



A Whale Goes Down

Oer

CreateSpace (Oct 15, 2012)

Softcover \$27.80 (584pp)

978-1-4781-6531-6

A Whale Goes Down traces the story of a man through five tumultuous decades. The book opens as readers are introduced to the harsh environment of the Chukotka frontier. The main character, Igor, the son of a Russian/Polish father and a Chukchi mother, searches for his place and identity as he leaves Chukotka, the land of his childhood, and travels to Russia and later to New York City. Author Oer chronicles Igor's life from birth to adulthood as the forces of capitalism and communism collide.

Through Igor's experiences and interactions with family, love, and the authorities, OER paints a vivid picture of the struggles of the Cold War and the decades surrounding it. The chaos in Igor's personal life reflects the greater chaos in the world outside his daily existence and effectively draws readers into the story and the time described.

Oer's brilliant storytelling is created through an effective combination of dialogue and narrative. He begins or closes many of his chapters with a question or statement posed by one of the characters, which helps create a fast pace and urges readers to continue onward. Oer makes use of literary quotes and references as well in order to frame the narrative and set the tone. For instance, he opens one chapter with Ecclesiastes 12:8 to create an ominous mood as events conspire to sink Igor into despair.

The length of the book may be intimidating, but Oer's crisp sentences move the work along. He also masterfully intertwines symbolism drawn from the natural world into the narrative. For instance, he writes, "The world he was entering now was full of spring sun and renewed life, fresh hopes and new dreams."

Oer skillfully controls the emotions of the story—and thus of his readers—by carefully building up to tragedy without tipping into melodrama. For instance, immediately before Igor's uncle, Alexander, suddenly passes away readers are introduced to the love that other characters have for Alexander, thus highlighting the tragedy of the loss. The reader also becomes attached to Alexander as they are shown the love the characters have for him.

The frequent references to specific dates and locations provide a sense of immediacy, but at times the book seems less like a work of fiction and more like a creative and well-orchestrated historical work. In addition, some of the foul language and adult scenes seem forced. Certain expletives appear so repeatedly that any potential effect on the reader is certainly lost, and many of the adult characters' personal escapades fail to actually help drive the plot forward.

In all, *A Whale Goes Down* will provide readers, and especially lovers of historical fiction, with an entertaining and satisfying story.

EMILY ADAMS (December 19, 2012)

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