



Faithful Elephants: A True Story of Animals, People, and War

Yukio Tsuchiya (Illustrations), Ted Lewin (Illustrator)

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A zookeeper recounts the story of John, Tonky, and Wanly, three performing elephants at the Ueno Zoo in Tokyo, whose turn it is to die, and of their keepers, who weep and pray that World War II will end so their beloved elephants might be saved.

Faithful Elephants: A True Story of Animals, People, and War Details

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From Reader Review Faithful Elephants: A True Story of Animals, People, and War for online ebook

Steph says

Okay, I get it. War is bad. I'm not a fan of it either. It is sad and scary and it brings about a lot of inhumane behavior. And that message needs to be told.

And this gut-wrenching story needs to be told; I totally support that. But as a picture book... I just feel like I had no idea what was coming. I ugly cried. I had to set the book down in the middle of the story and come back to it because I genuinely could hardly handle reading it.

So this is where I am torn. I understand that this incredibly sad message should get out there but is there any possible way to tell it without it completely splitting apart your heart into thousand pieces as the elephants die of starvation?

Anti-war messages are fine with me, and I can't believe this happened and I'm glad I know this story now. But this is an incredibly harsh book and I'm in fear for the young child who picks it up without knowing what it is about because it looks like a picture book about some cute elephants and yet, alas, you might find that child distraught and confused after reading about something that maybe they, in their innocence and youth, didn't quite need to know about yet.

Yikes. Definitely never saw it coming when I picked it up.

Jenni Davis says

Informational Text:

I haven't had much experience with informational texts before, so I was intrigued to read this book! Although the story was heartbreaking, I absolutely loved this book and the illustrations in it!

Faithful Elephants is told by a zookeeper at the Ueno Zoo in Tokyo. During the time that this story was written, Japan was involved in World War II. Bombs were being dropped on Tokyo and the people who lived there were worried that the bombs would fall on the Ueno Zoo and set the animals to run wild. Therefore, the zookeepers were commanded by the army that the animals were to be killed. So, they poisoned the food that they gave to the lions, tigers, leopards, bears, and snakes. Then, they tried to poison the elephants in the same way, but they were too smart and ended up pushing away the poisoned food. Next, they tried to inject the poison directly into the elephants but their skin was too tough. The zookeeper's only option was to starve the elephants. The zookeeper was heartbroken to watch the elephants slowly die. The elephants were so kind and well-trained; they even tried to do a trick with the hopes of being rewarded with food. As time went on, the elephants died and the sounds of bombs filled the Tokyo sky once again and the zookeepers begged for the war to end. In honor of the three elephants, there is now a memorial for them at the Ueno Zoo.

I think that this book would be used in any classroom in grades 3-5. I think that this book does a great job of explaining the unintended effects of war. Since this is a fairly short informational text and not too complex, I think this book would be a great way to introduce the concept of war (specifically World War II) in the classroom. One activity that could be done using this book would be for students to research other unintended effects that World War II had on Japan or other countries. Bringing awareness to these events

will help students better understand the consequences of war. Another activity that can be done using this book would be to have students create an alternate ending. Instead of the elephants dying in the end, students would write an ending that would differ while still including information they have learned about the war. I think that both of these activities will engage readers more deeply with informational texts.

I thought that this book was a WOW book because it demonstrated such a powerful message of anti-war. I loved how this book told an impactful story while still providing information about life during World War II in Japan. I think this would be an amazing book to incorporate into my future reading instruction!

Cherie says

My mom's student teacher was subbing for another teacher who had an emergency and had to leave. "Here, read this." So my mom's student teacher did--and read the entire thing to a class of first graders, who were bawling when he was done with it. Later, he said, "I didn't know what to do. She told me to read it and I didn't want to disobey her." The teacher had not read it...

My mom told me about the story and I read it. I cried. I told my friend about it and I got teary talking about it (and this was before I read it).

This children's story is about a zoo that cannot keep its animals. In case something happens, they are afraid the animals will run wild and kill everyone, causing even more destruction. So they kill the tigers and the bears. However, the elephants they cannot kill. They try to feed the elephants poisoned potatoes, but the elephants don't eat them. They try to give them hypodermic needles but their needles break. They eventually starve them to death and the elephants, when they see the zookeepers walk past their cage, do the tricks they were once taught...It is so sad and amazing and beautiful. I am a 28 year old woman and I LOVED this book. Small children might find it intensely sad, but it teaches about war and animals and compassion. I love this book. Please read it.

Manybooks says

Although Yukio Tsuchiya's 1988 picture book Faithful Elephants (well, actually, the author wrote the story in the immediate post WWII period, in 1951, but this here picture book was originally published in 1988) most definitely has a very strong and also powerful anti-war (and thus also a pro peace) message, the fact that the zoo animals were deemed necessary to be killed in the first place (and that the elephants were slowly starved to death, and thus basically tortured in my opinion, instead of the zookeepers for example shooting them, and thereby giving them at least a quick demise and not a long and agonising decline and death), makes me physically ill to my stomach. Yes, war is indeed terrible and horrible, and I appreciate that the author points out how even the animals at the Tokyo zoo are affected, suffer and die, but I really do wish that there had been at least a bit of criticism meted out against the zoo officials, against the zoo keepers for choosing slow starvation to kill the three elephants when poisoning them was shown not to work (I mean, it was WWII, and I am sure that some high powered firearms could have been found to quickly and painlessly kill the poor elephants instead of denying them food and water until they slowly became weaker and weaker, until they finally died, and come on, they were found with their trunks extended in supplication, begging even in death for food and water).

And thus, while I absolutely do NOT in any way consider Faithful Elephants as Japanese propaganda or in any manner as anti-Americanism (as some very vile and hate-filled ranting reviews I have read online seem

to claim), I also cannot either enjoy or recommend this book, as the method used to kill the elephants was and remains simply massively cruel and inhumane (even though the zoo keepers obviously did feel horrible with regard to the latter and while I do oh so much appreciate the anti-war sentiments expressed and shown by them). For even though I still would have been sad and likely even crying had the three elephants been shot to death, I could have at least known and felt a bit cheered and relieved that they had died quickly and not in this cruelly long and drawn-out fashion, in a manner that these faithful and gentle giants must have experienced as willful neglect by their zookeepers, whom they obviously considered like companions, like friends. And thus, only two stars for Faithful Elephants, as the evocativeness of the narrative, its obvious anti-war and very much pacifistic messages notwithstanding (and while Ted Lewin's accompanying watercolour illustrations are indeed simply and divinely beautiful, heart wrenching) cannot take away my sense of personal disgust and anger at how the elephants were put to death, that they were basically slowly tortured to death through the wilful denial of food and water, through starvation (that the animals kept begging for sustenance and must have felt neglected and puzzled, must have felt as though they were perhaps even being punished in some manner) and that this is all simply related by Yukio Tsuchiya as rather matter of fact without ANY kind of even mild criticism or condemnation of the zookeepers (or that perhaps, quickly shooting them might have been an option to at least consider), it just makes me too sad and too personally angry to consider a higher rating.

Meghan Schroeder says

This book has a powerful message, but is very upsetting. Because it creates such strong emotions makes it the amazing book that it is, however, I will never read this book again because of how upset it made me. I couldn't read this to a group of students let alone discuss it. The message to to reader helps put the book into perspective, but I was still very upset and emotional for a long time after reading.

Vee says

I read this story to my son and found it extremely disturbing. It is intended to be an anti-war story, but in that it fails. Because who is going to believe that the war was responsible for the zookeepers starving the elephants to death? If there was money to put bullets in guns to fight the war, there was money to put an end to these elephants' misery. This story does not at all convince that there was no other choice but to watch these animals waste away over almost three weeks of sheer torture. I lie in bed awake tonight unable to get their suffering of my mind, and feeling guilty also that I read it to my son. There are certainly much more convincing books if you want an anti-war book. Lastly, this book has nothing to do with the idea that elephants are faithful, which was what drew me to the book. This book is about the fact that the elephants tried to survive in any way they could, and it is horrifying. Should be renamed Wartime Inhumanity at the Zoo.

Carson Anderson says

This is one of the most heartbreaking books that I have ever read. The book really gives you a larger perspective on the devastation that war leaves behind. So often times we think of the soldiers that put their lives on the line to fight on either side of a war, but not animals. The animals at the Ueno Zoo were peaceful and well trained animals. Prior to the two elephants that live at the zoo now, there were three other elephants. When bombs were being dropped on Tokyo, the zoo keepers decided it would be dangerous if a bomb hit the

zoo and wild animals were to get out. So they ended up poisoning the lions, tigers, leopards, bears, and big snakes. Then it came time to poison the elephants, but they were too smart to eat the poisoned food and their skin too thick to be injected. The zoo keepers only option was to starve the elephants. This was a heartbreaking time for the zoo keepers, watching the life leave the elephants. Once the elephants had died, they begged for the war to end. Now there is a memorial for the the peaceful elephants that once lived at the Ueno Zoo.

I would use this book in upper elementary, starting in 4th grade all the way up into high school. The way this picture book is written, is very eloquent and provides a gateway to discuss war and all of its unintended effects. This book would pair well with a discussion of WWII in particular since the story is based in Japan.

This is a WOW book for me because once I finished reading "Faithful Elephants" I was speechless. My heart broke for these animals and I think the author did an amazing job writing this book. As a reader, you become so engrossed in the story and feel the pain that the zoo keepers felt. I think it takes a powerful book to be able to connect the way that I did as a reader.

Gofita says

The book is supposed to bring about anti-war sentiments...but not for me. The illustrations were wonderful, but I just didn't buy the story. The zookeepers really couldn't figure out a more humane way to kill the elephants? I'm sure they had shotguns, at least. They really didn't have needles big enough to draw blood or administer other things for the elephants?

Yes, war is sh*tty, it really is. But this book didn't help me think more about anti-war, just how come these zookeepers were so inhumane? Moral was lost completely. Granted, I wasn't there...but maybe if there was more information. I guess I'll just have to look it up and see...

Amanda Vaughan says

Unintentional consequences of war. Who are the real victims during times of war? This is the emotional story of three elephants - John, Tonky, and Wanly from the Ueno Zoo in Tokyo, Japan and their keepers. The story chronicles the lives of these three elephants as war is taking place all around them. The story takes place during WWII and is a wonderful story of love, affection, and the internal struggle of those who have to make the choice between life and death for those they care about.

This book is WOW book for me because it tells children the story of the human heart. The illustrations are beautifully done and the writing style captivates readers of all ages. I have used this book for years in teaching a unit on the unintentional consequences of war across grade levels. Students I have previously taught ask me to read this to them year after year, sometimes multiple times. The ideal behind my using this book is to make students aware that every action has a reaction and sometimes those reactions devastate the ones we love the most. This book is nonfiction and appropriate for all ages and grades. It can easily be incorporated into social studies, science, reading, and ELA.

Katharine says

This book was awful. It talks about how the dangers of war allowed individuals to justify killing animals for no immediate reason. They could have shipped the animals to safer destinations, there were clearly other alternatives. In times of war they should have plans for the animals. When taking on an animal as a pet, there are certain responsibilities that one must undertake. If you feel you cannot care for it properly, it does not give you the right to simply kill them off.

Daniel Herrera says

The story Faithful Elephants by Yukio Tsuchiya is a great book to be read by all ages. The story is sad and helps open your eyes to not assume something that might happen. It is about how Tokyo thought they were going to get bombed and they didn't want the zoo animals to suffer so they killed them.

Taylor Hucks says

I read the Amazon Kindle version of Faithful Elephants, which was published in 2015 although the original was published in 1951. Yukio Tsuchiya tells the story of three elephants residing in Tokyo's Ueno Zoo during a war. Told as an informational text, this book takes readers through similar emotions the zookeepers felt when they were ordered to get rid of all the animals at the zoo because the bombs raining on Tokyo could put the city at harm if the animals were to get out. I believe this text was written to make readers feel how unfair and unjust war is because it builds itself around the natural human instinct to do the right thing. Because of the violence that occurs in this book, I would only recommend to grades four and up if the students are well prepared to deal with this kind of topic. However, it is the unfair things that occur in this book that really make readers feel raw emotion and walk away from this book moved in some way. There are so many great activities that could go along with this book and several ways to tie in social studies as well. I would love to have students problem-solve to come up with some other solution if something like this were to happen again. Once they have come up with ideas and we've held discussions about the realities of their ideas, we could all decide on what we believe to be the best option that doesn't involve unfair casualties. Students would then write a letter to the army as the elephants' zookeeper to convince them there are other ways to deal with living and breathing animals. I would also address the deeper meaning of this book by discussing with students how war has more negative impacts than positive using evidence from the book. I loved this book because it addresses how unfair it is to believe that we have a right to take another's life.

Addison says

Faithful Elephants by Yukio Tsuchiya is a powerful story that reflects the horrors of war on an unlikely suspect. The story is captivating first by the beautiful illustrations of the animals in a Japanese Zoo. Faithful Elephants retells the devastating story of a Japanese Zoo in a panic to save their animals from bombing that is happening in Japan during WWII. The zookeepers in the zoo are forced to kill the animals that are at the zoo because they don't want them to die by a bomb that could hit the city due to the horrors of war. The details of the story are very graphic, as they discuss the different ways the zookeepers attempt to kill the animals. They focus in on three elephants and several different ways that they end their lives. The reality of the details is horrifying and deeply saddening, as the animals and elephants are put down one by one. The animals that died during that war are now remembered at the Japanese Zoo with a sign that marks where this sad tragedy occurs.

I find this book to be phenomenally real and a wonderful read for upper elementary students. Although the topic of the book is sad and dark, the story would be a great introduction to the reality of daily life when teaching WWII, as well as connections to science through different wildlife animals, as elephants and tigers are specifically addressed along with the care and keeping of them. Students may not make the connection to how war hits on the home front in every aspect, and this would be a great tool to reveal this to them. Spoiler: there will not be a dry eye in the room!

Caleigh says

Genre: Nonfiction, Folktale, Historical Fiction

Faithful Elephants tells the true story of a war-stricken Tokyo and a zoo that is ordered to kill all of their animals to protect the people and the city. The city want to prevent the animals from escaping if bombs happen to fall in the zoo. The story focuses on three elephants and their trainers and the sad decision they have to make because of the army's orders.

This book could be used for lessons on war and the impact it has on people, animals, and a community. It takes a unique perspective on war that would give students the opportunity to look at it through a different lens. The main message that I got was that everyone at the zoo wanted the war to end so they didn't have to kill the animals. It could also be used as a way to discuss animal treatment and how the trainers must have felt having to kill the elephants that didn't do anything wrong or deserve to die. It would be a great read-aloud book to combine with a mini-lesson on either topic.

This book was a WOW book for me because of the powerful story and message/central theme. It takes on a unique perspective of war and is heartbreaking, while also eye-opening. I couldn't stop thinking about it after I read it and what it must have felt like working for the zoo. While it is not an easy topic to read about, the information that can be learned and then taught from the book is very valuable. I definitely recommend this book!

Jonathan Peto says

I read this in a workshop with other teachers today. The other teachers seemed to buy into the idea that the fate of the elephants at a Tokyo zoo during World War II carries a strong anti-war message. I was more skeptical. Yet I was disturbed by the story. That's one reason I liked it. There was a lot to consider, especially because the elephants were portrayed as trying to please the zookeepers to the very end.

I suppose children might be drawn in by the elephants, but I actually thought that was disturbing too. It seems to imply the children will not feel any empathy for people, perhaps like the zookeepers. When the zookeepers wanted the war to end because of its effects on the elephants, I found it disturbing they weren't convinced beforehand, by the suffering of countless others in Tokyo and around the world.

Finally, the title kept gnawing at me. Why faithful elephants? Then I had a disturbing revelation about it on the train ride home: (view spoiler)
