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Running Wild

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Editor's Choice:

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Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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Will is nine years old. It is Christmas 2004 and Will's father, a soldier, has just died in the Iraq war. To provide solace, Will's paternal grandmother buys tickets for him and his mother to spend Christmas in Indonesia. Will's Christmas present is to be a ride on an elephant, arranged for Boxing Day.

The elephant, Oona, is placid enough at the start of the ride. But at a certain point she sheds her mahout and stampedes into the jungle with Will still on board. It transpires that the elephant senses the imminent tsunami and thus saves Will's life. The reader is left uncertain whether Will's mother has been equally fortunate, or has died in the floods. Will now spends a year living in the jungle in an episode reminiscent of Kipling's **The Jungle Book** before he is confronted by a choice: return to England and a dull but secure life or remain in Indonesia, a dangerous but thrilling environment?

Sarah Young's illustrations are in stark black and white, adding drama and immediacy to Morpurgo's narrative. As we would expect, this book is exceptionally well written, with expert intertextuality with Kipling and with Blake's 'The Tyger'. Morpurgo deals sensitively with Will's fluctuating emotions. There is a very moving section where Will and his widowed mother reflect on the futility of war. The episodes in the jungle, however, are sometimes drawn out beyond their natural length. There are two postscripts to the book, the first explaining the literary influences, the second a summary of the Iraq war, the tsunami and the endangered species of the orang-utan. It must be admitted that these postscripts end the book on an uncomfortably didactic note. It might have been preferable to let young readers work out these connections for themselves.

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