

## The Boy Who Talked to Whales

Webster Smalley

Set near Puget Sound in the Northwest, ten-year-old Jerry befriends and learns to communicate with Ooka, a fifty-foot whale that has escaped from whalers. Together with his friend, Meg, Jerry devises a plan to help Ooka protect herself. In the process, though, they create an international crisis that they have to help the president of the United States resolve.

← FYI

### *One Male and Two Females*

In the first scene of the play, Betty, Jerry's mother, is searching for him when she encounters eleven-year-old Meg, a friend of Jerry's, playing on the pier. Betty and, at first, Meg are unaware that Jerry is hiding under the pier. In the second scene, Jerry introduces his friend Meg to Ooka, the whale.



*Betty sits on edge of pier, hears noise.*

BETTY: Jerry!

MEG: (*Entering.*) It's just me.

BETTY: (*Stands.*) Oh, Meg. Have you seen Jerry?

*(Meg is eleven, but is in Jerry's class. She is dressed in jeans and a sloppy blouse. She is attractive and bright, a bit of a tomboy.)*

MEG: (*Simply.*) I was eating dinner.

BETTY: Well, I want Jerry to have his dinner.

MEG: Yeah, I heard. I wish my dad'd fix interesting things. We just had crummy old steak.

BETTY: Do you know where he might be?

think. Wild! But Fred stopped him pretty quick — then, Miss Franklin came. But it was too late. I dunno why he did it.

BETTY: Calm down, Meg. You said something about a whale? What did a whale have to do with it?

MEG: How do I know? You know how Jerry is about some things? Funny.

BETTY: Some people may think so. Miss Franklin and the principal, but you know and I know he usually has some good reason for what he does. I need you to help me find out what that reason is. Will you?

MEG: I guess — *(Remembers Jerry's presence.)* But what if he doesn't want you to know?

BETTY: *(Starting off.)* You just find him. Tell him I'm making something special for dinner. I'll do the rest.

MEG: *(Reluctantly.)* OK.

START

*Betty exits. Meg makes sure she has gone for good, then —*

MEG: Jerry, she's gone. *(As he climbs on the pier.)* Why didn't you stay down? She almost saw you. *(No answer. Apologetically.)* I'm sorry about what I said. She kept asking things. I couldn't help it. *(Still no answer.)* You better go in . . . Aren't you going to talk?

JERRY: It was bad enough before. Now she'll ask questions all night.

MEG: She wasn't really mad. Anyway, she knows you weren't hurt.

JERRY: Naw, I know. She just gets curiouiser and curiouiser. It's even worse since she took those psychology courses at the college. Is your dad like that?

MEG: *(Thoughtful.)* He asks some questions, but he's an adult

psychologist. I don't think I have to worry till I grow up . . . Anyway, it's your own fault. Why'd you fight about a stupid old whale?

JERRY: It's not stupid, it's smart. Maybe the smartest, most intelligent whale in the world.

MEG: What're you talkin' about? *(As Jerry gets pipe from under pier.)* Hey, what's that?

JERRY: A pipe. I need to practice.

MEG: Practice? Practice what?

JERRY: I can't talk about what.

MEG: I don't get it.

JERRY: I can't talk about this. It's too important. *(Accusing.)* You told her about the Morse code.

MEG: I thought you'd told her yourself. I had to say something about the noises you make. You know something? They don't even sound like the Morse code anymore.

JERRY: I know.

MEG: You mean they're not the Morse code? What are they then?

JERRY: Can't tell. It's a secret.

MEG: *(Indicating pipe.)* Like that?

JERRY: That's right. I can't tell even you.

MEG: I won't tell anyone — not anyone — not ever. Who else can you tell besides me? . . . Not anyone, that's who . . . Please?

JERRY: *(Realizes the truth of this.)* It's so hard to keep it all inside me. *(Deadly earnest.)* You really promise? Not a little promise, probably the biggest promise you ever made, ever in your life.

MEG: I promise — biggest ever in my whole life.

JERRY: *(A pause, then decides.)* All right. I'll show you.

MEG: *(Lost.)* Show me? Show me what?

JERRY: The secret. Watch! And listen.

*(At the end of the pier, he places one end of the pipe in the water and puts his mouth to the other.)*

MEG: What are you doing?

JERRY: Wait! You'll see.

*(Puts his mouth back to pipe, and with much effort and breath, he begins to make strange and wonderful deep musical noises. Meg watches, puzzled.)*

MEG: Good grief! What are you doing?

JERRY: *(Breathless.)* Sh-hh. Wait.

*(He makes more noises, then listens to the pipe.)*

MEG: *(Can't stand the wait.)* You have to tell me. I can't guess.

JERRY: *(Still listening.)* Sh-h-h.

*(He gestures for quiet, then a distant splash is heard on the house speaker. Jerry makes more noises. Other splashes as he holds his hand up for silence. Then, a short whale song from Ooka.)*

MEG: *(Whispers in wonderment.)* Holy cow, what is it?

JERRY: *(Simply, just explaining a fact.)* A whale. The biggest whale you ever saw. Her name is Ooka.

MEG: *(Astounded, but not doubting Jerry.)* A real whale? A genuine, big whale — that sings? *(Gen-u-wine.)*

JERRY: Of course. They all talk like that. An' she isn't a killer whale, or even a gray whale like they think. She's a sperm whale.

*(Ooka's answering song is heard.)*

I have to warn her — about Mr. O'Connell's boats. That's

what's so important. *(He makes sounds into pipe.)* There!

*(Whale sounds diminish in distance as he gets his breath.)*

Now, she won't be there if Mr. O'Connell goes after her. *(And he moves to hide the pipe.)*

MEG: She — won't be there?

JERRY: *(Simply, as he hides pipe.)* I told her to go away from here for a while.

MEG: *(Following him as he moves away from pier.)* You — told — her?

JERRY: That's what I was saying into the pipe. *(Simple expla-*

*nation.)* Oh, she can't hear me without the pipe. You see, it goes under water and —

MEG: *(Interrupting. One thing at a time.)* You talked — to a — whale!?!?!

JERRY: *(Worried.)* You promised — really promised — not to tell. I'm in enough trouble. On top of everything, I ripped my jeans when Fred O'Connell knocked me down — and Mom hasn't found them yet. More questions!

MEG: You really talked to a whale?!

JERRY: Yeah, I did, but it's only going to get me in more trouble, especially after Mr. O'Connell finds — *(Stops suddenly. He shouldn't have said that.)*

MEG: *(Suspicious.)* Mr. O'Connell finds out what?

JERRY: Nothin' you need to know. Remember, you promised not to tell!

MEG: Ye-es, but — *(No nonsense. Look him in the eye.)* How do you know it's a whale? A sperm whale?

JERRY: She told me — or tried to. Then, I got some whale books from the library — after she jumped. She jumped once — real early in the morning so I could see her. No one was around.

MEG: *(Doubtful, now that it has come to details.)* How do you understand — and talk to a whale? Tell me that.

JERRY: *(At a loss. He doesn't fully understand, himself.)* I don't know. I just — *can.* . . . You see, I sneaked out here one Saturday morning, about a month ago — it was too early for Mom to let me go swimming, and —

MEG: *(Scolding.)* You went swimming alone. That was dumb.

JERRY: *(Quickly.)* I didn't go out deep. Nobody else was up — not even you. So be still and let me talk. *(Acting it out as he remembers. Lies on back.)* I was floating on my back — with my ears under water — and I heard this sound — boo-oo, boo-oo. It was *in* the water. Then, I heard it again, boo-oo.

I was scared. The *water* was making a noise. I stood up quick — and listened. You know what?

MEG: For gosh sakes, tell me.

JERRY: I didn't hear anything.

MEG: (*Annoyed.*) That's not all, and you know it.

JERRY: I ducked my head, and there it was again. All around. *in the water.* (*Another dramatic pause.*)

MEG: You make me mad. Either tell me or I'm going home.

JERRY: OK, OK. I couldn't stay with my head under all day, could I? Besides, I was getting cold. So I put on my clothes and tried to figure it out. That's why the pipe.

MEG: You don't make any sense, Jerry Johnson. Sometimes I think you're as nutty as lots of people think you are. What does a pipe have to do with noises in the water?

JERRY: (*Gets the pipe.*) Don't you see? I remembered this old plastic pipe in the garage. It's like a glass you put on the floor or wall — and you can hear on the other side. Like those things doctors use to listen.

MEG: Stethoscope!

JERRY: Yeah. So, when I put one end in the water, I heard the sounds again. With the pipe.

MEG: (*Takes pipe and listens in water.*) I don't hear anything.

JERRY: She's gone away. Remember? Anyhow, with the pipe, it wasn't so scary. I could listen — slow — and there was a kind of pattern — like in Morse code. I'd come down at night — and real early, even before the sun. I began to understand a little — and I tried to talk with it — and I practiced the sounds. I practiced a lot — even at school.

MEG: I know. You made Miss Franklin want to fly out the window, an' she sort of likes you.

JERRY: You think I'd tell her? Or the principal? (*Imitating principal.*) "Why were you making strange noises, young man?" — Well, sir, I was practicing talking whale. — "Bonkers,

young man. You are bonkers. Sorry, we will have to send you away to the Bonkers Farm."

MEG: (*Giggling.*) I can just see Mr. Moffett.

JERRY: Grownups wouldn't understand. Maybe even kids'd think I was crazy. But it's true, I can — (*Grabs her arm, excited.*) I can understand, and talk it a little. You should hear her. Wow! Sometimes she just sings. Ooka likes to sing, just for the fun of it. She has a good voice, don't you think? For a whale?

MEG: (*Thinks a moment.*) I guess. I haven't heard any other whales.

JERRY: She's pretty young.

MEG: (*Suspicious again.*) How do you know it's a girl?

JERRY: It's partly a guess. She wants to have baby whales — like her mother. Her mother got hurt — killed maybe — by a whaler. It's hard to understand what she means. First, I have to try to understand *what* she is saying . . . Then, I have to pretend *I'm* a whale to figure out what she means. (*He begins imitating a whale, using his arms as flukes, and looks up as if from beneath a boat.*) A boat looks a lot different to a whale than to us.

MEG: (*Imitating Jerry, looking up as if at boat.*) Yeah — gee, I hadn't thought of that.

JERRY: (*Excited. Acting it out.*) She loves the big ocean. Go down deep, way down into the dark — then up fast — like flying — and swish — way up in the sunlight. Then *splash* — a big breath and down again and find a nice big, tender octopus to munch — whish — up into the sun and good, fresh air to breathe.

MEG: Octopus — ugh!

JERRY: When she jumped for me, you should have seen her. She is big — I mean, BIG! (*Eyes alight.*) She's bigger than a — a house trailer. When she jumped, she just kept coming out of the water, and coming out — almost forever. (*Earnestly.*

*Tears almost come.*) She is the most wonderful thing I have ever seen. I love her!

MEG: (*Impressed, but not knowing quite how to respond.*) Jerry, you — You're something!

JERRY: (*Darkly.*) But she's scared.

MEG: What could a big thing like that be scared of?

JERRY: Whalers. That's why she's in Puget Sound, to get away from whaling ships. Then, old Mr. O'Connell — (*A reminder of a big worry.*) Oh — no —

MEG: What? (*As Jerry sits despondently.*) What's the matter? You said something before about Mr. O'Connell.

JERRY: When he finds out, I'm in real trouble.

MEG: When Mr. O'Connell finds out what?

JERRY: When Fred said his dad was going to take his boats and go after Ooka — to try to catch her — something terrible might happen to her. Oh, they couldn't catch her — not her. They don't know how big she is. They think she's an old gray whale. But they'd scare her, even hurt her maybe. Boats are always hurting whales.

MEG: OK. So what'd you do to Mr. O'Connell?

JERRY: I — I sort of took something.

MEG: (*Puzzled.*) You took something? What? Who from?

JERRY: From Mr. O'Connell's boats. Something from their motors. They won't go, now.

MEG: (*Shocked.*) You stole something from Mr. O'Connell's boats? From all three of them?

JERRY: Don't say it like that. I sort of — borrowed some — fuel pumps. (*Hastily.*) I'll give them back as soon as —

MEG: You sto — I mean took the fuel pumps from all three of his boats?

JERRY: (*Nods.*) I don't think he can get replacements right away. But Ooka's in trouble. I had to do it.

MEG: But you told Ooka to go away. She's gone! You didn't have to do that.

JERRY: I wasn't sure I could get her to go. She doesn't always understand. I had to do everything I could, didn't I? Besides, I don't know how far she's gone. See?

MEG: I guess. (*A horrible thought.*) Jerry, he'll know who did it. After you told Fred you'd stop his father.

JERRY: (*Sadly, resigned.*) I know. Fred saw me leaving the boats, too. I told you it was worse than my torn jeans.