

Preface I

Dear Reader:

Allow me to congratulate you on learning how to eat with a fork, how to walk without dragging your knuckles, how to resist the urge to pick the nits out of your fur, and – last but not least – how to read a preface. Bravo! That you don't swing from branch to branch, or groom yourself with your toilet-claws, or forage for nuts and predate on other primates is a credit to you. Not all primates learn to do these things, but you, personally, stand out among the great apes as a shining example of what can be achieved with perseverance, an expanded cerebral cortex, and about \$150,000 dollars. Raising a great ape such as yourself is not cheap, you understand, but the fact that your parents picked you over the cheaper hairy-eared dwarf lemur, or Zanzibar bushbaby, or white-cheeked spider monkey just goes to show how much they wanted a sapient Homo. It's not the only reason they wanted you, I'm guessing, but being the exact species they'd always dreamt of might be worth pointing out, to your parents as well as to your teachers, and especially to prospective employers. Belonging to the "in" species can give you the edge you need out there in an increasingly competitive job market because – let's face facts – *Homo sapiens* almost always get the upper management positions. It's unfair, but to be honest, no one really wants to deal with a CEO who eats insects and urinates willy-nilly on the boardroom floor.

I hope that the following *Stories for Animals* will fill you with merriment, and that if you are reading them secretly in class, they will cause you to snort, and then to chuckle, and

then to erupt with laughter and wild territorial hooting. I hope you laugh so hard that your teacher trumpets at you across the room and says something like, “Perhaps you’d like to share the joke with the rest of the class.” Too many students treat this sort of question as merely rhetorical, rather than what it is: an open invitation. Take the opportunity to regale your fellow students with tales of bees and basset hounds, slugs and snails, and all the other animals who are your distant cousins on the great Family Tree of Life. Read about how other animals tackle phobias, magical thinking, aliens, environmental responsibility, and job opportunities for those among us with brains the size of mouse droppings. And as you read to your fellow primates, ask them to ponder the study questions located at the end of the book. Tell them not to worry – nobody is going to ask them about plot, characters, or setting, or use words like metaphor, simile, or even oxymoron (which sounds only like a detergent for idiots). In fact, these questions are not like normal study guide questions at all, there to suck the joy out of every last brain cell. They are intended only to increase happiness, which is one of the most important emotions for primates such as yourselves and, indeed, for all animals everywhere.

Again, congratulations on your achievements, my little ape friend, and I hope you enjoy reading these *Stories for Animals* as much as I enjoyed the many delicious cups of coffee I drank while writing them.

Most sincerely,

I. H. Smythe

Preface II

Dear Parent, Teacher, Guardian, Guardian Angel, Governess, Nursery Maid, Butler, Bodyguard, or Correctional Officer:

Each of the following five stories was written with the students at Westmount Charter School in mind, all of whom are – as we like to say in the literature – giphted. You will notice, then, that the stories comprising this volume are of somewhat unusual length and weight. This is because, like Doctor Who’s Tardis, children’s heads are much bigger on the inside than the outside, and they therefore require stories of considerable heft and dimension to fill them up. Most children prefer stories of substance anyway, and tales such as “The puppy was sad but luckily he got adopted and so he was happy” leave them cold.

Now, because some of my *Stories for Animals* contain complicated words and sophisticated concepts, I have occasionally been accused of didacticism. This is an outrage. My intent is not to teach anyone anything – leave that to television, I say. I seek merely to entertain, and if a child accidentally learns the meaning of a word along the way, or how to mix the perfect Manhattan, or the best method for taking the temperature of a cat, this is in no way my fault. In fact, the truth is that *I* use large words and big ideas chiefly because my *children* use them. For example, the other day one of my children, who shall remain nameless, casually used the word “elephantine” to describe a very large object. This surprised me, since I was only dimly aware of the word “elephantine” myself and have never used it in his presence; nor have I read the word “elephantine” to him; nor do we

have an elephant as a pet; nor do we own an enormous fork with gigantic tines. Where had he learned this word, I asked him, but before he even replied, I knew that the answer must be a book, of course, and how I wanted to shake the hand of the intrepid author who had dared to use such a formidable word with its four jumbo syllables, its two tusks, and a trunk.

“TV,” my child replied in answer to my question, and my eyes rolled in their sockets – but, as I should have known, the little jester was having me on, and in fact, he *had* read this word in a book, along with several thousand others much like it. In my experience, elephantine words, like elephantine gifts, delight and amuse children so long as they are allowed simply to *play* with them, and not to be forever disgorging them on vocabulary tests. (Note well that some students, like some caterpillars, are known to regurgitate simply as a method of defence.) Admittedly, large and unfamiliar words are sometimes hard to read aloud, but there is no shame in mispronunciation or, indeed, in faking. The point is to have a happy time and not to worry too much about sounding like a complete nincompoop in front of those to whom you are the most vulnerable.

Happy reading,

I. H. Smythe

PS: Please note that I use the phrase “who shall remain nameless” merely as a figure of speech and not as a statement of intent, and that now would be a good time to call Child Welfare Services back and tell them it was all just a silly misunderstanding. Thank you.