



Tua and the Elephant

Written by R. P. Harris

Illustrated by Taeun Yoo

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“You speak to her (the elephant) with your heart, Tua, the same way she speaks to you. And you speak with your eyes, the tone of your voice, and the touch of your hand. The language of the heart is a tongue all of us would understand if we only took the time to learn it. And you, my little Tua, have a very big heart indeed” (p. 195).

Ten-year-old Tua (“Peanut” in Thai) is an only child living in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Each evening when her single mother goes off to work in a restaurant, Tua heads for the excitement of the nearby Night Market, where a cast of friendly vendors and enticing tastes and sounds await. Taro, tamarind, durian and coconut ice cream – yum! A traditional band of coconut-shell fiddle, bamboo flute, chimes, gongs, and wooden xylophone players’ tunes compete with pop music. The Night Market is a feast for the senses and Tua’s experiences quickly immerse readers in Thai culture. Illustrator Taeun Yoo’s digitally manipulated charcoal and linoleum block print illustration of the market helps readers see its cultural features. Her occasional illustrations support the print throughout the novel.

While running errands for vendors, Tua discovers a hole in the market wall, climbs through, and leaves the safety of the Night Market where everyone knows and cares about her and finds herself in a larger world of swift moving traffic, intimidating tall buildings, and many farang (foreign) faces. As her uncle was fond of saying, “Farangs are as noisy as frogs in a pond and puffed up to twice their normal size” (p. 27). Mistaken for a beggar and a pickpocket, Tua turns to flee and bumps into a young elephant. True to Thai nature, the girl instantly falls in love with the elephant. Even more than affection, Tua senses she has the ability to communicate with this animal.

Unfortunately, the elephant is under the command of two scruffy, shifty mahouts who are using it to make money from the farangs. Tua wants to speak to the elephant but watches instead. “After accepting a fifty-baht note from a farang, taking it with its trunk as easily as someone with an opposable thumb and four fingers, the elephant stretched as far as it could reach and dropped the note in the lap of a woman who, motioning with hand to mouth in a pantomime of hunger, sat begging on the street with her baby” (p. 33). Tua identifies with this compassionate act but the mahouts scold the elephant, retrieving the money from the begging woman, and leading the animal away in chains.

Tua hears the elephant's plea for help, gives the poor woman money, bows palms together in a wai, and sets out to rescue the elephant from her captors. And so begins the adventure.

At first, Tua hides the elephant in Auntie Orchid's backyard. To her credit, Auntie Orchid, an actress, singer, and eccentric lovable character, brings the elephant inside and helps Tua give it a name. After much negotiation, the elephant is named for Pohntip Tua's best friend at school. Pohn-Pohn (which means double happiness to Tua) is hungry but there isn't enough food in Auntie Orchid's refrigerator. All of the neighbors bring food and during the party that ensues Pohn-Pohn is well fed. The way these neighbors come to each other's aid and enjoy life in the process is in stark contrast to the actions of the people Tua met in the big city. Readers are privy to the elephant's thoughts on the matter: "How curious people are, Pohn-Pohn must have been thinking. How creative and ingenious they are, yet capable of both kindness and cruelty" (p. 66).

The mahouts do not easily let go of their property and are in hot pursuit of their elephant and the "cunning little devil" who stole her. The plot proceeds with narrow escapes, a treacherous river crossing, the help of allies (teenage monks), ransom negotiations, and chases as the determined mahouts search for Tua and the elephant. In the end, Tua delivers Pohn-Pohn safely to a sanctuary where kind farangs join with Mae Noi (an elephant whisperer) to care for and protect Asian elephants. Author R. P. Harris gives readers a satisfying ending: Tua is invited to work alongside Mae Noi at the elephant sanctuary.

Tua's spunky character, a fast-moving plot, and both intense and humorous situations will capture the attention of middle-grade readers and their teachers as an excellent read-aloud selection. But *Tua and the Elephant* offers more. Readers are shown aspects of Thai culture that can enrich their knowledge of other people's way of life and worldviews. In addition to Thai foods, language, geography, and affection for elephants, they will note contrasts between rural and city life in Thailand. Readers can examine stereotypes and prejudices between people from diverse cultures, particularly as native Thais interact with farangs. Readers will also be challenged to consider the plight of poor children and families and animals in an adult world that has placed value elsewhere.

Author R. P. Harris has traveled the world, spending much time in Asia, including three months in Thailand, where this story was born. The book was inspired by Harris's trip to the Elephant Nature Park (<http://www.elephantnaturepark.org/>) in Chiang Mai, Thailand. While Harris writes from a cultural outsider's perspective, he contributes a story to international literature where there is a dearth of books for younger readers about Thai children and culture. R. P. Harris currently lives in Shanghai, China.

Readers of mainstream U.S. literature may liken Tua to the spunky character of Lucky from Susan Patron's (2008) *The Higher Power of Lucky*. For those who connect with the plight of the Pohn-Pohn and animal rescue efforts, pair this book with *The One and Only Ivan* by Katherine Applegate (2012) or *The Tiger Rising* by Kate Dicamillo (2002). For additional books about Thailand, search [wowlit.org](http://www.wowlit.org) under Asia/Thailand.

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