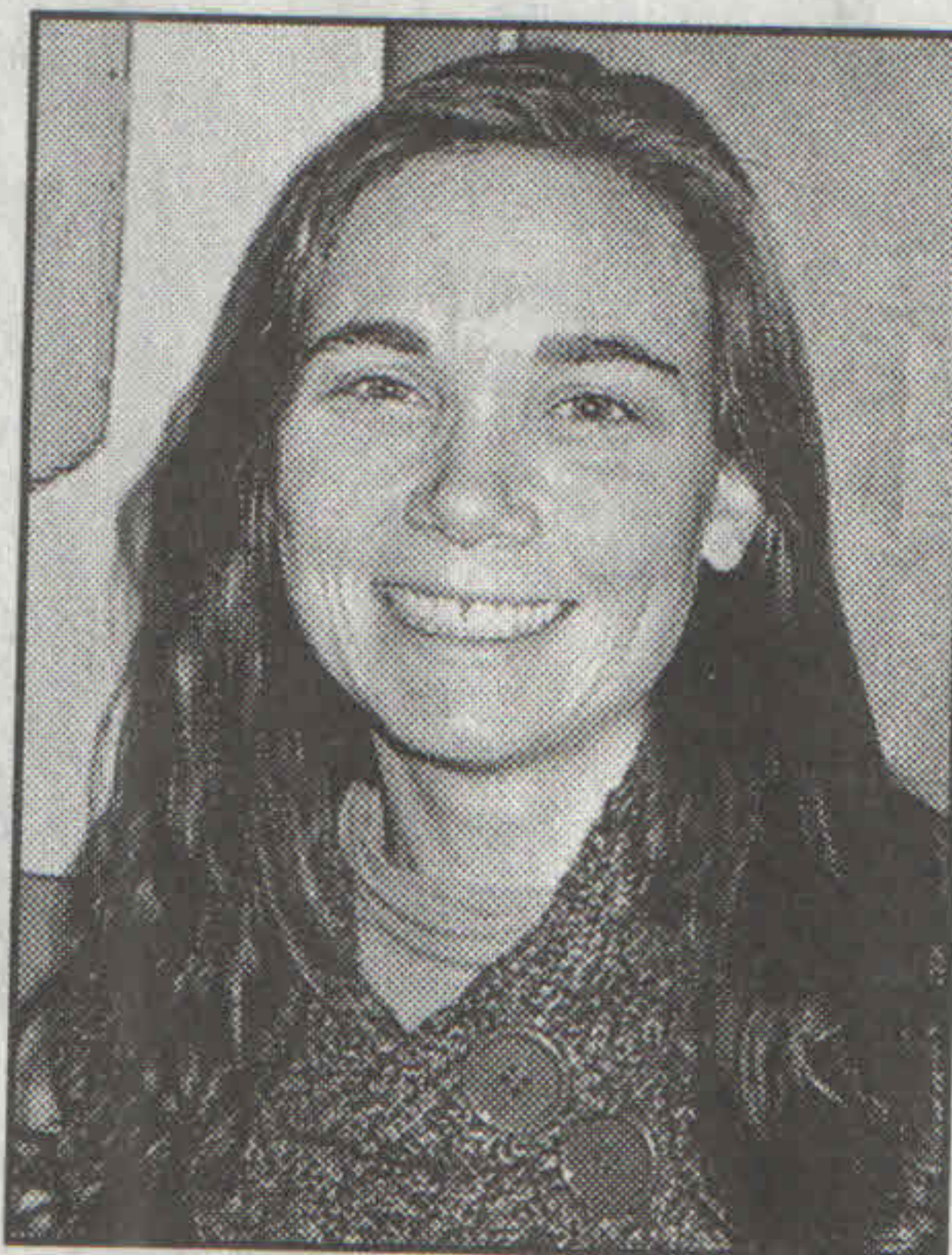
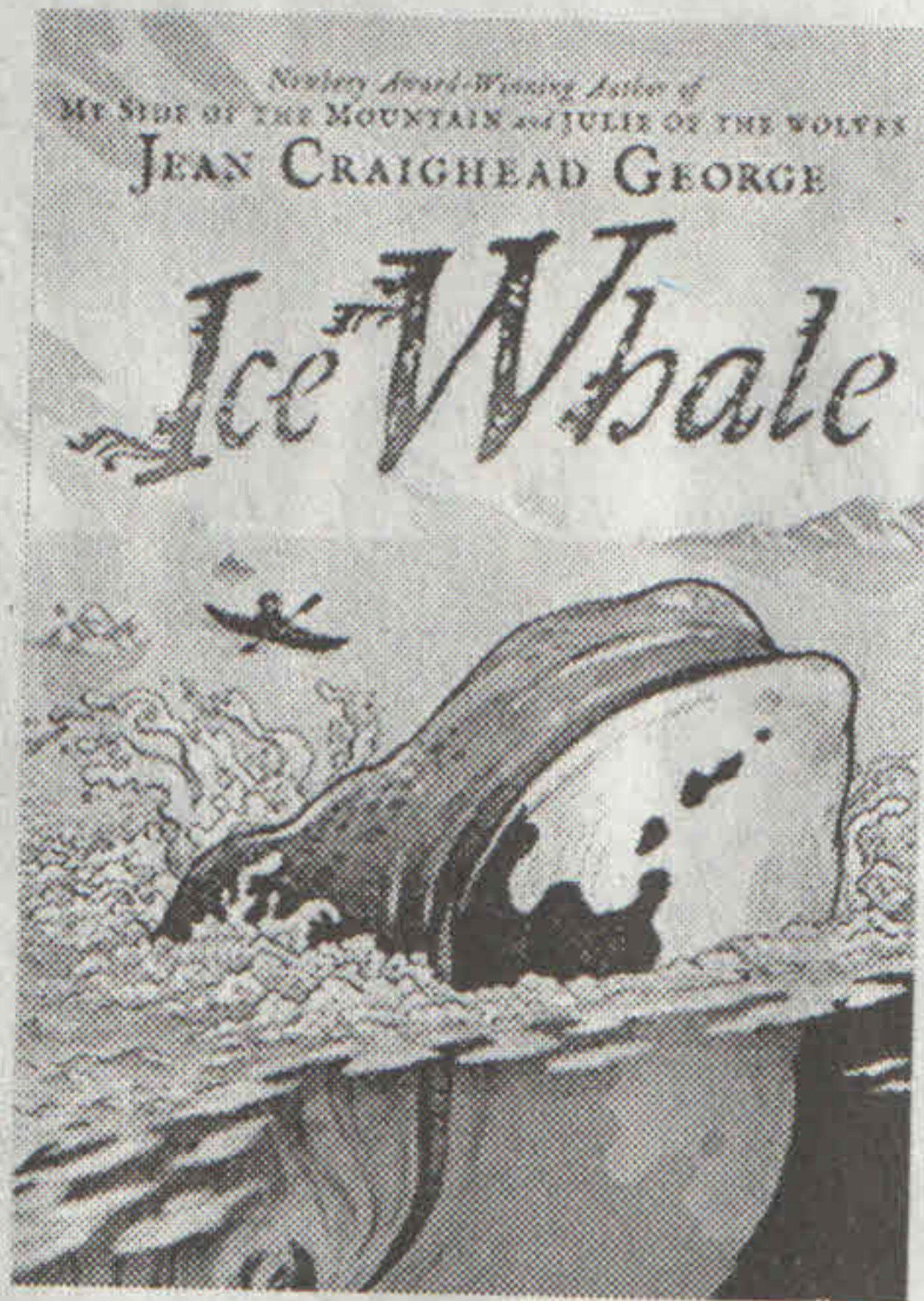




The Village School's Children's Book of the Month



Book reviewed by
Shannon Johnson,
2nd-3rd grade teacher

'Ice Whale'
By Jean Craighead George

The largest creatures on Earth are always a source of wonder for children. Siku, a bowhead whale, is the main character in Jean Craighead George's last novel, "Ice Whale." Siku instantly became a favorite of the second and third graders. Like "My Side of the Mountain," the story is woven with natural images and knowledge about the natural world, in this case the Alaskan tundra.

Set in the harsh and unforgiving Alaskan Tundra, "Ice Whale" follows generations of a Yup'ik Eskimo boy's family. Having witnessed the birth of a bowhead whale, the Eskimo boy Toozak feels blessed by this good omen. But that all changes when he absentmindedly discloses a secret spot where whales feed to Yankee whalers. So begins his family curse, but because he saw Siku being born, he is spared a little bit. The shaman of his village tells him that the spirits are angry with him and that he must protect Siku for as long as Siku is alive or until a Toozak saves Siku or Siku saves a Toozak. Toozak takes the curse seriously and begins a journey to the far north to learn from the best Eskimo whalers. He needs to learn how to track Siku in order to protect him.

The story is told in alternating views, from that of the generations of Toozaks and from Siku. We learn about the plight of the bowheads and Eskimo community as the whaling industry pushed further and further into the Arctic to hunt whales. The magical side of the story is the relationship between Siku and generations of Toozaks, whom Siku learns to recognize as the ones with the "kind eyes." Spanning from 1848 to 2048, we witness the life of Siku and the special relationship with the Toozaks.

The story climaxes with Emily Toozak, who gets stranded on an ice floe at sea while trying to cut Siku free of a rope that was wrapped around his fluke. She struggles to set Siku free and then must try to recall her ancestors' teachings as she faces the harsh elements of Alaska on her own.

The lives of the Eskimos and whales are intertwined and we learn how intimate their relationships are. This carefully written tale, which was finished by George's children after she died, tells a beautiful story of a love between humans and animal that transcends understanding. Each generation of Toozak that learned of the curse, felt a special connection to Siku when they'd see the whale with the dancing Eskimo on his chin. Moreover, Siku felt it too.

"Ice Whale" is a page turner that moves quickly from chapter to chapter, generation to generation. It became an instant favorite of the 2nd and 3rd grade class and is a great story that supports our thematic study of whales and whaling. We learn just how beautiful and dangerous the Alaskan tundra can be, but ultimately, we learn about the special bond between human and animal, where the humans go to great lengths to protect what they love, and vice versa.

This is a lovely read-aloud for 7 to 9 year olds. Children 10 and over can enjoy reading it themselves.