

# ELEPHANT LUCK

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## SUMMARY

*Dreaming of foreign travel, Catrin Davies plays in an old car in Bossman's scrapyards in Fishguard. She finds a box containing a glass figure, half-man and half-elephant. She discovers a note inside the box, from Mummyji in Nairobi to somebody called Sunita. Catrin writes to Mummyji to explain that she has found something of Sunita's. She sets out to find out more about the figure and discovers that his name is Ganesh and he is a Hindu god.*

*Sunita and her father, who live in Swansea with Sunita's mum and sister, go to visit grandmother Mummyji and all their other relatives in Nairobi. Just before they return home, Mummyji reveals that she has had a letter from a girl called Catrin. Sunita has to reveal that she lost the Ganesh figure, a gift from her grandmother. At the airport, Sunita writes a letter back to Catrin in Fishguard.*

*Catrin's family makes contact with Sunita's to make arrangements to return the Ganesh. The Davies family go and have a meal at the Spice House Restaurant in Swansea and the Patel family are invited back to Fishguard. Sunita gives Catrin her very own Ganesh and says that Mummyji has suggested that Catrin should go out with them to Nairobi on their next visit.*

*Elephant Luck* is an excellent choice for reading aloud to children from the age of eight upwards. It has a great deal to offer for teachers across the UK but particularly in Wales:

- It is a gentle story which nevertheless deals with issues important both to children and adults, such as family, faith, honesty and friendship.
- It is simply told in thirty-four short chapters. When curriculum pressure makes it difficult to find time for a story, short chapters are ideal and help children to focus.
- The story has a three-part structure set in Fishguard, Nairobi and south-west Wales. This offers an appealing and straightforward model for children's own stories.
- *Elephant Luck* shows in the most natural way how a faith community shapes family activities, attitudes and values.
- The Welsh dimension is explicit, in both setting and language.
- The story revolves around solving a problem – what is the small glass figure and who does it belong to – and shows how people use information sources, including the internet, to find out about issues important to them.
- It shows a main character actively asking questions about the way other people live and what they believe, and offers a paradigm for

personal exploration, essential to the religious education curriculum.

Many aspects of the story link extremely well with the study of Hinduism, a world faith which is celebrated in most parts of the UK, including the multi-faith Community of the Many Names of God at Skanda Vale, Llanpumsaint in Carmarthenshire.

There are many discussion points within the novel which link with the Personal and Social Education curriculum, particularly the social, community, spiritual and moral aspects. It also lends itself to a variety of literacy activities. The principal focus, however, in the following pages is on the teaching of PSE and religious education.

- ☞ **Special places 1.** Begin the reading of the novel with an activity. Ask the children to think about a place which is very special to them. They might draw, write or talk about it.
- ☞ **Special places 2.** In the first chapter of the novel we discover that Catrin has a special place – with a built-in problem. It's strictly out of bounds! The car in Bossman's scrapyards – the Mellow Yellow Renault – is very important to Catrin. It is her place for dreaming. Catrin, however, experiences a conflict of interest. She knows she shouldn't go there, but the Mellow Yellow Renault represents the world beyond the small seaside town where Catrin lives. At the end of the novel, when she has solved the mystery of the Ganesh figure she finds in the car, we see her standing at her bedroom window. She opens it to look at the stars directly: 'how much brighter the stars became without the glass of the window in between' (111). Catrin's day-dreaming at the beginning of the novel is connected to her sense of wonder at the end. Her horizons are wider now, but they also have a clearer shape, not the fantasy worlds of the south of France and Disneyworld but real places inhabited by real people – Mummyji and Sunita's aunts and uncles in Nairobi. It is clear that in the future many places will be special to Catrin. She is restless, one of life's travellers. Her 'journey' to find Ganesh's owner, Sunita, is virtual, conducted by letter, on the internet and on the phone, whilst Sunita's journey to Kenya is actual and physical.
- ☞ **Special places 3.** Sunita has her own special places too and is aware that other people in her family do as well. She shows Catrin the special room in their house where she and her father and Hema, her sister, perform puja, and where her mother keeps a Welsh bible and a Palm Sunday cross. Uncle Ram in Nairobi shows her the specialness of the garden at Mummyji's house and tells her that the smell of the frangipani tree has always meant

home for him. Mummyji gives Sunita's father a frangipani blossom so that he can savour the smell on the flight home.

*ACTIVITY Ask children to close their eyes and think about a perfume which is important to them. We know that the senses of smell and taste remain very powerful throughout our lives and can reconnect old people to their memories of childhood.*

*ACTIVITY Talk about the places special not just to the children, but to their families and communities.*

ॐ **Religion.** Catrin's meetings with Sunita's family lead her to understand far more about the importance of religious practices in the lives of others. Her blunt questions to Sunita would be difficult for an adult to ask. Sunita's commonsense answers show how one family goes about dealing with difference. 'Puja [is] like saying our thanks to God and thinking about our family and saying our prayers'. We learn about religious tolerance too. Sunita hears over and over from her father the story of how he met her mother (a nurse from Wales) and about Mummyji's initial opposition to their marriage and how she did not feel able to attend the wedding ceremony. When Catrin (104) asks her new friend about the practical complications of having one Christian and one Hindu parent, this is what Sunita has to say (104): 'On Sundays, Hema and I usually go to church with our mother. And sometimes in the week we do puja with our dad. And Daddy says that's OK. He says we might choose later, but we don't have to choose now. He says things don't have to be awkward if you've got a big enough heart'.

*ACTIVITY Discuss with the children what Daddy means when he talks about having a 'big enough heart'. Ask them to think of occasions with their schoolfriends when not making a choice – tolerating differences and making compromises – might be helpful. This could be linked with discussion about ceremonies which mark full membership of faith communities. Is it always possible to postpone important choices?*

ॐ **Festivals.** We are aware of the importance of Christmas to Catrin in the course of the story: her Sunday School class is getting ready for the Christmas play and both she and Sunita exchange Christmas presents. We also learn that on her visit to Nairobi Sunita makes the Rangoli patterns usually associated with the festival of light Diwali (60), an experience which suddenly becomes much richer and more meaningful for her than previously at school.

*ACTIVITY Find out about Diwali and the traditions associated with this important winter festival.*

- ॐ **Global citizenship.** We are very aware of Sunita's extended family: many still live in India, some in Canada and some in Wales. The connection with India is still strong at Mummyji's home in Nairobi, where Sunita comes across practices with which she isn't totally comfortable, such as her grandmother's employment of the servant boy Mamodi (65). Despite the fact that his earnings will enable him to go to college, Sunita is very aware of her own privileged position with an automatic right to education.

*ACTIVITY Ask the children, in pairs, to make a list of eight things they think every young person should be entitled to. Link this with discussion about the economic situation in developing countries and with the UN Millennium Development Goals. [www.un.org/millenniumgoals/](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/)*

- ॐ **Food.** Food is very important to our sense of place, even when that place, like the Patel family restaurant in Swansea, is a very long way from Mr Patel's family roots in India. Mary Medlicott uses food to create atmosphere, but also to show how food and eating together are a very important part of family life and identity. Children might like to compare the Davies family's Saturday lunch with the picnic enjoyed by Sunita's family at Lake Nakuru where the aunts provide pakoras, bhajis and samosas and with the family feast at the Paradise Gardens Curry Restaurant in Nairobi. Billy is determined that he is not going to eat 'curry anything' when the Davies family visit the Patels at the Spice House Restaurant in Swansea. The range of dishes is lovingly described (107) and we get a sense that this is about more than just satisfying physical hunger. Catrin's tentativeness – but willingness – to try Chicken Kashmir is a sign that she is prepared to explore another culture. As she says (93) about Ganesh: 'The glass figure was showing her ways of living and thinking she'd never even thought about before. It was leading her into a whole new world'.

*ACTIVITY Ask children to think about the foods special to their own family in times of celebration. Prepare a menu to share with the rest of the class. Talk about foods connected with religious celebrations.*

- ॐ **Brothers and sisters.** Sunita and Catrin have only one sibling each, in contrast to Sunita's extended family. Sunita knows that she will have to take turns with her sister, Hema, when it comes to

visiting Mummyji because of the distance and the expense. Catrin has a big-sisterly relationship with Billy. She feels responsible for him, particularly when it is likely that their playing around at the scrapyard is going to get them into big trouble at school (36).

*ACTIVITY Discuss with the children the Hindu festival of Raksha Bandhan celebrated in July or August. A girl ties a bracelet made of silk or cotton around her brother's right wrist – a symbol of protection from evil. In return, he promises to look after her in the coming year. The festival comes from a story about the god Indra whose wife tied a bracelet around his wrist, which saved him from a demon. Ask the children to design and make the bracelet they would like to give or receive.*

☞ **Confession and forgiveness.** These concepts, important to some religions, especially Christianity, lie behind some of the key incidents within the novel – though dealt with, of course, very lightly. When Bossman visits the school, Catrin goes to the room of her head teacher, Mrs Evans. Her mumbled, 'Thank you, Mrs Evans' is a tacit confession that it was she who had been trespassing at Bossman's yard. Mrs Evans acknowledges Catrin's confession: 'Good girl' and the knowledge that Catrin has been forgiven strengthens her when she is subsequently chased by Bossman. She (41) confesses to her parents what she has done, shows them the Ganesh figure and tells them about writing to Kenya. It is clear that she feels much better when her parents know about it too. Sunita has something on her conscience as well: the loss of her Ganesh. At the family party in the Paradise Gardens Restaurant, she has to admit to losing it. Again, the whole incident is smoothed over and her family do their best to restore the situation.

*ACTIVITY Ask the children to think about situations where they have been disobedient and what they did to put things right. This could lead onto a more general discussion about how people try to put things right and mend their relationship with others and with God.*

☞ **Symbols.** Catrin's question to family friend Aunty Bets (93) about the Ganesh figure is very important. She asks her, 'Do you think it's like a toy...Or do you think it's more important? Something a bit more special?' This is part of Catrin's growing realisation that the Ganesh – and the stories connected with him – have a special meaning, a religious significance to Sunita. This is why she decides to wrap him up in a very special way. She has already

engaged in a number of activities to find out about Ganesh: looking in the encyclopedia, looking on the internet and reading her book about World Myths and Legends. The reader is already aware that the figure symbolises something important because one of Sunita's aunts (75) says, amidst tearful goodbyes at the airport in Nairobi, 'I shall be praying to Lord Ganesh'. We learn that Ganesh is important as a symbol of good luck and prosperity. This is one of the reasons why Catrin becomes concerned when the time comes to part with him, and why she is so glad to have a Ganesh figure of her own.

*ACTIVITY Discuss with the children the importance of particular objects in their own lives. Do they have something which is very special to them, perhaps which they believe will bring them good luck? This is an opportunity to talk about symbolism, for example the importance of the cross symbol within Christianity.*

*ACTIVITY Catrin's finding-out activities could be replicated by the children, either with Ganesh himself, or with one of the other Hindu gods, for example Indra.*

☞ **Language.** It is clear throughout the novel that Catrin speaks two languages and that she moves fluidly between them. The conversation between her hairdresser mother and an elderly customer is in Welsh and later on Catrin explains to Sunita that sometimes she speaks Welsh, sometimes English. At the dinner table in Nairobi, language is the focus of discussion and Sunita speaks some Welsh to her cousins and sings 'Un bys, un bawd yn symud' (One finger, one thumb keeping moving). Multilingualism is the norm it seems: Sunita's cousin Amrita (69) explains that she speaks three languages: Gujarati, English and Swahili (the language of Kenya). The ability to speak more than one language helps to bind the speaker with particular communities and situations. This is particularly important when a group of people moves to a new country but still has ties somewhere else. Losing the original language means cutting ties and destroying identity. This is why Gujarati remains so important to Sunita's family who moved from India to Kenya.

*ACTIVITY Conduct a survey of the languages spoken by class members and their families. Identify the situations in which particular languages are spoken and with whom, for example in the home with grandparents, at Sunday School with friends.*

☞ **Wales and Welshness.** The discussion about different languages follows on from more general questions about Wales. Sunita's dad resorts to a comparison to fully answer Amrita's question when she asks (68) whether Wales is a place in England. He uses the comparison of a family to explain that each country within the UK has its own history and language, having found it very difficult to distinguish Wales from England on the basis of food, shops, schools or weather.

*ACTIVITY Ask the children to make a simple 100 word summary describing Wales so that children in other countries understand that it is different from England. This may well involve the use of reference sources such as the internet. Sites such as [www.visitwales.co.uk](http://www.visitwales.co.uk) provide a wide range of information.*

☞ **Friendship.** One of the issues Catrin has to deal with is her best friend Hannah's jealousy of her new friendship with Sunita. Catrin becomes aware that her interest in her new friend might have hurt Hannah's feelings and tries to reassure her. 'But, Hannah...you are my friend and you always will be'. But when Hannah talks about 'that silly elephant thing you found' (97) Catrin responds robustly, explaining that we all have things which are important to us.

*ACTIVITY Write a list of 'always' and 'never' features for your best friend. 'Best friends always...Best friends never...'*

☞ **Respect.** This is one of the key concepts underlying *Elephant Luck*, respect for people and their feelings. Sunita's father is very concerned about Mummyji – traditionally Hindu society respects older people, especially parents. Catrin and her dad feel guilty when they laugh about Auntie Bets but it is clear that they value her and would not hurt her feelings. During the course of the novel Catrin has to learn to respect other people and their property, even horrible Mr Smart, the owner of the scrapyard. Sunita's experience when her dad takes her to the Elephant Nursery shows that respect extends to animals too. Bahati, the young elephant, is lucky to be alive and both Sunita and her cousins are profoundly affected by (54) accounts of cruelty to a baby she-elephant.

*ACTIVITY Discuss how we show respect towards other people. Is it something we do automatically, or is it something which other people have to earn?*

☞ **Correspondence.** Notes and letters are a very important means of advancing the plot in *Elephant Luck* and their wording is crucial.

*ACTIVITY* Look again at Mummyji's note (29), Catrin's letters to Mummyji, both drafts and finished versions (31, 32) and the gist of Sunita's letter to Catrin (77). Write Mummyji's letter to Catrin inviting her to Nairobi for a visit. Write Catrin's letter to Mummyji either accepting or refusing the invitation. The concept of respect will be very important in deciding the language and tone of the communications.

☞ **The whole picture.** After reading and discussing *Elephant Luck*, the class will be in a position to think about the overall story structure and its suitability for comparing different cultures.

*ACTIVITY* On a whole class basis, discuss and plan a story with a similar structure based on a lost object and two different families/cultures. This could then be written on a class, group or individual basis.

You can find out more information about author and storyteller Mary Medlicott at the following website: [www.oriel.ysgolccc.org.uk/boathouse](http://www.oriel.ysgolccc.org.uk/boathouse) by clicking on the 'storyteller' link.

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