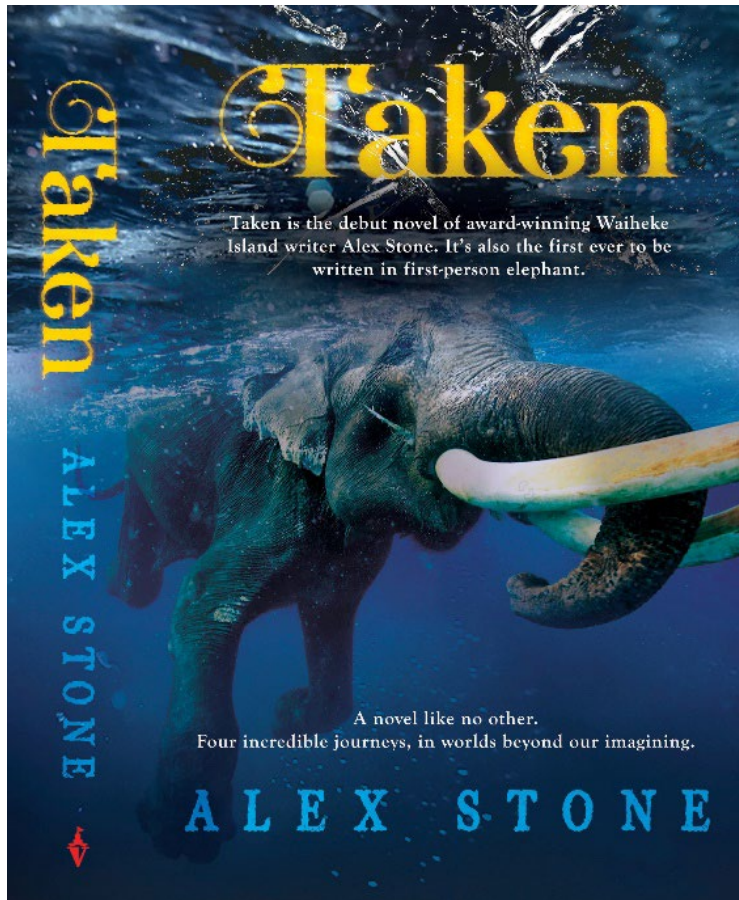


From reviews of *Taken*

<https://pegasuspublishers.com/books/alex-stone/taken>



A writer of striking originality with qualities of daring and humour that are rare. Like Lloyd Jones, Alex has the ability to create a landscape so vivid the reader feels he is walking down a dusty road or in the hold of a ship.

- **Elizabeth Smither**, novelist and Poet Laureate of New Zealand

There is energy and confidence on every page. The way you inhabit your lines is remarkable.

- **Lloyd Jones** author of *Mr Pip* and Winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Award

A really strong idea for a story. The elephants' voice works very well. This is hard to pull off but you did a great job of the African voice in [the short stories] *Came to talk*, and *Four*, so if you can do that, you can do this. I see this one as having great potential; for a long story..."

- **Stephen Stratford**, NZ literary editor

Sometimes his rendering can be so singular, so startling, that you'll hear yourself exclaiming aloud.

- **David Hill**, *Kete Books*

Meet Hannibal Solo, Biligiri, Tant-Meisie and Pulmulla, the majestic stars of four narrative threads which knock us over and pull us into a world of magic realism. The author plays with time and place, fiction and non-fiction in journeys which blend personal and historical, creating a kind of dream state.

It is an absolute blast – a triumph of writing of the imagination, skilfully mashing together magisteria – of orders of life, time, ecology, colonialism and the damage it does – without losing the reader or taking the easy route.

Most remarkably of all, the voices are those of elephants, and *Taken's* greatest feat is to let you in on their secrets so utterly, you begin to feel like one.

Superb.

- **Jenny Nicholls**, *Weekender*

Taken is about the importance of storytelling, more specifically, who tells the story; whose perspective endures. "So that we may not be forgotten" – each of the elephant narrators wants their story remembered, for it is in their nature to remember..

There are also exquisite descriptions of acts of kindness, and gestures of gentleness – extended to elephants and humans alike.... The device of having one elephant who appears in two of the stories somehow gives dimension to all the characters – and by the end of the book, I felt so sad for those lost, and I regretted leaving those still living.

Much of the descriptions are richly olfactory, given as they are by elephants, who can smell emotions, intentions, and deceptions, as well as weather, flora, food, and farts.

We listen; that has always been our strength – or at least one of them”, and I guess *Taken* is saying if only we were wise enough to listen to elephants

I loved reading this book.

- **Alyson Baker** *alysontheblog reviews of New Zealand fiction*

Hannibal’s interlopers want their voices heard, and what wonderful voices they are.

[*Taken*’s] story will delight and haunt readers.

The author’s original use of language is demonstrated not only by the characters’ distinctive voices, but also in his creative wordplay. The beautiful conversation Pulmulla’s group has with a sea mammal when they are forced to swim illustrates Stone’s innovative skills...Poetic writing brings energy to the mundane. When Biligiri speaks of dust in the air, he notes, ‘the dust...enveloping us like the softest cloth, a sari of new circumstance.’

This book is a gem. Perhaps we need dense storytelling to fully appreciate highlights in Stone’s writing, which appear like morsels of delicious fruit.

- **Nod Gosh**, *Landfall*

Absorbing and lyrical, and poignant in the elephants’ message, like Heathcote Williams’ *Sacred Elephant* before it, *Taken* deserves a wide readership.

- **Gareth Patterson**, author of *The Secret Elephants*, and *Beyond the Secret Elephants*

Just read *Taken* and want to congratulate you!

It was a very ambitious project, but you managed to pull it all together and hold my interest up until the end.

Don't think that many modern writers would have been prepared to take on such a challenge but, for me, it was part of the charm of this novel. You had a passion that needed to be shared in its entirety.

Bravo!

- **Margaret Peacocke**

Alex Stone is an artist, inventor, poet and award-winning writer. His extraordinary literary debut novel is written from the point of view of three Indian elephants, who are on a march to the fabled land of Abyssinia.

This is a lyrical and poignant read as we follow the story from the late 19th century to the present decade. Whether in Kentucky or the Belgian Congo, the landscape is vivid, and the events are dramatic, daring and humorous by turn.

And you will want to savour each page – there are many moments of brilliance. But it's a rewarding read, and on each page, you can see how much research the author has done on this topic and how much he cares about animal welfare.

The most compelling part of this novel? The voices of the elephants, with their distinctive tone and cadence. *Taken* is an epic novel and a saga of these wonderful creatures that you won't forget. It will be interesting to see what this accomplished author chooses to produce next.

- **Karen McMillan, NZ Booklovers**

Your writing absolutely needs to be reaching a world audience. I am so happy for you. And I am so happy that a book like this with such affinity and empathy for elephants has been written. I love how you have written from the elephants' point of view Alex.

Hopefully this will help people to see animals and understand their plight more clearly. It is a beautiful book Alex and because of your writing, I was reading from inside the book rather than outside of it. (I'm not sure if that makes sense).

The way you see the world, your metaphors, and the way you transform the day to day into something that makes the reader's mind sparkle with different ways of seeing the world.

Just an example of what I'm trying to describe - badly, is your paragraph of making new worlds by walking and the difference in the way that the invaders understood the land through one dimensional maps, missing all the richness, detail and meaning of the land itself.

Anyway. Congratulations Alex. Beautiful, eye opening, exquisitely absorbing, gentle and powerful.

This is a poignant story written with extraordinary beauty.

- **Danielle Mathieson**, NZ artist

Wonderful to see you giving some non-human perspectives some air!

- **Susan Wills**, NZ writer, poet

Taken deserves to reach people. It has breadth and depth.

- **Janet Salas** NZ writer

It is more than time Elephant entered the corpus of published languages.

- **Leith Duncan**

Bravo Alex! What a journey it has been for you, let alone your elephant friends.

- **Sam Cunningham**, writer and Ethiopian tour guide

Taken looks to be a bold and imaginative concept. Writing samples I have seen have a musicality and dignity...

- **Katie Hayworth**, Penguin Books NZ editor.

I was greatly impressed by his entry *Taken* – an accomplished and poignant story. Here was a writer of considerable potential should he decide to write longer fiction...

- **Tessa Duder**, judge, AUT creative writing competition.

I've read and re-read your short story, and I think this: It is intriguing, beautifully-crafted, moving and poetic, in form at least seeming an extension of your poem 'History of Anchors'. It brings the knowing eye of elephants to bear on the reader, creating the feeling of injustice I always have when I'm close to them. It's a parable of imperialism. For all these reasons and more, I loved it.

Alex's perspective is unusual. This gives his stories their outstanding quality: they are original. I have not read stories like this before. If one of the objects of good writing is to move the reader to a different place, then he succeeds very well.

- **Bruce Ansley**, one of New Zealand's pre-eminent storytellers, and author of *A long Slow Affair of the Heart*, *A Fabled Land*, and *Coast: A New Zealand Journey*, winner Best Illustrated Non-fiction Book at the New Zealand Post Book Awards

It was a pleasure to meet the elephants again and go on reading. They seem quite familiar to me now, as if we are already acquainted. And you've written some stunning and moving scenes. I think this last section contains some of your best work. But, once again, you are the master of this, the supreme *mahout*.

...philosophical discourse – this is one of the charms of *Taken* does that. Philosophising is almost made for elephants, being part of their characters, a strategy for survival in difficult situations and unrelieved tedium.

I felt very flattered to read about the wedding of Willie and Anna and, of course, the participation of Aunty-Girl – you hear of newly-weds taking pets or even relatives on a honeymoon but this must be a first for an elephant.

The battle scenes I thought were marvellously done – I felt thoroughly engaged in the battle and the aftermath – I think the aftermath is something the reader always wants to know about and is often short-changed. (The famous aftermath in ‘War and Peace’, aftermath descriptions of the American Civil War – have you read ‘Lincoln in the Bardo’? – I think you would find it interesting).

I found many, many things to delight in – the mysterious man moving in the dark, the battle that is absolutely alive, the burial of the queen, the retreat, the British Museum curators (how well done that is!).

- **Elizabeth Smither**, novelist and Poet Laureate of New Zealand

First, I want to say how marvellous, interesting, absorbing this is. I can imagine it as a big novel with an appeal that lies somewhere between fiction and non-fiction. Modern readers are receptive to new forms that combine information and imagination in equal parts. An interior voice – whether elephant or human – needs interesting content more than strict reality and *Taken* is mercifully free of didacticism. The interior voices of the elephants, their singular personalities and experiences have human parallels – how they survive in situations beyond their control, how they find pleasure and interest on a daily basis among the dreary and repetitious. How philosophical they are and what superb analysts! If an elephant (of moderate size) were to appear in my garden I feel I would be delighted. I have so many questions I could ask and would love some wise advice.

There were many places where I paused and thought ‘This is interesting, this is something I haven’t thought of.’ A great strength, which gives the novel a broad sweep (of landscape and mood), is that elephants and humans (I am repeating myself here?) share the Larkin-like problem of how to live day by day. There are perfect pages in the novel that move with speed and energy and still combine a sense of underlying philosophy. Perhaps applied philosophy.

There are many beautiful landscape descriptions.

Also marvellous descriptions of method (like the experiments we did in science). How to get an elephant onto a boat or a gun onto its back. The humans barking orders and the elephants’ quiet receptivity is well and amusingly contrasted.

There is some wonderful writing in here – the last page (pg 173) ‘The wheel brakes of the train screech in protest as we slow to enter the fringes of a dusty mid-size town in the haze of a wood-smoke dawn’. The beginning is great: ‘I am besieged by dreams’. **Shreemayi** and the four felled mango trees (pg 19); the descriptions of scents and how elephants feel the earth through their feet; the night at the circus that goes wrong and is saved by improvisation; the lists; the library with 37 books; the human friendships (Cat and Debbie); the philosophizing of the elephants and their wise judgements of human beings; trains and boats; the coming war with Tewodros and negotiations with the *Ras*.

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Such a pleasure to get the last chapters and I couldn’t help smiling to myself at the clever way you have ended it. Not in ‘closure’, as we think of it – it always seems to me an over-used and inaccurate word – but in the opening out into a broad and accommodating philosophy which gathers all the threads together: the death of the little king, the new elephant babies, the pigeon and his enlightened explanation of flying, the grief assuaged by lighting a fire. That you haven’t wrapped it up tightly and tied it with a ribbon is a good thing, in a great tradition.

- **Elizabeth Smither**, novelist and Poet Laureate of New Zealand.