

Chris Crutcher

Whale Talk

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Q: Why do you write books for teenagers? Do you feel especially attached to this age group?

A: Actually, I consider that I write books about teenagers, for anyone. I do feel especially attached to this group, partly because I so keenly remember my own adolescence, and because I have spent a lot of my life working with people of this age as a therapist, a teacher (of sorts), a coach (of more suspect sorts), so it's familiar territory. I also think it's an important developmental stage in all our lives.

Q: When did you decide to write about the experiences you encountered as a therapist? How did you turn those stories into fiction?

A: I didn't decide consciously. The experiences I encounter as a therapist, the failures and heroism, stimulate my imagination, and I begin with the fiction writer's credo, "What if ..." It all comes from there.

Q: Have you ever had a client whose story was in one of your books come back to you with comments about it, either good or bad?

A: I haven't put a client's story in a book straight out, but I have written stories that make clients think of themselves. Most like it; it seems to give them a voice.

Q: Being an outsider is maybe the toughest thing for a teen to deal with. Can you talk a little about what it means to be an outsider and about how your novel, *Whale Talk*, addresses it?

A: Being an outsider means not being heard, not having a voice. It means being treated as a second-class citizen, being diminished in the eyes of others. We have all felt this way at one time or another, but some feel it more consistently. Unfortunately, our schools often do not embrace the talents of many of their occupants. *Whale Talk* is a story about a group of outsiders who rise up and refuse invisibility, and they use an unlikely forum in which to do it. Some of my favorite characters are in this book.

Q: Teenage audiences are actively targeted by marketers of pop culture - in movies, television, music, merchandising. There's even a Teen Choice awards show! Is all this attention healthy for them, or do you see negative effects from the bombardment of information they get?

A: I suppose there are positive and negative effects. I am for anything that makes teens visible in an honest way ... in other words, anything that represents them the way they are, positively or negatively. Sometimes, when teens or people who know teens well aren't consulted for this "merchandising," it can get a bit ridiculous. Everything needs balance.

Q: Your books don't shy away from dealing with dark, often violent, experiences. Is any topic taboo for your books, or do you think teens are too sheltered from dark subjects?

A: I can't think of a subject that is taboo for me, unless it's one I simply don't know anything about. Some teens are too sheltered, and others could use a little shelter. I think the value in books like mine, and a great number by other talented writers, is in the ability to bring dark subjects into the open where they are not so dark, where they can be talked about and considered by teens and adults alike. A lot of things I write about are tougher on adults than they are on teens.

Q: Telling kids the truth about the world - how the innocent suffer, how justice is not always found - must take a lot out of you. Do you sometimes wish you could write fairy tales instead? How do you keep doing it?

A: Naw, I'd never be able to write good fairy tales. A line I used in Ironman, one I gave a secondary character, goes like this: "If you want to see how something works, look at it broken." That's what I think I do a lot of the time: look at broken lives. I am hugely curious about life on this planet, and particularly in this culture. Doing the work I do and writing the stories I write helps satisfy that curiosity; it makes me pay close attention, when, otherwise, I might not. When people say my stories must take a lot out of me, I never know exactly what they mean. In fact, I feel selfish sometimes and, in a strange way, honored to be able to have the vantage point I have and be accepted for writing about it.

Q: You develop your characters so fully and experience their emotional growth with them ... Is it hard to let them go when you are done writing their stories?

A: Not usually. The reason is that I rewrite and rewrite and rewrite, and by the time I'm finished, I'm FINISHED. I might revisit some of them in short stories, but I'm plenty glad to turn them loose.

Q: You've said you weren't much of a reader growing up. Did you feel there weren't books that spoke to the kind of problems you were having? When did you start to read, and what do you read now?

A: I started reading when people stopped telling me to. And yes, I do think my teachers were not giving me stories I could relate to. I've often said I think the only thing worse than being Silas Marner is having to read about him. One of the reasons I fell in love with *To Kill a Mockingbird* was that it was real to me. I loved that voice, that town, those people. The injustice clawed at my very soul. Some of my favorite books and authors (off the top of my head) are *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, *I Know This Much Is True* by Wally Lamb; Christopher Paul Curtis, Terry Davis, Jerry Spinelli, Judy Blume, Chris Lynch, Lois Lowry, Gary Paulsen in my own genre, to mention only a few ...; anything by Kurt Vonnegut (you can't be my age and uninfluenced by Vonnegut). I loved *The Prince of Tides* and *The Great Santini* by Pat Conroy. There are many more.

Q: Your books sometimes strike a nerve with educators, parents, and even some kids. You always respond to their notes, almost inviting commentary, good or bad. Do you think this open dialogue is the way to avoid censorship?

A: I don't know whether or not it avoids censorship, but I believe it can't hurt. I'm aware that I strike some raw nerves and, because of that, believe I need to be available for dialogue with people regarding their responses to my work, be they positive or negative. I've never written anything for shock value only, so I invite dialogue about why I write what I write.

Q: You've had many roles in your life - teacher, therapist, writer, to name a few. Each one evolves into the next. Where do you see yourself heading now?

A: I see myself doing more work with troubled families. I'm working with some men in a drug court program now, and learning so much. I still work with teenagers from time to time, and with parents who endanger their children. Most of that is pro bono, because I like my work to be outside the state bureaucracy. I also volunteer time on Spokane Child Protection team, which is an advisory group for child protection workers on their toughest cases. I will write more ... some about teens and some about adults. I certainly feel blessed by the universe, in the sense that my work and my passion are the same.

Q: What do you hope teens will walk away with after reading your books?

A: I hope they will think they've read a good story worthy of consideration. And I guess I hope they've picked up the message that I wrote toward the end of my very first novel, that, in the end, we're responsible for everything we do. I once heard Jesse Jackson, at a high school in Oakland, say "You may not be the one who got you here, but you're the only one who can get yourself out." I love empowerment.