

## The Last Whale

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Themes: Environment and Nature, Adventure,  
Non-Fiction, True Stories

Year Levels: SS • Cross Curriculum: History

Recommended by: Shortlisted, Frank Broeze Maritime History Book  
Awards, 2009

### Synopsis

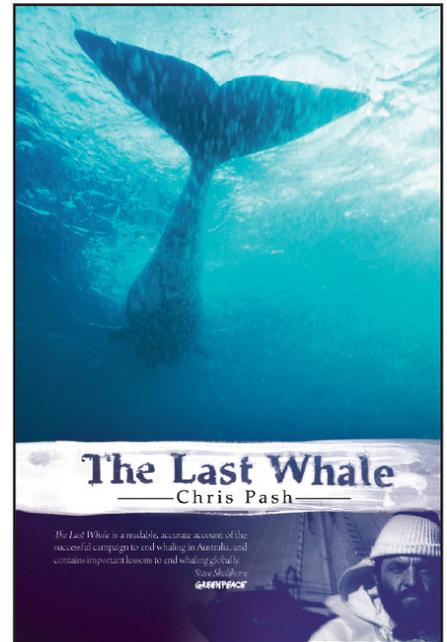
It is the 1970s and tension slashes the air: dangerous ideas; protests movements; challenges to the order of life. But the pace of change is slow in Albany, a small town on the south coast of Western Australia. Isolated geographically and culturally, Albany is doing its own thing as it has done since 1826, when it became the first European settlement in the west of Australia. Whaling has always been important to the health of the town and it defines the community; a whale of a town, it calls itself.

A group of scruffy hippies appear and the world focuses on Albany for a few weeks in 1977 as the town reluctantly becomes the environmental frontline.

The anti-whaling activists take to the sea over the horizon to the edge of the Continental Shelf to disrupt the operations of the last whaling station in the English-speaking world. Harpoons fly as the whalers fight back.

*The Last Whale* follows the lives of the whalers and the anti-whaling activists to the death of the last whale on 20 November 1978.

Main characters: Canadian Bob Hunter, the founder of Greenpeace; Jonny Lewis, the son of a NSW Premier; Jean-Paul Fortom-Gouin, a French businessman who finances the anti-whaling campaign; Kase Van Der Graag, a Dutch-born whaling ship captain; Ches Stubbs, the harpoon gunner who loses a leg to a sperm whale; Paddy Hart, the whaler who rescues a tourist from the teeth of the wild Southern Ocean.



## The Author

I was a cadet reporter at the *Albany Advertiser* newspaper when a group of anti-whaling activists took direct action against Australia's last whaling station. The events and the challenge to the then current thinking stayed with me and three decades later I tracked down the participants from both sides to create the *The Last Whale*. The distance of time allowed me to dig deeper into the thoughts and emotions of those involved in whaling and the people who tried to stop them. The anger had dimmed for the whalers, those who lost their livelihoods with the closure of the whaling station. The activists staged what was then a new, or at least to Australia, form of protest – nonviolent direct action – and their actions were all but forgotten, a blip in news coverage.

## Structure

The book could be labelled creative nonfiction, narrative nonfiction or perhaps literary journalism. All these terms label the application of all or some of the elements of fiction — scenes, character, setting, description, dialogue, emotion — to nonfiction. This involves character building rather than character creation, the same techniques as a novel but with the added restriction that the narrative deals with real people and must be factual. Dialogue can be re-created by mining the memories of those who experienced events, seeking agreement between participants as to what was said or relying on transcripts, interviews and news reports from the time. Settings and description can be created using physical attributes and the memories of those who were there. Scenes, pieces of action usually from one point of view, are the building blocks. My great advantage is that I was there for some of the events. Still, I had a large job to sort fact from legend and get events in correct chronological order. For example, the whalers have a form of collective memory; they take ownership of a story even though they may not have been there themselves.

## The Facts

- The last whale harpooned by Australia was a female sperm whale off Albany, Western Australia, on 20 November 1978.
- The 1977 Albany campaign was the first direct action by Greenpeace in Australia.
- The whaling station operated by the Cheynes Beach Whaling Company was the last in the English-speaking world. The last day of operation was 21 November 1978. The catch that day was zero — no whales were sighted.
- The Albany whaling station is located at Frenchman Bay. It was originally planned to be at Cheynes Beach east of Albany but the ground at that bay was too soft to anchor a winch and pull a whale ashore to be cut up. They moved to Frenchman Bay which had a rock platform running down to the water.
- The sperm whale is reported to be the only animal in the world physically capable of swallowing a human whole. I have been unable to find a checkable incidence of this actually happening and wonder why a whale would be interested in swallowing a person.
- Sperm whales eat giant squid. Sucker marks found on sperm whales caught off Australia were as large as dinner plates. Portions of squid tentacles as thick as a man's waist have been

found inside sperm whales.

- The world's largest and most complex brain, in terms of neural connections, belongs to the sperm whale. No-one is sure why sperm whales need such a brain.
- Sonar operators on the whale hunting ships reported sperm whales 'talking' and 'swearing' at them in clicks and burrs. They say a sperm whale has a distinctive 'angry' tone when hunted.
- Australia's last whalers have a deep store of personal observations about the behaviour of whales. They report seeing whales work together to protect their young against attack by killer whales – two whales carrying a calf out of the water.
- Two of the main characters in *The Last Whale*, Jonny Lewis and Kase Van Der Gaag, met for the first time in November 2007 – more than thirty years after they clashed in the 1977 anti-whaling protests. They enjoyed the meeting and speak well of each other.

## Topics for the Classroom

- The author endeavours to deliver to the reader the people and events from the 1970s without comment: this is how whaling worked; this is what this character thought. Where do you think the author stands on the issue of whaling?
- How does the author use point of view in scenes to present action which is disputed by the two main parties, the whalers and the anti-whaling activists.
- Can you identify the presence of the author in chapters where there is no mention of the author?
- Is nonviolent direct action a valid means of protest?
- Can a true story be re-created using the techniques of fiction? Is it really a wholly true story or is it true to the experience, something more than fact?
- Were the whalers treated fairly?
- Is absolute objectivity really possible or will our personal experiences always colour the way we see and understand things?
- How important is the role played by the media in the outcomes for community-based campaigns and protests?
- Humans kill and readily eat and use products from many animals. Why do you think that many people think differently about whales?
- People often put themselves in danger, in situations like the anti-whaling protesters or when pursuing personal adventure. Do you think there are any limits to community responsibility to provide assistance when things go wrong?

## Links

Whales on the Net has over 60 education links:

<http://www.whales.org.au/links/educ.html>

The Australian Government has teaching resources and an interactive site for students at:

<http://www.environment.gov.au/coasts/species/cetaceans/teachers.html>

<http://www.environment.gov.au/coasts/publications/whales-kids-interactive/index.html>

The Australian Museum has fact sheets on different sorts of whales for teachers:

<http://www.aronline.net.au/factsheets/>

A meeting with a sperm whale:

[http://www.actionreporter.com/001.monde/0007.cachalot/page\\_reportage\\_b.html](http://www.actionreporter.com/001.monde/0007.cachalot/page_reportage_b.html)

The World Wildlife Foundation has information on whale numbers and species at risk: <http://www.worldwildlife.org/species/finder/cetaceans/whalesanddolphins.html>

Whale World has short stories and activity sheets on whaling:

[http://www.whaleworld.org/Education/Short\\_Stories\\_for\\_Your\\_Class/](http://www.whaleworld.org/Education/Short_Stories_for_Your_Class/)

[http://www.whaleworld.org/Education/Childrens\\_Activities/](http://www.whaleworld.org/Education/Childrens_Activities/)