



The Child's Elephant

Rachel Campbell-Johnston

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When Bat, a young African herd-boy, stumbles upon an orphaned baby elephant, he takes her home and pledges to look after her. As Meya grows and learns, she becomes part of Bat's family, and is soon the joy of the entire village. But she can't stay with Bat for ever - she belongs to the wild, and with Bat's help she joins an elephant herd, roaming free on the plains.

Bat returns to the gentle, peaceful rhythms of village life. But everything he knows is shattered when he and his best friend Muka are kidnapped and forced into the child army. They witness horrors and experience cruelties they never thought possible.

Now it is time for Meya to rescue Bat, but even together, are they strong enough to find their way home through the harsh African savannah?

The Child's Elephant Details

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From Reader Review The Child's Elephant for online ebook

LH Johnson says

There's a couple of things I need to acknowledge about my reading of The Child's Elephant and it's those that influence my rating and feelings around the book.

This is a glorious big book, but it's also resolutely a book of two halves and it took me two goes in reading to actually complete it. The first time I read it, I think it suffered both from my preconceptions and reactions to it (expecting something akin to a Michael Morpurgo, which is not a bad thing but it is not the right thing for this book), and also the slow, leisurely pace of the first half. The pacing of the first half is one of those things that do make sense upon completion, and I understand it now and see the shape of this book, but it was the reason I put the book down at first. So there is something to learn from this and it is something to do with pacing, but also of expectations and of the difficulty of classifying a book before you have read it.

Because the second half of this book told me that I had got it all wrong and that beneath this world, edging the beauty, was a kernel of darkness so horrible and so gutwrenching that it would inevitably pull Bat and Muka and Meya into its path.

You'll note that I'm telling you very little about what actually *happens* in this book, and that is quite deliberate. I'm starting to wonder if it's one of those books that benefit from the blank slate, from not being compared and contextualised against others. I wonder if it's one of those books you sort of have to slide into a little blankly, a little reluctantly, maybe, to read into the book, to wade through the beautiful, painterly passages about the jungle to fall a little unexpectedly into the bit where everything starts to fall apart, too fast, too soon, too hard, and to *feel* that shift, to *feel* that wrench from everything you've become comfortable with, that you have come to love and accept as the truth of this world and to be left breathless at the awful, awful truth.

Rebecca Foster says

A tale of human-animal friendship can easily turn mawkish, but *The Child's Elephant* strikes the right balance, acknowledging that wildness is preeminent and people and animals can only ever have temporary connections. The author does not talk down to the older children who will form her audience. Instead, she displays a deep knowledge of African culture, with lush metaphors and precise descriptions of places and weather. (See my full review at We Love This Book.)

Beth says

This was such a gorgeous book to read. The characters, the setting, the storyline was all so intricately woven to make an exciting and memorable read. The descriptions of Bat's home in Africa, of his Grandmother and his village are stunning and really draw you in. I loved the elephants, especially Meya and my heart broke for Bat when he has to let her join the herd and then he and Muka leave her. The brutality and cruelty of what happens to the children is horrendous yet gives the story a grittiness which makes you not want to put it down for a second. This has to be one of the best children's books I have read since Wonder as it was

beautifully written and the story carries you along breathlessly until the last word on the last page. Highly recommend this to absolutely any reader and would make a fantastic movie!

Rachael says

A. MA. ZING.

Such a wide range of emotions come with this book, I went from pure joy to laughter to extreme despair and wanting to put the book in the freezer! (joke from Friends!). Reading this felt like I was living it too.

This is a story about Bat, a boy who grows up in a little village in Africa, who finds a baby elephant. The book is written in such a vibrant way, you get so immersed in the life of Bat and the African culture it's like you've travelled through a portal into Africa. There are also gorgeous illustrations which accompany the story of Bat and his elephant.

As always though life does not go to plan and as Bat and the elephant grow up their lives change through many twists and turns, some which are heart wrenching and quite distressing at times and can be tough to read. It's heavy on the realism when you realise that things like this are happening, very informative.

Buchdoktor says

Bat, die Fledermaus, wird der 7-jährige Nakisisa genannt. Der Junge lebt bei seiner Großmutter und hütet in der afrikanischen Savanne ein paar Rinder. In Afrika ist es nicht ungewöhnlich, dass Kinder nicht bei ihren leiblichen Eltern leben. Von Bats Dorf Jambula zeichnet Rachel Campbell-Johnston ein archaisches, zeitloses Bild. Die Menschen leben in traditionellen grasgedeckten Lehmhütten, Frauen und Mädchen wickeln sich in Tücher und das Wasser wird von der Wasserstelle in Tonkrügen zu den Hütten getragen. Bat wächst inmitten einer vielfältigen Pflanzen- und Tierwelt auf. Als der Junge ein winziges Elefantenbaby findet, dessen Mutter vermutlich von Wilderern getötet wurde, möchte er die kleine Elefantenkuh Meya gern aufziehen. Die weitere Handlung folgt der unrealistischen Annahme, dass Bats Großmutter, die selbst von ein wenig Handel lebt, auf Bats Arbeitskraft verzichten kann und ein Haustier duldet, das 20 Stunden am Tag frisst. Bat hat mehr Freiheiten, sich um Meya zu kümmern, weil das Mädchen Muka ihn als Hirtin vertritt; mit Muka im Haushalt muss nun wiederum der Lebensunterhalt für drei Personen und den jugendlichen Elefanten verdient werden.

Mensch und Elefant sind direkte Konkurrenten um einen schwindenden Lebensraum. Auf der Suche nach Futter und Wasser zerstören Elefanten Felder und Wasserstellen der Menschen, in Panik sind die riesigen Grasfresser für Menschen lebensgefährlich. Vom Fischer Bitek lernen die Kinder eine Menge über die Bedürfnisse und das Verhalten der Elefanten. Bitek dringt darauf, dass die inzwischen dreijährige Meya in eine vorbeiziehende Elefantenherde ausgewildert werden soll.

Im zweiten Teil der Handlung werden Gerüchte Wirklichkeit über entführte Kinder, die als Soldaten in eine Rebellenarmee gepresst werden. Bat und Muka werden von den Rebellen entführt. Aus Angst verlassen die Menschen ihre Dörfer und ziehen in Flüchtlingslager. Entscheidend für das Schicksal der Kinder werden Bats Wissen über Elefanten sein und die jahrhundertealten Wege der Herdentiere.

Nicht gefallen hat mir die verwirrende Bezeichnung der durchziehenden Elefantenherde als Wildelefanten (S. 140). Diese Wortwahl könnte suggerieren, dass es sich bei den frei lebenden und den in Gefangenschaft aufgezogenen Tieren um zwei unterschiedliche Arten handelt oder dass die Handaufzucht von verlassenen Jungtieren der Normalzustand wäre. Den Einblick in die Emotionen der Kindersoldaten in der zweiten Hälfte des Buches finde ich dagegen durchweg gelungen. Ohne die Gründe für den bewaffneten Konflikt weiter zu vertiefen, wird hier die Verletzlichkeit und Verlorenheit der Kinder deutlich, die in einem verwüsteten Land gar nicht wüssten, wohin sie vor ihren erwachsenen Unterdrückern fliehen sollten, falls sich eine Chance zur Flucht bieten würde.

Rachel Campbell-Johnstons Stärke sind ihre Naturbeschreibungen, die jüngere Leser vermutlich weniger interessieren werden. Über das Verhalten von Elefanten fließt eine Menge Wissen in das Buch ein. Die Autorin schildert ein Afrika wie aus dem Museum, das man in dieser Form nur noch selten antreffen wird. Die Handlung beruht auf realen Ereignissen in Uganda 1986 und Interviews der Autorin mit Kindersoldaten. Die im Buch gezeigte Dorfidylle bleibt nicht klischeefrei, das Buch vermag jedoch gerade aufgrund seiner Zeitlosigkeit dem Afrikabild aus europäischer Perspektive neue Facetten hinzuzufügen.

In einem Jugendroman mit dem Thema Kindersoldaten hätte ich mir gewünscht, dass dieses besonders Jungen ansprechende Thema zügiger zur Sprache gekommen wäre.

Sally says

I wouldn't have picked this one up usually, but it was long listed for an award I follow so I added it to my pile!

I was actually pleasantly surprised. the writing was good, the illustrations beautiful and the topic surprising adult for what i thought was it's target audience! I think the publishers should have branded this book differently as the cover and title make it look like a Michael Morpurgo book which is aimed at a younger audience.

The story was good though, and realistic too. It does work out for some, but not all so the hardships of the society that the characters live in along with the landscape are not brushed over lightly. It is a good way of alerting folk to the terrors of Kony's rule in Uganda along with opening a debate about how Ugandan communities live in harmony with their environment.

All in all, it was good but nothing that blew my socks off.

Meredith Fletcher says

Please note: I didn't finish this book as I couldn't carry on because I really didn't like the book

This story is about Bat who lives in a small village in Kenya with his grandmother. The story begins with Bat witnessing poachers cutting away at an elephant's tusks. Bat finds the elephant's baby and looks after it until it is too big to stay in the village. About halfway through the book Bat and Muka are abducted and have to live with the rebel army.

My favourite character was Lobo as I felt he had quite a unsettled personality as if he didn't know himself as a person and why he was doing some of the things he did.

I think that the book was to draggy and detailed and definately could have done with some editing. I felt the storyline was quite boring as there wasn't a lot going on. A nice book for those that like animal stories though.

Selan says

Trigger warnings: Child abuse, Child soldiers

More trigger warnings. I don't deliberately read books like this (I stay away from them if anything) but they just seem to crop up for some reason. And one look at this book, you wouldn't expect to see it. So yeah.

This book reminded me of the kind of book that your teacher has you discuss in class, and thoroughly analyze it, and everyone is in agreement that "This is a really thought-provoking book and really awesome! If you want to be a writer, then you should aspire to this kind of writing!"

The writing is very good, very descriptive and paints a good image of what it's trying to convey. The main character is Bat (evidently not his real name) and the story starts with him discovering a baby elephant and learning to raise it. The elephant's mother was shot by poachers (in an evocative scene in the very first chapter) and overall I thought it was very beautiful. (The raising of the elephant, that is, not the murder of its mother.)

I saw no real flaws with it at that point, aside that I ended up skimming most of the descriptions (there were a lot of them). And...it was really very predictable. I've read books like this before.

Now, I should mention that this book is split into 3 parts. I like that. Let's go over them.

Part 1: Bat finds a baby elephant and has to learn to raise it, before eventually he must say goodbye to it tearfully and let it rejoin its herd. Very emotional.

Part 2: Bat and his friend Muka are kidnapped by the army and forced to become child soldiers, subject to abuse, outright torture, beatings, half-starved, living in fear all the time, worked to exhaustion and -

wait stop what the fuck?!

Where the hell did that come from?? I thought I was reading a nice story about raising a baby elephant! What?! Child soldiers?

This is where the book takes a sudden twist and gets rather disturbing with the descriptions. It leaves out the explicit parts, but they are forced to join a child army - which is led by an elephant poacher from the beginning of the book! How coincidental.

It's quite grisly at this part. Many of the children are forced to kill, food is very scarce, and inevitably Bat is targeted by the leader as someone who knows where to find the elephant herd.

Shortly after that part finishes - spoiler here - the elephants rescue them! Woohoo!

Oh, I sure wasn't expecting that part! I mean, the section which dealt with the baby elephant wasn't even halfway. Of course the elephant was going to come back.

The third part is them trying to get back home, with the elephant's help. I thought the ending was rather rushed actually. Shouldn't his grandmother be like "Oh my god you were kidnapped for weeks on end I'm so glad you're still alive" or something? You know, something that last more than half a page? Oh well.

And then the author's afterword starts talking about Kony. I guess I should have expected that.

I enjoyed the book overall, but it was prettttt predictable...up to the child soldiers part where you're like what the literal fuck. And then that ends, and it becomes predictable-ish again.

I was actually expecting the main villain to suddenly come back at the end and say "I've come back for revenge!" or something stupid but he didn't.

Yellowoasis says

I could tell from the foreshadowing at the start that this book was going to be both a weepy and a look at the brutality of children being taken as soldiers. I did wonder if I was prepared to go through all that – I think a writer has to earn the right to that sort of story and I'm not convinced she did it for me. Of course, some classics get away with this brilliantly ("Where's Papa going with that ax?") and you're prepared to go on the journey with the characters. I guess my discomfort was that the book seemed 'worthy'. It was also too long and would probably have been a better book if sections had been tightened up.

Anna says

I find it really hard to work out who this is written for. I read this as part of the 2014 Carnegie Shortlist, the cover is tedious and succeeded in putting off all the 12 year olds in my reading group. They all judged that things were not likely to end well for either the boy or the elephant. They were quite happy to read of disasters affecting humans but the thought that the elephant might be shot, having watched him grow up, was not acceptable. I on the other hand, was loathe to read a book on child soldiers. I was torn between the over sanitisation in the novel and the possibility that it would be unbearably graphic.

Although the violence was carefully edited, the descriptive passages weren't and every time we changed location, we were thrown into a vat of heavy prose. Not that it was badly written; the level of detail just became tedious. I found myself wondering how Johnston could keep on describing yet another slightly different fauna in such detail. Turns out she is a tracking and survival expert.

In terms of violence, it did turn out readable for 11-3 year olds and less brutally violent than some others in the 2014 shortlist (though I still couldn't persuade any students to try it).

A low three as it was worthy and well written, I just didn't really enjoy it.

Rachel says

This is an amazing book that'd i'd encourage everyone to read, and have been massively recommending it too. As far as in concerned any book that opens up peoples minds and takes them to places and situations they knew nothing to little about is a winner, and this does exactly that. When you read it you are transported into that world, where life isn't easy like we have it here and at times horrendous things happen to good people. I dont think its any good recommending away from books like this, as quite simply, it's life. People should be aware of this stuff. It evokes tears and giggles and sometimes a mixture. Perfect for fans of Gill Lewis and Morpurgo. Brilliant and touching.

Ramona says

This is a truly beautiful book.

I have chosen it this year for our school's 'Whole School Read' which is , itself the biggest compliment I could give as I am recommending it to all our 957 students and our entire staff.

The book starts with a rifle shot, out in the savannah. It is heard by a young boy, Bat, who knows straight away this is a sign of something not good. He finds a baby elephant and at first you are captured by his love and affection for this young elephant thinking it may be a lovely story about animals- which it is- but it is so much more.

The story is about friendship, great sacrifice, love.

It is also about war and the brutality of it. It has a story within the first story but I don't want to spoil it...read it.

I promise you will enjoy it.

Stephen Palmer says

Aimed at a young-to-YA audience, this novel is set in a modern Africa of tribal communities and elephant poachers. Main character Bat rescues an orphaned baby elephant, which, as he grows up, grows alongside him. Eventually the inevitable happens, and Bat is left to live his life without his elephant friend. However, in the second main section of the novel things get a little more unpleasant, with the return of poachers. This is a good book, which I enjoyed reading. I was quite surprised in a few places at the density of the prose - which seemed aimed at an older audience - and also at various POV changes that are unflagged, and require going back to re-read. (I don't normally comment on this sort of thing, but it surprised me in a novel aimed at this particular audience.) As an evocation of Africa, and of childhood and the perils of life as an older person, this is a great read.

Anne says

My, what a rollercoaster of a story! I began by holding my breath with wonderment so as not to disturb the quiet, gradual appearance of the savannah in all its beautiful and detailed glory - animals of all sizes, plants and flowers, heat, dust and luscious water of the rainy seasons. We all know much about the animals we see

on safari, but not so much about their surroundings. Rachel Campbell Johnson allows us to sit undisturbed, maybe behind an acacia bush, to view her tale of an African childhood, as if through a pair of binoculars.

But having experienced a complete story in itself as Bat and his friend Amuka mature and care for an elephant until it is accepted back into the wild, just like parents would a child, (For me, personally, the last scenes were bitter-sweet as I am about to lose my son to university) it is with horror we embark on the 2nd part of the book. Suddenly the friends are kidnapped and taken brutally far away into the forest as new recruits for the rebel army. I could hardly make myself read at times, as I saw their new found maturity stripped from them and they become scavaging, dirty, scrawny kids dominated by savagely cruel adults (whose names even, resemble wild animals) The savannah when glimpsed has changed, now wracked with drought, dry and cracked. It has become as broken and barren as the gruesome army attacking the villages we have become acquainted with.

I fell deeply in love with the children (as I have so many of the characters in this year's disturbing 2014 Carnegie Shortlist) and followed their journey desperately. But the end was a long time coming. I'm afraid Campbell Johnson should have reigned in a lot of her description which sadly became tedious and held up the adventure too much - even for me as an adult. The ending although too far-fetched would be greatly appreciated by younger readers but only if they can stay the course.

Sally Flint says

This was the last book left on the Carnegie Short List I had to go and what a great read it is. The writer managed to create a wonderful evocative sense of the beauty of Africa whilst showing the plight and innocence of child soldiers. The story is fiction, but the backdrop of Joseph Kony and the child soldier situation in Uganda is real. Reading this is a great introduction and easy way to understand more about the situation. The characters were quite simply drawn, but despite this it was so easy to empathise with and care for them. The bond between the elephant and the human was beautifully portrayed. I am not an animal person, but I was left utterly convinced by the majesty, humility, intelligence and caring nature of the elephants. I really loved this book and would be thrilled if it was the Carnegie Winner. Having said that it has been a bumper crop this year.

Libby says

Originally posted on Through the Wardrobe

With a title not dissimilar to a Kipling classic and an endorsement on the cover from the one and only Michael Morpurgo, a certain preconception of this title as a 'soft' child/animal relationship story is set long before the cover is opened. Written by a journalist and a charity campaigner however, this novel is far from forgettable. Exploring both the relationship man has with nature as well as the haunting reality of child soldiers in Africa, The Child's Elephant is told with careful precision and obvious passion – a tale of two stories that begins with the death of an elephant.

Bat lived a relatively mundane life in his close-knit African village until the day he discovered how poachers make their money. Walking away from the body of a de-tusked elephant, Bat soon learns that these horrors have consequences as he finds the newly-orphaned calf and brings her home. An amazing, intuitive

relationship develops as elephant and boy grow up side by side. However, the rural idyll is soon threatened as the call of the wild begins to draw Meya home and the village is soon threatened by the brutality of guerrilla warfare.

Mixing the heart-warming love of man and beast with a perceptive portrayal of unimaginable inhumanity is a difficult coupling to manage, to say the least! Campbell-Johnson's ability to write sensitively and subtly means that this balance is expertly managed. Her journalistic background clearly cements the story within the factual yet the very real horrors related to child soldiers is masked and there to be read into rather than deliberately shown – a technique that works very well for this target audience.

Due to the nature of the writing and subject matter, there is a clear ideology within this novel that makes the reading of it quite serious. I really enjoyed reading about Bat, Muka and Meya and felt every step of their journey as keenly as if I were alongside them but at times the message, particularly in relation to the elephants, was delivered with a bit too much of a heavy hand but this is merely a little niggle in an otherwise affecting and effective novel.

There is something very traditional about the feel of *The Child's Elephant*. Divided into three parts (a beginning, middle and end), the story is told in a third person narrative and the ending is satisfactorily conclusive, if not a little implausible. It is an evocative piece of fiction; the descriptions of the African geography are particularly atmospheric as Campbell-Johnson personifies the power of nature in relation to the human world.

Ellie says

What an incredible book! I have to be honest, after reading the blurb I was feeling fairly sceptical. I'm not a huge fan of animal friendship books. However, this was so much more than that. The characters were all superbly written, and hugely likeable, though the star of the show was of course Meya the elephant. The author really brought her to life, and she stole the show. My main reason for liking it, though, was the child soldier plot. This made it very different from all other books in this genre. It was very realistic, and I loved the way she didn't tone anything down. Both heartbreakingly and uplifting, this is a definite gem of a read!

Kyra MacDonald says

I thought this was a really good storyline and it all was really interesting. I really liked the setting that took place. Also it's a book with many emotions, I loved the animal and human friendship/bond that this book had. I did find it a bit boring at some parts for example the child soldier story line, but other than that I really enjoyed it. I would recommend this book to anyone, maybe a bit more to anyone that likes animals and the friendship between animals and humans.

Anthony Burt says

This is a difficult book to review. I both enjoyed it and didn't at the same time. It was good, had a lovely storyline (and an endorsement by one of my fave authors Morpurgo), but - to be honest - I felt there were quite a few issues with it.

About a young African boy called Bat, who adopts a baby elephant after its mother is killed by poachers, this is a story of them growing up together, learning their identities, losing touch, him joining a child soldier army and then searching for his elephant again throughout horrible tragedy and torture.

Sounds great, eh? So what was wrong with it...

For starters, there was waaay too much description. For the YA audience it's aimed at, I felt like it left little to the imagination and should have been snappier. The over-description turned a potential fairytale story into a tedious no-space-for-the-reader yarn.

The character of Muka - Bat's friend - seemed to start off as a "wild" girl but then her character traits basically disappeared. It was as if the author got bored with her and didn't bother writing her properly after the initial introduction.

On top of this, the book is actually two books. Which makes it very hard to get through. There is the lovely elephant part at the beginning, which is great, and then it suddenly switches from that to a harsh child soldier storyline (for an older readership) that seems to jar you out of what you were reading. It didn't work for me this part. Ironically, with all the action in it, this child soldier part was slightly dull, unemotional and I skimmed it.

Ok, so I sound like I'm slating it but I'm not really. It's a nice book and well written. And, also, you have to know that I lose patience with books that don't have an element of magical reality to them, which this doesn't. So it's probably me and my book choices too, not just the book!

So it's good, just not as good as it could be.

(Sorry Rachel and lovely editor Bella!...it's just my view, of course...)

Katy Noyes says

4.5 stars.

"Bang!" An elephant is shot. Unusual start to a children's book, but reminiscent of Bambi, she leaves behind a newborn baby. Bat has been watching nearby and takes the baby home with him. He and his friend Muka struggle to feed it and keep it alive.

The book veers from where you expect though. Adults might be expecting a 'Born Free' emotive journey where the children must raise their calf, see it grow, teach it to live in the wild and finally let it go.

And while that's a big part of the story (and there's lots of fun to be had in elephant Meya's antics), the story darkens as villagers begin to talk of the child soldiers that are edging ever-closer. And eventually Bat and Muka's rural idyll cannot protect them from the cruelties of life.

This isn't one for sensitive young readers. The first half may lull you into a false sense of security, but be warned, Bat and Muka do experience fairly graphic (for the children's market) violence and psychological torture. It's shocking, saddening and upsetting. And well conveyed.

A debut work, the author has been nominated for various awards for *The Child's Elephant*, and rightly so. It had an excellent sense of location, some vivid characters, a plot that draws you in and suspense and humour combined.

Only for aged 10+ in my opinion, and adults will find this a good read too.
