



A MEMORY OF ELEPHANTS: INTERVIEW WITH RACHEL CAMPBELL-JOHNSTON

Article Author:

[Caroline Sanderson](#) [1]

199 [2]

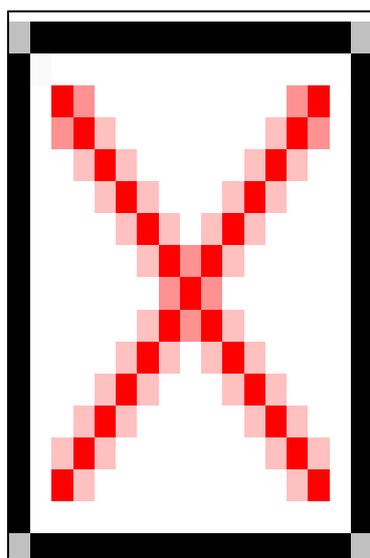
Article Category:

Featured author

Byline:

Rachel Campbell-Johnston talks about the effect she hopes her debut children's novel, **The Child's Elephant**, will have on young readers.

‘I want to really flood them with a sense of the glory of the natural world.’

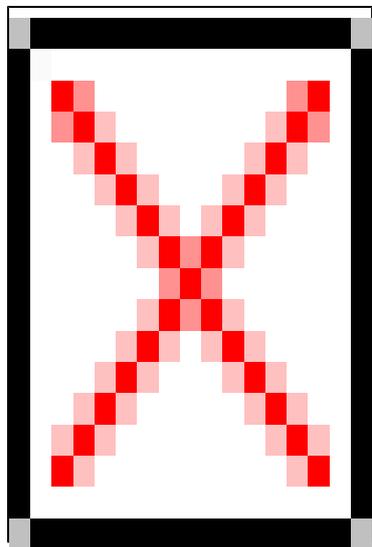


Rachel Campbell-Johnston is talking about the effect she hopes her debut children's novel, [The Child's Elephant](#) [3], will have on young readers. In writing this intense tale, infused with a sense of Africa; she drew on many extraordinary experiences of her own, as well as a time of immersion in the ways of the elephant during a stay in Kenya. ‘Elephants are prehistoric forces. There is something mystic about them: you feel it from their sheer size, the incredible complexity of their brains, and their enormous gentleness. And I feel a deep rage that we have invented ways of slaughtering them so unfairly.’

The Child's Elephant is the story of Bat, who lives ‘embedded like a tooth in a jaw’ in a closely-knit African village, where he spends his days as herd boy to his grandmother's cows. Out in the bush one day, he stumbles across poachers who have just shot an elephant and are cutting the tusks from her with a chain saw. Later, he discovers her orphaned calf, weak but alive. With the help of his friend, Muka, Bat adopts the elephant, and brings her up in the sanctuary of the village, giving her the name, Meya. For a few years, the threesome lead an idyllic existence, their lives only faintly disturbed by rumbles of a conflict raging beyond the horizon. Then the time comes when Bat realises he must let the now fully-grown Meya return to the wild, and to her elephant family. As he mourns the parting of their ways, Bat pays little attention to rumours of violent child abductions, whipping like wildfire across the savannah. Then one day, the unthinkable happens, and Bat and Muka are snatched from their village. The story that unfolds is both horrific and magical. It beggars belief, but is also sadly, and beautifully believable.

The novel came, says Campbell-Johnston, from a story she had had in her head for a long time. ‘As a child I used to

imagine what it would be like to have an elephant and keep it in the paddock. Writing this book was like making that dream come true?. In conjuring her fictional elephants so vividly, Campbell-Johnston mined the diaries she had kept whilst in Africa, as well as her conversations with trackers. ?I loved talking to them. For example, you can tell the speed an elephant is moving by the position its fore footprint is in relation to its back, or how old a mark is by the degree of erosion. The sounds the elephants make are also as accurate as I could make them: I read every elephant behaviourist; people who?d studied elephants for years, recording their languages and their movements and the way the herd works. I hope that by the end of my book, you can speak elephant; and you know what it means when they swing their leg or when they fling earth?.



Campbell-Johnston?s deep love of the natural world took root during her country childhood in Worcestershire. ?I was a gawky, buck-toothed, little ginger nut, leading a lonely life on a farm at the end of this long drive that nobody ever came down. I was born on the feast day of St Francis of Assisi and I always wonder if that had something to do with my passion for animals. I had a little fledgling blue tit that I?d reared and which sat on my shoulder. I had a goose with a twisty leg that used to wait in the stream for me to walk home from school. I had ponies. I fed the calves before school and took my goat out to pasture.? Her CV thereafter is a thing of wonder, and an intrepidness which her petite frame and pale, redhead?s skin belies. At a ?painfully shy? 15, Campbell-Johnston took a holiday job as a shepherd in the Outer Hebrides, and then, after she left school the following year, she took her shepherding skills to the Falkland Islands. ?It was wild and very basic and I adored it?. At the end of one shearing season, she took a trip to mainland South America just as the Falklands broke out, and she found herself stranded. ?I literally left on the last flight out. I?ve still got an unused return ticket for an Argentine military flight to the Falklands?.

Armed only with a small rucksack, Campbell-Johnston next fetched up in Peru, where a chance conversation with a priest led to a spell working on an agricultural project, in the Altiplano, high up in the Andes. Even after she had returned to the UK to study English at Edinburgh University, her wandering instinct led to vacation trips to work in a displaced people?s camp in El Salvador, which provided her first experience of children at war. ?Helicopters would pass over the camp and the children would just scatter. They?d be taught from birth to hide because of the strafing of villages?. What she witnessed inspired parts of **The Child?s Elephant**, including the heart-rending story of Gulu, the boy whom Bat befriends in the guerilla camp.

Campbell-Johnston first visited Africa as a student, returning there many times whilst working as a leader writer for The Times (she is now the paper?s art critic). In Uganda, she heard the horrific stories of the former child soldiers ? some as young as six years old - who had been brutally kidnapped from their homes across a huge swathe of the country, and forcibly recruited into warlord Joseph Kony?s so-called Lord?s Resistance Army. ?It was terribly moving because I thought they?d be very shy or not want to talk. But they wanted to speak. I heard the most incredible stories?.

What began as a fight for the rights of the Acholi tribe in 1986, soon escalated into a brutal guerrilla war. Kony?s army captured tens of thousands of children and forced them to fight, routinely murdering their parents and burning their villages so they had nothing to go back to. Though in recent years, the Acholi have been returning to their farms and the rehabilitation of child soldiers has begun, Kony remains at large. Campbell Johnston has given a portion of her advance

to **Send a Cow**, a charity which is working to help Ugandans rebuild their shattered communities.

Though 'The Child's Elephant' is not specific about where it is set, Campbell-Johnston deliberately strove to give it as authentic a feel as possible, partly because she believes that it was 'a dangerous move, for a white middle-class woman to write it from the point of view of an African child'. Dangerous it may have been, but the risk was worth it. **The Child's Elephant** is a captivating and deeply affecting book, exceptional both for the in-the-field research that has gone into writing it, and for the writing itself which is mesmerising. Credit must also go to Alex Egan, a neighbour of Campbell-Johnston's in Norfolk for the delightful illustrations. Michael Morpurgo says: 'I cannot trumpet this book loudly enough. Scary, funny, romantic, heart-warming; an elephant book you won't forget'. **Times** reviewer, Amanda Craig calls it 'a tale about salvation through love' and 'a masterpiece', while Nicholas Tucker in the [Books for Keeps review](#) [3] hails it as 'one of the best children's novels published this year'. I agree wholeheartedly with all of them.

The Child's Elephant [3] by Rachel Campbell-Johnston David Fickling Books, hbk, £9.99, 9780857560766, e-book available

For more information about **Send a Cow**, visit www.sendacowuganda.org [4]

Page Number:

46

Source URL (retrieved on Apr '19): <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/199/childrens-books/articles/featured-author/a-memory-of-elephants-interview-with-rachel-campb>

Links:

[1] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/caroline-sanderson>

[2] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/199>

[3] <http://booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/199/childrens-books/reviews/the-childs-elephant>

[4] <http://www.sendacowuganda.org>