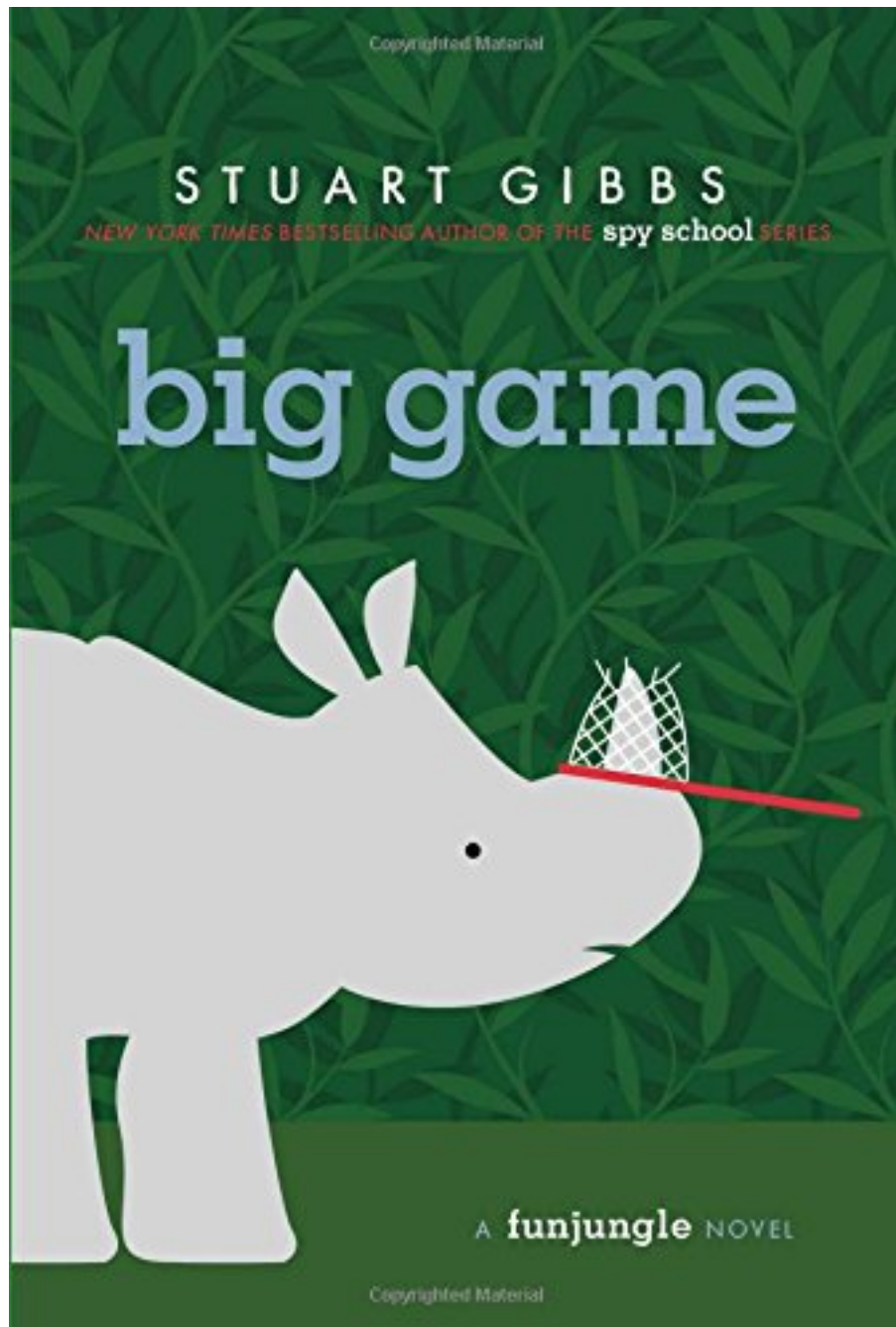


BIG GAME (FUNJUNGLE) BY STUART GIBBS



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About the Author

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Big Game

THE STAMPEDE

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In the wild, elephants walk a lot. They've been known to cover more than fifty miles in a day, although the average is around twenty. They're built for walking (they're the only animal with four knees), but even at a massive, state-of-the-art place like FunJungle Wild Animal Park, there couldn't be an exhibit big enough to let them roam that far. So, in the interest of keeping the elephants fit and happy, the staff walked them in the morning, the same way normal people walked their dogs—only, the pooper-scoopers were a lot bigger.

I wasn't really supposed to be walking the elephants because I was only twelve years old. Any animal that weighs eight tons and is capable of lifting a small car can be dangerous. But since I was the only kid who lived at FunJungle, I'd gotten to know lots of the keepers well, so they cut me some slack—as long as I kept a safe distance and one of my parents came with me.

That was easy to arrange. My father was always happy to bring me. As a professional wildlife photographer, he didn't mind getting up early; that was the best time to take pictures of animals in the wild. Plus, being with the elephants reminded him of life back in Africa. My mother was a famous primatologist, and before my folks had been hired by FunJungle, we'd spent ten years in a tent camp in the Congo while Mom studied chimpanzees. We'd all loved it, but a war had forced us to give up that life. Living in a trailer park behind the world's biggest zoo was probably as close to the African experience as we could get, but it still wasn't quite the same.

For starters, it was really cold that morning. The temperature in the Congo had rarely dropped below seventy degrees, while winters in central Texas could be bone-chilling. I had never even owned a sweater in Africa; Now I was wrapped in a ski jacket with three layers underneath. Our breath clouded the air in front of us, while steam rose off the elephants' warm bodies.

The elephants didn't seem bothered by the cold, though. The whole herd was there, twelve elephants ranging in age from two to sixty. Eleanor, the matriarch, was in the lead, while the younger mothers and their offspring followed. (The park's only breeding male, Tembo, had to be kept apart and did his walks late at night.)

It took five keepers to control the elephants. Two flanked the herd on either side, gently directing them along Adventure Road, the park's main concourse. The keepers were all armed with brooms with the bristles wrapped in towels, which looked kind of like giant Q-tips. These were used to gently prod the elephants along, or to nudge them back into line should they veer off and try to eat an expensive piece of landscaping.

Bonnie Melton, the head keeper, brought up the rear. Bonnie had forty years of experience in zoos and knew more about elephants than almost anyone on earth. She was wrinkled as a prune—caring for elephants meant you spent a lot of time in the sun—but she had the enthusiasm of a kindergartener. While none of her subordinate keepers seemed pleased to be working so early, Bonnie was chipper as could be, even though she had an industrial-size pooper-scooper slung over her shoulder.

"How's school going, Teddy?" she asked me, as we led the herd past the front gates.

"Pretty good," I replied.

"You making friends okay?"

“Yeah, I guess.”

“You guess?” Dad repeated, then put an arm around me proudly. “Ever since Teddy knocked out the school bully, he’s the most popular kid there.”

Despite the freezing temperatures, I could feel my face grow warm with embarrassment. “No, I’m not, Dad.”

“The head cheerleader came over for a date,” Dad told Bonnie.

“It wasn’t a date,” I corrected. “She only wanted to see FunJungle behind the scenes.”

“Sounds like a date to me,” Bonnie said, stifling a smile.

I tried to change the subject. “If anyone’s the most popular kid in my school, it’s Summer McCracken.”

Bonnie nodded knowingly. “She would be.”

Summer McCracken was the daughter of J.J. McCracken, the local billionaire who’d sunk a good deal of his fortune into building FunJungle. Summer was only a year older than me, and she was the first friend I’d made in Texas. Until recently, she’d attended prep school on the East Coast, but she’d asked to come home—so now she was the newest student at Lyndon B. Johnson Middle School.

“Is that why she transferred from that fancy-schmancy school?” Bonnie asked. “So she could be belle of the ball here?”

I shrugged. “Summer said life was more exciting here.”

Bonnie laughed. “Here? We’re thirty miles from the nearest city.” She suddenly turned and yelled, “Kwame! Don’t eat that!”

Kwame, a three-year-old elephant, sheepishly unwound his trunk from an oleander bush like a kid who’d been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

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At that moment, Eleanor Elephant lifted her tail and deposited a large pile of poop on the concourse.

“Oh yeah,” Bonnie said. “This place is a thrill a minute.” Then she hoisted the pooper-scooper off her shoulder and hurried off to clean up after Eleanor.

According to Summer, poop had always been J.J. McCracken’s biggest concern about letting the elephants walk around the park in the morning. “Oh sure, he’ll say he’s worried about safety,” she’d told me, “but really, it’s the poo. He’s terrified the keepers will somehow overlook a big old elephant poop one morning and that some poor guest will step in it.”

I could understand J.J.’s concern. Elephants make nearly two hundred pounds of poop a day—as well as enough pee to fill a bathtub. A janitorial team armed with industrial-strength cleansers had to follow the elephant parade around the park every morning. To that end, J.J. had looked for an alternative way to

exercise the elephants—and had even considered building jumbo-size treadmills at one point. Nothing had panned out, though, so for the time being, the elephants were still walking.

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I turned away from the elephants and looked at him, surprised. “What?”

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“Or she likes animals.”

“What’s her name again?” Dad asked. “Daisy?”

“Violet,” I corrected. “Violet Grace.”

“You should ask Violet to the movies sometime.”

“No.” I looked back toward Bonnie. I would have rather watched a person clean up elephant poop than have this conversation.

Dad wouldn’t let it go, though. I got the sense this was a talk he’d been wanting to have for a long time. “Why not? She’s the head cheerleader and she likes you. Back when I was in middle school, I prayed that would happen to me.”

“I just don’t want to ask her—that’s all.” Normally, I didn’t like the idea of lying to my father, but at the same time, I didn’t feel like telling him the real reason I didn’t want to ask Violet out.

However, Dad was savvier than I realized. “Is this about Summer?” he asked.

I turned back to him, caught off guard. But before I could answer—or figure out how not to answer—Athmani Okeke came along.

Athmani was a wildlife security specialist from Kruger National Park in South Africa, where he’d worked to protect the animals from poachers. FunJungle had been open only six months, but already its hippo mascot had been murdered and a popular koala bear had been stolen, so J.J. McCracken had decided his animal security needed to be greatly improved. He’d hired Athmani as a consultant right after New Year’s, and Athmani had been working so feverishly since then, he’d barely left the property. He was wearing a camouflage uniform from Kruger, because he still hadn’t made it to town to buy any new clothes yet.

“Good morning, gentlemen!” he called, waving to both of us. Athmani spoke with a lilt in his voice, the way many native Africans did, which made his words sound a bit like a song. His skin was so dark that the whites of his eyes seemed to glow against it. “What brings you out here so early this morning?”

“Getting a little exercise.” Dad shook Athmani’s hand. “How about yourself?”

“I’m making sure my elephants are safe.” Athmani held up his hand to me for a fist bump. Fist bumps were new to him, and he seemed to find them amusing.

I knocked my knuckles against his. “Do you think they’re in danger?”

“Well, they’re not while I’m around.” Athmani grinned, but it didn’t last long. “To be honest, I’m not crazy about them walking around the park like this. Lots of things could go wrong.”

“We’ve got them under control,” Bonnie said, trotting back over. Her pooper-scooper was considerably heavier and smellier now, though neither she nor Athmani seemed bothered by the stink. Their years around the elephants had made them immune. “And they love the exercise. They can’t just sit in their exhibit all day.”

Athmani frowned. “I’m not that crazy about their exhibit either. I have concerns about security in that part of the park.”

“Like what?” I asked.

Before Athmani could answer me, a rifle shot rang out. It sounded like it was coming from close by, loud and clear, shattering the morning quiet.

I know what a rifle sounds like. There were lots of hunters in that part of Texas. Our trailer sat right on the edge of the woods, and I’d heard plenty of rifle shots from there.

But I’d never heard one this close to FunJungle before.

Dad, Bonnie, and the rest of the keepers instantly went on alert. So did all the animals. By now we were close to Monkey Mountain, and the air was suddenly filled with startled whoops and cries from the primates. Elsewhere, birds squawked, zebras brayed, and big cats roared.

But the elephants responded most dramatically of all.

It’s not a myth that elephants never forget. They have tremendous memories, particularly of emotional moments. Eleanor had been born in the wild and orphaned by poachers. When the rifle sounded nearby, she panicked. She trumpeted loudly and ran, leading her herd toward safety. The other elephants dutifully followed. They veered away from their keepers, off Adventure Road, stampeding in the opposite direction from the gunshot.

Unfortunately, Dad and I were right in their path.

“Look out!” Dad yelled, as though maybe I hadn’t noticed twelve elephants bearing down on me and trumpeting at the top of their lungs. He grabbed my arm to drag me away, though I was already moving.

An elephant can run twenty-five miles an hour. Dad and I dove out of the way just in time. The herd thundered past us, then plowed right through some decorative landscaping. A group of topiary animals was flattened into mulch within seconds. One of the bigger females sideswiped a large oak tree, which toppled as though it had been hit by a truck, crushing a souvenir kiosk.

“Eleanor, stop!” Bonnie shouted, but her words were drowned out by the ruckus the elephants were making. Bonnie and the other keepers ran after the herd, but keeping up with it was hopeless. The elephants were too fast, and to make matters worse, they—like most animals—responded to fear by emptying their bladders.

The evolutionary reason animals (and in many cases, humans) do this is that it's hard to run with a full bladder. Plus, all that pee and poop weighs quite a lot—especially when you're an elephant—and when you're fleeing for your life, every last bit of weight you can leave behind helps. Within seconds, the ground was a minefield of elephant poo, with an ocean of pee around it. Understandably, the keepers were in no hurry to run through it.

Ahead of them, the panicked elephants stampeded onward—even though the Gorilla Grill, one of the most popular restaurants at FunJungle, sat right in their way. In the wild, there's not much that elephants can't plow through, except for the occasional baobab tree, so when they're on the run, they tend to go in a straight line, flattening anything in their path.

The restaurant was no match for them. The front of it was floor-to-ceiling windows. The herd smashed right through them, shattering the glass and splintering the support beams, then stormed through the dining area, crushing tables and chairs as though they were made of paper. They crashed through the far wall, trampled the outdoor furniture, and raced off toward Monkey Mountain.

I picked myself up off the ground and surveyed the wreckage. The restaurant was totaled. The service counter had been pounded into toothpicks. The grills had been upended and jets of flame flared from where the gas lines had snapped. Geysers of soda erupted from the previous site of the soft-drink dispenser. Then, with a shriek of rending wood, the roof caved in.

Bonnie and the other keepers kept after the herd, desperately yelling commands at them as though they were Labrador retrievers. “Stop! Stay! Bad elephants! Bad elephants!”

My father and Athmani both looked extremely concerned—although they weren't watching the elephants. In fact, neither seemed to be aware the restaurant had collapsed. They were staring off in the opposite direction, the way the rifle shot had come from. Both started running that way.

“Wait!” I called, chasing after them. “Shouldn't we help with the elephants?”

“Bonnie will get them under control,” Dad told me. “Right now I'm more worried about whoever fired that shot.”

“You don't think it was only a hunter?”

“No,” Dad said. “Whoever fired that gun was too close to FunJungle. I don't think they were going after deer or rabbits.”

“You mean . . . ?” I began.

“Yes.” Dad looked back at me, and I could see the worry in his eyes. “I think someone just tried to kill one of our animals.”

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When someone takes aim at Rhonda Rhino, FunJungle's pregnant (and endangered) Asian greater one-horned rhinoceros, the zoo steps up security measures in order to protect this rare animal and her baby.

But the extra security isn't enough—someone is still getting too close for comfort. Teddy and company start to suspect that whoever is after Rhonda is really after her horn, which is worth a lot of money on the black market.

For the first time ever, the head of the zoo enlists Teddy for help—for once, he doesn't have to sneak around in order to investigate—and the results are even more wacky, and even more dangerous, than ever before.

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Big Game

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That was easy to arrange. My father was always happy to bring me. As a professional wildlife photographer, he didn't mind getting up early; that was the best time to take pictures of animals in the wild. Plus, being with the elephants reminded him of life back in Africa. My mother was a famous primatologist, and before my folks had been hired by FunJungle, we'd spent ten years in a tent camp in the Congo while Mom studied chimpanzees. We'd all loved it, but a war had forced us to give up that life. Living in a trailer park behind the world's biggest zoo was probably as close to the African experience as we could get, but it still wasn't quite the same.

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The elephants didn't seem bothered by the cold, though. The whole herd was there, twelve elephants ranging in age from two to sixty. Eleanor, the matriarch, was in the lead, while the younger mothers and their offspring followed. (The park's only breeding male, Tembo, had to be kept apart and did his walks late at night.)

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“How’s school going, Teddy?” she asked me, as we led the herd past the front gates.

“Pretty good,” I replied.

“You making friends okay?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“You guess?” Dad repeated, then put an arm around me proudly. “Ever since Teddy knocked out the school bully, he’s the most popular kid there.”

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“It wasn’t a date,” I corrected. “She only wanted to see FunJungle behind the scenes.”

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Bonnie nodded knowingly. “She would be.”

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“Is that why she transferred from that fancy-schmancy school?” Bonnie asked. “So she could be belle of the ball here?”

I shrugged. “Summer said life was more exciting here.”

Bonnie laughed. “Here? We’re thirty miles from the nearest city.” She suddenly turned and yelled, “Kwame! Don’t eat that!”

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“Or she likes animals.”

“What’s her name again?” Dad asked. “Daisy?”

“Violet,” I corrected. “Violet Grace.”

“You should ask Violet to the movies sometime.”

“No.” I looked back toward Bonnie. I would have rather watched a person clean up elephant poop than have this conversation.

Dad wouldn’t let it go, though. I got the sense this was a talk he’d been wanting to have for a long time. “Why not? She’s the head cheerleader and she likes you. Back when I was in middle school, I prayed that would happen to me.”

“I just don’t want to ask her—that’s all.” Normally, I didn’t like the idea of lying to my father, but at the same time, I didn’t feel like telling him the real reason I didn’t want to ask Violet out.

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“Look out!” Dad yelled, as though maybe I hadn’t noticed twelve elephants bearing down on me and trumpeting at the top of their lungs. He grabbed my arm to drag me away, though I was already moving.

An elephant can run twenty-five miles an hour. Dad and I dove out of the way just in time. The herd thundered past us, then plowed right through some decorative landscaping. A group of topiary animals was flattened into mulch within seconds. One of the bigger females sideswiped a large oak tree, which toppled as though it had been hit by a truck, crushing a souvenir kiosk.

“Eleanor, stop!” Bonnie shouted, but her words were drowned out by the ruckus the elephants were making. Bonnie and the other keepers ran after the herd, but keeping up with it was hopeless. The elephants were too fast, and to make matters worse, they—like most animals—responded to fear by emptying their bladders.

The evolutionary reason animals (and in many cases, humans) do this is that it’s hard to run with a full bladder. Plus, all that pee and poop weighs quite a lot—especially when you’re an elephant—and when you’re fleeing for your life, every last bit of weight you can leave behind helps. Within seconds, the ground was a minefield of elephant poo, with an ocean of pee around it. Understandably, the keepers were in no hurry to run through it.

Ahead of them, the panicked elephants stampeded onward—even though the Gorilla Grill, one of the most popular restaurants at FunJungle, sat right in their way. In the wild, there’s not much that elephants can’t plow through, except for the occasional baobab tree, so when they’re on the run, they tend to go in a straight line, flattening anything in their path.

The restaurant was no match for them. The front of it was floor-to-ceiling windows. The herd smashed right through them, shattering the glass and splintering the support beams, then stormed through the dining area, crushing tables and chairs as though they were made of paper. They crashed through the far wall, trampled the outdoor furniture, and raced off toward Monkey Mountain.

I picked myself up off the ground and surveyed the wreckage. The restaurant was totaled. The service counter had been pounded into toothpicks. The grills had been upended and jets of flame flared from where the gas lines had snapped. Geysers of soda erupted from the previous site of the soft-drink dispenser. Then, with a shriek of rending wood, the roof caved in.

Bonnie and the other keepers kept after the herd, desperately yelling commands at them as though they were Labrador retrievers. “Stop! Stay! Bad elephants! Bad elephants!”

My father and Athmani both looked extremely concerned—although they weren’t watching the elephants. In fact, neither seemed to be aware the restaurant had collapsed. They were staring off in the opposite direction, the way the rifle shot had come from. Both started running that way.

“Wait!” I called, chasing after them. “Shouldn’t we help with the elephants?”

“Bonnie will get them under control,” Dad told me. “Right now I’m more worried about whoever fired that shot.”

“You don’t think it was only a hunter?”

“No,” Dad said. “Whoever fired that gun was too close to FunJungle. I don’t think they were going after deer or rabbits.”

"You mean . . . ?" I began.

"Yes." Dad looked back at me, and I could see the worry in his eyes. "I think someone just tried to kill one of our animals."

Most helpful customer reviews

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

Wacky, Hilarious, Suspenseful, and Action-Packed Mystery!

By The Kid Book Reviewers

Thoughts: I have been reading Stuart Gibbs' Spy School series for quite a while now, but only recently heard of the FunJungle series. Since Stuart Gibbs is one of my favorite authors, I decided it would be a crime to not read his other books. I picked up this book, firstly because it was a FunJungle book, and secondly because it's Stuart Gibbs' latest book (Oscar and I always read and review our interviewed authors' latest books). I immediately was thrust into Teddy's world, and I couldn't turn my eyes away. I always love mysteries, as long as they're the type that are action-packed, mind-boggling, and suspenseful. Big Game is definitely those three things, and so much more.

I loved every one of the characters in this book. They were all developed, and at times so ridiculously silly that I honestly couldn't take them seriously (Marge.) But that's what I love about this book - it's like a weird mix of some wacky Roald Dahl characters, Percy Jackson, and mystery. The writing was enjoyable, suspenseful, and (of course) hilarious. There was an amazing twist at the end, and the story kept the reader on their toes the whole times. Overall, probably one of my favorite mysteries I've ever read.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Wonderful Funjungle fun!

By Lizz A. Belle

This is another gem in the Funjungle series.

Someone is after Rhonda the Rhino! She has been shot at from a distance and everyone at Funjungle wants to find the perpetrator and ensure the safety of the rhinos (who are very endangered due to some mumbo jumbo about their horns being medicinal, which is blatantly false). Teddy Fitzroy, the hero of our Funjungle series is put on the case by the owner, JJ McCracken, to help find this terrible person and bring them to justice. Meanwhile, someone is throwing garbage cans through shop windows after hours and making off with baked goods, ice cream and 25 pounds of candy. Teddy is now also investigating this crime to clear his name for Large Marge, who work's security in the park and is determined to get Teddy for his vagrant behavior because he is such a bad apple (also bogus). Teddy and his friend Summer, JJ's daughter, find evidence that the shooter is someone inside Funjungle and they must find out who it is before the rhino's horns are removed in an attempt to "save them" from this nefarious person.

I do enjoy a good mystery and one set inside a zoo is even better. What made this book such fun is the interactions Teddy and his parents (a primatologist and wildlife photographer both employed by the zoo) have with all the creatures. The included information the author has at the end of the novel about the devastation of the rhino population is also interesting and very sad at the same time. This is another great book from the Funjungle series and I eagerly await new releases. I must also mention this is great as a stand alone (you don't have to read the other two to enjoy this book) but I am sure you will want to seek the other two, Poached and Belly Up, if you read this one. While there is implied violence with the shooting, there is nothing here that would scare younger readers and is definitely a suitable chapter book for bedtime reading.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

Awesome

By Mohammed Jamaluddin

Gripping book

Makes me feel like my dad's purchase was 101% worth it. Every time I read Big Game, I can't stop reading. I recommend this book to kids 8 years and up. I am sure they'll love it.

[See all 48 customer reviews...](#)

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Review

PRAISE FOR BELLY UP

"Great fun. . . .In his authorial debut, screenwriter Gibbs combines details of the inner workings of zoos with some over-the-top action for an entertaining read." (Kirkus Reviews)

PRAISE FOR POACHED

"This thrill-ride of a mystery is chock-full of hijinks for middle-grade sleuths and budding zoologists alike." (Kirkus Reviews)

"[A] genuinely engaging mystery set in a zoo. . . . Poached is so strong that it is surprisingly second in a series, following 2010's *Belly Up*, with only a few lines that refer to past adventures and, better yet, do not give spoilers for an audience that is sure to want to read more. . . . This will appeal to animal and mystery lovers alike." (VOYA)

"[W]hopper of a whodunit that delivers plenty of suspects, action, slapstick, gross bodily functions, red herrings, and animal trivia. This sequel stands alone nicely, and while the mystery is solved at the end, new occurrences promise to make Teddy's life much more interesting in a possible third book." (School Library Journal)

About the Author

Stuart Gibbs is the author of the *FunJungle* series, as well as the New York Times bestselling *Spy School* and *Moon Base Alpha* series. He has written the screenplays for movies like *See Spot Run* and *Repli-Kate*, worked on a whole bunch of animated films, developed TV shows for Nickelodeon, Disney Channel, ABC, and Fox. Stuart lives with his wife and children in Los Angeles. You can learn more about what he's up to at StuartGibbs.com.

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Big Game

THE STAMPEDE

I was helping walk the elephants when we all heard the rifle go off.

It was a little after seven o'clock on a February morning. We had to walk the elephants early, because it

couldn't be done during normal theme-park hours. The elephants were walked through the park, and tourists would just get in the way.

In the wild, elephants walk a lot. They've been known to cover more than fifty miles in a day, although the average is around twenty. They're built for walking (they're the only animal with four knees), but even at a massive, state-of-the-art place like FunJungle Wild Animal Park, there couldn't be an exhibit big enough to let them roam that far. So, in the interest of keeping the elephants fit and happy, the staff walked them in the morning, the same way normal people walked their dogs—only, the pooper-scoopers were a lot bigger.

I wasn't really supposed to be walking the elephants because I was only twelve years old. Any animal that weighs eight tons and is capable of lifting a small car can be dangerous. But since I was the only kid who lived at FunJungle, I'd gotten to know lots of the keepers well, so they cut me some slack—as long as I kept a safe distance and one of my parents came with me.

That was easy to arrange. My father was always happy to bring me. As a professional wildlife photographer, he didn't mind getting up early; that was the best time to take pictures of animals in the wild. Plus, being with the elephants reminded him of life back in Africa. My mother was a famous primatologist, and before my folks had been hired by FunJungle, we'd spent ten years in a tent camp in the Congo while Mom studied chimpanzees. We'd all loved it, but a war had forced us to give up that life. Living in a trailer park behind the world's biggest zoo was probably as close to the African experience as we could get, but it still wasn't quite the same.

For starters, it was really cold that morning. The temperature in the Congo had rarely dropped below seventy degrees, while winters in central Texas could be bone-chilling. I had never even owned a sweater in Africa; Now I was wrapped in a ski jacket with three layers underneath. Our breath clouded the air in front of us, while steam rose off the elephants' warm bodies.

The elephants didn't seem bothered by the cold, though. The whole herd was there, twelve elephants ranging in age from two to sixty. Eleanor, the matriarch, was in the lead, while the younger mothers and their offspring followed. (The park's only breeding male, Tembo, had to be kept apart and did his walks late at night.)

It took five keepers to control the elephants. Two flanked the herd on either side, gently directing them along Adventure Road, the park's main concourse. The keepers were all armed with brooms with the bristles wrapped in towels, which looked kind of like giant Q-tips. These were used to gently prod the elephants along, or to nudge them back into line should they veer off and try to eat an expensive piece of landscaping.

Bonnie Melton, the head keeper, brought up the rear. Bonnie had forty years of experience in zoos and knew more about elephants than almost anyone on earth. She was wrinkled as a prune—caring for elephants meant you spent a lot of time in the sun—but she had the enthusiasm of a kindergartener. While none of her subordinate keepers seemed pleased to be working so early, Bonnie was chipper as could be, even though she had an industrial-size pooper-scooper slung over her shoulder.

"How's school going, Teddy?" she asked me, as we led the herd past the front gates.

"Pretty good," I replied.

"You making friends okay?"

“Yeah, I guess.”

“You guess?” Dad repeated, then put an arm around me proudly. “Ever since Teddy knocked out the school bully, he’s the most popular kid there.”

Despite the freezing temperatures, I could feel my face grow warm with embarrassment. “No, I’m not, Dad.”

“The head cheerleader came over for a date,” Dad told Bonnie.

“It wasn’t a date,” I corrected. “She only wanted to see FunJungle behind the scenes.”

“Sounds like a date to me,” Bonnie said, stifling a smile.

I tried to change the subject. “If anyone’s the most popular kid in my school, it’s Summer McCracken.”

Bonnie nodded knowingly. “She would be.”

Summer McCracken was the daughter of J.J. McCracken, the local billionaire who’d sunk a good deal of his fortune into building FunJungle. Summer was only a year older than me, and she was the first friend I’d made in Texas. Until recently, she’d attended prep school on the East Coast, but she’d asked to come home—so now she was the newest student at Lyndon B. Johnson Middle School.

“Is that why she transferred from that fancy-schmancy school?” Bonnie asked. “So she could be belle of the ball here?”

I shrugged. “Summer said life was more exciting here.”

Bonnie laughed. “Here? We’re thirty miles from the nearest city.” She suddenly turned and yelled, “Kwame! Don’t eat that!”

Kwame, a three-year-old elephant, sheepishly unwound his trunk from an oleander bush like a kid who’d been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“There has been some excitement here,” Dad pointed out. “A murdered hippo. A stolen koala. An escaped tiger. Those kinds of things don’t happen too often at prep school.”

At that moment, Eleanor Elephant lifted her tail and deposited a large pile of poop on the concourse.

“Oh yeah,” Bonnie said. “This place is a thrill a minute.” Then she hoisted the pooper-scooper off her shoulder and hurried off to clean up after Eleanor.

According to Summer, poop had always been J.J. McCracken’s biggest concern about letting the elephants walk around the park in the morning. “Oh sure, he’ll say he’s worried about safety,” she’d told me, “but really, it’s the poo. He’s terrified the keepers will somehow overlook a big old elephant poop one morning and that some poor guest will step in it.”

I could understand J.J.’s concern. Elephants make nearly two hundred pounds of poop a day—as well as enough pee to fill a bathtub. A janitorial team armed with industrial-strength cleansers had to follow the elephant parade around the park every morning. To that end, J.J. had looked for an alternative way to

exercise the elephants—and had even considered building jumbo-size treadmills at one point. Nothing had panned out, though, so for the time being, the elephants were still walking.

“I’ll bet that cheerleader thought it was a date,” Dad said.

I turned away from the elephants and looked at him, surprised. “What?”

“She spent over four hours with you,” Dad told me. “I don’t think she would have done that unless she liked you.”

“Or she likes animals.”

“What’s her name again?” Dad asked. “Daisy?”

“Violet,” I corrected. “Violet Grace.”

“You should ask Violet to the movies sometime.”

“No.” I looked back toward Bonnie. I would have rather watched a person clean up elephant poop than have this conversation.

Dad wouldn’t let it go, though. I got the sense this was a talk he’d been wanting to have for a long time. “Why not? She’s the head cheerleader and she likes you. Back when I was in middle school, I prayed that would happen to me.”

“I just don’t want to ask her—that’s all.” Normally, I didn’t like the idea of lying to my father, but at the same time, I didn’t feel like telling him the real reason I didn’t want to ask Violet out.

However, Dad was savvier than I realized. “Is this about Summer?” he asked.

I turned back to him, caught off guard. But before I could answer—or figure out how not to answer—Athmani Okeke came along.

Athmani was a wildlife security specialist from Kruger National Park in South Africa, where he’d worked to protect the animals from poachers. FunJungle had been open only six months, but already its hippo mascot had been murdered and a popular koala bear had been stolen, so J.J. McCracken had decided his animal security needed to be greatly improved. He’d hired Athmani as a consultant right after New Year’s, and Athmani had been working so feverishly since then, he’d barely left the property. He was wearing a camouflage uniform from Kruger, because he still hadn’t made it to town to buy any new clothes yet.

“Good morning, gentlemen!” he called, waving to both of us. Athmani spoke with a lilt in his voice, the way many native Africans did, which made his words sound a bit like a song. His skin was so dark that the whites of his eyes seemed to glow against it. “What brings you out here so early this morning?”

“Getting a little exercise.” Dad shook Athmani’s hand. “How about yourself?”

“I’m making sure my elephants are safe.” Athmani held up his hand to me for a fist bump. Fist bumps were new to him, and he seemed to find them amusing.

I knocked my knuckles against his. “Do you think they’re in danger?”

“Well, they’re not while I’m around.” Athmani grinned, but it didn’t last long. “To be honest, I’m not crazy about them walking around the park like this. Lots of things could go wrong.”

“We’ve got them under control,” Bonnie said, trotting back over. Her pooper-scooper was considerably heavier and smellier now, though neither she nor Athmani seemed bothered by the stink. Their years around the elephants had made them immune. “And they love the exercise. They can’t just sit in their exhibit all day.”

Athmani frowned. “I’m not that crazy about their exhibit either. I have concerns about security in that part of the park.”

“Like what?” I asked.

Before Athmani could answer me, a rifle shot rang out. It sounded like it was coming from close by, loud and clear, shattering the morning quiet.

I know what a rifle sounds like. There were lots of hunters in that part of Texas. Our trailer sat right on the edge of the woods, and I’d heard plenty of rifle shots from there.

But I’d never heard one this close to FunJungle before.

Dad, Bonnie, and the rest of the keepers instantly went on alert. So did all the animals. By now we were close to Monkey Mountain, and the air was suddenly filled with startled whoops and cries from the primates. Elsewhere, birds squawked, zebras brayed, and big cats roared.

But the elephants responded most dramatically of all.

It’s not a myth that elephants never forget. They have tremendous memories, particularly of emotional moments. Eleanor had been born in the wild and orphaned by poachers. When the rifle sounded nearby, she panicked. She trumpeted loudly and ran, leading her herd toward safety. The other elephants dutifully followed. They veered away from their keepers, off Adventure Road, stampeding in the opposite direction from the gunshot.

Unfortunately, Dad and I were right in their path.

“Look out!” Dad yelled, as though maybe I hadn’t noticed twelve elephants bearing down on me and trumpeting at the top of their lungs. He grabbed my arm to drag me away, though I was already moving.

An elephant can run twenty-five miles an hour. Dad and I dove out of the way just in time. The herd thundered past us, then plowed right through some decorative landscaping. A group of topiary animals was flattened into mulch within seconds. One of the bigger females sideswiped a large oak tree, which toppled as though it had been hit by a truck, crushing a souvenir kiosk.

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"Bonnie will get them under control," Dad told me. "Right now I'm more worried about whoever fired that shot."

"You don't think it was only a hunter?"

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"Yes." Dad looked back at me, and I could see the worry in his eyes. "I think someone just tried to kill one of our animals."

Big Game (FunJungle) By Stuart Gibbs. The industrialized modern technology, nowadays sustain every little thing the human needs. It includes the daily activities, jobs, workplace, amusement, and more. One of them is the excellent internet link and computer system. This problem will reduce you to assist among your leisure activities, reading behavior. So, do you have prepared to read this e-book Big Game (FunJungle) By Stuart Gibbs now?