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# THE ELEPHANT THIEF

BY JANE KERR

## SYNOPSIS

Street urchin and pickpocket Boy has been recruited by a criminal gang leader, Frank Scatcherd, to find a lost fortune. Murdered Walter Wormwell, whose collection of wonderful animals is to be auctioned off to pay his debts, hid thousands of pounds somewhere among his belongings. He owed it all to Scatcherd, and Boy has to find it.

Boy - who is mute - attends the auction of Wormwell's animals to search for the missing money, but instead he's caught by zookeeper Mr Jameson. Boy ends up helping him to bid on an elephant, the majestic Maharajah. Jameson recognises an instant friendship between Boy and the elephant - he gives Boy a name, Danny, and a backstory as a lost Indian prince, and recruits him to help at Belle Vue, his zoo in Manchester.

At the train station the next day, Maharajah refuses to ride on the train, and Danny is the only one who is able to calm him down. Jameson realises they'll have to walk to Manchester - but unpleasant rival zookeeper Albright makes a wager: if Mr Jameson manages to walk Maharajah home in seven days, he'll stake his own menagerie as a prize. If he doesn't make it, Albright wins Belle Vue instead. Unable to resist the publicity, Mr Jameson agrees.

The journey begins with a disaster - Maharajah races wildly down Edinburgh market with Danny on his back, and Mr Jameson has to pay off disgruntled shoppers. But soon the walk is underway. En



route, elephant trainer Lorenzo helps teach Danny how to control Maharajah.

Soon Danny (or 'Prince Dandip' as he's known) is something of a celebrity, with newspapers covering the story and people lining the streets to welcome him and Maharajah through their towns. He even makes a friend, Henrietta, the daughter of the vet travelling with the party. But Danny has the distinct feeling that there's someone in Mr Jameson's company who he can't really trust – someone determined to foil the journey. In fact, both Albright and Scatcherd are on the company's trail. To protect his future, Boy and his new friends will not only have to win the race, despite Albright's foul play; Boy will need to face up to his dark past and find his voice to defeat the cruel Scatcherd ...

The group are on the last leg to Manchester. Maharaja is wounded and Danny is lost: for a while, it appears certain he won't be able to finish in time. But Danny's last minute arrival spurs the elephant to one last push, and brings him home at last – in the nick of time. What's more, Danny discovers the location of the missing fortune in the elephant's elaborate harness: a precious jewel. Danny's and Maharajah's futures at Belle Vue Zoo look bright.

## WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

*'Elephants are amazing, but it's not just their awesome size, cool trunk-work and clever eyes: there's something profound about this wonderful animal. Jane Kerr captures it perfectly in her totally gripping adventure. The Elephant Thief is a story of stolen treasure, an impossible challenge and a real-life journey, but at its heart lies an unlikely and touching friendship between a boy and an elephant. You'll experience tears of rage, wonder and joy as this classic tale of hope against all the odds transports you to another time ...'* **BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE**

## AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Jane Kerr grew up in North Wales and wrote her first book at the age of seven. 'The Jones Family have a Picnic' was not a big-seller, but it sparked a life-long love of writing and story-telling. After a brief detour working as speech therapist, she trained as a journalist, and has since written for newspapers, online, radio and television. The story telling never stopped. She is married with two children and a guinea pig.



# AUTHOR MOTIVATION

*'I first saw Maharajah in the Manchester Museum ten years ago. His skeleton was on display alongside a brief history. I never forgot the story – or him.*

*Maharajah had been part of a travelling circus, Wombwell's Royal Number One Menagerie, until April 1872, when he was sold at auction in Edinburgh. He was bought for £680 (about £30,000 today) by James Jennison, owner of the Belle Vue Zoological Gardens in Manchester.*

*But moments after boarding the train to his new home, Maharajah destroyed his railway carriage. Instead, his keeper, Lorenzo Lawrence, decided they would walk from Edinburgh to Manchester. It took them ten days.*

*In reality, the walk was fairly uneventful. In my book, it isn't. But the common theme is the affection that Maharajah inspired during the journey – and for a long time afterwards. In fact, such was his popularity that the Victorian artist Heywood Hardy is thought to have used him as inspiration for his painting, The Disputed Toll.*

*I borrowed many of these true events and real people to help create The Elephant Thief, but one confession: the real Maharajah was an Asian elephant, not African. He died in 1882 from pneumonia after ten years at Belle Vue. His skeleton was put on display, and when Belle Vue eventually closed, he moved to the Manchester Museum where visitors can still marvel at him today.'* **JANE KERR**

## THEMES

- Poverty and misfortune
- Cruelty and abuse
- Friendship and trust
- Kindness and loyalty
- Victorian Britain
- Bravery and determination



- Adventure and mystery

## WRITING STYLE

*The Elephant Thief* is written in the third person, past tense. The style is reminiscent of classic Victorian novels, with strong storytelling pulling the reader through a plot full of revelations, twists and turns. The author conjures the atmosphere and characters of Victorian Britain both through description and speech, which is often idiosyncratic and accented. **28 chapters, 322 pages, age 9+**

## PUPIL ACTIVITIES

### 1. *Blending history and fiction*

*'Maharajah's trunk curled around his wrist, warm and rough. Boy's heartbeat slowed. The clever, gold eyes blinked again and when they opened, he saw himself reflected back.'* (Page 16)

The author based her story on a real-life character and event – Maharajah was a real elephant who journeyed from Edinburgh to Manchester in 1872. However, our main character Danny is an invention of the author.

Pick a real-life historical event that inspires you. Choose one important character from this event, and invent another character. In order to help develop this imaginary character, write a short description of him or her, including the following details: age, gender, appearance, backstory, character traits and motivations – and answer the question: why are they at this event and what is at stake for them?

In a thousand words or less, write the moment the real character and the imaginary character first meet each other. What are their impressions? How might your fictional character have fitted into the event – or how might they have changed it?



## **2. Stop in the name of the law!**

*'If I were you, I'd watch how you go on from here. There are a lot of unscrupulous characters about. And not everyone is exactly who they seem.'* (Page 151)

*The Elephant Thief* has a rich ensemble cast of characters with a mixture of motivations and histories, which are only disentangled towards the end of the book. As a class, compile a comprehensive list of all the characters in the novel, and divide them up between you. If there aren't enough to go around, separate into small groups. Create a 'police profile' for each character, as if you were presenting all known information about a suspect in a criminal line-up: you will need a headshot drawing, details of appearance, motivations and a brief backstory – anything you can glean from the novel. You might even try to write a short 'personal statement' in the voice of that character. Once you've finished, create a display of all the profiles on your classroom wall. As an additional activity, you could try 'fantasy casting' your characters – who would play each in a movie production?

## **3. Man's best friend**

*'Maharajah stopped wailing. His ears fanned out. They stared at one another. For once in his life, Boy had no ideas.'*  
(Page 37)

Writing stories with realistic animal main characters is notoriously difficult; animals cannot speak, nor do they have the facial expressions of humans. Writers therefore have to be inventive in how they characterise these creatures and show their emotions. How does Maharajah express his character and emotion throughout the book? Go through the story and highlight relevant scenes. The author clearly researched the behaviour of elephants as well as using her imagination and empathy.

Pick an animal of your own. How would you characterise this animal – how does it express fear, love and joy? Research the animal online and what behaviours it might exhibit. When you feel confident enough, write a short scene in which your animal character experiences some intense emotion and expresses this to a human



friend. The scene must be written from the human's perspective.

#### **4. Hot off the press**

*'Gentlemen of the press! ... I understand these developments have caused a great deal of excitement.'* (Page 236)

Throughout *The Elephant Thief*, the story of the elephant's extraordinary journey is covered in the newspapers. Imagine yourself a journalist covering part of the event. Pick a moment in the novel and write a report in the style of a newspaper – you may like to research the writing style and format of newspaper reports before you embark on this task. Alternatively, imagine yourself interviewing one of the central characters and write up the conversation. Create at least one image, diagram or map to accompany your piece, and be sure to choose a snappy headline to capture the attention of readers. When finished, use the newspaper articles to form a classroom display.

## **WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. *'The King hates that you don't talk, and he specially hates that you don't talk to him. Maybe if you'd say something then he'd stop going after you.'* (Page 27)

Why do you think Danny is silent until the end of the novel? What causes him to repress his voice – and what causes him to speak eventually?

2. *'He hadn't forgotten the curious sense of kinship, or the warmth of being held ... He owed Maharajah his life.'* (Page 186)

Why do Danny and the elephant, Maharajah, have this 'curious sense of kinship'? What is the nature of their friendship, why is it so important to both of them, and how does it grow throughout the book? How does this friendship compare to the other friendships in the book, such as Danny's friendship with Henrietta?

3. *'You thievin' little beggar!'* (Page 11)



Danny starts out the story as a thief, working for an unscrupulous and cruel gang leader. Throughout the course of the novel he is transformed into a prince – but does he really escape his past? How are poverty and wealth represented in the novel? What is the significance of money in the story? Do you feel there is a message of redemption here from the author?

4. *'Danny was the last to step out into the long, low room. And he wasn't prepared for what he found. Glass cases lined the walls, each filled with animals. They were all dead.'*

Lord Cawthorne's gallery of stuffed animals is a very arresting scene in *The Elephant Thief*. What does the gallery represent and why? What is the author trying to say about the villains in the novel and about animal life?

