# The Elephant Keeper

by Christopher Nicholson




## About the Book

England, 1766: After a long voyage from the East Indies, a ship docks in Bristol, England, and rumor quickly spreads about its unusual cargo. In the final two crates is a pair of young elephants, in poor health but alive.

Seeing a unique opportunity, a wealthy sugar merchant purchases the elephants for his country estate and turns their care over to a young stable boy, Tom Page. It takes time for Tom and the elephants to understand each other, but to the surprise of everyone on the estate, a remarkable bond is formed.

**The Elephant Keeper** is a captivating tale of love and loyalty between one man and the two exotic animals that change the lives of everyone who encounters them.

## Discussion Guide

**1.** Differences of class were an unavoidable part of life in 1800s England. How do they manifest themselves throughout the novel, both in everyday life as well as in how the characters relate to each other?

**2.** Do you think that Tom and Jenny spoke to each other literally?

**3.** Do you think it would have been possible for Tom and Lizzie to have ever had a life together? If they had stayed together, how do you think their lives might have been different?

**4.** What is the novel saying about the differences between animals and human beings? Do you think that humans are morally superior to animals? Or inferior? Do you think that animals like elephants are capable of moral intelligence?

**5.** Is the portrait the novel offers of the relationship between Tom and Jenny too sentimental? Does it seem credible to

you? Is the depiction of Jenny too idealized?

**6.** What is the novel saying about the nature of male sexuality, especially sexual violence, both in elephants (Timothy) and human beings (Tom Page, Mr. Singleton)?

**7.** In the London section of the novel, Mr. Cross tells Tom Page: ?So long as the stories are possible, it does not matter whether they are true or false.' Do you agree? What is the novel saying about the value of stories and story-telling?

**8.** In the London section of the novel, Tom Page sometimes seems to lose his grip on reality; he looks back on his country childhood with a kind of disbelief, as if unsure whether it really happened. Do we sometimes also look back on our own pasts in that way?

**9.** Is the novel's last section too much of a surprise? In introducing a modern narrator, what is the writer suggesting about our engagement with the lives of people in the eighteenth century?

**10.** Which ending do you believe happened? Is it important that a novel choose an ending or does leaving it up to the reader to decide what happened bring one closer to the story?

## Author Bio

A prize-winning radio documentary producer who has worked for the BBC World Service, Christopher Nicholson rode an elephant for the first time at Chitwan National Park in Nepal. He has been interested in natural history and animals his entire life and many of the programs he produced for the BBC World Service revolved around the connection between animals and humans. Because of a deep love for the novels of Thomas Hardy, Nicholson and his wife settled in Dorset, England, with their two children. Learn more about **The Elephant Keeper** here and here.

## Critical Praise

"An extended meditation on human needs and how our choices shape a better or lesser existance. [A] poignant, heartfelt novel."

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