

Rory Sparkes and the Elephant in the Room

Hugh Bonneville

Discussion guide and activity pack

ABOUT THE BOOK

A laugh-out-loud debut from Paddington star Hugh Bonneville, *Rory Sparkes and the Elephant in the Room* is jam-packed full of heart and humour, and filled with brilliantly funny illustrations from Loretta Schauer.

Inspired by events from Hugh's own childhood, this story will delight readers with the chaotic adventures of Rory Sparkes, his friends, family and some very unusual neighbours.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hugh Bonneville grew up and went to primary school in South East London, just like Rory Sparkes. Later he studied Theology at university and became a professional actor in 1985. His career has spanned radio, television, film and stage, including highly acclaimed appearances in *Downton Abbey* and the Paddington films and as the voice of Santa in *Stick Man*. *Rory Sparkes and the Elephant in the Room* is his first book for children.



The following pack is designed for a range of settings, to use to explore the book with children. Following the discussion guide, there are a series of creative engagement activities and suggested follow-ups.

While the book is very funny, there are important subplots that deal with bullying, familial loss and other issues. Please ensure appropriate ground rules and support are in place before discussing the book or undertaking activities.



Discussion Guide

Getting started

What did readers like about the book? Did they have a favourite character or scene? Encourage children to explain why, and to explore their answers. Was anyone reminded of other characters, or stories they've read or seen?

1. Rory

How would anyone describe Rory as a character? What is he like? What do members of the group like about him? Does anyone know someone a bit like Rory? Why is he the central character of the book? How would the book feel different if the central character was, say, Guy?

2. Evie

How is the reader introduced to Evie? How is this different to the way in which Rory is introduced to Evie? Does this make a difference? Why/why not? What are Evie's 'character traits' (check vocabulary here, as required)?

3. The Sparkes family

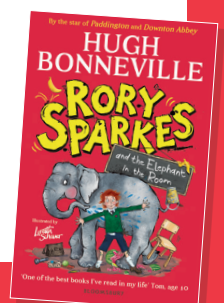
How does Bonneville portray Rory's relationship with his family? How do they react to the things he does, or tells them? Why? Is their family realistic? What writing techniques are used to make the family situations funnier, or sillier, or more entertaining? Introduce the ideas of caricature and exaggeration, and discuss as a group.

4. The elephant in the room

Look at the title of the book together. What does the expression 'the elephant in the room' mean? In relation to the book, is this just Donna, or is it suggesting something else? How important is Donna to the story? What might it be like if someone came to school with an elephant?

5. Guy & Adrian

Rory's old friends are Guy and Adrian – how do the three friends differ from one another? How are they similar? Why is Adrian known as 'Adrian Thingy from Round the Corner'? Does this name suit his character? What does Rory admire about Guy? What might Guy admire about Rory?



Discussion Guide

6. Circus

Read the opening paragraphs from page 9 again together. How is the circus introduced? What impression is left with the reader? Does this align with Rory's impression? How do the realities of the circus differ from the reader's/Rory's impressions? Why? Who likes the idea of being part of a circus? Why, or why not? What does Evie like about it? In smaller groups, discuss which circus act group members would most like to do. Why?

7. Illustrations

Look through the illustrations in the book together, as a group. How has the illustrator, Loretta Schauer, captured different characters or scenes from the book? How do they enhance the reading experience? Did anyone picture the characters differently? In what way?

9. Madame Lowe

How does Bonneville create the atmosphere of Madame Lowe's house? What senses does he evoke, or suggest, for the reader? What is the effect of this? Is Madame Lowe, at first, like any other characters readers remember? How does this change as the book goes on?

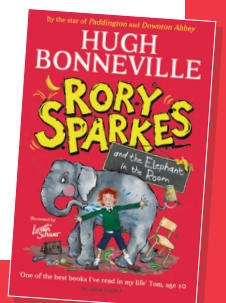
8. Billy

Discuss the story of Billy within the book. What first impression did readers have? What did group members think of him? How does he change? Who, or what, allows him to eventually become a part of the group? How can things that people keep hidden affect how they behave? Can we always know what is causing someone to act in a certain way? What is Bonneville trying to suggest about how we view other people?

Discuss other first impressions in the book (Rory and Evie, or Madame Lowe, for example), and look at how they might have given a false impression.

10. Strengths

'Strength' comes up regularly in the book – both physical strength, and characters' different strengths. What do we mean by strength? What strengths do different characters value in the book? Can anyone remember specific examples? For instance, Evie overpowers Billy, but does she value her physical strength as much as Billy does? What strengths do group members value most? Why?



Activities

Creative writing

These three writing exercises take inspiration from the book and will challenge pupils to consider their writing style, point of view, character development and plot. Choose one, give pupils a choice, or use all three across a period of time. They are designed to be fun, creative tasks, but can be mapped against composition curriculum needs, as required.

What next?

At the end of the book Rory sees a 'shiny metal box' in the scruffy garden over the fence. Challenge pupils to write a scene from Rory's next adventure, when he opens the box. How will he get into the garden? Will it be locked? What will he find inside?

Pupils should think about the book's style – can they make it funny, and intriguing? Mysterious? Dangerous? Will Rory need Guy's help? Or Adrian's?

Another point of view

Challenge pupils to rewrite a scene from the book, but from a different perspective. In groups, discuss pupils' favourite scenes or characters, and decide from whose perspective each pupil would like to write. Afterwards, ask any pupil willing to do so to read their scene aloud.

They might like to write the meeting between Evie and Rory, but from Evie's perspective. Or Clare's point of view as she stuck the note to Rory's back. They could even choose J.P. Sparkes on his motorbike, or try to portray how Donna might have felt, squirting water over the windows or eating watermelons.

Love birds

Look again at Madame Lowe's recollection of Pierre leaving for the war. Use the prompt of the line given, 'To remember us by, my love', and recreate this scene in which Pierre gives Madame Lowe the love birds. Think about how different Madame Lowe might have looked, or what sights, smells and sounds they might have heard in the midst of the war. How can pupils convey the feelings between the two?



Activities

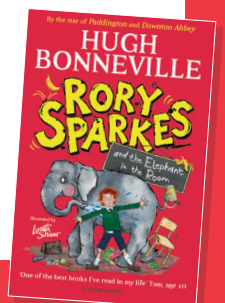
Delving deeper

These research tasks are designed to be done individually or in small groups, developing pupils' research and speaking skills. Other topics relating to the book can be chosen, if desired.

Divide the group into smaller groups and assign each group a research task. They should use resources available to them – either the internet, or books in the library or reading space, to find out what they can and prepare a short report for the other groups. Depending on the group, you may want to pre-prepare some relevant links or find some relevant books to support their research.

Choose from, or divide up, the following topics:

- Circus performers (choose a specific act, like the acrobats from the book)
- The history of the circus (think about mentions in the book of how performing animals were phased out)
- Elephants – how have elephants been used by mankind through history? What protections are now in place for them?
- The Battle of Britain – how did Spitfires 'tip the balance' in the battle, during the Second World War?



Activities

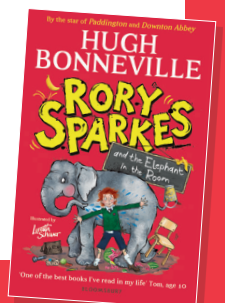
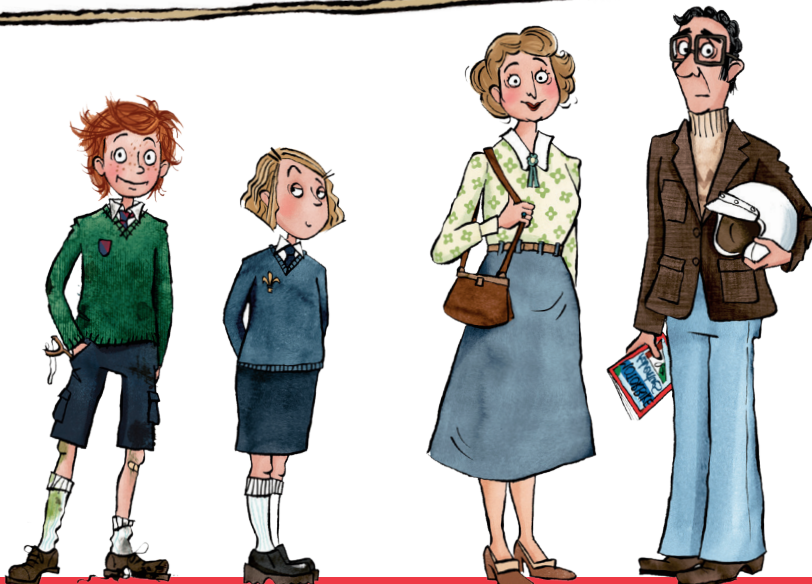
Family portrait

Look at the illustration of the Sparkes family on pages 4–5.
Discuss the details in the picture. Are they realistic?
What features have been exaggerated or enhanced?

Revisit (or discuss for the first time) the idea of caricature and exaggeration. Challenge pupils to draw a portrait of their own family, the people in their home, or their group of friends. There is a template below that pupils can use.

How can they make the portrait more fun? Can they make it a caricature? (Discuss the difference between having fun with the task and being mean, or insulting, first.)

Create a gallery of portraits, and share pupils' work with the rest of the group or with other classes exploring the book.





Draw your
portrait here



Activities



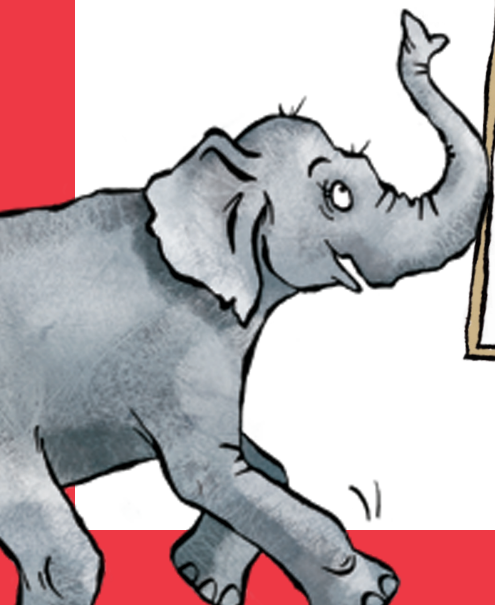
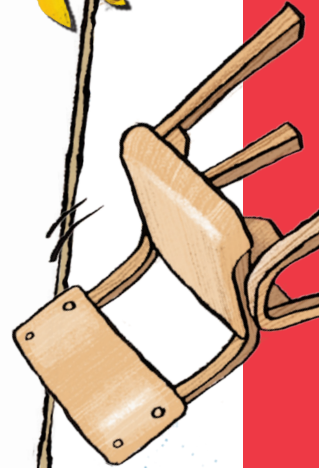
Making it funny

Think again about ways in which the book is funny. How does Bonneville introduce comedy and humour? You might like to talk about different kinds of comedy, such as slapstick, or parody, or surreal humour, etc. How might Bonneville have taken real-life incidents from his own childhood and made them even funnier, or sillier, for the book?

Set a task for pupils to keep a true diary for a day – or a week, if you have time. Revisit the conversation about what makes things funny and challenge pupils to make their diary funnier, writing it as a narrative. They could keep it in first person or write it in third person (check understanding before exploring).



- Can they ramp up the stakes?
- Can they heighten the emotion? Create more tension?
- Can they invent new outcomes from what they were trying to do? What would have been a funnier result?
- Can they make the characters in their 'diary' more ridiculous?
- Can they merge different incidents together to create more impact?
- How will they tell what happened, so the ending is more surprising?

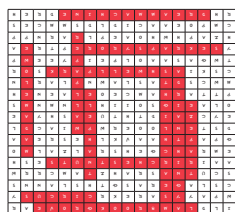


Wordsearch



I	L	D	L	A	M	B	R	O	O	K	G	R	O	V	E	A	R
W	P	A	Y	Y	S	A	R	E	K	R	C	I	R	C	U	S	Y
C	S	L	A	G	E	R	A	S	G	T	H	S	L	A	N	N	S
S	C	U	T	N	A	S	R	A	H	Z	T	A	M	C	R	R	W
A	A	I	R	I	R	C	H	E	S	T	N	U	T	S	E	S	H
E	M	R	A	H	C	G	E	H	S	R	A	L	Z	A	L	M	O
G	P	A	P	T	H	A	A	V	K	L	H	E	S	R	E	A	A
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C	M	P	O	E	A	A	C	I	D	L	D	S	M	M	C	E	S
R	H	D	R	E	A	M	M	A	C	H	I	N	E	D	R	E	H

ADRIAN THINGY • CHESTNUTS
 RORY SPARKES • ELEPHANT • TRAPEZE
 MADAME LOWE • ASHWELL PARK
 SEARCHLIGHTS • CIRCUS
 WALLPAPER • LAMBROOK GROVE
 DREAM MACHINE



NOILNOS





Anagrams



Unscramble the letters to spell out key words and phrases from the book. When you've finished, the circled letters can be rearranged to make one final word.



RECAL SKAPERS: _____ o _____

CLIFK DAN SILFS: _____ o _____

BARCOATS: _____ o _____



YUG SUNGROPE: _____ o _____

CRUSTYANA: _____ o _____

BONUS WORD: _____



ANSWERS:

Clare Sparkes
Flick and Fliss
Acrobats
Guy Spurgeon
Sanctuary
Bonus: RUSTY

