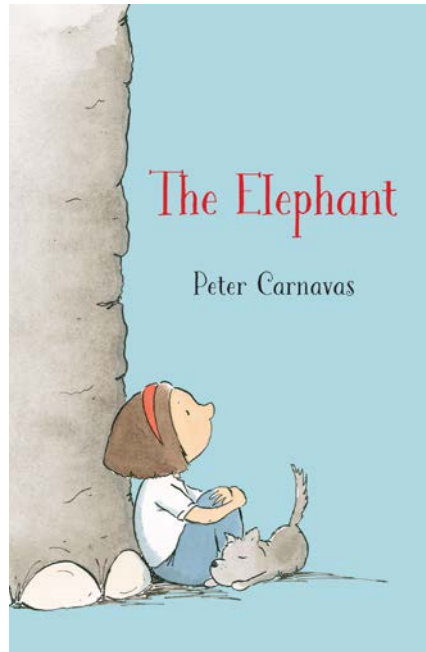


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# THE ELEPHANT

## Peter Carnavas



### Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising teacher librarian  
in context with the Australian curriculum  
(English)

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**SYNOPSIS**

Olive may be small, but she has a huge heart and understands sadness; her father's sadness is so great that she imagines it as a large elephant following him everywhere. But with the help of her best friend, Arthur, and her grandad, Olive decides it's time for the elephant to leave and for her dad to return.

Beautifully written, *The Elephant* is a novel about dealing with grief and sadness.

**THEMES**

- Grief and sadness
- Relationships
- Friendship
- Hope

**WRITING STYLE**

*The Elephant* is a tenderly written story that explores a young child's recognition of sadness in those close to her. Written in third person, past tense, the language is tangible and relatable. It is suitable for a younger–middle primary audience, although it could also be used with upper primary students.

**STUDY NOTES**

- Discuss the opening sentence of the novel: 'When Olive walked into the kitchen, she found an elephant sitting beside her father at the small wooden table' (p1). What can we tell about the story from this sentence and the opening few paragraphs? Why is it important that the complication is introduced so early in the novel?
- What clues do we get on the first page or two that Olive's father is struggling?
- How do we know that the elephant reflects that something is wrong? Discuss the use of words such as 'shadow' and 'darkness'.
- Why does Olive hope her smile might be contagious?
- Make predictions about the story after reading the first chapter.
- Re-read the first paragraph of the second chapter, titled 'Grandad'. Sketch Olive's backyard using this description.
- Olive has a 'thinking spot', high up in the branches of a jacaranda tree. When up in the tree, she imagines what it must be like to sit on the wings of a bird and see the world below. After reading what Olive imagines it to look like on p8/9, sketch this view.

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- Describe your thinking spot. Why do you like this place? If you don't already have one, decide on somewhere that could become your thinking spot. Why is it important for Olive to have such a spot? Discuss.
- What effect does the elephant have on both Olive and her father? What examples from the text can you use to support your ideas?
- Cedar Hills Primary School is celebrating its 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, and Olive's class is studying old things in their own lives and homes that are important to them. Using this same idea, roster students to bring an old object from the family and share its story.
- Peter Carnavas uses figurative language throughout his novel to enhance the reading experience. Discuss the impact these devices have on the text. Examples include:
  - 'They both ... stared out the window, as if it were a painting they had never seen before' p1
  - 'Her father ... looked at her with raincloud eyes' p1
  - 'Olive's backyard was a neat rectangle of grass, with flowers and vegetables hugging the edges' p4
  - 'It was a bird in the shape of the letter V, like a fine pencil mark in the sky' p8
  - 'Her hair was a delightful mess, an orange nest of tangled twirls and curls, with ribbons and clips and flowers springing out, as if trying to escape the knotted jungle' p14
  - 'The children ... pluck[ed] the rusted spokes as if they were harp strings' p18–19
  - 'It was like looking at a fossil and imagining the marvelous creature it had been' p25
  - '... there was an ocean full of secrets that only they shared' p34
  - 'It was black with freckles of rust' p38
  - 'The keys were small and shiny and round, like little saucers perched on metal arms' p38
  - '... his face was a picture of goofy pride, as if he were showing off a baby brother' p46
  - 'It sounded like a wobbly chorus of busted car horns' p47
  - 'His voice fizzed with energy' p51
  - 'The melodies floated and swam around Olive, and the room felt brighter, and more colourful' p67
  - '... the gnarly roots ... wormed and buckled in the grass' p78
  - 'Velvety clouds of jacaranda flowers' p79
  - 'Sunlight leaked through the curtains, warming the foot of her bed' p85
  - 'Her hula-hoop earrings danced about and her necklace clinked softly' p95

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- 'Her thoughts somersaulted in her head, bumping and rolling into each other' p97
- 'Like soft pieces of clay, these thoughts rolled around, then merged together to form an idea, big and bold and exciting' p97
- '... their eyes shone like tiny raindrops in the darkness of the hall' p107
- 'The applause ... sounded like a plane coming in to land on the roof' p108
- '... small drops trickled down his cheeks, finding a home in his wrinkles, the way fresh rain tracks its way into dry river beds' p109
- 'His face was like a pale stone, worn flat by sea and sand' p115
- 'Shards of afternoon sunlight angled in through the windows' p119
- 'A maze of bookshelves zigzagged towards the far wall' p120
- 'It circled above the mall, swimming through the afternoon air, smooth and silent' p122
- '... a splatter of stars appeared like pinholes in a curtain p128
- '.. it gathered into something bigger and brighter, a cluster of stars, a shimmering constellation' p131
- 'Sharp, pointy paper plane-shaped flowers, flitting and fluttering about' p142
- 'She felt as if she were flying, like a perfectly folded plane soaring through the afternoon sky' p156
- Why does Olive describe the elephant as an imaginary enemy?
- What role does Arthur play in *The Elephant*? How important is it that Olive can share with Arthur her ideas about the elephant?
- How would you solve Olive's dad's sadness?
- Discuss the relationship that Olive has with Grandad. How does he help Olive to learn about happiness as well as about her mother?
- Grandad used to type his daughter's favourite poems on his old typewriter and mail them to her. Choose your favourite poem to type, print and send to a friend in your class using an internal mail box system. Explain in a short letter why you love that poem.
- What secrets does Olive have that she wishes she could share with her father?
- Why is Olive's father so sad? What impact is his sadness having on Olive?
- What is so special about Grandad's purple backpack? Why are there always lovely memories attached to Olive's outings with Grandad and the backpack?
- Grandad teaches Olive to slow down and take notice of things. Why does he teach her that not all pigeons are grey? How does this symbolise the theme of hope in *The Elephant*?

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- Why does Olive say her dad's daily routine – wallet, water, kiss – reminds her of 'old movies, the ones Grandad had played for her – black and white. And silent.' (p59)?
- Why does Olive hope that if her mother is looking down on them, she can see the colourful parts of their lives (p64)?
- How does the song that Grandad and Olive sing – 'Side by Side' – represent many of the themes in *The Elephant*? (See lyrics at [www.metrolyrics.com/side-by-side-lyrics-brenda-lee.html](http://www.metrolyrics.com/side-by-side-lyrics-brenda-lee.html) and view on YouTube at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjNX\\_gayY1E](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjNX_gayY1E))
- Why has Olive's dad become trapped in the time of his wife's death, unable to move on? Why does Olive say that 'since then life had just become one big elephant' (p76)?
- Why can't Olive find any photos of herself, even though her dad has a camera?
- What do you think about Olive's choice to take photos of her jacaranda tree and share that as her object? Why does Olive want to show her classmates what it looks like as well as what it feels like?
- Using a camera, take photos of a tree in your backyard or school yard. Take close-up shots of its flowers, trunk, branches and roots. Use these photos to help write your own description of the tree.
- Why, when Olive falls from the tree, does she later see a tortoise with Grandad?
- Olive says that 'Grandad rubs out the grey parts of my day and fills them in with colour' (p111). Who does this for you? How do they do this? Write a reflection to share.
- Reread the passage on p115 in which Olive notices that the elephant is bigger than ever, dragging her father down: 'The steps bent and buckled under their weight'. If the elephant is imaginary, what signs must Olive be seeing that her father is struggling? Why does she feel so helpless? What would you do if you were Olive?
- Write nice messages for some classmates and fold into a paper plane. Launch these planes, making sure that the message is received by its intended recipient. Why is this a nice thing to do? How does this help to cheer people up?
- Why is throwing paper planes from the old shop Olive's favourite purple backpack day ever? What does this tell us about Olive? Why does this make her feel 'as light and free as a paper plane floating above the town' (p126)?
- How does Arthur's book about elephants help Olive to see a future of happiness for her dad?
- What is Olive's response when she sees photos of herself all over her dad's workshop? How has Grandad 'peeled back a curtain to show how her father really felt about her' (p151)?

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- How does telling her dad about the elephant help him?
- How have things changed for Olive now that the elephant has gone? Why can she see light that was hiding the whole time?
- Why does Olive feel ‘as if she were flying, like a perfectly folded plane soaring through the afternoon sky’ (p156) when the elephant leaves and she and her dad are spending time together?
- How did you feel when you realised that Freddie was imaginary? In what ways did Freddie help Olive with her sadness? What does this tell us about people’s sadness and their ways of coping with it?
- What do you think Olive will call her real pet? Why do you think she will choose that name?
- Compare *The Elephant* with the picture book *Mr Huff* by Anna Walker.
- Create a class ‘purple backpack’ and fill it with objects and ideas to help see the colour in everyday things.
- Write a story that shares the importance of an old object that is precious to your family.
- Invite a counsellor to speak with the class about ways of dealing with sadness and strategies to help a loved one who is struggling.
- Keep a class blog as you are reading *The Elephant*, in which students can share their opinions and feelings about the text.

**AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

I wanted to write about a child who was determined to cheer up an adult in her life. It’s an idea I’ve had in my head for a long time. Children often ground us, but they can also lift us when we really need it.

I had the three main characters in my head for years — a girl, her father, and grandfather. I loved the idea of the grandfather–granddaughter relationship, and I had a plan for the girl to somehow cheer up her father. But that’s all I had. I started thinking about the father — why he might be sad, but more importantly, what his sadness might look like to his daughter, Olive. From her perspective, I pictured his sadness as something big and heavy and grey, and I finally settled on an elephant. The more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Elephants are such beautifully emotional animals, and it’s so easy to picture them as symbols of grief.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Peter Carnavas writes and illustrates books for children and the grown-ups in their lives. His first book, *Jessica's Box*, was shortlisted for the Queensland Premier's Literary Award and the CBCA Crichton Award for Emerging Illustrators. He has since created many books, including *Last Tree in the City*, *The Children Who Loved Books* and *Blue Whale Blues*. He has recently illustrated Damon Young's series of humorous picture books that celebrate family diversity. He is a popular presenter in schools and his work has been translated into many languages, including Italian, Portuguese, Korean and Dutch. Peter lives on the Sunshine Coast with his wife, two daughters and a small, charming dog called Florence.

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