

## Elephants in My Room: True Stories

**Christie Nicholls**

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*Driven by its faith in the transformative power of humor, Elephants in my Room is a lighthearted personal collection.*

Christie Nicholls's *Elephants in my Room* is a quirky collection of personal stories.

First focused on travel with family, the book opens with a story about a childhood obsession with a dog, Ferdinand, during a summer stay in Brazil; it milks humor from zany childhood logic. Next follow stories about brushing up against the cultural divide between a fun-loving American family and staid Brits during a family wedding in England; there's also an element of stand-up comedy to Nicholls's experiences as a non-native speaker in Sweden.

The book's second section focuses on odd jobs and shares a variety of less-than-successful efforts to earn money. These include babysitting brats, working at a deceitful call center, waiting tables, and dog walking. They are followed by tributes to people who've passed, entries that highlight formative experiences while paying homage to influential people, including grandparents and a piano teacher. Misadventures in love close the book. Family coping mechanisms bind the material, including the liberal uses of alcohol, humor, and swearing.

A hilarious story about renting a manual transmission car in Iceland despite having little experience driving a stick shift produces laugh-out-loud moments. Such moments are balanced by poignant accounts, such as of losing a grandmother to Alzheimer's, and another about overcoming fear of a grandfather to forge a stronger bond. Elsewhere, tones vacillate; a story about a teacher who lives with eighteen cats is ripe for humor, but is uneven, both earnest and flippant. Expletives and sudden cynicism distract from otherwise touching material; some attempts at humor are strained. Throwaway jokes, along with the book's excess verbiage, become a point of distraction; they blunt the impact of scenes.

Scenes are not always set up with enough details to invite the audience into their actions, resulting in a sense that being there was necessary to understanding what happened. At other times, descriptions and recalled conversations help to convey how Nicholls overcame awkward situations and growing pains, though the ultimate chronology of events is unclear. Some entries are disjointed within the book as a whole.

Driven by a belief that comedy enables people to "recycle painful energy into something as inexplicably brilliant as a big, full-bodied belly laugh," *Elephants in my Room* is a lighthearted personal collection that muses on past struggles—and the lessons learned from them.

WENDY HINMAN (March 21, 2020)

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