



The Tusk That Did the Damage: A novel

By Tania James

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The Tusk That Did the Damage: A novel By Tania James

From the critically acclaimed author of *Atlas of Unknowns* and *Aerogrammes*, a tour de force set in South India that plumbs the moral complexities of the ivory trade through the eyes of a poacher, a documentary filmmaker, and, in a feat of audacious imagination, an infamous elephant known as the Gravedigger.

Orphaned by poachers as a calf and sold into a life of labor and exhibition, the Gravedigger breaks free of his chains and begins terrorizing the countryside, earning his name from the humans he kills and then tenderly buries. Manu, the studious younger son of a rice farmer, loses his cousin to the Gravedigger's violence and is drawn, with his wayward brother Jayan, into the sordid, alluring world of poaching. Emma is a young American working on a documentary with her college best friend, who witnesses the porous boundary between conservation and corruption and finds herself in her own moral gray area: a risky affair with the veterinarian who is the film's subject. As the novel hurtles toward its tragic climax, these three storylines fuse into a wrenching meditation on love and betrayal, duty and loyalty, and the vexed relationship between man and nature.

With lyricism and suspense, Tania James animates the rural landscapes where Western idealism clashes with local reality; where a farmer's livelihood can be destroyed by a rampaging elephant; where men are driven to poaching. In James' arrestingly beautiful prose, *The Tusk That Did the Damage* blends the mythical and the political to tell a wholly original, utterly contemporary story about the majestic animal, both god and menace, that has mesmerized us for centuries.



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Editorial Review

Review

"Impressive...captivating...When the stories of the Gravedigger, the poacher and the filmmaker inevitably converge, the novel veers toward a fatalistic irony, but in James's assured and skillful treatment, the result is stark tragedy."

—*New York Times Book Review*, Editor's Choice

"*The Tusk That Did the Damage* is one of the most unusual and affecting books I've read in a long time. Narrated by a poacher, a filmmaker, and, most brilliantly, an elephant, this is a compulsively readable, devastating novel. "

—Jonathan Safran Foer, author of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*

"Although it has much insight and nuance to add to the [ivory] discourse, James's inventive new novel has a far broader vision, one that will likely outlast this iteration of the ivory conversation. With remarkable brevity, *The Tusk That Did the Damage* delves into India's mythic, troubled history with elephants — a strange marriage of reverence and violence — and asks readers to imagine the incomprehensible, to experience the world, for a few moments, through the eyes of a killer elephant called the Gravedigger."

—*Los Angeles Review of Books*

"This gorgeously written novel is unlike anything I've ever read, and unlike anything you've ever read too—unless you can tell me honestly you've read something with an elephant narrator. (There are a couple human ones too.)...thought-provoking but never feels like heavy lifting."

—*Glamour Magazine*

"*The Tusk that Did the Damage* is spectacular, a pinwheeling multi-perspectival novel with a cast that includes my favorite character of recent memory, 'the Gravedigger,' an orphaned homicidal elephant. Tania James is one of our best writers, and here she is at the height of her powers: brilliant, hilarious, capable of the most astonishing cross-cultural interspecies ventriloquies and acrobatic leaps of empathy. You will read this ravishing novel in an afternoon and immediately want to press it on your favorite people."

—Karen Russell, author of *Swamplandia*

"*The Tusk That Did the Damage* is a bighearted, morally complex novel... James skillfully blends the suspense of a thriller and the erotic tensions of two romantic triangles with mythical, mournful flashbacks to Gravedigger's life and ancestry...*Tusk* nimbly divulges virtues and vulnerabilities so readers come to empathize with everyone, especially with Gravedigger, the very soul of the novel."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"[H]eart-racingly paced, with each perspective taking a chapter in turn—three interwoven stories that converge with a devastating, compelling fatality...This is a story that moves between the humid intensity of southern India's jungles, the cool assurance of the American's editing studio, and the elephant's primordial internal landscape with grace and humour, as light-footed as a poacher."

—*National Geographic Traveler*

"The rural India described by these spiraling voices seems haunted, seeded with gods, ghosts and

myth...[James'] elephants loom larger than life."

—*Washington Post*

"*The Tusk That Did the Damage* is a novel of great moral intensity, with the pacing of a thriller. Everyone is implicated. Everyone is righteous. Tania James' gift, her genius, is to turn this scenario into an occasion for grace."

—Julie Otsuka, author of *The Buddha in the Attic*:

"Original and multi-layered ... captivating storylines and searing imagery...James conveys a palpable, infectious empathy for an animal that fascinates us from afar, even as she probes the mindset of the disadvantaged people driven to hunt it."

—*Washington City Paper*

"TUSK...will leave you breathless as you follow three narrators across the wild plains of India...all illuminate the complexities of the country and culture, and you'll be stunned by the author's portrayal of the magnificent, tusked animals central to the characters' lives."

—*Time Out NYC*

"In *The Tusk That Did the Damage*, James grounds a moral investigation in fallible human (and animal) emotionality: her prose is simple and beautiful, and her characters, both human and pachyderm, are lovingly rendered. But mostly you'll come away with a dreadfully heightened awareness of our careless destruction of the natural world."

—*Bustle Magazine*

"Utterly entralling...a story that is bound to leave marks, but the best ones always do."

—*Suvudu*

About the Author

TANIA JAMES is the author of the novel *Atlas of Unknowns* and the short-story collection *Aerogrammes*. Her fiction has appeared in *Boston Review*, *Granta*, *Guernica*, *One Story*, *A Public Space*, and *The Kenyon Review*. She lives in Washington, DC.

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The Poacher

Everyone in Sitamala thinks they know my brother's story. On the contrary. They may know the tune, but I would bet a half bag of pepper the words are all wrong. I blame his wife's people for spreading slander, all those perfidious huge-hipped sisters, not a one half as lovely as Leela.

Our father was a rice farmer. He came from a time when to farm was a noble profession, when people sought our gandhakasala and our rosematta for their earthy fragrance superior to the stuff that now comes cheap from Vietnam. Who can remember those times with all these farms lying fallow and many a farmer's son

gone to roost in a soft office chair? And who am I to blame them, I who have seen the Gravedigger for myself and felt its breath like a steam on my face?

Some say my brother stepped into the very snare he laid for the elephant. I say opinions are cheap from far. I will take you to the Gravedigger myself and let you meet its honey-colored eye. I will show you the day it first laid its foot on our scrawny lives. Then you tell me who was hunter and who was hunted.

To know our troubles, you must know what happened to my cousin Raghu. When I think on poor Raghu, I see him stoking a small fire. I see him nudging a stick aside so as to let the flames breathe. I have called up this image many a time as if I were with him in the palli as I should have been that night.

The palli was a paddy-roofed matchbox on bamboo legs stranded in the midst of his father's rice field, same as the ones in the neighboring fields. If a herd of elephants were to come glumping their way through the stalks, we were to wave the lantern and give the long caw that would set the others cawing. If this didn't scare the herd away, we used crackers and rockets. But the herds became wise to our ways. They learned that our racket had no teeth to it, so they kept on eating their way through six months' worth of our back-bent work. Sometimes we had to call the Forest Department; it would send three or four men to blind the beasts with headlights and fire ancient rifles. We called them greenbacks for their dingy green uniforms and their love of currency.

The herds were mostly cows, and they meant no personal harm unless you tampered with a calf. There is no one more fearsome than a mother enraged. In my youth I heard of a cow that cradled the carcass of her baby for days and would not be deprived of it.

Now the solo bull could be a very rude intruder. If one of those fellows were to pay us a visit, we were to leap out of the palli and race home. Do not be fooled by the lumps you see at the zoo—the elephant can run! Ask Raghu's father, who was only twenty years old when a bull elephant discovered him dozing in the palli. Synthetic Achan survived because he knew the elephant has weak eyes. Run straight and you will be trampled. Cut a zig-zag and you may confuse it.

Synthetic Achan felt Raghu was too young to sit guard in the palli alone, so he drafted me also. Yet I do not know where I was that night, probably testing my luck with some soft-bottomed girl. What to say. I was nineteen and had discovered that my visage had an effect on certain girls, so to speak. I pretended not to care about my visage, but Raghu needled me about the cream I occasionally raked through my hair. Sometimes he called me Styleking as in: "Eh Styleking, did you bathe in Brylcreem or stick the whole tub up your rump?"

"Yamini likes it."

"Up the rump?"

"Do not talk of her rump."

"I hear what I hear. And from the particulars, I would not touch her with a boatman's pole."

We bickered, but there was a comfort to our fuggy odors and the flash of our teeth in the dark. Other times we burrowed into the quiet, each of us privately wondering what kind of future awaited us. I had a habit of dozing, which Raghu allowed to a limit and would shake me awake only if I were to poof. "What is this," he would shout, flapping his hands about his face, "your personal shithouse?"

Whenever he gently tapped me awake, I knew I had been murmuring for my brother, something like *Where is Jayan where is he*, even though Jayan had been home for six months already. To spare me the shame,

Raghu would only say I had been poofing again.

Humble as it was, our palli commanded a five-star view. To the north a phone tower climbed the sky. To the east an owl glared from its bamboo perch, swiveling its head for rodents among the stalks. To the west we watched the sunset pour over the teak- rimmed forest aka Kavanar Wildlife Park.

Our people had been walking the forest long before it took that fussy name. The new laws forbid us from doing anything in the park, not walking, not even picking up a finger length of firewood without being fined for trespass and stealing. Stealing from trees that had dropped us fruit and firewood for centuries! Meanwhile, the laws looked kindly on the greenbacks and timber companies, their rows of rosewood, eucalyptus, teak.

So I had zero patience for Raghu's ramblings when he decided to tell all about the spectacle he had witnessed one day prior, starring his brand-new hero: Ravi Varma, Veterinary Doctor. I had never seen this Ravi Varma, M.D., though I had heard of his exploits with the greenbacks, and I was no fan of theirs nor his by association.

And what heroic feats had the cow doctor performed to deserve Raghu's worship? Pulled an elephant calf from a tea ditch, where the wee thing had tripped and fallen much to its mother's distress.

I told Raghu my demented old mammachi could pull an elephant calf from a tea ditch.

"Not only that," Raghu enthused. "The vet doctor got the mother to *take back* the baby."

Now this part was pure lie. "A mother elephant won't touch a calf that was handled by humans. Every idiot knows that."

"But she did! And she thanked him after."

"Did they shake hands too?"

"And two sayips were there, filming it all. BBC people I think."

This gave me pause. In those days, it was rare to see foreigners in our parts, and we were neither poor enough nor princely enough to appear on Western screens. I was minimally intrigued. What did the BBC want with us?

Raghu sighed, still dazzled by the memory of Ravi Varma, M.D. "It was something, Manu, I tell you."

Was Raghu musing about the mother and calf on his final evening? Did that sentimental memory lead him to lay down his guard? I imagine his last and lonesome hour, I see him drifting off, a breath from sleep, before he sits up quick to the snap of a broken branch.

In the silence he looks from one doorway to the other. He can open his lungs and caw and set the other palls cawing, but what if it was only the snap of the fire? He hears me scoffing in his ears: *A broken branch in the middle of a field?*

Raghu hunkers beneath his blanket, hiding from the possibilities.

After a noiseless minute he can breathe again, relieved he never set to squawking like some half-brained bird. He draws deep on the comfort of woodsmoke, sure I will come. Until then, he will tend the fire alone.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Maribel Davenport:

As people who live in the modest era should be change about what going on or facts even knowledge to make them keep up with the era that is certainly always change and progress. Some of you maybe may update themselves by examining books. It is a good choice for you but the problems coming to an individual is you don't know which you should start with. This The Tusk That Did the Damage: A novel is our recommendation to make you keep up with the world. Why, as this book serves what you want and want in this era.

Bessie Hall:

Why? Because this The Tusk That Did the Damage: A novel is an unordinary book that the inside of the publication waiting for you to snap that but latter it will shock you with the secret this inside. Reading this book next to it was fantastic author who have write the book in such incredible way makes the content inside easier to understand, entertaining way but still convey the meaning completely. So , it is good for you because of not hesitating having this ever again or you going to regret it. This unique book will give you a lot of gains than the other book possess such as help improving your skill and your critical thinking way. So , still want to hold off having that book? If I were being you I will go to the publication store hurriedly.

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