

## *Elephants Have Wings*

by **Susanne Gervay** illustrated by **Anna Pignataro**

### Study Guide

#### **About the author**

Susanne Gervay's award winning books are published internationally and include picture books, children's and young adult fiction. Awarded an Order of Australia, she is a Writer Ambassador for Room to Read, Role Model for Books in Homes, Australia Day Ambassador, Patron of Monkey Baa Theatre, former Chair of the Board of the NSW Writers Centre, head of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators SCBWI Australia East and New Zealand.

Her anti-school bullying '*I Am Jack*' books have become a rite-of-passage series, adapted into a play that has been touring Australia and USA since 2008. Susanne's acclaimed picture book *Ships in the Field* is a moving exploration of the immigrant experience; while *Elephants Have Wings* embarks on the great journey of discovering the humanity in all of us. [www.sgervay.com](http://www.sgervay.com)

#### **About the illustrator**

Award-winning illustrator and best selling Anna Pignataro, has created over fifty books for children. Published in more than seventeen countries and in eleven languages. Winner of the Crichton Award for Book Illustration in 1998, Anna has been shortlisted for picture book of the

year with both the Children's Book Council of Australia and YABBA, and many of her books have been awarded Notable Books CBCA.

Anna hopes to connect with and encourage children to follow their hearts and dreams and to believe that anything is possible.

### **Author/illustrator inspiration**

'Elephants Have Wings' is the creative collaboration of this author-illustrator team. Their first collaboration was 'Ships in the Field' inspired by their personal stories as the children of refugees.



'Elephants Have Wings' is their second collaboration. Inspired by Susanne's journey to India and South East Asia, she returned imbued with the cultures of India and Asia, the parable of the blind men and the elephant and a commitment to open a discussion about pathways to peace.

Anna Pignataro embraced the themes and colours of India and Asia to create an illustrative narrative embedded with symbolism, characterization, cultural indicators through her impressionist free flowing style.

### **Illustrations**

The artwork is created with pencil, watercolour, acrylic, collage using vintage fabric and textiles, interpreting colours, patterns and a feeling of India in an expressionistic way, weaving into a global vision.

A visual feast blending the colours of Asia & India into a universal story, inviting visual exploration to discover the elephants and hidden symbols.

### **Introduction**

‘Elephants Have Wings is a unique inter-faith/multi-faith/humanist, peace picture book fostering social inclusion and cohesion.

On the wings of a mystical white elephant two children embark on the extraordinary journey to discover the meaning of the parable of the blind men and the elephant and the humanity in all of us.

The parable of the blind men and the elephant is found in Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sufism and modern philosophy.

### **Themes of ‘Elephants Have Wings’**

Multi faith/interfaith/ humanism.

The tree of life.

What is truth?

Search for peace

Family relationships

Elephants within mythology, culture and sustainability.

### **Discovery of the Secret**

The father retells the story of the blind men and the elephant told to him by his father. There is a secret in the story.

‘So what is the secret?’

‘It is for you to discover’, Father says.

The children search for the answer on the wings of a white elephant, crossing rivers, jungles, deserts, mountains and the beauty of the universe.

Suddenly the skies crack as war descends. The parts of the elephant are spread across the pages. The children escape on their elephant home, where they discover the secret.

‘Everyone is different, but we’re the same, too. The elephant is in all of us.’

The illustration of the children is in their safe circle. The background contains the symbols of Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, the symbolic hands of connection to all people.

### **Why is it called Elephants Have Wings?**

In Hindu mythology during the monsoons that refresh the earth with life-giving rains, the clouds bringing rains are regarded as the ***WINGS OF ELEPHANTS***.



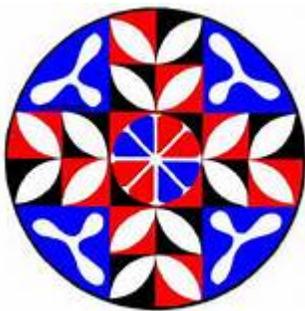
The title ‘Elephants Have Wings’ is symbolic of new life.

### **The Parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant**

‘Elephants Have Wings’ is a re-visioning of the parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant for a universal audience.

There are many versions of the story of the blind men and the elephant, where a group of blind men (or men in the dark) touch an elephant to learn what it is like. Each one feels a different part. They argue over what they feel, until they realise they are touching the same elephant. It opens discussion about what is truth.

This parable is told in Buddhism, Sufism, Hinduism, Jainism and many Asian- Indian religions and studied in philosophy universally.



### **The Blake Prize**

The Blake Prize for Art and Poetry endorses ‘Elephants Have Wings’.

Since its inception in 1951, The Blake Prize has stimulated a fascinating dialogue between art and religion in all its manifestations in Australia. The Prize is named after the legendary British artist and poet William Blake (1757-1827) whose broad range of artistic and poetic innovations, visionary imagination and radical politics made him an outsider in his day.

The Prize was instigated by Jesuit priest, Michael Scott and a Jewish businessman, Richard Morley. After World War 2 they hoped that the establishment of a prize would encourage artists of disparate styles and religious allegiances to create significant works of art including The Blake Prize for Human Justice.

Like the Blake art prizes, poets are challenged to explore the spiritual in poetry. First held in 2008, the Blake Poetry Prize encourages Australian poets to engage in the dialogue between religion, spirituality and poetry. [www.blakeprize.com.au](http://www.blakeprize.com.au)

Blake Prize Entry of ‘Elephants Have Wings’:

Statement about the work’s spiritual integrity

In Hindu scripture, the Divine Elephant conjures up clouds of winged elephants bringing monsoon rains and growth. Within the painting, the complexity of flowers, birds, leaves,



elephant imagery and hints of modernity, references man

y religions and times, taking children on the journey of spirituality to find the beauty within humanity.

Artist: - Anna Pignataro

**The End papers**

The end papers are symbolic of the journey of the children to find wisdom.

The end papers are inspired by the Buddhist and Hindu chakras where seven parts of your body and the colours associated with these parts are identified on the journey to enlightenment.

The chakras are:-

Colour	Body	Search
Violet	top of the head	Peace, wisdom and oneness with God.
Indigo	centre of forehead	Balance, devotion
Blue	throat	Truth through the spoken word
Green	heart	Love
Yellow	ribs	Positive use of personal power

Orange  
Red

abdomen  
base of the spine

Happiness, confidence  
Courage, vitality



The opening end paper is RED – the beginning of the journey to enlightenment  
The final end paper is the 7 colours to enlightenment.





The red wash of the end papers is used to give an impression of Indian and Asian culture. Red is a spiritual and cultural colour in Hinduism, Buddhism and throughout India and Asia.



The design in the Asian and also 'Elephants Have

The tree of life is



end papers are derivative of Indian, European folk traditions making 'Wings' universally relevant.

included in the images.

### **Symbolism in 'Elephants Have Wings'**

#### The Tree of Life

The tree of life is part of most cultures and religions including Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, the Baha'i faith, Islam. It is a symbol of immortality and eternal life.

In the Old Testament, the tree in the Garden of Eden bearing fruit which gave eternal life (Gen. 3:22-24).

The Tree of Immortality (Arabic: *الخلود شجرة*) is the tree of life motif in the Koran.

Throughout 'Elephant Have Wings' the tree of life weaves through the illustrations as trees, brown leaves, buds, burnt trees, buds of regrowth. The quintessence of the tree of life is seen in the wordless double page spread which embraces the colours of the chakras, elephants and journey.

## Elephants

Elephants are represented in many ways throughout the picture book, both in the words and illustrations.

Elephants for many cultures and faiths represent courage, hope, endurance, wisdom. Within 'Elephants Have Wings' the elephant takes the children across the world to find answers.

As the story opens, there are elephant toys and a drawing in the children's room. Ganesh the elephant God of Hinduism is revered and he must never be at the foot of a bed or beneath a person's feet. So the elephants are on a shelf behind the family.

The elephant is the mystical white elephant with wings. He's faintly imaged elephant at the end of the story, hidden in the tree of life and throughout the book.

## Newspaper Collage

'Elephants Have Wings' revisions the ancient parable of the blind men and the elephant for today's readers. Symbolic of this are snippets of newspaper clippings dotted throughout the book, on stars, leaves, in the sky, on mountains giving the story modern currency.

## Birds

Birds, symbolic of flight and journey are integral to the theme of search for meaning and answers. They are found on throughout 'Elephants Have Wings'.

## Mandala

**Mandala** (from Sanskrit *Mandala* means 'circle') is a spiritual and ritual symbol in Hinduism and Buddhism, representing the universe. Forms which are evocative of mandalas are prevalent in Christianity such as the Celtic Cross, the halo, rose windows in cathedrals.

The Mandala is part of meditation and represents a journey from the outer world to the inner sacred centre.

The mandala in 'Elephants Have Wings' is a peaceful circle in contrast to the 'shrieking at each other like a babble of monkeys'. Through creating a mandala and meditating on the circle, it is one way to find personal peace.

## Parts of the Elephant

The parts of the elephant make up the whole elephant. This is core to the parable of the blind men and the elephant. The symbols of the parts – rope, branch, marble, scarf and wall – can be found in the illustrations. They are torn apart during war. They are reunited with understanding.

## Characters

- The girl is the narrator. She is a searcher, looking after her younger brother, protecting him as they seek to understand the secret of the elephant.
- Younger brother trusts his sister and follows her on the search for the secret
- Father is a teacher to his children, passing on the story told by his father in the search for wisdom.
- Mother is protective and loving and part of the passing on the wisdom of the story of the blind men and the elephant.
- Grandfather is wise and passes on the tradition of storytelling.
- Children are of differing colours /ethnicities as they argue between themselves on the journey to find wisdom.
- The Elephant with silver wings is the protector of the children and also the sage who opens the children's understanding of the world and who they want to be.

## **Elephants**

Elephants are the inspiration for 'Elephants Have Wings'. Elephants are integral to Buddhism and Hinduism and other faiths.

Buddha was re-incarnated into a white elephant and at his birth, a white elephant appeared in the sky.

The **Garuda** is a large mythical bird-like creature, in both Hindu and Buddhist mythology. Garuda the mythological bird created from the cosmic egg hatched the eight elephants supporting the universe.

Ganesh, venerated Hindu Elephant God, is Lord of Obstacles and Beginnings.

Elephants are known for their strength, capacity for love, intelligence, their ability to show grief, joy, anger and play. They form deep family bonds and live in a herd led by the oldest and often largest female elephants. Extremely intelligent, they have memories that span many years. Roaming in herds and consuming hundreds of pounds of plant matter in a single day, elephants need a lot of food, water and space. However their habitats are being lost through urbanisation and development and hunters are poaching them for their ivory tusks.

The African and Asian elephants' survival is being threatened today.

There are groups like WWF; Australia Zoo; Taronga Zoo working to protect elephants.



## [LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM](#)

‘Elephants Have Wings’

**General Capabilities across the curricula from Foundation to year 10. (01.1 – 01.9)**

- Literacy
- Literature
- Critical and Creative Thinking
- Ethical Understanding
- Personal and social capability
- Intercultural Understanding Sustainability)
- Multi modal literacies – visual literacy
- Comparative religions

**Cross-Curriculum Priorities:**

- Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia (01.1/01.4)
- Sustainability (01.1 – 01.9)