

## BOOKS

# A Year with Elephants

For his eighth book, *Elephas Maximus: A Portrait of the Indian Elephant* (Harcourt, 2004), Stephen Alter '77 took a year's leave from teaching to write and travel. The author talks about his extensive research around India and the lessons he learned about the writer's craft.

The matriarch shouldered her way through a tangle of branches and raised her trunk to catch our scent. She then led a herd of more than 30 elephants through a fringe of grassland bordering the Karbi hills of Assam, in northeastern India. Ears flapping and trunks swinging side to side, the elephants browsed along the margins of the jungle. Most of them were adult females with calves of different ages, including a newborn nursing between its mother's forelegs. We followed them in our jeep for half an hour, until the December twilight faded into darkness and all I could see were blurred gray shadows disappearing through the grass. At that moment, surrounded by the verdant sanctuary of Kaziranga National Park, it struck me: ordinarily, at this time of year, I would be frantically marking papers and calculating final grades. Thanks to a Guggenheim Fellowship, I was observing wild elephants instead.

Writing and teaching are two of the most compatible occupations. Over the past 15 years in the classroom I've found that teaching both fiction and nonfiction prose reinforces my own commitment to the craft of writing. One of the challenges, however, is that though I now live and teach in Massachusetts, all of my books are set in India. A colleague once joked that my writing was full of perspiration. Not sharing his amusement, I had to explain that I could only travel to India over summer break, when temperatures rise above 110 in the shade.

For my elephant project a year's leave of absence was crucial, as most wildlife sanctuaries in India are closed from June to October because of the mon-

soon. Important events were also scheduled at times of the year when I would otherwise be teaching. The Ganesh Chaturthi festival, for instance, when thousands of elephant-headed deities are paraded through the streets of Mumbai (Bombay), takes place at the beginning of September.

My new book links elephant lore and mythology with natural history and conservation. The Asian elephant is an endangered species, with a total population of less than 50,000. Of these, approximately 30,000 live in India. (By comparison, the African elephant has a population of roughly 300,000.) Loss of habitat, poaching, and death or injuries caused by farmers protecting their fields are just some of the threats the elephant faces. India has a long tradition of elephant capture and training but questions remain about the ethics and viability of keeping these animals in captivity, whether it be in national parks, where tourists view wildlife from elephant backs, or at Hindu temples, where tuskers take part in religious ceremonies.

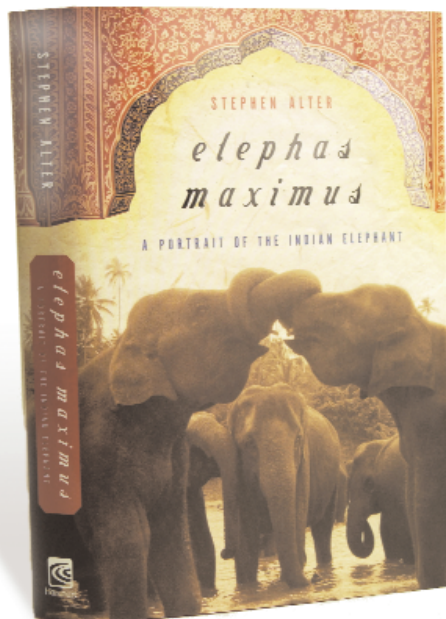
More than anything, this book was driven by my own fascination with elephants, which began when I was a child growing up in India. *Elephas maximus* is an enduring symbol of Asia's natural heritage but also a fellow mammal with whom we share unusual affinity. My approach to elephants is not as a scientist, though nat-

ural history has always been a personal passion. Instead, I see myself as a biographer of elephants, recounting the life story of this species.

As much as a year away from teaching allowed me to focus on the book, it also provided experiences and insights that I can use in the classroom. Of course, there are plenty of stories to tell— anxious moments spent watching a tiger stalking an elephant calf, or the many times I saw captive elephants being bathed by their handlers. This involves a pachydermal massage and pedicure, after which their foreheads are anointed with mustard oil and their faces and ears painted with floral patterns.

But more to the point, I can emphasize from personal experience the

RICHARD WILBUR TOLD ME,  
"IF YOU WANT TO BECOME A  
WRITER, STUDY EVERYTHING."



importance of keeping a journal, which often serves as a first draft for my books. During a series of treks through Periyar Tiger Reserve, in the southern state of Kerala, my raw impressions of the forest were recorded in a notebook. When my guide and I finally came upon a herd of elephants swimming in

a lake, the excitement was captured in a scrawled entry, rewritten later as a finished chapter.

Equally important is the lesson that good writing crosses disciplines. Years ago one of my own professors at Wesleyan, Richard Wilbur, told me: "If you want to become a writer, study everything." In researching the story of India's elephants, I found myself reading field studies by zoologists, treatises on statecraft and warfare, reports by animal rights advocates, translations of Persian couplets, Greek texts from 300 B.C.E., and several bestiaries. Over the course of the year, I visited dozens of museums and saw images of elephants in miniature paintings, marble sculptures, even knotted into Mughal carpets. Buddhist frescoes at Ajanta illustrate parables of virtuous elephants, while ancient Hindu temples at Ellora are built on a foundation of stone elephants, representing a primal herd of tuskers who support the cosmos on their backs. One chapter of my book deals with the erotic side of elephants, not only their mating habits and the sensual foreplay of their trunks, but the way in which Sanskrit and Tamil poets employ elephants as metaphors of desire.

In my travels, I interviewed environmental activists, forest department officials, mahouts and maharajahs. One of the most interesting people I met last year was Parbati Barua, an elephant expert who specializes in capturing or driving away wild elephants that raid farmers' crops. Barua has years of experience in the forest, training and handling elephants. When she learned that I was a teacher, Parbati looked at me with a skeptical eye and said: "In the university of nature there is no syllabus. Each day I learn something new."

A good motto for a mahout, a writer, and a teacher. 

Stephen Alter is a writer-in-residence in the Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He has written four novels and four books of narrative nonfiction.

JUST PUBLISHED

Spring 2004 Books

Our seasonal roundup of noteworthy books by Wesleyan alumni, faculty members, and parents.

FICTION:

KAYLIE JONES '81, *Speak Now* (Akashic Books, 2003)

SCOTT MEBUS '96, *Booty Nomad* (Miramax, 2004)

NONFICTION:

HENRY ABELOVE, WILLBUR FISK OSBORNE

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH, *Deep Gossip*

(University of Minnesota Press, 2003)

WILLIAM BERLINGHOFF '76, PhD, AND

FERNANDO GOUVÊA, *Math Through the Ages*

(Oxton House and the Mathematical Association of America, 2003)

ADAM BERINSKY '92, *Silent Voices: Public*

*Opinion and Political Participation in America*

(Princeton University Press, 2004)

DOMINIQUE BROWNING '77, *Paths of Desire: The*

*Passions of a Suburban Gardener* (Scribner, 2004)

ZDENEK DAVID '52, *Finding the Middle Way: The*

*Utraquists' Liberal Challenge to Roman and Luther*

(Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003)

VIRGINIA PAGE FORTNA '90, *Peace Time: Cease-*

*Fire Agreements and the Durability of Peace*

(Princeton University Press, 2004)

MARIA GRAHAM AND JENNIFER HAYWARD '83,

EDITOR, *Journal of a Residence in Chile During*

*the Year 1822*, and *A Voyage from Chile to*

*Brazil in 1823* (University of Virginia Press, 2003)

STACY I. MORGAN '93, *Rethinking Social*

*Realism: African American Art and Literature*

*1930–1953* (The University of Georgia Press, 2004)

ARDEN REED '70, CONSTANCE DEJONG, GUS

BLAISDELL, *Constance DeJong: Metal* (University of

New Mexico Press, 2003)

PETER SCHARF '80, *Ramopakhyana—The Story*

*of Rama in the Mahabharata: An Independent-*

*Study Reader in Sanskrit* (Curzon Press, 2003)

JOSEPH VANDER VEER JR. '59, MD,

*A Surgeon's Devotions* (Pleasant Word, 2003)

OF NOTE:

NINA JAFFE '76 is the author of new book series for

children ages 4–7 that is based on the comic book char-

acter Wonder Woman. Some of the titles in the series

include *Amazon Princess*, *The Journey Begins*, and *I*

*Am Wonder Woman* (HarperFestival, 2004).

JOSHUA SPARROW '77, M.D., is co-author with T.

BERRY BRAZELTON, M.D., of two new additions to

the Brazelton Way book series, *Feeding Your Child*

and *Toilet Training* (Da Capo Press, 2004). Both

these guides provide concise and practical advice

according to the child's age. The books aim to help

parents better understand their children's behavior so

they can support them positively along the way.

*Robert Ball and the Politics of Social Security* by

EDWARD BERKOWITZ (The University of Wisconsin

Press, 2003) focuses on ROBERT M. BALL '35 and the sig-

nificant role he played in shaping Social Security and

Medicare policies in America. Ball was Social Security's

chief administrator from 1953–1972 and one of the pro-

gram's leading defenders for the rest of the 20th century.

NEW FROM WESLEYAN

UNIVERSITY PRESS:

*The Sensitive Self* by MICHAEL EIGEN

Despite the pervasiveness of sensitivity in our lives,

few psychological studies have attempted to explain

its role. This book by a professor of psychology at

New York University includes a collection of essays,

clinical portrayals and interviews, and case studies as

it examines sensitivity from a variety of perspectives

and draws upon theorists such as Freud, Bion,

Winnicott, and Elkin.

For additional book reviews and listings, please see

[www.wesleyan.edu/magazine/wesmag\\_books.html](http://www.wesleyan.edu/magazine/wesmag_books.html).

If you are a Wesleyan graduate, faculty member, or

parent with a new publication, please let *Wesleyan*

magazine know by contacting David Low.

e-mail: [dlow@wesleyan.edu](mailto:dlow@wesleyan.edu)

fax: 860/685-3601

mail: *Wesleyan* magazine

Communications Office

Wesleyan University/South College

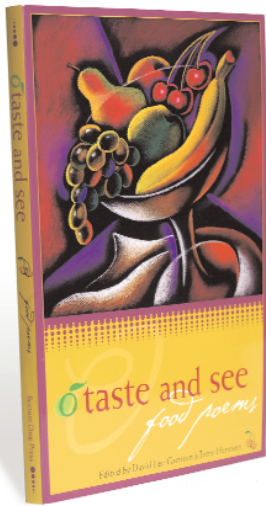
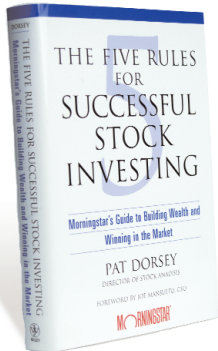
Middletown, CT 06459

PAT DORSEY '93

*The Five Rules for Successful Stock Investing: Morningstar's Guide to Building Wealth and Winning in the Market*

(John Wiley and Sons, 2004)

This accessible, well-organized guide by the director of stock analysis at Morningstar, Inc., aims to help investors evaluate worthwhile businesses and purchase stocks at reasonable prices. The book stresses five core principles: doing your homework, finding companies with strong competitive advantages, having a margin of safety, holding for the long term, and knowing when to sell. Readers receive tips on how to better understand how stocks operate and how to avoid common investing pitfalls.



DAVID LEE GARRISON '68

AND TERRY HERMSEN, EDITORS

*O Taste and See: Food Poems*

(Bottom Dog Press, 2003)

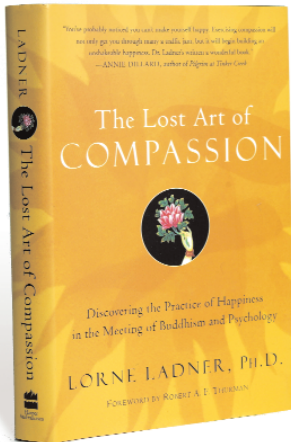
You don't have to be a food fanatic to enjoy this fine feast of words. This delightful anthology contains carefully selected poems about food by 125 writers, some well-known and others not, cleverly arranged according to different categories such as friends, family, and love.

LORNE LADNER '89

*The Lost Art of Compassion*

(HarperSanFrancisco, 2004)

This encouraging book by a clinical psychologist and practicing Buddhist synthesizes ideas from Western psychology with practical methods from Tibetan Buddhist tradition so that readers may use them to cultivate positive emotions in their daily lives, such as affection, joy, love, and particularly, compassion. The guide abounds in useful and practical advice on ways to develop happiness in one's life and to connect with the feelings of others.



J. PEDER ZANE '84, EDITOR

*Remarkable Reads: 34 Writers and Their Adventures in Reading*

(Norton, 2004)

If you're an avid reader or bibliophile, I urge you to purchase immediately this irresistible collection of essays by 34 splendid writers. Each contributor describes his or her specific encounter with a book, and the results are highly personal, inspiring, and illuminating—and always worth reading. Writers were asked to choose a single adjective to describe their literary experience, and part of the fun of the anthology is picking an essay to read by its title, such as “The Saddest Book I Read,” “The Most Incomprehensible Book I Read,” or “The Most Surprising Book I Read.” The works covered range from classics such as *Doctor Zhivago*, *Howard's End*, and *The Catcher in the Rye* to lesser-known books such as Katherine Butler Hathaway's memoir, *The Little Locksmith*. —David Low '76

