p. 56]

Camaraderie is as important as miles [TJ p. 63]

Racism is ignorance [Georgia and TJ p. 69]

Georgia says it's what isn't inside a person [TJ p. 74]

Things will look different when you get to college [TJ p. 77]

...trying to replace the fear and contempt in my gut [TJ p. 79]

...but I have a certain respect for athletics myself, so don't push it too far [Simet p. 83]

Tay Roy ... dedicate himself athletically [TJ p. 86]

He is singular in his vision of himself as an athlete [TJ p. 87]

...that racist thought and action say far more about the person they come from than about the person at whom they are directed [TJ p. 88]

I haven't yet figured out why he picked this team for his sanctuary [TJ p. 89]

I know now he felt every sting [TJ p. 93]

You should have to be a lot more than decent to be a kid's hero [TJ p. 95]

You want to turn out like everyone thinks you've turned out? [Icko p.96]

... it's hard to see someone as big and strong as my father reduced like that [TJ p. 115]

Connection...there is very little about humans that doesn't have to do with connection [Georgia p. 120]

I'm a little kinder to myself most of the time. I tell myself I learned an important lesson the hard way; that the universe doesn't make allowances for mental lapses or ignorance, but maybe I'm a better man because I know that. [Dad p. 129]

Because when rage takes you over, you do what the rage tells you [Georgia p. 146]  
They're there for a reason. When you figure out what it is, you won't even notice them anymore. [Dad p. 150]

Something about the entire experience makes me like these guys a lot [TJ p. 162]

No, man this is a team. Our season lasts as long as one of us is alive. [Tay-Roy p. 163]

That was Jesus' last line. [TJ p. 212]

There's an ... an emptiness when you can't get to your dad [Kyle p. 218]

### **Contradictions**

Why would anyone want his opponent not to be at his best? [TJ p. 13]

...be careful what words you use [TJ p. 107]

What you need to know about your old man is that I *always* bounce back [Dad p. 132]

Are we big or are we small? [TJ p. 134]

...a fat kid pretending to be an amputee, dare to dream. [Mott p. 137]

...you didn't respond to what was good for you, you responded to what you knew, what was familiar [Georgia p. 147]

But knowing it and doing something about it are two different things [Alicia p. 157]

...we'd accomplished our goal, or at least my goal. I know the whole thing is only symbolic, a gesture....because it lets us stand up for ourselves in the language that is understood at this school. ...it's so much more than what I had in mind in the beginning, and I don't know if what we got from it can ever be re-created. [TJ p. 167]

I am pissed. This is exactly the reason I've never turned out for anything; they always have to have it their way. They seem to listen, but in the end they make the rules and to

hell with the people who have to follow them. They have no respect for what we did, no respect for what we created out of thin air. [TJ p. 183]

Nothing exists without its opposite. I didn't earn a letter jacket because I could, and all my friends did because they couldn't. Some things really don't get any better. [TJ p. 204]

Not one minute for revenge. [TJ p. 219]

Sometimes there's just no place to put this [TJ p. 220]

SOURCE: <http://www.chriscrutcher.com/index.2ts?page=alabamastudents>

## **To high school students in Alabama (and everywhere)**

To the Students of the Limestone School District:

Recently my book, *Whale Talk*, was banned in your school district, and I thought I might address that. First, let it be known that I don't take it personally. None of the four school board members who voted to take the book out of your reach knows me and I have no reason to believe any of them bear me ill will. From all I have read, I believe the stated reason the book was banned was for "curses", which, where I come from are called "cuss words."

Arguably the two most offensive passages in the story occur when a four and a half year old bi-racial girl screams out the names she is called on a regular basis by her racist stepfather and later when that same racist stepfather is drunkenly threatening the foster family that is keeping her safe.

In the 1980's and early 1990's when I was working as a child abuse and neglect therapist in the Spokane (Washington) Community Mental Health Center, I worked with a young bi-racial girl living in circumstances much like those depicted in the book. Her biological father didn't even know of her existence and her mother didn't have the emotional strength to keep her out of the eye of the hurricane of her stepfather's hatred. She couldn't eat at the table until her younger, white stepbrothers had finished. She wasn't allowed to play with toys until they were broken and handed over to her. The first time I saw her she was standing over a sink, trying to wash the brown off her skin so her (step) daddy would love her. Time and time again in therapy she expressed the self contempt she had gained believing there was something fundamentally wrong with her because there was no way to find acceptance in her his world. In play therapy she was allowed to work through her life trauma to ultimately better understand that it was not her fault she was treated as she was, and to come to a better understanding (in a four-year-old's way of understanding) of the world she lived in. The language that little girl used was even tougher than what my character used in *Whale Talk*.

When *Whale Talk* gets challenged or banned, it's often because a parent who hasn't read the book runs across that passage or one like it, sees the words (which in this case are in large font because the little girl is screaming) and decides they are a danger to you. They describe the story, more often than not without reading it, as obscene or vulgar or evil --or all three.

But what's truly obscene is that I know a real girl in the real world who has gone through this. What's obscene is that so do you, even if you're not aware of the specifics. What's obscene is that you know kids who have gone through, and are going through, worse.

What's obscene is that kids who are mal-treated often grow up angry and depressed and anxious and desperate. They experience crippling difficulties in school, in social relations and in all matters of self-esteem. They use the language I use in the story and worse because it is all they have to try to match what is inside to the outside world. They need to be recognized, and brought into your fold. Often we adults can't help them, but you can. I write the stories I write to bring things like this to your attention because I believe if kids who are treated badly are to survive, they will survive through the acceptance of their peers, and that acceptance will come from understanding. It's true; I'm asking a lot from you.

Let me tell you something else I think is obscene. I think it obscene that your school board doesn't trust you enough to know you can read harsh stories, told in their native tongue, and make decisions for yourself what you think of the issues or the language. It is astonishing to me that grown men, in this case, don't believe you can think for yourselves. Some of you could have voted in the last election. Many more of you will be eligible in the next. Some of you may be going to war.

It is not a big deal that *Whale Talk* was removed from your school library shelves. There are plenty of good books out there that your school board hasn't had a chance to ban yet. But consider this.

About a decade ago, a stellar author named Walter Dean Myers wrote *Fallen Angels*, a story about a young African American man fighting in Vietnam. Walter told his story, using the language of soldiers at war. It was pretty much the language I used to talk about this four-year-old girl, who was also at war. *Fallen Angels*, a critically acclaimed book is constantly under the same attack that *Whale Talk* is under from your school board. Think about this a minute. In the not too distant future many of you will be soldiers also asked to fight in the name of your country. Statistics say a few of your number will also be writers. Imagine risking your life in war, coming back to tell your story in as real a fashion as you can, only to have *your* children told they can't read your story in your school because the school board won't tolerate the realistic language in which you tell it. They not only tell *their* children it can't be part of their education, they tell *your* children it can't be part of their education.

I have no problem at all with any or all of you pick up *Whale Talk*, reading a couple of chapters, or even a couple of pages, not liking it, slamming it shut and never opening it again. I don't even have a problem with that if you do because you are offended by the situations -- or the language. I don't have a problem with that because it's **your choice**. I trust you to know what you like and what you don't, and what's good for you in terms of literature; the same way the United States Supreme Court trusted high school students when they ruled in their favor in the landmark case of known as the [Board of Education vs. Pico](#).

I can't change the minds of people who believe that the best way to keep kids safe is to keep you ignorant. What I can, and will do is this: Donate copies of *Whale Talk* to your public library, which is a lot less likely to try to think for you. I can urge you to take a look at it and decide for yourselves. I can encourage you to stand up for your own intellectual freedom; to choose what you want to read about and talk about and explore. I can encourage you to let those members of your school board who don't trust you with tough material, know you are a lot more savvy than they think you are, and that there is no way they can capture your intellectual freedom with the silliness of banning a book from the library shelves. There are plenty of places to get books.

I have to be honest. I don't think the only reason those four school board members wanted *Whale Talk* out of your schools was language. I could be wrong - it's certainly happened before - but I think there are other issues in the book that make them uncomfortable. But even on language alone, if you accept the banning of this book, you should demand that they also remove other books in which that language exists. Start with Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize winning *The Color Purple*, then go to Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. You certainly can't allow any of my other ten books there, nor any of Robert Cormier's, many of Walter Dean Myers' or Tim O'Brien's (*The Things They Carried* may well be one of the ten best written books of the twentieth century). Sherman Alexi, the great Native American writer is out, hands down and there is *no* way you can be allowed to cast your eyes upon Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. If you accept this "protection" from your school board, demand that they step up and truly protect you.

I may seem somewhat *flip* here but I believe that adolescence is an extremely important time in any human's development. There are hundreds of questions about relationship and career and identity, and you are handcuffed to look at them when a group of men who believe that the depiction of true, rough language is a top-priority moral issue. I trust you to read my book, or any of the other, far more familiar books mentioned above, and decide for yourselves what you think of them. It wouldn't be completely over the top for you to expect your school board to do the same. Remember this: your school board is there to make decisions to further your education, not keep themselves in their own comfort zones.

I do want to compliment those members and the superintendent who voted against the banning. It does my heart good to know there are many educators out there who understand that good education requires the opening rather than the closing of minds. Again, this isn't about *Whale Talk*, it really isn't. It's about you.

Sincerely,

Chris Crutcher