



Sylvia Bishop, from Oxford

# A jumbo problem on the doorstep

Debut book by 25-year-old Oxford graduate Sylvia Bishop – one half of the musical duo Peablossom Cabaret, a genre-crossing comedy act that sprung from the UK improv scene – with drawings by first-time illustrator Ashley King (who loves elephants too)

**ERICA is a small girl with two problems: a) her Uncle Jeff, with whom she lives, has gone off travelling and the money he left her is running out, and b) something else, which is quite a big problem – and when I say quite big, I mean really big. No scrap that, I mean ENORMOUS. What's more, this enormous problem eats 200kg of cabbage every day.**

The elephant which appears on Erica's doorstep on the morning of her 10th birthday is quite a surprise – well, it would be – but Erica becomes very fond of him and does her very best to look after him in the extremely funny *Erica's Elephant* by Sylvia Bishop.

Of course, there are several problems, usually connected with size, but also because there are people who are keen to take the elephant away and put him in a zoo, saying that would be best for him. Erica, a feisty young thing, knows it wouldn't and she and a neighbour, Miss Pritchett (who keeps ants... but we won't go into that here), try to hide him – not an easy thing to do.

In contrast to the refreshingly sharp strand of

humour which runs through the book and in Ashley King's illustrations, the end is touching as Erica realises that true friendship dictates she must let the elephant go home to India.

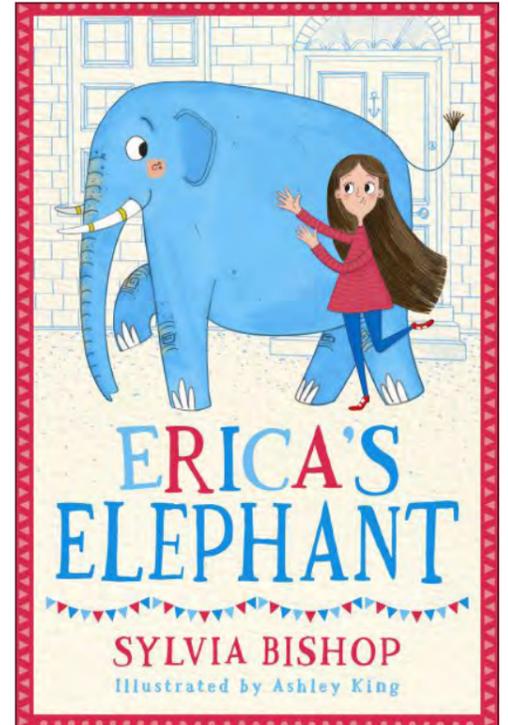
Give this book to the eights-plus to read for themselves, or buy it to read to a younger child. *Erica's Elephant* is one of the best books to have crossed my desk this year.

**CAROLINE FRANKLIN**

Published by Scholastic at £8.99

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## Win a copy of Erica's Elephant

N2 has three copies of *Erica's Elephant* to give away. To be in with a chance of winning one, answer the question on the form below and send it to Erica's Elephant competition, Newbury Weekly News, Newspaper House, Faraday Road, Newbury RG14 2DW, to reach us by Friday, July 15. See rules on page 46.

# Behind the elephant...

N2 talks to Sylvia Bishop about the inspiration behind her first book

### OK... so why an elephant?

Elephant was inspired by a text from a grateful friend, promising me an "elephant festooned with tea". The idea of an elephant turning up on my very narrow residential street with no parking permit tickled me – what would the neighbours say? – and the story grew from there.

A humble elephant turned out to be an incredibly useful character. The combination of good intentions and slapstick-prone size makes him both comic and endearing, whatever he does. I've sorely missed him in everything I've written since.

### WHICH authors did you enjoy as a child?

AA Milne's tales of Winnie the Pooh, and his poetry, were a huge favourite. I loved Hilaire Belloc's *Cautionary Tales* too, and the Nigel Molesworth books. In other words, when my parents read to me, they were essentially providing a crash-course in classic British wit. My dad told us his own stories too, which was very influential.

When I was a little older, I discovered the fantasy author Dianna Wynne Jones and that was when I really fell in love with reading. She packs rich, complex worlds into books that are shorter and younger than most comparable fantasy. They blew my mind.

### YOU still read children's books – so who inspires you now?

Yes. My favourites are books that combine humour with plot-driven, high-stakes storytelling; bonus points for warmth and making me cry a bit at the end. Ross Montgomery's *Perijee and Me* is a really wonderful recent example (with stunning cover art by David Litchfield).

### HAVE you always enjoyed writing stories and can you remember your first?

I have certainly always enjoyed making up stories: only a small proportion made it on to paper. The first one I remember taking seriously was about some telepathically-connected quadruplets. They were royalty on an island that

was under magical attack from its neighbours, and there was a lot of kerfuffle involving cursed brooches. I *LOVED* that story.

### MANY authors let their characters dictate the direction of the story – did this happen in *Erica's Elephant* or did you have a plan?

Neither really – I didn't plan, but it didn't feel character-led. I would normally be one or two chapters ahead of myself, and each new idea would have a specific source. For example, some research about elephants gave me the clue for trick that Erica and Elephant play to get themselves out of trouble. And the ending is a straight-up copy of what was really happening to me and my friends at the time.

### WHAT are the challenges of writing for children? Would you like to write for adults at some point?

Children are a wonderful audience. I think the challenge is to fit something exciting and rich into a short space; it's like painting in miniature. Maybe one day I'll want to write for adults, but I can't see it happening any time soon. I love the excitement and adventure of middle grade fiction.

### WHEN and where do you like to write?

In an ideal world, I would write first thing at morning and last thing at night, at my desk in my bedroom. The rest of my life has unfortunately not got the memo about this, and keeps getting in the way. So mostly, I write when I can. I wrote a lot of Erica on buses between Oxford and London.

### DID you have an image of Erica and her elephant in your mind and were you involved in the illustrations – there is a look of you about Erica – was that intentional?

A lot of friends ask if the illustrated Erica was based on me, and I can see why, but Ash and I had never met when he first drew her, so it's pure coincidence. I was sent 'roughs' of everything and invited to comment. But I don't really visualise when I write, and I think Ashley's work is stunning, so I never had much to say.

### YOU round your story off with an epilogue, do you think it important for children have a sense of what happened beyond the story and that everything is explained?

No, it probably isn't important, but it's an irresistible impulse for me. I'm always over-keen to fit events into a complete life story that 'makes sense'. In this particular case, I had something that I wanted to say about how we can make sense emotionally of... er... what happens at the end. But I am straying towards spoilers, so I should stop...

### SO what's next?

I have another book coming out with Scholastic in 2017, so editing is under way for that. And I have a couple more stories simmering along – I always like to have more than one on the go. I imagine I'll be sticking to humorous adventures under 20k words for a while yet. I love the challenge of telling a story so economically, and the imaginative scope of writing for that age group.

### ICE cream... what's your favourite flavour?

Yes... I do talk about ice cream a lot in the book. And chips. And tea. But there's a fine precedent here. Look at *Swallows and Amazons*, for example. Ransome is *OBSESSED* with what they eat.

...Mmmm. Ice cream. If anything, I should have written about it more.

My favourite is a combination of two flavours, and one is a sorbet, so I am cheating. One scoop of coffee ice cream, one scoop of lemon sorbet, please.

### WOULD you like an elephant?

I'd rather have a rhino. They've always been my favourite animal. It's very hard, though, to find books or documentaries about rhinos that aren't primarily about elephants. So, as a child I learned about elephants as a by-product.

I used to keep ants, like my character Miss Pritchett. And I'd love chickens. But all I really need is a cat.

**GERALDINE GARDNER**

Question: Who is Erica's ant-keeping neighbour?

### Erica's Elephant competition

Answer.....

Name.....

Address.....

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