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Children and Young Adult Book Review *High School* *A 52-Hertz Whale*

Student Reviewer: Kelsey Messinger
Educator Reviewer: Heidi Hadley



Sommer, B. & Tilghman, N. H. (2015). *A 52-hertz whale*. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner Publishing Group.

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Pages: 200

Student Review:

Don't be deceived by the title, this book has very little to do with actual whales. James is a 14-year old with a fixation on whales and when the whale he is following online gets separated from his pod, he gets worried and decides to contact Darren, a 23-year old aspiring filmmaker who volunteered with his social skills group. Although Darren is of absolutely no help on the whale front, he does give James some advice and thus begins the friendship of two seemingly unconnected people.

This story is told completely through emails, which makes it slightly disjointed, but this does not detract from the overall appeal of this book. In fact because the side characters also have email exchanges with each other and the main characters, you are able to see the story from different perspectives. The only downside to this is that there are a lot of characters to keep track of as well as multiple storylines. If you enjoy a lot of characters in a hilariously bizarre story, then *A 52-Hertz Whale* is definitely the book for you.

Kelsey Messinger
Travelers Rest High School, Travelers Rest, SC
12th Grade

Educator Review:

A 52-Hertz Whale is a book that is almost entirely without a whale as a character, despite the title. It is filled, however, with characters who just might relate to a 52-hertz whale (“the only individual emitting a call at this frequency and hence . . . the world’s loneliest whale”). There’s James, a high school freshman whose passion for whales and inability to read social cues makes navigating high school difficult to say the least. There’s Darren, a heartbroken twenty something filmmaker who is refusing to move on from his spectacularly failed relationship. There’s Peter, a scientist who is desperately trying to find the answers to the juvenile whale-beaching problem while also trying to find his addict sister.

When James panics about a young humpback whale that has been separated from his pod, he sees no problem at all in emailing Darren, who volunteered in James’s special education class way back in junior high. And while Darren may know nothing at all about whales, since his heart has been broken by the love of his life, he has nothing better to do than return James’s emails. A sometimes bizarre friendship is forged when both James and Darren use their emails to each other as a sounding board, working together through some of the challenges they are each facing in their own lives.

This novel is entirely written in emails between many different characters. Some of the secondary characters are less developed, but it doesn’t keep them from being relatable, and if anything, reinforces the idea that we are all, in our own way, 52-hertz whales. Much of the charm of this story lies in the diversity of the characters and the similarity in the feelings of isolation they all seem to share. While the email format may lose some readers, many young adult readers will see themselves in the characters of James and Darren, who are still figuring out how to best navigate the stormy seas of love, relationships, and friendship.

Heidi Hadley
The University of Georgia
Doctoral Student

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