

## **Reviews: Elephants Have Wings by Susanne Gervay ill Anna Pignataro**

### **Indian Perspective**

**Reviewer: D.R. Pattanaik, Professor of English, Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, 221005 India**

I was simply swept off my feet by the quality of the work and realised that I can't thank you enough for sharing the book with me. The book apart from being a wonderful book for children in its own right militates against many stereotypes around the discourse of children's literature. It proves once and for all that children's literature need not be childish. Great ideas and complex thoughts need not adopt complex mode of polarisation and a grave bearing. The book demonstrates with great power that we can teach our children profound truths and timeless values through a language they can easily access.

### **Tasmanian Times**

New children's picture book, 'Elephants Have Wings', promotes peace and social inclusion. By acclaimed author Susanne Gervay's new children's picture book, Elephants Have Wings is inspired by the ancient story of the blind men and the elephant and promotes the importance of peace and inclusion to younger readers. Inspired by Susanne's journey to India and South East Asia, she returned imbued with the cultures of India and Asia and the parable of the blind men and the elephant with its spiritual traditions in Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Sufism and modern philosophy. As the child of refugees, Susanne wanted to open a discussion about pathways to peace by creating an illustrative text that gave young people positive ways to navigate a world torn by conflict.

Beautifully illustrated by Anna Pignataro, Elephants Have Wings follows the story of two children, riding on the wings of a mystical white elephant, embark on an extraordinary journey to discover the meaning of the parable of the blind men and the elephant, and the humanity in all of us. Endorsed by the esteemed Blake Society and created by the award winning picture book team of Susanne Gervay AO and Anna Pignataro, Elephants Have Wings is a remarkable book that promotes peace and understanding to young readers.

<http://tasmaniantimes.com/index.php?/books-article/New-childrens-picture-book-Elephants-HaveWin/>

### **Reading Time – Children's Book Council of Australia**

**PIGNATARO, Anna** (illus.) **Susanne Gervay** (text) *Elephants Have Wings*

Two young children plead with their father to hear their favourite story. The story, passed down from grandfather, tells of a group of children searching in the dark to discover a secret. Each believes they have found the secret until grandfather shines a candle and they realise they all hold parts of a bigger truth. Wanting to discover the secret for themselves, the two young children embark on a magical journey, riding on the back of a winged elephant over faraway lands into Grandfather's past. When they return home the girl whispers the secret to her brother.

This beautiful picture book is based on a parable of the blind men and the elephant. The ethereal illustrations are rendered in watercolour and collage. They are a rich tapestry, bringing depth to the words and challenging the reader to discover their own truth. *Elephants Have Wings* demands rereading and will offer a great springboard for visual literacy. Possible topics to explore are parables, symbolism, point of view, war, migration, truth and hope. As the symbolism allows the viewer to interpret the story for themselves, this book is highly recommended for readers of all ages.

*reviewed by Sharon Seymour*

### **[Aussie Reviews](#)**

**Reviewer: Claire Saxby author, reviewer, mentor [www.claresaxby.com](http://www.claresaxby.com)**

*'Please tell us the story.'*

*'Yes, the story.' My brother nudges me.*

*'Pleasssse, Father.'*

*Father always pretends he won't tell us, but he always does.*

*Each time, the story is more amazing.*

*'Alright, tonight I will tell Grandfather's story.'*

Two children beg their father to tell them Grandfather's story. And tonight he agrees and tells them the story of children searching in the dark to discover the secret. Each is sure they have discovered the secret until Grandfather brings a torch and reveals that what they have each discovered is both true and only part of the truth. The two young children having heard this story then embark on a flying journey aboard their grandfather's mystical elephant. They see the world from above, their grandfather's home in a distant country, the war that hurt so many and many more places. Eventually they return home to the safety of home. Illustrations are in soft beautiful watercolours, realistic and mythical in turns. Text wanders about the page, adding to the dream/mythical sequences. Endpapers begin monochrome red and end rainbow-hued, though the underlying ink patterns remain the same.

*Elephants Have Wings* is both realistic and allegorical. The family are safe in their home, but the story the father shares with the children reflects a previous life that wasn't so safe, and tells a tale that reminds us that there are many perspectives and only by looking at the whole picture can we truly understand others. Elephants symbolise many things for different cultures. They are strong, live long, are considered wise and steadfast. All these characteristics are inherent in any journey to safety. *Elephants Have Wings* is a beautiful story and will be enjoyed by many young readers purely on a superficial level. But there is much more to be explored here. Migration, oppression, endurance, perseverance and more, illuminated in word and image. A rich and delightful story for young and old alike. Recommended for primary readers.

**[500 Hats http://500hats.edublogs.org](http://500hats.edublogs.org) ; [The Bottom Shelf http://thebottomshelf.edublogs.org/](http://thebottomshelf.edublogs.org/)**

**Reviewer: Barbara Braxton, Teacher Librarian, M.Ed.(TL), M.App.Sci.(TL), M.I.S.  
(Children's Services) Dromkeen Librarian's Award**

Bedtime. And that means a bedtime story, a nightly ritual in many homes and especially this one. Snuggled under the covers, the children wait in anticipation as Father begins Grandfather's Story, a tale from his childhood.

"One night, your grandfather told me and the other children to go outside and search for the secret..."

And so begins a new take on the old story of The Blind Men and the Elephant [http://www.constitution.org/col/blind\\_men.htm](http://www.constitution.org/col/blind_men.htm)

The children all think the secret is something different – "a rope", "a tree branch", "a marble", "a scarf", "a sandy wall" they cry, and begin arguing until they are so angry they are shrieking at each other like a babble of monkeys because each believes they were right. And then Grandfather came outside carrying a candle and the children saw that each had been right but had also been wrong.

"So what is the secret?" asked the children.

"It is for you to discover," said Father.

And as the children fall asleep, pondering, they set off on a magical adventure flying on a mystical elephant with wings through to morning where they discover the secret.

In a world where reality comes straight into our living rooms, it is lovely to share a story that offers the suggestion of peace and hope. As the elephant soars over the world's landscapes showing the children its beauty but also its ugliness, the children learn about people and the core thread of humanity that binds us all together. The elephant is symbolic in many religions, representing courage, hope, endurance and wisdom and so the parable of *The Blind Men and the Elephant* is part of the story-telling of many religions and cultures, making this re-imagining a story for all children.

The riches of tradition, mythology and spirituality are woven into a wonderful tapestry, beautifully captured by Anna Pignataro's imagination in the outstanding pictures, intertwined with imagery of the Asia and India where the story first originated. The concept that we are all the same but different is a difficult one for young people to grasp because they only see the external but this partnership of Gervay and Pignataro (who also brought us *Ships in the Field*) is so successful that the message is accessible to all. So much so that it has been awarded the Blake Prize logo, an annual Prize and Exhibition program for contemporary art and poetry exploring the themes of spirituality, religion and human justice, and the first children's book ever to have been honoured in this way.

This is a book for all ages. The commonality of its story across so many religions begs an investigation into why it would be – what is its core message that has such universality? Going back to the original story could spark a discussion about what is truth and how our perception of events is dependent on our role within them and the lens through which we are looking. Even though each picture is full of the richest details, its true beauty only emerges when we look at it in its entirety.

I have a shelf on which I put the books that I think are going to be CBCA award winners this year. This one is going onto that shelf!

### **Deescribe Writing**

**Reviewed by Dee White – <https://deescribewriting.wordpress.com/>  
<https://www.deescribe.com.au/>**

**Elephants Have Wings** is a stunning picture book written by [Susanne Gervay](#) and illustrated by [Anna Pignataro](#) representing the search for peace.

It's the story of two children who embark on an extraordinary journey on the wings of a mystical white elephant, as they search for the humanity in all of us.

This story is inspired by the parable of the blind man and the elephant found in Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sufism and modern philosophy.



Each page in this book is an exquisite work of art – a true harmony of text and illustration.

The parts of the elephant are the parts of the truth and the tree of life is beautifully depicted in Anna's detailed illustrations.

I love the colour and vibrance of this book, the movement and the melding of all elements.

*“The air dances with elephant wings, flying with tails whirling, legs outstretched, ivory shining.*

*Ears swaying in a towering wall as we soar  
over snowy mountain peaks.*

There are so many layers in this book that I can see it having appeal to readers of any age.

Elephants are revered in religion and respected for their prowess in war. Ever since the stone age, there have been images of elephants in art and mythology surrounding them. For many cultures they symbolise courage, hope, endurance, wisdom.

**Elephants Have Wings** crosses all borders, and has relevance anywhere in the world today.

It's no wonder this book has been endorsed by the Blake Prize for art and poetry.

The Blake Prize is named after the legendary British artist and poet William Blake (1757-1827). Established by Jesuit priest, Michael Scott and a Jewish artist, Richard Morley to create significant works of spiritual art in 1951 in the search for understanding and peace. The Blake Poetry Prize was added in 2008.

Full of motifs, symbols, pictures and texts that represent diversity and our universe, *Elephants Have Wings* provides so much to think and talk about in the classroom.

Find out more about this 'peace book for our time' at author Susanne Gervay's [www.sgervay.com](http://www.sgervay.com). Comprehensive teacher's notes are available

### **National Reading Ambassador**

**Reviewed by Hazel Edwards OAM <https://www.hazeledwards.com/>**

Were you aware that the elephant is revered in the spirituality of many cultures? But if you're a 5 year old sharing this picture book, you get the idea that this cute elephant can fly and knows stuff.

Anna Pignataro's artwork portrays a universal family. And her elephant is reassuring, whimsical and friendly with the power to fly. But if you look closer at the intricate artwork, you'll see the elephant's tears as it flies across war zones. Check the endpapers which offer colour and hope. And examine the wordless double page spread.

'Elephants Have Wings' reads well aloud which is a vital consideration for a book to be shared in a classroom, library or child's bedroom.

Children may have heard the riddle of the blind man 'feeling' the elephant. This well constructed picture book goes from the known to the unknown. From a family sharing grandfather's elephant story to an opportunity to examine the detailed artwork linking main world cultures.

Titles are the first clue to a picture book. And it's significant that 'Elephants Have Wings' is a statement, rather than a question. This multi-layered story accepts that many cultures use symbols to explain the inexplicable: the BIG questions about getting along with others and why some do not.

'Elephants Have Wings' is inspired by the author's journeys to India and Asia and the story of the blind men and the elephant with its traditions in Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, and Sufi Islam.

Even if you've never heard of the poet William Blake's 'Songs of Innocence and Experience' or his memorable 'Tyger Tyger burning bright,' the power of a symbol in a story is that it works underneath, suggesting all the associated ideas and emotions. It stands for itself AND those ideas.

A well constructed picture book operates simultaneously at several levels. And can be re-read as the child or adult is ready for the other levels. First is the straight plot of the 'what happens next?' family story where the children fly around the world and through history on a cute

elephant. At the second or allegorical level, the elephant stands for the ways cultures have used the elephant or spiritual ideas to explain complex questions. So each reader can start from their own culture and add. At the universal level, seeing from the viewpoint of the elephant symbolises understanding or tolerance via travel, education or ideas.

I thought that Ganesh or the elephant, symbolised female creativity for writers but it has much broader relevance. Ganesh, venerated Hindu Elephant God, is Lord of Obstacles and Beginnings. In Hindu scripture, the Divine Elephant conjures up the clouds of winged elephants bringing monsoon rains.

The elephant represents courage, hope, endurance and wisdom. Buddha was re-incarnated into a white elephant and at his birth, a white elephant appeared in the sky. Garuda the mythological bird created from the cosmic egg hatched the eight elephants supporting the universe.

Ford Street is to be commended for publishing this picture book, as there are few which explore the theme of spirituality, in an accessible way for children without tying to the dogma of a particular religion. As indicated in the earlier 'Gracie and Josh' picture book, author Gervay handles significant subjects in an approachable way for young readers and their families.

The Blake Prize is adopting 'Elephants Have Wings' to start discussion and encourage young readers to engage in spirituality by linking art and religion.

The Prize is named after the legendary British artist and poet William Blake (1757-1827) They hope that the establishment of a prize will encourage artists of disparate styles and religious allegiances to create significant works of art with religious content. <http://www.blakeprize.com>

I tip 'Elephants Have Wings' is likely to become a classic. Highly recommended.



## **BUZZ WORDS**

**Reviewed by Francine Sculli**

*Elephants Have Wings* by Susanne Gervay, illustrated by Anna Pignataro

When writer Susanne Gervay and illustrator Anna Pignataro teamed up a couple of years ago to deliver the impeccable book *Ships in the Field* it was evident that their union was destined to bring deep thought on important topics to the picture book world. Their latest offering, *Elephants Have Wing*, cements them as a powerhouse duo, bringing something different to the page.



*Elephants Have Wings*, is a beautiful tale rich with the tapestries of ancient storytelling, spirituality and mythology. Placed in the Asian-Indian region, the book starts with two children asking their father to tell them *the* story – their grandfather’s story. The father commences, telling the wide-eyed children how their grandfather sent him and the other children out one night to look for “the secret”. All of the children saw different things and argued about who is right and who is wrong, until the grandfather came out and circled his light through the night, revealing a majestic elephant and showing that all the children were right but wrong at the same time.

The two children ask their father to tell them what their grandfather’s secret was, but he tells them that they must discover it themselves. The children spur each other on, willing on the vision of the elephant, who takes them on a journey through the air, over the wilderness, red deserts and snowy peaks, and through the sparkling stars to another place, high and faster and farther away. Bringing them home, only when the children have learnt their grandfather’s secret: “Everyone is different, but we’re the same, too. The elephant is in all of us.”

In many ways, this is a complicated picture book that explores rather esoteric themes, often difficult to articulate. What Susanne Gervay and Anna Pignataro do so well together, is bring these themes to life in a magical way that taps into children’s natural ability and openness to journey through the terrain of social inclusion, spirituality, unity, empathy and understanding. With roots in the ancient story of the blind men and the elephant, *Elephants Have Wings* is a wildly imaginative tale that is multifaceted. While younger children can lose themselves in the imaginative and magic journey of the children riding on the back of the elephant, older children can lose themselves in the mythology and modern importance of this tale.

And like *Ships in the Field*, Susanne has penned effortlessly poetic words that take us right through the sparkly stars with the children and Anne’s illustrations perfectly compliment this poeticism with pages of expressionistic watercolours and collages, whimsical in tone, that capture the peace, serenity and ethereal nature of this book.

A must read for those with a thirst for something different, unique and beautiful.

<http://www.buzzwordsmagazine.com/>

### **Picture Book of the Month: Just So Stories**

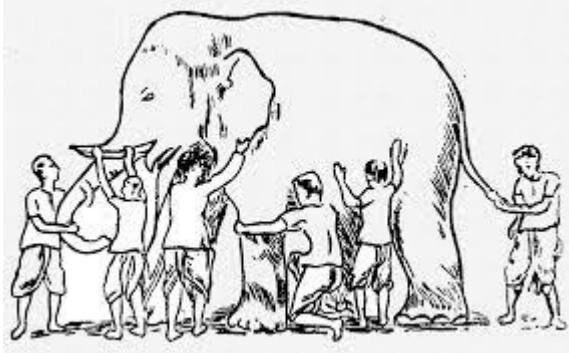
#### **Random Reviews and Ramblings from Redcliffe**

Reviewer -Sue Warren <http://losangzopa.wordpress.com/>

#### ***ELEPHANT AND THE BLIND MEN***

*Once upon a time, there lived six blind men in a village. One day the villagers told them, “Hey, there is an elephant in the village today.”*

*They had no idea what an elephant is. They decided, "Even though we would not be able to see it, let us go and feel it anyway." All of them went where the elephant was. Everyone of them touched the elephant.*



*"Hey, the elephant is a pillar," said the first man who touched his leg.*

*"Oh, no! it is like a rope," said the second man who touched the tail.*

*"Oh, no! it is like a thick branch of a tree," said the third man who touched the trunk of the elephant.*

*"It is like a big hand fan" said the fourth man who touched the ear of the elephant.*

*"It is like a huge wall," said the fifth man who touched the belly of the elephant.*

*"It is like a solid pipe," Said the sixth man who touched the tusk of the elephant.*

*They began to argue about the elephant and everyone of them insisted that he was right. It looked like they were getting agitated. A wise man was passing by and he saw this. He stopped and asked them, "What is the matter?" They said, "We cannot agree to what the elephant is like." Each one of them told what he thought the elephant was like. The wise man calmly explained to them, "All of you are right. The reason every one of you is telling it differently because each one of you touched the different part of the elephant. So, actually the elephant has all those features what you all said."*

*"Oh!" everyone said. There was no more fight. They felt happy that they were all right.*

*The moral of the story is that there may be some truth to what someone says. Sometimes we can see that truth and sometimes not because they may have different perspective which we may not agree too. So, rather than arguing like the blind men, we should say, "Maybe you have your reasons." This way we don't get in arguments. In Jainism, it is explained that truth can be stated in seven different ways. So, you can see how broad our religion is. It teaches us to be tolerant towards others for their viewpoints. This allows us to live in harmony with the people of different thinking. This is known as the Syadvada, Anekantvad, or the theory of Manifold Predictions.*

<http://www.jainworld.com/literature/story25.htm>

Taking inspiration from this old moral tale used in many spiritual traditions including Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Sufism, Susanne Gervay has created a beautiful story for children to explore 'the humanity in all of us'.



After their father retells his version of the story, two children are magically transported on a winged elephant to discover the meaning of the parable. This beautiful tale is accompanied by wonderful illustrations created from a variety of media in an expressionistic style.

The book has been endorsed by the Blake Society with the [Blake Prize](#) for art and poetry exploring themes of spirituality, religion and human justice and links perfectly with the Australian Curriculum: [Asia & Australia's Engagement with Asia](#).

A beautiful addition to your collection for children Lower/Middle school.

**MUMMAHH**

Review by <http://www.mummahh.com.au/elephants-wings/>

**A lovely book came my way recently.**

A new children's picture book, [Elephants Have Wings](#), by acclaimed author Susanne Gervay, is inspired by the ancient story of the blind men and the elephant. It's a beautifully illustrated book that promotes the importance of peace and inclusion to younger readers.

**Elephants Have Wings** was inspired by Susanne's journey to India and South East Asia and she hopes the book can open a discussion among young people about peace and positive ways to navigate a world torn by conflict.

This is an absolutely beautiful book which makes a great bedtime read for the kids. Since I first read it to *Little L* (4 years old and my youngest) it has become a bit of a favourite. It's also quite an easy book to read for my older two.

Amanda xx

There are many more reviews of [Elephants Have Wings](#) available online.