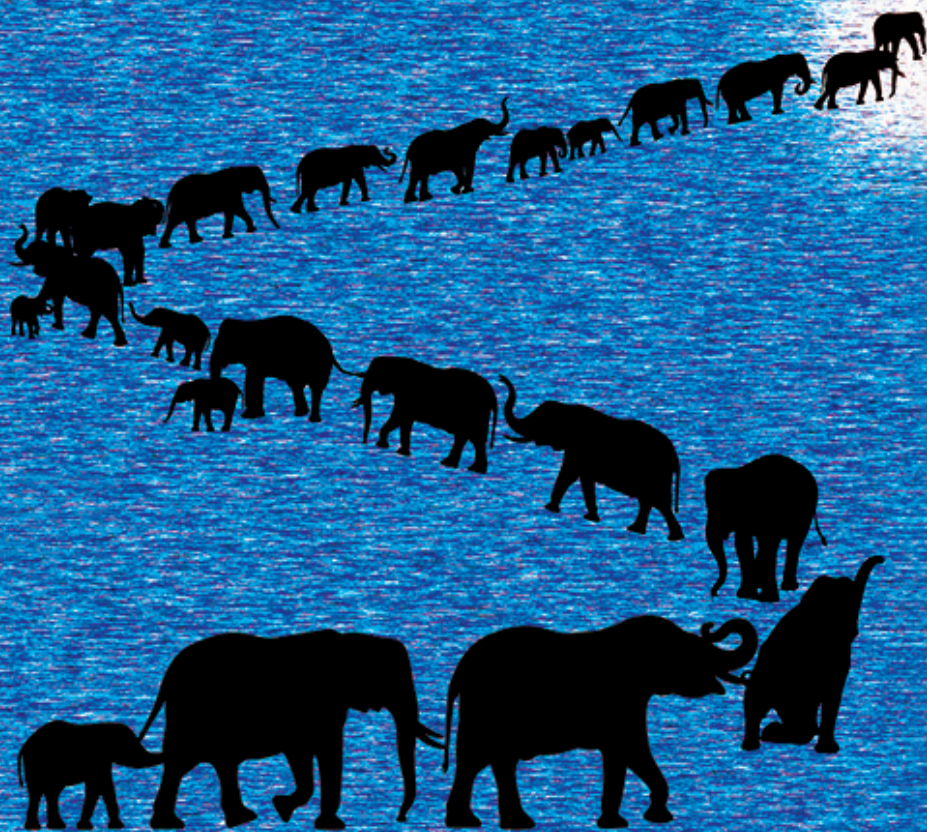


TO FOLLOW ELEPHANTS

a novel



RICK HODGES

To Follow Elephants

Rick Hodges



Stormbird Press



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26

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They both sat in silence. Owen didn't know what to say. It seemed such a waste of time, to sit with his own father after all these years but say nothing.

Karl broke the silence. "Did your mother ever try to come visit me in person, like this?"

"No."

Karl didn't ask why. Owen didn't offer a reason.

"What do you mean, you talk to elephants?" asked Owen.

"What?"

"You said you talk to elephants."

Karl Dorner paused, taking back control. "They come to visit me. Out back." He jerked his thumb toward the rear of the prison house.

"And you talk to them?"

"Sure do. I speak their language. I've had plenty of time to learn it. I'm a fucking Tarzan."

To Follow Elephants

“What do you say?”

“I mostly say ‘thank you,’ because they do all the talking. They tell me all the secrets of the elephants. Like elephants are stronger and better than humans. And I say ‘thank you,’ because they’re right, and I needed to know that. Keeps me from slipping up and having too much respect for people. People basically suck.”

The elephants talked to him? Was he crazy or pretending to be?

Owen suddenly felt hopeless in the situation. There were only two possibilities. Either his father would live up to his dreams, or not. If he didn’t, Owen would wish he’d never jumped on the plane and rushed across the globe without thinking things through. If he did, Owen would wish he could take his father out of prison and bring him home. There was no way to win.

No, there was a third possibility—he could keep Owen guessing, which would leave him where he was before he came here.

“Are you sure you never thought about joining the military, son?”

Though he called Owen “son,” it was more like an older man using it with a younger man to remind him who is in charge.

“No.”

“Good. Don’t. There’s no future in it. Look at me.”

Owen struggled for something meaningful to talk about. What exactly do you say to the father you meet for the first time, in prison? “I could ... is there anyone you want me to tell anything to? Back home? Any messages?”

“Well, your mother doesn’t want any messages from me, that’s for sure. But maybe she goes to weddings or funerals, and old buddies ask about me, and she says I’m dead or whatever story she made up. And you could jump in and tell them that before I died, I told you a story.

“So here’s the story, and it’s true,” he said, rubbing his hands through his short hair.

“A large herd of elephants was crossing the plains. It’s the dry season, and the matriarch—the old female who knows where to go for food and water and minerals in the earth and protection—is leading them to fresh food. She knows what’s in season and where to find it. She’s over 50 years old, and she’s teaching her daughters all her routes and tricks, like digging deep in the ground or through the middle of a giant Baobab tree for water. To get there, the herd has to cross a rather large river.

“Now, this matriarch is very wise, and the rains have been good, and the territory is safe because the humans haven’t come to shoot them for meat or to get them out of the way so fat-ass tourists in Fort Lauderdale can have pineapple juice for their piña coladas. And in these good times, the herd has produced many babies. The herd crosses the river, but as they’re about to continue on, they hear an agitated trumpeting behind them.”

He pulled a cigarette out of his pocket and put it in his mouth, but did not light it. It bobbed between his lips as he spoke, like a conductor waving a baton.

“There was one elephant, a juvenile born the previous year, who was scared to cross. The other elephants started to walk away, but the little guy didn’t cross.

To Follow Elephants

They trumpeted back at him, urging him on, but he still couldn't bring himself to get in the water. He would stick his trunk in and pace back and forth on the bank, but no dice. The water wasn't deep, and smaller elephants, babies even, had made the crossing. It was some kind of fear. Two adults crossed back over and tried to lead the youngster in. They pushed and cajoled and walked back over a few times. Nothing.

"After a few hours of this, the entire herd headed back over the river, and went off in a different direction. They refused to leave the little guy alone. The will of an entire herd of gigantic animals was changed by one of the little weak ones. This wasn't even the decision of the matriarch, mind you. The entire herd knew what they would do, and they crossed back over, and they found another place to go."

Karl stood up. "Think you'd ever see a herd of humans do that? All of them? Nope. Like I said, people basically suck."

His eyes were as determined as ever. Owen watched them move beyond him and then realized why he had stood up. Someone had appeared in the hallway behind Owen.

"Colonel says the visit time almost over," said the guard. "He says you can come back later."

"The Colonel wants to count his money," Karl Dorner replied.

Owen couldn't wait for another visit, if there was going to be another visit. "I have to ask you one more thing."

"Of course you do."

His habit of knowing everything before Owen told him, or at least pretending to, was infuriating him. It was too much like Mubego.

“Did you really ... did you really do what you were charged with?”

He chewed on the cigarette and waited a long time to answer.

“Owen, Owen. Do you know what the ultimate sacrifice for your country is?”

Owen thought for a moment. “It means you die. You die in battle.”

“Wrong!” He banged his fist on the table, making Owen jump. “Bzzzzt! Wrong answer.”

Owen waited for the answer, but his father said nothing.

“What is it, then?” Owen finally demanded.

“Go find out, godammit. Ask Mubego. He won’t tell you, but you can go to the American Embassy in Nairobi, on Kenyatta Avenue, and ask the military attaché there. Name is Hentoff. He’s one of those old buddies I told you about. Maybe he’ll tell you.”

“And you can tell the Colonel I said that!” he added, for the guard.

“Mr. Dorner, we must go now,” said the guard.

“Which one? We’re both Mr. Dorner. Can I leave? I’ll get my stuff. Ha!”

The guard took Owen’s arm and led him out.

“Sayonara, son. I’ll ask the elephants about you. Can you come see me again?”

Owen said nothing. He didn’t want his father to hear

To Follow Elephants

he was holding back tears.

For the first time since he had read the newspaper article with his father's name in it, he felt like a stupid, helpless kid again. He wanted to run home to Mom and cry in her lap, but it was too late for that.

There was one thing left for him to do.

About the Author

Rick Hodges is a writer and author whose written works are as diverse as his life experiences.



Rick enjoys a deep appreciation for the natural world on a simple, introspective level, informed as much by digging in the dirt as a child or beekeeping as a teenager as by travels to great landscapes. A voyage to East Africa,

and the experience of seeing how the people there lived in tandem with wildlife, inspired his novel, *To Follow Elephants*.

His daytime career as a writer for non-profit groups and journalist in Washington, DC, has given Rick the chance to write about a wide variety of topics and experiences. Government, politics and business issues have all crossed his desk, of course, in the form of news items, fundraising appeals, speeches and congressional testimony. But his published portfolio also includes a nonfiction instructional book for high school students about the Muslim world, an article about the best way to make coffee that appeared in the *Washington Post* Food section, a humorous essay about raising a child with a disability, an article about airline collision avoidance systems he wrote after riding on a demonstration flight involving his plane flying head-on at another, and a story about a town that united to make a dying boy's last day the best of his life, among many others.

Aside from his 9-to-5 writing, Rick has produced fictional works, including short stories and a stage play. He wrote his play, *Three Generations of Imbeciles*, based on a 1927 court case from his home state of Virginia that cleared the way for involuntary sterilization of people with disabilities for decades before the practice was outlawed.

Rick's wife, Elenor, is executive director of a local environmental organization and inspired him to work for a time as a grant proposal writer for The Wilderness Society. In his current job, Rick writes magazine copy for a national labor union. He lives with Elenor and his two daughters in Arlington, Virginia.

www.RickHodgesAuthor.com

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