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Whale Talk

Emma Patton

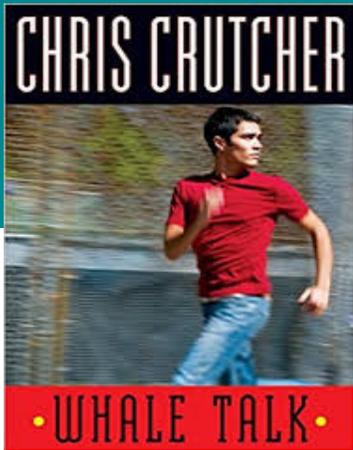
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Book Review

Whale Talk

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Illustrator

Reviewer

Emma Patton

Rating

Dependable

Level

Young Adult

Pages

221

Year

2001

Publisher

Laurel-Leaf Books

ISBN

9780440229383

T.J. Jones is an athlete, but he's not a jerk. At Cutter High School, athletics are everything, and the best athletes get away with everything, inside and outside of school. When one of T.J.'s favorite teachers recruits him to help form a swimming team, T.J. makes it his mission to turn some of the biggest outcasts in school into athletes. If all of these guys letter in swimming, it will challenge the elitism of Cutter sports. However, he soon comes to see the swim team as more than just an attempt to make the jocks and school board angry. This random assortment of students quickly joins together as a team and a brotherhood, working hard to improve, if not win. Meanwhile, T.J. must confront his own personal weaknesses. His desire to protect others often gets him into trouble. He often struggles to control his temper, and he starts to see that his lack of judgment could affect the people around him as well.

Whale Talk explores topics like peer acceptance, domestic and child abuse, and racism. Also, the book uses severe language, including racial slurs. The first-person narrator speaks in a casual tone that is comparable to an actual high schooler, but he is unrealistic in many respects. Though T.J. has a rough history, he has no shortage of confidence and is portrayed as nearly invincible. He seems to hold all the characters and institutions in the palm of his hand, and, however honorable his reasons may be, he completely manipulates the school system and the adults behind it. While T.J. is sometimes just the average, struggling high school student, he also fills the role of superhero, which makes him a confusing and improbable figure. Finally, the book ends with a rather abrupt tragedy. Since the tragedy occurs at the very end, it seems unremarkable compared to the previous events in the story and makes the narrative feel scattered and unresolved. So, while this book is compelling and sometimes profound, it does have some shortcomings.

*Contains severe language, mild sexual content, and mild violence.