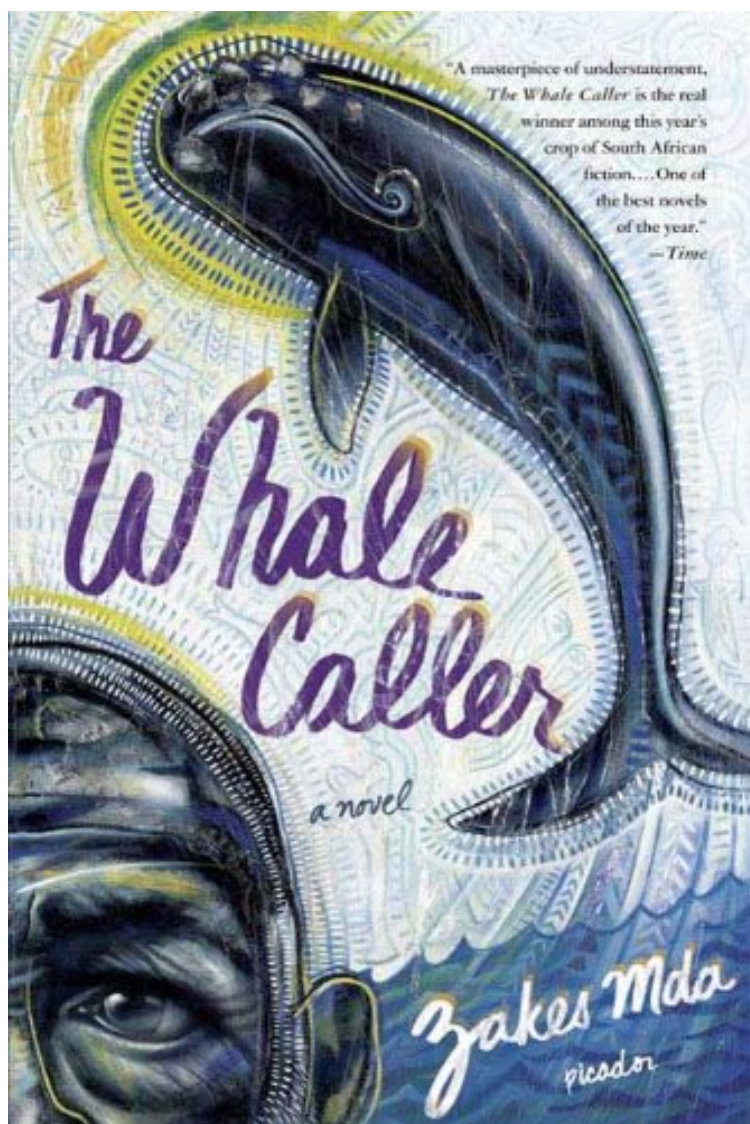


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The Whale Caller: A Novel



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur"A voice for which one should feel not only affection but admiration." --The New York TimesThe Whale Caller, Zakes Mda's fifth novel, is his most enchanting and accessible book yet-a romantic comedy of sorts in which the changing face of post-apartheid South Africa is revealed through prodigious, lyrical storytelling.As the novel opens, the seaside village of Hermanus, on the country's west coast, is overrun with whale watchers-foreign tourists wearing floral shirts and toting expensive binoculars, determined to see whales in their natural habitat. But when the tourists have gone home, the Whale Caller lingers at the shoreline, wooing a whale he calls Sharisha with cries from a kelp horn. When Sharisha fails to appear for weeks on end, the Whale Caller frets like a jealous lover-oblivious to the fact that the town drunk, Saluni, a woman who wears a silk dress and red stiletto heels, is infatuated with him. After much ado-which

Mda relates with great relish—the two misfits fall in love. But each of them is ill equipped for romance, and their on-again, off-again relationship suggests something of the fitful nature of change in post-apartheid South Africa, where just living from one day to the next can be challenge enough. Mda has spoken of the end of apartheid as a lifting of the South African novelist's burden to write on political subjects. With *The Whale Caller*, he has written a tender, charming novel—the work of a virtuoso among international writers. From Publishers Weekly

In this follow-up to last year's excellent *The Madonna of Excelsior*, the title character, in leading an off-shore "dance" with a whale named Sharisha by blowing a kelp horn, spills his seed in his trousers. Things pretty much go downhill from there in Mda's unconvincing fifth novel, a hodgepodge of allegory, pop psychology, faux navel diction and occasional references to the new South Africa. *The Whale Caller*, as he is called wearily throughout, is torn between his very real lust for Sharisha, whom he courts from the shore, and his inarticulate affection for Saluni, the town drunk. Saluni herself is torn between love for the Whale Caller, love of the bottle and what she calls an "addiction" to a pair of singing, nine-year old sisters whom she has dubbed the Bored Twins. Aside from Saluni's jealousy of Sharisha, all goes well until the Bored Twins get to record an LP, Saluni's lust for fame is fabricated and disappointed within the space of a few pages, and tragedy befalls both of the Whale Caller's leading ladies. But the symbolism at the heart of this novel (the unattainable whale) is pushed so ludicrously far and left so carelessly unmoored to believable characters or real-world specifics that the novel drifts away from the reader. (Dec.) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. From The Washington Post's Book World/washingtonpost.com

Zakes Mda's fifth novel, *The Whale Caller*, is an oddball love story, wonderfully timeless and familiar: Boy meets whale, boy loses whale, boy meets wino lovechild with missing front teeth. . . . Quixotic and doomed, Mda's charming romantic leads are obsessed with the unattainables of life. The leading man, a misanthropic whale-watcher in the tourist-ridden village of Hermanus, on the west coast of South Africa, is so infatuated with the southern right whale he's named Sharisha that his entire lifestyle, livelihood and identity are based on his adoration of her. Tuxedoed like a suitor, keeping vigil on a rocky spit, he dances and blows a horn to lure her closer. His intentions are purely to adore her -- un-Ahab-like, the Whale Caller wields neither harpoon nor malice, only his heart. Tourists occasionally toss him coins for the spectacle he presents, but it's clear he would continue this ritual with no remuneration. He is a man enthralled by a whale. To his annoyance, he has also enticed Saluni, a baffling, sour-smelling, dentally deficient -- though nonetheless beautiful and enchanting -- barfly who trails him wherever he goes, watching him as he watches the whale. When she develops a bad rash and stays away for days, he grows curious and eventually anxious. He begins to miss her stalking and finally searches the town for her, marking the beginning of many volleys of pursuit and counter-pursuit. When he locates Saluni, she's busy with a new affliction, picking lice off herself in the surf, and their love affair begins when he takes her home and administers sheep dip. Yes, delousing is their first date, and her attempts at detoxing and casting a voodoo love spell on him constitute their prolonged courtship. But once she has him, she develops an uncontrollable jealousy: "You must dream about me, man, willy-nilly!" Winning her man isn't enough for Saluni. Tragically, she goes on to demand his full attention. "I am not going to be part of any triangle," she says. "The fish must go." On the one hand, *The Whale Caller* is a sweetly thoughtful fable about a simple love triangle between a rigid and ritualized man, a captivating town drunk and a spectacular whale. But as a satirical structure, it also serves to lampoon all the banalities, constraints and tribulations of standard romantic love. There are, in this cross-species affair of the heart, outbursts of jealousy, bitterness, desire and squabbling to outdo even Jerry Springer: "I say leave him alone, you foolish fish," she shouts. "He is mine!" She turns her back to the whales. The level of water is just below her knees. She lifts up her wet dress and lowers her underpants to the knees. She moons Sharisha, slapping her bottom and screaming, "Take that, you lousy fish!" And then she pulls up her underpants and walks away, leaving the poor whale looking scandalised." Love, in all its varieties, appears here as equal parts euphoria and pain. When the Whale Caller and Saluni finally manage a physical relationship -- his initial impotence is caused by his inability to stop thinking of the whale -- Mda writes of a "sickness" these wobbly lovers feel. But this isn't some tropical disease. This is love. At one point, Saluni frets because "there is no anguish. True love is supposed to be accompanied by profound pain." And it is, so be prepared: Despite the lighthearted and often hilarious antics, this love triangle, like so many others, is tragically unsustainable. Perhaps this is where *The Whale Caller* defies expectation: If it is a morality play, these are unusually funny, richly developed characters. If it is a quirky, romantic comedy, it's dispensed with a heaping helping of human frailty, tragic behavior and self-destruction. With an offhanded mastery of lyrical language, this gifted storyteller's prose shimmers without

extravagance. As if awash in unremitting sun, *The Whale Caller* begins as a reverie, illuminating the beauty of imperfect love and the thrill of struggling to maintain it. Yet in the end, beyond the whimsy and whales, the deeper, darker concern here is not so much the fragility of love, but the fragility of life itself when one surrenders wholly to the foolish heart. ed by Steve Amick Copyright 2005, The Washington Post. All Rights Reserved.