

## Olentangy Local School District Literature Selection Review

Teacher: OLHS English    Grade: 9    School: LHS

Book Title: Whale Talk    Genre: Fiction/Contemporary Young Adult

Author: Chris Crutcher    Pages: 224 pages

Publisher: Laurel Leaf;    Copyright: Reprint edition (December 10, 2002)

*In a brief rationale, please provide the following information relative to the book you would like added to the school's book collection for classroom use. You may attach additional pages as needed.*

**Book Summary and summary citation:** (suggested resources include book flap summaries, review summaries from publisher, book vendors, etc.)

Intellectually and athletically gifted, TJ, a multiracial, adopted teenager, shuns organized sports and the gung-ho athletes at his high school until he agrees to form a swimming team and recruits some of the school's less popular students.

From Amazon.com: T. J. Jones is black, Japanese, and white; his given name is The Tao (honest!), and he's the son of a woman who abandoned him when she got heavily into crack and crank. As a child he was full of rage, but now as a senior in high school he's pretty much overcome all that. With the help of a good therapist and his decent, loving, ex-hippie adoptive parents, he's not only fairly even-keeled, he has turned out to be smart and funny.

Injustice, however, still fills him with fury. So when big-deal football star Mike Barbour bullies brain-damaged Chris Coughlin for wearing his dead brother's letter jacket, T.J. hatches a scheme for revenge. He assembles a swim team (in a school with no pool) made up of the most outrageous outsiders and misfits he can find and extracts a conditional promise of those sacred letter jackets from the coach. After weeks of dedicated practice at the All Night Fitness pool, the seven mermen get good enough not to embarrass themselves in competition. The really important thing, though, turns out to be the long bus rides to meets, a safe place to share the hurts that have made them who they are. Meanwhile, T.J.'s father, who has taken in a battered little girl to ease his lifelong guilt over his role in the accidental death of a baby, tangles with another bully--her stepfather--and his growing murderous rage.

Chris Crutcher, therapist and author of seven prize-winning young adult books, here gives his many fans another wise and compassionate story full of the intensity of athletic competition and hair-raising incidents of child abuse. (Ages 12 and older) --Patty Campbell --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

**Provide an instructional rationale for the use of this title, including specific reference to the OLSD curriculum map(s):** (Curriculum maps may be referenced by grade/course and indicator number or curriculum maps with indicators highlighted may be attached to this form)

Instructional Rationale:

This book is one of six novels selected to explore and examine how marginalized groups and/or individuals are represented in society. The selection of books for this unit allows students to view

the world from the viewpoint of marginalized characters. We will be examining stereotypes and questioning how stereotypes are established and perpetuated. Students will be asked to propose solutions to stop stereotyping and call others to action against stereotyping. Students will work in literature circles as they read this novel. The reading will be done individually and students will meet in their groups to discuss their novel. Literature circles offer powerful benefits to readers of all ages. The circles are structured to move readers through a range of cognitive roles as they discuss books that are self-selected. Literature circles allow students to connect with each other, with texts, and ultimately, with the world in which they live. They learn to take responsibility as members of a group who, together, must construct meaning through discussion, debate and reflection. Discussion, debate and reflection are anchored in the text which serves as a springboard to explore social issues.

Connection to the state standards/OLSD curriculum map(s):

- Acquisition of Vocabulary (1)
- Reading Application Informational (5, 6)
- Reading Application Literary (7, 9, 10, 11)
- Writing Process (all)
- Writing Application (5, 7, 9)
- Writing Conventions (10)
- Research Standard (11)
- Communication Standard (13)

**Include two professional reviews of this title:** (a suggested list of resources for identifying professional reviews is shown below. Reviews may be “cut and pasted” (with citation) into the form or printed reviews may be attached to the form)

Review #1

(From Amazon.com) From Publishers Weekly

Crutcher's (*Running Loose; Ironman*) gripping tale of small-town prejudice delivers a frank, powerful message about social issues and ills. Representing one-third of his community's minority population ("I'm black. And Japanese. And white"), narrator T.J. Jones voices a darkly ironic appraisal of the high school sports arena. Despite his natural athletic ability (at 13, he qualified for the Junior Olympics in two swimming events), T.J. has steered away from organized sports until his senior year, when Mr. Simet, a favorite English teacher, implores him to help form a swim team for the school (and thereby help the teacher save his job). T.J. sees an opportunity to get revenge on the establishment and invites outcasts to participate on the team; he ends up with "a representative from each extreme of the educational spectrum, a muscle man, a giant, a chameleon, and a psychopath." As might be expected, he accomplishes his mission: his motley crew of swimmers is despised by more conventional athletes (and coaches). The swimmers face many obstacles, but their dedication to their sport and each other grows stronger with every meet. The gradual unfolding of characters' personal conflicts proves to be as gripping as the evolution of the team's efforts. Through T.J.'s narration, Crutcher offers an unusual yet resonant mixture of black comedy and tragedy that lays bare the superficiality of the high school scene. 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." Ages 12-up.

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Review #2

(From Amazon.com) From School Library Journal

Grade 8 Up-T. J. Jones, the mixed-race, larger-than-life, heroic, first-person narrator of this novel, lays out the events of his senior year, with many digressions along the way. The central plot involves T. J.'s efforts to put together a swim team of misfits, as he tries to upset the balance of power at his central Washington high school, where jocks and the narrow-minded rule. However, a number of subplots deal with racism, child abuse, and the efforts of the protagonist's adopted father to come to grips with a terrible mistake in his past. Crutcher uses a broad brush in an undeniably robust and energetic story that is also somewhat messy and over the top in places. 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. 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.

Todd Morning, Schaumburg Township Public Library, IL  
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#### From Booklist

Gr. 8-12. Crutcher's fans will recognize the author's signature style and subject matter in his new novel, his first in six years. Adopted, biracial high-school senior The Tao Jones (his birth mother seems to "have been a little too 'spiritual'") is well-adjusted on the surface. A smart, likable kid with a great sense of humor and athletic ability, he glides through academia with everything an adolescent boy needs--decent grades and female companionship. What T. J. doesn't need is competitive sports, which Cutter High School jocks and coaches see as a personal snub. T. J.'s resolve weakens, however, when English teacher-coach Mr. Simet makes an unconventional offer: Be the anchor of the swim team and pick your fellow fish. Perfect, especially since racist football bully Mike Barbour has taken up letter jackets as a cause. It seems developmentally disabled Chris Coughlin has been wearing his dead brother's jacket, and Mike is annoyed. If Chris, naturally comfortable in the water, is on the swim team, T. J. reasons, Chris will earn a jacket of his own, and Mike will be put in his place. 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 heartwrenching 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. For more about the book, see the Story-behind-the Story on the opposite page.

Kelly Halls

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#### **What alternate text(s) could also fulfill the instructional requirements?**

Title: Looking for Alaska

Author: John Greene

Title: Chanda's Secrets

Author: Allan Stratton

Title: Sleeping Freshmen Never Lie

Author: David Lubar

Title: The Bean Trees

Author: Barbara Kingsolver

Title: Monster

Author: Walter Dean Meyers

Title:

Author:

#### **Document any potentially controversial content:**

1. There are numerous instances of profanity such as F\*\*K , B\*\*CH, ni\*\*er, g\*\*damned, a\*\*holes, and S\*\*T spoken by the narrator and other characters (both teen and adult) within the novel.

The language and the use of profanity in the novel illustrate how the various characters are verbally abusive toward the marginalized characters within the book, which is one of the key social issues within the book.

This strong language/profanity helps to characterize T.J. (the narrator) and his journey to become an adult as he struggles with anger -- as he has since the age of 4 -- and how he learns to overcome and change his life and future.

T.J. is a 16-year old boy who is struggling to figure out who he is within society, at Cutter High School, and also within his own skin and seeks the advice of his parents, his swimming coach, and a childhood therapist. T.J.'s birth mother, who was addicted to crack, and his birth father (whom T.J. refers to as his "sperm donor") abandoned him to be raised by adoptive parents who have a positive and healthy influence on his life.

2. There are several references to abusive relationships, which include some profanity as noted above and some strong language. T.J.'s parents work with Georgia, T.J.'s childhood therapist, to save a family that is being abused and bring them into their home through the foster care system. One such example refers to the mother of a multi-racial daughter as a "w\*\*\*e and a b\*\*\*h, and the next time he caught her showing her a\*\* he'd beat her half to death."

3. There are several characters who struggle with either physical or mental disabilities, and who at times are marginalized by other characters,.

4. Racism and the role of hatred for other races or multi-racial issues; marginalized characters, who are multi-racial, are often referenced by racist characters, such as Rich Marshall who uses references such as "ni\*\*er dolls...stupid black b\*\*\*h..." to emphasize their "power" or control over the marginalized characters (especially Heidi - his multi-racial stepdaughter)

5. References to violence such as the killing of a deer by the character Rich Marshall, while the protagonist is holding the animal. There are examples of references to Marshall as an a\*\*hole after and in reference to the incident.

There is a description of an accident that involves the death of a 2-year-old boy who crawled under the protagonist's dad's truck and got caught between the rear dual tires. This accident haunts T.J.'s father, which leads his dad to become a Guardian ad Litem or a volunteer through juvenile court to represent children in child-abuse cases.

6. When the narrator first meets his girlfriend, she states, "If we have sex, we have sex." ~ But, the relationship proves to be more supportive (cheering for the swim team) and there are no examples of sex, just teenage "sexual" attraction.

7. There is an incident where Mike Barbour (a bully) attempts to assault his girlfriend, Kristin Sweetwater, stating that she needs to make it up to him (sexually) for his suspected view that she slept with T.J. who is multi-racial. Barbour kept telling her "to strip, and I'd say no and he'd punch my arm," but Sweetwater escapes from the attempt.

8. References to drug abuse and child endangerment such as an example of one of the swimmers who was "tied up" and left while his mom's boyfriend is out with his friends. The swimmer loses his leg from Gangrene from the incident, but still triumphs as a one-legged swimmer on the team.

**Keeping in mind the age, academic level, and maturity of the intended reader, what is the suggested classroom use: (check all that apply)**

Gifted/Accelerated  Regular  At Risk

**GRADE LEVEL(S):** 6  7  8  9  10  11  12

**Reading level of this title (if applicable):** Grades 8-10

**Date Submitted to Department Chair: 4/8/07**

**Suggested Professional Literary Review Sources:**

School Library Journal

Horn Book

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books

VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates)

Library Journal

Book Links

Publisher's Weekly

Booklist

Kirkus Review

Wilson Library Catalog

English Journal (and other resources of the National Council of Teachers of English)

The Reading Teacher (International Reading Association)

Literature for Today's Young Adults