

# **Small as an Elephant Study Guide**

**Small as an Elephant by Jennifer Richard Jacobson**

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## Plot Summary

“Small as an Elephant” is a children’s novel by Jennifer Richard Jacobson which follows the experiences of eleven year-old Jack Martel as he attempts to return home after his psychologically-impaired mother abandons him at an island campsite in Maine. When the novel begins, Jack wakes up to discover that his mother, her tent, and her rental car have all vanished. Jack at first believes that his mother will shortly return, or that she is somewhere nearby. Several searches of the campground in addition to waiting reveal nothing to Jack. A few calls to his mother’s cell phone go unanswered.

Jack soon realizes he has some serious problems. He is alone, hungry, has little money, and will be unable to stay at the campground for long without his mother present. Jack befriends a boy named Aiden, whose family brings Jack around the island to spend time with them. Jack lies to them, telling his mother is sick or has gone into town for medicine and food as the situation demands. While swimming with Aiden, Jack ruins his cell phone battery. Jack begins to worry his mother may be having a mental episode. Not wanting to be taken away from her or have to live with his grandmother, he decides to try to find her.

In Bar Harbor, Jack goes to Geddy’s Bar and Restaurant after seeing a local wearing a t-shirt for the establishment. It is just like a t-shirt his mother owns. At Geddy’s, Jack meets Big Jack, who reports overhearing Jack’s mother deciding to go to the Bahamas with a yacht captain. Jack is stunned and leaves. He decides to walk home to Boston. He does not want to be taken away from his mother, and believes that if he can get home without anyone knowing, no one will report his mother to the Department of Social Services (DSS). Visiting a book and gifts shop in Bar Harbor, Jack steals a small plastic elephant, his favorite kind of animal.

Jack begins traveling south by foot. Along the way, he collects soda cans to exchange for money for food. He hurts his hand while going through a recycling bin for soda cans and plastic bottles, and is soaked in a downpour. He travels for days, camping out in the woods and stealing vegetables along the way. He travels through several towns, coming to learn that has been declared missing, and his grandmother and the police are searching for him. As time drags on, Jack becomes more and more frustrated, ultimately coming to feel as if his journey to get home is worthless and pointless.

Jack’s frustration with his mother grows. She has had bad episodes before, but not like this. Instead of going home, Jack decides to head to the animal park at York, Maine, in order to see Lydia, the elephant. It causes Jack to reflect on how he and his mother had argued about visiting Lydia the day before she disappears. Jack’s mother had called him selfish for wanting to see Lydia; Jack had questioned whether or not his mother was taking her medication. Jack secretly worries that his mother’s disappearance could be his fault.

Jack is ultimately found by Big Jack, who has joined the search for Jack. Big Jack decides to bring Jack to see Lydia. He explains that Jack’s mother leaving isn’t Jack’s



fault. He goes on to explain that he understands that allowing someone else to care for him would make Jack feel like he was betraying his mother. Big Jack assures Jack this is not the case. At Lydia's exhibit, Jack's grandmother is waiting. She has been waiting there for him for a week. Jack happily embraces his grandmother, who explains that her daughter is now in a hospital to get better. Jack will live with his grandmother for now.



# Chapters 1 – 5

## Summary

Chapter 1 – Eleven-year-old Jack Martel, in his Hubba tent at Seawall Campground on Maine's Mount Desert Island in Acadia National Park, wakes up hot and sweaty. He discovers his mom, Becky, the rental car, and all their camping gear are gone. His phone has no reception. He imagines his mother must have moved on to a better campground, as a park ranger explains they were lucky to make it in at all the night before. Jack travels around the campground looking for his mother's tent and rented Prius, which was borrowed back in Boston where they live. He cannot find her.

Hungry, Jack counts his money—fourteen dollars and sixty-three cents. The woman working the registration hut counter directs him down Route 102A to Seawall Camping Supplies. Jack wants to ask the woman if she has seen his mother, but instead asks if the store has neon-red hot dogs. The woman responds that they do. On his way to the store, Jack calls his mom, getting her voicemail. He leaves her a message, asking her where she is.

Chapter 2 – Jack purchases a two hot dogs, chips, small soda, and an issue of the Bangor Daily News for a couple of dollars. As he reads the headlines, he worries his mother may have had a car accident. Jack reads about a nine year-old girl missing, and wonders if adults are also kidnapped. Suddenly, Jack is angry. He has been looking forward to these three days on vacation like nothing else, and now his mother is gone. He walks over to where some tourists are walking along the rocky shore to look for his mother, seeking out her cropped, blonde hair. He watches a happy boy of about 11 playing Frisbee, making his parents laugh. Jack wishes he could be that boy, but takes it back because he thinks his own mom is cool.

The boy, Aiden, and his sister, Julie, appear when Jack tries to pick up a crab. He and his family are also staying at the campground. Aiden and his family leave, saying maybe he'll see Jack at the ranger talk that night. Jack finds a rock that looks like an elephant, lays down on it, and remembers the first time his mom took him to see an elephant at the circus. It was a nervous and exciting experience. Back at the campground, Jack sees he is still alone. A kind female park ranger asks if Jack is alright. Jack, wanting to avoid questions and conversations with adults, says everything is good.

Chapter 3 – Jack returns to the store to buy more food, imagining his mother returning any time and being impressed with his toasting marshmallows. He still has \$9.00 remaining. He tries calling his mother again and gets no answer. At the store, Jack buys some groceries and is allowed to take two paper coffee cups, and pack of matches. Jack realizes collecting firewood at the campground is prohibited, and wonders what he will do. Back in his tent, he eats salami, cheese, and marshmallows. He falls asleep, dreaming of his grandmother talking about baby elephants and how much food they eat. He remembers his mother saying she never would forgive his grandmother for what she



tried to do. He remembers reading his mother's favorite book of poetry, "The Cowboy and His Elephant."

Chapter 4 – Jack wakes a few hours later, at 9 PM. He goes to get some water from the faucet, and runs into Aiden's mom. She says she is happy Aiden has already made a friend. Jack explains he is staying with his mother. Aiden's mother invites them both to Echo Lake. Jack tells her his mother isn't feeling well, but that he'll come. He is brokenhearted the next morning when his mother still has not returned. He turns his phone off to conserve battery power. He runs into a male ranger named Stan, whom Jack tells his mother is at the store picking up supplies. The ranger explains he merely wants to confirm that Jack and his mother will be there until the following day. Stan tells Jack to find him if he needs anything.

Jack goes with Aiden and his family to Echo Lake on the Island Explorer, a free bus. Jack worries about where his mother is for the entire ride, imagining her battery has died or that she was in trouble and in need of help. Jack reflects on having been left once before by his mother, but it was at home in Boston, and she had come back. Jack promises himself to seek help if he cannot find his mother on the island. Jack goes swimming with Aiden. After eating lunch, Jack and the others can see elephant shapes in the clouds. He then realizes he has gone swimming with his cellphone still in his pocket, and the battery is ruined. Jack throws the battery and begins crying.

Chapter 5 – Jack explains his unhappiness to Aiden's family by saying he is worried about his mom. Aiden's mom, Diane, thinks she should have checked on Becky before leaving. She insists on checking in on Becky upon their return. Jack is terrified now that his secret will be found out, and that Diane will prove to be like all the guidance counselors and social workers he has had to deal with before. Back at the campsite, Jack explains his mother must have gone to get medicine. Diane says she'll bring over some food later. Inside his tent, Jack remembers a time at the train stop for Forest Hills when his mother began dancing around, asking people what can burn in space. The Department of Social Services was called, and Jack was forced to live with his grandmother until his mother was released. In the present, Jack packs everything he can in his backpack, and heads down to the Island Explorer.

## Analysis

"Small as an Elephant" is a children's novel by Jennifer Richard Jacobson which follows the experiences of eleven-year-old Jack Martel as he attempts to return home after his psychologically-impaired mother abandons him at an island campsite in Maine. When the novel begins, Jack wakes up to discover that his mother, her tent, and her rental car have all vanished at some point between the previous night and that morning. The absence of Jack's mother calls into question the loyalty of family, making family an immediate theme. Jack struggles to wonder where his mother has gone, and like a dutiful and loving son, sets out to find her.



Becky's absence not only calls into question the nature and meaning of Family thematically, but also brings to fore the theme of journey. Jack's determination to find his mother begins an important journey in his life, one that is not merely composed of traveling, but of emotional and moral growth. Notice that at first, Jack's reaction to his mother's disappearance is one of being stunned and unable to logically make sense of what has happened. Heartbreakingly, Jack gets by through imagining that his mother is merely indisposed or on her way back. Each minute that passes could see her return, but nothing happens.

Jack's second instinct becomes survival. Here, survival becomes an important theme in the novel. Jack, existing without his mother, now has only himself to rely upon. This includes for things like food. Jack has a couple of dollars that he uses to purchase food, thinking in his mind about how it is the mother's responsibility to provide for her child, not the child providing for the child and a child-like adult. Here again, subtle essences of the theme of Family can be seen in Jack's attempts to rationalize the situation, and to eat a meal.

Jack's own family situation is heavily contrasted with Aiden's family's situation. Aiden's family appears close-knit, warm, and loving, the sorts of things that Jack does not always have. Indeed, his mother won't even answer her phone. Jack quickly comes to realize that he will have to provide for himself if he is to survive the time until his mom returns, or he finds his mom. He also wants to avoid uncomfortable questions or the risk that others will involve themselves in his situation. A sense of survival kicks in as Jack begins lying his way through his difficulties. The lies become shields for Jack.

It is also through Jack's discovery that he is alone that the themes of Loneliness and Forgiveness begin to form. Jack can see how well other families get along, when his own mother isn't even around. Going to sleep at night, Jack feels lonely without his mother, and so he thinks of her constantly. Jack isn't merely just alone, but actually feels alone. As he wonders where his mother could possibly be, his mind alternates between worry, anger, and frustration. Part of him wants to be angry at his mother, while another part knows he'll forgive his mother. This is in sharp contrast with Jack's own mother, who vows she will never forgive Jack's grandmother for what Jack's grandmother tried to do —something which will become apparent in later chapters.

## Discussion Question 1

When Jack first discovers he is alone at the campsite, what thoughts run through his head about where his mother might be? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Jack tell Aiden and Aiden's family so many lies? What is Jack trying to avoid by telling lies?



## Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast Jack's and Aiden's families. How are they similar? How are they different? Are they more similar or more different than one another? Why?

## Vocabulary

fumbled, ambled, jumbled, whimpered, gravitated, reluctantly





# Chapters 6 – 10

## Summary

Chapter 6 – On the Island Explorer, Jack finally comes to Bar Harbor. It is one of the places he and his mother planned to visit. Jack ducks into some woods on Kebo Street, and a patch of mossy ground in the roots of a tree that will provide a perfect place to sleep and hide. Jack wonders how he will ever find his mother. He hears all kinds of wild noises around him, worrying him. Raccoons break into his backpack and steal his cheese. It is the last food he has.

Chapter 7 – Hungry and freezing in the morning, Jack collects soda bottles and cans to return for deposits. An old man in a hunting jacket directs Jack to Roberts Avenue. Jack finds the road has several bed-and-breakfast places. Leaving his bottles outside, he decides to begin checking them for his mother. He has no luck, and discovers a man has put his bottles into a recycling bin around back of the first B&B. He then retrieves his bottles, and decides to take others as well, but worries about whether or not it is stealing. A cat startles Jack, causing a box to fall on his hand. Jack then runs to the grocery store.

Chapter 8 – At the grocery store, Jack makes \$1.90 from the bottles, and he puts his throbbing hand into the freezers. He buys trail mix and a bottle of water, intending to eat sparingly and reuse the bottle. Jack is still very hungry, and vows to find more bottles or his mother. He decides to leave his mother a message online, but discovers he cannot use the computers at the Jesup Memorial Library because the library is closed for Labor Day. He becomes angry and realizes school begins the next day. He reflects on his mother's spinning times, where she doesn't think clearly. He reflects on searching for items that have rare colors during a spinning time, such as one his mom called "sunken treasure," a mixture of red, brown, and blue. He also thinks about his best friend, Nina, asking about his mother's moods, questions which Jack did not have answers to.

Chapter 9 – Jack walks through Bar Harbor. He samples some ice cream at an ice cream shop and wanders into shops looking for his mother, finding things he knows his mother would like. He sees a man wearing a Geddy's t-shirt, just like his mom does. The man explains the place is a bar and restaurant down the street. Jack goes to Geddy's. Jack sits beside an bearded man at the bar and asks for a glass of water. The young bartender kindly complies, asking Jack about his hand and finger. The bearded man believes the finger is not broken and has the bartender get Jack a bag of ice.

The bearded man introduces himself as Big Jack. Asking about Becky, Jack is thrilled to learn the bartender remembers seeing his mother on Saturday morning talking to Hinckley, who sails yachts for others. Hinckley, it is revealed, was preparing to set out for the Bahamas. As Big Jack sets about wrapping up Jack's fingers, he explains he once went to Ghana. This makes Jack think of African elephants. Big Jack offers Jack a cheeseburger, but Jack gets going, thanking Big Jack for his help. Jack is sickened to



think his mother may be headed to the Bahamas. Jack goes into a book and gift shop called Sherman's. There, he steals a plastic elephant figurine, and is nearly caught by the woman working and by Big Jack.

Chapter 10 – Jack rushes out of town, ultimately coming to an old farm down a dirt road. Jack meets a friendly old dog, and goes into the barn. Jack lays down to rest in the hay loft. When he wakes up, it is the middle of the night. Jack cannot stop thinking about his mother. He returns to sleep. When he wakes up, it is morning. Heading outside, he goes to take some tomatoes from the farm's garden, only to be caught by the woman who owns the place, Mrs. Olson. Olson wonders why Jack is not in school, but doesn't pursue the questions too far.

She offers him food in exchange for helping her to harvest some produce for the food pantry. Jack readily agrees. Olson tells Jack to ask the food pantry to send back a box of dried milk. He considers eating the food on the way, but then realizes he won't be able to bring back milk. He wonders about the poor people who cannot afford food, knowing he is one of them now. He wonders how people can end up so needy. He eats a carrot, and realizes he is heading toward Bar Harbor once more.

## Analysis

Jack has decided that he will go and try to find his mother. He has truly begun his journey at this point, leaving the relative safety of the campground to venture out into the world, into a place he has never been before. He has little money, he is exhausted, he is hungry, and he is lonely. Jack has much to contend with as he travels through Bar Harbor, seeking information about his mother.

It is through Jack's time in Bar Harbor that he learns about his mother's fate. She is on her way to the Bahamas. Here, family seems to have totally and completely failed Jack. Jack's mother should be on vacation with Jack, not cruising to another country. Jack is stunned, but is still in disbelief. His faith in family—in his mother—means that, while she may be mentally unsound, and while she may have her "spinning" moments, she is still his mother and she could not have abandoned him. This is something that Jack refuses to even contemplate.

It is at this point that Jack realizes there may be very bad trouble if others learn of his mother's intentions, and his own being left behind. Jack's subsequent trip to Sherman's book and gift store, and the stealing of the plastic elephant, come to symbolize Jack's frustration and heartache. The reader should note the importance of the elephant stolen by Jack. Jack's obsession with elephants is not only represented by the elephant, but the elephant itself becomes representative of safety and reassuring memories of his mother. The elephant, in a way, becomes Jack's child, something he can protect and take care of when no one is protecting or caring for him.

Indeed, Jack's recognition that he must survive on his own brings to the fore the theme of Survival once more. Jack, low on money, must collect bottles and cans for returns in



order to purchase food and water bottles. He later comes to Mrs. Olson's garden to steal produce in order to feed himself, a very base act of survival. It is almost as if Mrs. Olson can sense that Jack is in trouble, for she agrees to give him produce in exchange for his running an errand on her behalf.

Jack's sense of loneliness continues in this section of the novel, growing stronger each day. The plastic elephant he carries becomes something of a bulwark against that loneliness, for Jack, knowing he must care for the plastic elephant by not leaving it behind whenever he goes somewhere, is able to transfer his loneliness to a sense of belonging by way of the plastic elephant. The stealing of the elephant also alerts people to Jack, and Jack knows now that his fight for survival has begun in earnest. He knows that, having been caught stealing, the police will be brought in. Jack has unwittingly drawn even greater attention to himself than before.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why does Jack steal the plastic elephant? Why is Jack drawn to the elephant in the first place?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Jack has moral concerns about stealing produce from Mrs. Olson despite the fact that he is trying to survive. Why?

## **Discussion Question 3**

When Jack learns that his mother is probably headed to the Bahamas, he refuses to entertain the possibility that she has actually abandoned him. Why is this so?

## **Vocabulary**

intentionally, blurted, industrious, insatiable, futile, acquaintance, ravenous, tchotchkes, contemplated



# Chapters 11 – 15

## Summary

Chapter 11 – Jack goes back to the library for directions to the food pantry. He hides the vegetables outside. Inside on the computer, he finds he has no messages on his YouPage from his mom. He wonders if something has prevented his mom from contacting him, with the idea that perhaps his mother never intended to leave him alone at all. He thinks about leaving his plastic elephant behind at the barn, and wonders if he'll be able to return to retrieve it. Nina messages him, wondering why he isn't at school. He tells her he and his mom have decided to stay longer, and that everything is okay. She asks if Jack has seen Lydia, the elephant tourist attraction off Maine Pike. Jack explains they have not yet seen Lydia. Jack then sees two women conversing in the library, one of whom is Laurie, a waitress from Geddy's.

Jack finds directions to the food pantry, learns it will take him three days and thirteen hours to walk home, and that the Island Express makes a stop on the mainland. Jack then goes to the YMCA food pantry, where the man working fills up Mrs. Olson's bag with canned and other kinds of goods to return with Jack. Jack asks for cereal bars for Mrs. Olson as well. The man agrees. Jack eats one of the cereal bars, hides the rest in the barn, and puts the plastic elephant in his pocket. Jack leaves the bag of food for Mrs. Olson with a thank you note, collects the vegetables she has left for him, and then leaves to begin his 248-mile walk home.

Chapter 12 – Jack takes the Island Express to an RV campground called Narrows Too outside Trenton, Maine. He then goes into the Trenton Bridge Lobster Pound, a restaurant. Inside, he meets an elderly couple from Melrose, Massachusetts, four-and-a-half hours from Boston. Jack rushes into the parking lot, finds a pickup truck with Massachusetts plates, and hides under a tarp in the bed. The truck pulls up to the couple's summer place. Jack is saddened and cries. He hears a TV news report from inside the summer cabin about a boy missing from Mount Desert Island. He eats scraps from the trashcan outside the cabin, wondering if his mother has initiated the search. Jack will have to find out who has started it.

Chapter 13 – Jack dreams of being chased before waking up in the pickup truck bed in the rain. Looking into the cabin, Jack sees the elderly couple playing scrabble. He passes Lamoine Consolidated School where a woman stops him to see why he is not in school. Jack explains he is homeschooled and was merely returning some supplies. The woman tells Jack to hurry home. Jack thinks he could become a spy because he has begun to lie so well. He reflects on his mother's own ability to lie, once telling others she was taking Jack to the doctor, only to take him to an amusement park instead.

Jack goes to the Lamoine General Store. There, an older guy named Ralph and a younger guy are waiting on lunch. They reach for a paper, asking if Jack is "that kid" – but before they can finish, Jack flees the store. He keeps going until he finds an L. L.



Bean Outlet store. It is one of the places Jack and his mother had intended to visit in Maine. He changes out of his wet clothing and into dry clothing, reminding himself he is not stealing but borrowing them for a little while sitting in the dressing room. He wonders what to name his plastic elephant, and then hides in the dressing room when the store is closed.

Chapter 14 – Jack scouts out the L. L. Bean store, finding a futon to sleep on and first aid supplies. He eats some gummy worms from the store. In the staff room, he finds a fridge full of half-eaten lunches and other foods. He eats, watches a little TV, and goes onto the office computer. He finds his picture on a Bangor news website. He discovers his grandmother had received a call from a man on the way to the Bahamas, learning that Jack was not with Becky. His grandmother learned from Nina about the vacation in Maine, during which time his grandmother had called the Maine State Police. Many witnesses had since come forward, having encountered Jack.

Jack now knows the moment he comes out of hiding, he will never be able to live with his mother again. All his life, his mother has told him that his grandmother is crazy and controlling. Jack wonders if he could make it to the Bahamas, and if his mom might stay on her medication for good this time. Knowing that people are looking for him, he will not sign back online again.

Chapter 15 – Jack wonders how to travel as fast as possible without being seen. Suddenly, headlights appear outside the store, and Jack ducks down as a man tries the doors and leaves. Jack can hear a radio, and imagines the man must be a police officer. Jack wonders if he is turning into a bad kid. He goes on to cover his tracks in the store, straightening things up. He plans to take a bike from the store in the morning.

## Analysis

As the novel continues, so too does Jack's journey. The theme of Journey is front and center as Jack decides that he will indeed return to Boston by foot. It becomes apparent that Becky has disappeared before, though never away from home. Jack is used to dealing with this kind of situation, as he has always had to lie to protect his relationship with his mother. While he may not be able to find his mother, Jack seeks to find his way home. This means that Jack will at least have familiar territory from which to defend himself.

Jack's journey will take days, and as Jack begins moving south, his life begins to change. He endures the cold, sunburn, exhaustion, and hunger as he travels by foot. He knows he can no longer stay at the campground, and having been unable to bring all of his things with him, he knows that people will be coming looking for him. Jack's attempts at journeying meet with varied success. His trip to the mainland on the Island Express works out well, but his stowing away in a pickup truck does not. Jack's being forced to rely on himself slowly makes him a more independent and stronger kid. He continues to realize he truly only has himself to rely on and that he can indeed rely on himself.



Between the stealing of the elephant, and the assumption that others will soon find his abandoned tent at the campground, Jack begins dreaming of being chased. The reader should note that these dreams of chase become harbingers for what will soon unfold. Jack will have to struggle against time, against the police, and against search teams in order to make it back to Boston. Indeed, Jack has a close encounter not only with Ralph in Lamoine, but while he is in the L.L. Bean outlet store. A police officer nearly catches Jack inside. Jack's journey in large part has quickly become a quest for survival. Yet it has also become a journey of the soul as Jack draws near deeper truths about his life and his situation.

As Jack journeys along, the theme of Family remains present but subtle. Jack's family is mostly glimpsed through memories of them. Among these memories are those of Jack and his mother planning what to do while in Maine, from camping to visiting Bar Harbor to shopping at L. L. Bean. The planning of happy future events is of some comfort to Jack, though it also underscores his disbelief that his mother could have done anything such as to abandon him. Family means too much to Jack even at this point to entertain the idea that his mother deliberately left him behind. This is expressed through his thoughts in the library that perhaps his mother had never intended to leave him behind at all.

Other memories of family come to haunt Jack's mind in a negative way. Jack has grown up being afraid of, and nearly hating his grandmother. This owes to the stories and opinions of Becky, who takes every chance she can to speak ill of her own mother. Becky has constantly written off her mother, Jacks' grandmother, as crazy and controlling. This intense dislike of his grandmother is a position from which Jack will soon be making an emotional journey.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Jack decide to return to Boston? How long will it take him? How successful are his first few attempts to get back to Boston? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Jack spend the night in an L. L. Bean store? How does he feel morally and ethically about the food he eats, the clothes he wears, and the bike he steals? Why?

## Discussion Question 3

Among those Jack is seeking to avoid is his grandmother. Why does Jack want nothing to do with his grandmother? Do you believe he is justified in holding these views? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

irate, imperial, bartered, agitated, mock, impatient, involuntarily, edible, luxurious, ambitious





# Chapters 16 – 20

## Summary

Chapter 16 – Riding the bike, Jack passes through the town of Ellsworth and continues on. He rides for hours, stopping at a gas station at an intersection to use the bathroom. Jack, coming out of the bathroom, nearly bumps into a sunburned man. Jack then continues on, coming to rest by the Orland River, where he goes swimming. He then moves on, heading through Bucksport and going over several impressive bridges. As he rides, he begins to feel the effect of sunburn. He comes upon Fort Knox, a state historic site, where he wanders through the underground tunnels and bunkers. There, he is frightened by an unknown man, and Jack rushes away. He discovers his bike, sleeping bag, clothes, and flashlight are all gone. He now only has his water bottle, the clothes he is wearing, and the plastic elephant.

Chapter 17 – Outside the fort, Jack begins crying. He feels utterly hopeless, not wanting to do anything anymore, not even seeing his mother again. He finally moves along because of the mosquitoes that come out. Jack begins walking, thinking the plan to get home on his own was stupid, and realizing he no longer has a plan about what to do next. Jack believes that as soon as he gets home, someone will call the Department of Social Services (DSS). He waves at a passing truck to stop, but the truck goes past.

Chapter 18 – Jack stops at Safe Harbor Church, where a choir and band are practicing. He wonders what his mother will think of the plastic elephant. He knows his mother has become impatient with his elephant obsession. Jack thinks about Lydia the elephant, at York's Wild Kingdom. He reflects on how his mother opposed keeping an elephant in captivity. He reflects on the argument he and his mother had driving up to Maine, where she called him selfish, and he yelled at her for not taking her medication. He remembers her saying they would only spend one night in Maine and how the next morning, his mother was gone. In the present, Jack wonders whether his mother is her true self or not. He decides to go and see Lydia.

Chapter 19 – Jack spends the night in the balcony of the church. Waking up, he is hungry and determined to head to York, Maine. He takes a Searsport Vikings baseball cap from the lost-and-found bin as he leaves. Walking for two hours, Jack comes into Searsport. He sees kids heading out to school. An older girl asks him if he is new, but Jack says he forgot his homework and heads away. Jack goes to Coastal Café in order to use the internet and get directions to York. There, the girl appears and identifies him as the missing kid. Jack flees. The girl chases him.

Jack rushes into a bookshop. The girl finds him in the back vault, where Jack pulls her in and shuts the door. The girl says the whole state of Maine is looking for him, and that the bookshop owner, Mrs. Magillicutty will be angry with her. Jack begs the girl not to turn him in. The girl introduces herself as Sylvie Winters, and asks Jack why he doesn't want to be turned in. Jack confirms his mother left him, but says it is not permanently.





He is worried he will be taken away with his mother. Sylvie believes Jack's mother might even go to jail. She asks what Jack was planning to do. Jack responds that he wanted to see an elephant.

Chapter 20 – Sylvie shares her sandwich with Jack, asking him to tell her about elephants. Jack asks Sylvie what she'd like to do with her mother if Sylvie was going to leave. Sylvie responds she'd like to play Monopoly with her mother before leaving since it is her mom's favorite game. Jack explains that seeing Lydia is all he has left. When Mrs. Magillicutty opens the vault, Jack hides and Sylvie covers for him. She says someone must have shut the door after she wandered in. Mrs. Magillicutty cannot imagine who would have done it, though she is glad Lydia is okay. Lydia asks Mrs. Magillicutty to drive her to school to help explain why she is late.

## Analysis

Jack's journey continues through this part of the novel as he experiences some of his lowest points yet. By now, he is exhausted, nearly always starving, sunburned, and heartbroken. Every time Jack gets ahead a little, something bad ends up happening to set him back. He is experiencing the pitfalls of life the way that adults do even though Jack is only eleven. Having made it to Fort Knox, Jack comes to discover that his bike, sleeping bag, clothes, and flashlight have all been taken. It is the final straw for Jack. His resolve crumbles, and he breaks down and cries. He feels lost, alone, and helpless. Only swarms of mosquitoes give Jack enough motivation to keep moving.

Jack has been pushed to the breaking point. It is clear that apart from mosquitoes, Jack truly doesn't want to give up. He knows that getting home will mean the difference between DSS getting involved or not. However, he comes to suspect that, even should he make it home, DSS will become involved anyways, and take him away from his mother. It is striking to the reader that this late in the novel, despite Jack's alternating feelings of longing for and rage against his mother, he should long to remain with her after what she has done to him. For Jack, family is a moral absolute: there is nothing more important than family.

However, Jack decides to alter his plans. Knowing that DSS will probably be swarming around in Boston, and knowing that his mother is probably on the way to the Bahamas, Jack decides to go and see Lydia the elephant instead. Here, the reader is given the revelation of an argument occurring a day before Becky disappeared. This argument transpired between her and Jack beginning with elephants. The reader is shocked to see the cruel way in which Becky reacts to Jack's request, casting doubts on her abilities at being a mother. Jack's contention that Becky should stay on her medication only underscores this point.

The theme of Loneliness remains strong as Jack spends the night in Safe Harbor Church. The balcony in the church gives Jack a safe, warm, quiet place to sleep. It is his first decent sleep in days, and is where Jack decides once and for all to change course to go see Lydia. The reader recognizes that Jack has had a moment of spiritual



awakening in his journey, drawing near the place of God in which Jack's life is altered for the better. He is no longer concerned with getting home, but with doing something else. Jack's decision to go to York is a result of this spiritual motivation, and will pay great rewards by the end of the novel.

Beyond God, Jack's journey also brings him into contact with Sylvie. Sylvie represents a dramatic shift in Jack's life as it is to Sylvie that he first truly comes clean about everything, from his mother to where he wants to go. Jack's trusting of Sylvie isn't just because he finds her attractive, but because he finds her comfortable, and because she comes to shield him from Mrs. Magillicutty. Sylvie is the one person whom Jack has met along the way who hasn't tried to turn him in since news about his going missing went public. It reassures Jack, but also demonstrates how much Jack has grown in that he is able to trust someone else beyond his mom or best friend.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you believe that Sylvie does not turn Jack in? If you were in Sylvie's place, would you have turned Jack in? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Jack decide to alter his plans from getting home to Boston to going to see Lydia? What does he hope this will accomplish?

## Discussion Question 3

At Fort Knox, Jack reaches his breaking point. Why? How does he handle this breaking point? What finally gets him motivated again?

## Vocabulary

predict, impatient, emerged, obvious, enlighten, soothingly, qualifies, child neglect, abandonment



# Chapters 21 – 25

## Summary

Chapter 21 – Jack travels through Searsport to Mosman Park’s rocky beach. He hides in nearby bushes, intending to wait for dark to continue his journey. Two women with a dog named Waldo nearly stumble upon him. He decides to head back into the residential area of Searsport, coming to a shed with an old chair and mystery magazines inside. He decides to pass some time reading. When night falls, Jack begins walking again. Eventually, a van slows down behind him. Jack rushes into the trees.

Chapter 22 – A teenage boy gets out of the van calling for Jack. It is Sylvie’s cousin, Wyatt. He offers to bring Jack to York. Jack agrees to go with Wyatt. Wyatt wants to get Jack to York as fast as possible; Jack is worried about roadblocks and being spotted on major highways. Jack then speaks to Sylvie on the phone, thanking her. Wyatt begins asking Jack all kinds of questions, from how he has avoided the police to where he has been staying to if his grandmother is rich. Jack asks Wyatt for some food, promising to pay Wyatt back.

At a Citgo gas station, Jack overhears Wyatt talking to someone about a reward. Jack flees, rushing to hide in a dumpster. He finds half-eaten food and consumes it. The police arrive to speak with the people in the store. Jack soon hears them talking about the search out in the parking lot, talking about how Wyatt ran into Jack at just the right time. Jack realizes that Wyatt may not have ratted him out, but knows he cannot trust Wyatt.

Chapter 23 – Behind the Citgo, Jack finds an old rusted car where he spends the night. He takes Old Route 1. A police cruiser pulls up beside Jack, asking him if he lives in town. Jack explains he has a violin lesson. When the police officer calls Jack by his name, Jack responds and realizes his mistake immediately. The officer tells Jack to get in, saying he is going to radio in news for Jack’s grandmother, after which he will bring Jack to Moody’s Diner for breakfast. Jack runs, rushing into a pharmacy basement. The officer pursues and calls for backup.

As Jack tries to escape the building, he is caught by Big Jack. Jack accuses Big Jack of wanting to send him to DSS like everyone else. Big Jack says he is trying to do what is best for Jack, but Jack says no one cares what he actually wants. Big Jack reveals that Officer Kline has found his mother. Jack begins crying, furious about his mother leaving him. Big Jack hugs Jack. Jack cannot imagine why his mother would have ever left him in the first place.

Chapter 24 – Big Jack does not turn Jack immediately, wanting to know what Jack has been up to. Jack explains he was trying to go and see Lydia. Big Jack decides to bring Jack to York, hoping that the animals have not been taken south for the winter, yet. Big Jack reveals that he spoke to Jack’s grandmother. Despite Jack’s thoughts that his



grandmother hates his mother, Big Jack reveals that his grandmother spoke very highly of his mother. Jack then realizes that it was his mother who left his grandmother. Big Jack and Jack arrive at the animal park. Lydia is still there. Jack is stunned to see his grandmother in front of Lydia's pen as well.

Chapter 25 – Big Jack explains that he himself was a foster kid, and that Jack can't blame himself for his mother's leaving. Big Jack goes on to explain that he knows Jack feels like he is betraying his mother by wanting to be with people who will take care of him. Big Jack reveals that it was Jack's mother who made sure that Jack's grandmother knew what had happened in the first place. Jack, crying, then happily embraces his grandmother.

Gram explains she has been with Lydia all week Gram reveals it was she who first took Jack to see an elephant, long before he could remember. Gram also reveals that Jack's mom is in the hospital and will stay there until she can get better to come home. Gram will take care of Jack, moving to Jamaica Plain to do so. Jack then asks Big Jack to give the plastic elephant to Sylvie and tell Sylvie he got his Monopoly. Big Jack agrees to do so. Gram and Jack then go to see Lydia. The trainers offer Jack the chance to ride Lydia, but Jack kindly refuses. Instead, he pets and hugs Lydia. He and his grandmother then had home together.

## Analysis

As the novel concludes, the themes of Journey, Family, and Survival all intertwine in some fashion. Jack's journey, both physically and personally, comes to a conclusion. His journey physically ends in York's Wild Kingdom, where he sees Lydia and finds his grandmother waiting for him. Yet, Jack's physical arrival also reflects his emotional maturation as well. Jack has come to realize that not all things are as black-and-white as his mother has led him to believe.

For example, Jack realizes now that his mother's mental illness means that she may not always be a good or reliable mother, while all of the things Jack has been told about his grandmother are lies. It is clear to Jack that his mother abandoned his grandmother, just the way that his mother abandoned him. This sets the stage for a better relationship with his grandmother.

Indeed, Jack's grandmother demonstrates the love she has for her family. Even in the midst of her daughter's latest episode, she insists to others that her daughter is indeed a good mother. Gram herself is a wonderful grandmother, having waited for Jack for an entire week at Lydia's enclosure on the off-chance that Jack might show up. It is an act of family loyalty and love that totally contrasts with Becky's actions. Jack comes to understand that his mother did indeed leave him but that his grandmother is waiting with open arms for him.

It is through family that the theme of Loneliness can again be glimpsed and done away with. All of the loneliness that Jack has felt on his journey finally subsides when he



embraces his grandmother. He realizes that she truly does love him, and is truly a good person. While he will miss his mother for the time being, Jack knows he will be safe with his grandmother. Indeed, it is clear his grandmother has also been lonely without her daughter and grandson in her life, and her willingness to move to Boston is not just an example of human kindness, but of the desire to be with those she loves.

Most critically as the novel ends is the theme of Forgiveness. By now, it is readily apparent to the reader that Jack blames himself for everything that has happened –from the fight to his mother’s abandonment of him. However, it is Big Jack who contends that Jack cannot blame himself for things beyond his control. Big Jack explains that Jack must learn to forgive himself, because what happened truly isn’t his fault. The reader recognizes that people make their own choices. Jack could not force his mother to take her medication, and Jack could not predict or determine how his mother would behave without it. Jack does indeed ultimately come to forgive himself, finding reassurance of this forgiveness in his grandmother’s love.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Do you believe that Wyatt was only trying to help Jack for the reward money? Why or why not?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What makes Jack realize that his mother has lied to him about his grandmother? How does Jack react when he first sees and then later embraces his grandmother? Why?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What must Jack forgive himself for? Why does Big Jack insist that Jack forgive himself?

## **Vocabulary**

pangs, poaching, adhering, exaggerating, melodramatic, pummeling, traipsing, scatterbrained, contradict, manic, boisterous, bemused, impish



# Characters

## Jack

Jack Martel is the eleven-year-old principal protagonist of the novel “Small as an Elephant” by Jennifer Richard Jacobson. Jack is a bright, personable, untrusting, and sensitive kid who loves his mother dearly. They live in Boston. Jack is noted by his obsession with elephants, having first encountered elephants with his grandmother and mother, Becky, as a very young child. Elephants are symbolic of safety and happiness to Jack as a result. He hopes to be able to see Lydia the Elephant at the zoo in York, Maine, while on vacation but his mother opposes creatures being kept in captivity and will not allow Jack to see Lydia. This causes an argument between them in which Jack speaks about his mother refusing to take her medication.

The next morning, Jack wakes up alone at the campground he and his mother have taken a spot at. Jack is stunned. At first he thinks his mother must have gone to the store or is somewhere nearby, but he cannot find her anywhere. He cannot understand where his mother has gone or why she has left him, but he decides to find her. He must lie his way through numerous situations with strangers, including to Aiden and Aiden’s family, telling them that his mother is merely not feeling well or has gone shopping. Jack begins working his way south toward Boston, passing through one town after another. He learns from a man named Big Jack that his mother has gone to the Bahamas.

As Jack continues traveling, he sees that he has been listed as missing by his grandmother, and that all of Maine is looking for him. Panicked that he will be taken away from his mother, Jack continues fleeing south. He steals what he needs to survive, such as food, and sleeps wherever he can, such as in a church and in an old abandoned car. Jack is finally found by Big Jack and the police along Old Route 1. Big Jack brings Jack to York’s Wild Animal Kingdom to see Lydia the elephant. There, Jack’s grandmother is waiting to bring him home. She explains that his mother is now being treated in the hospital, and that everything will be okay.

## Becky

Rebecca “Becky” Martel is the mother of Jack, and the daughter of Gram. Becky has a mental illness, requiring medication to stay calm and stable. She dislikes taking medication, saying it stops her from feeling, and hates her mother telling her what to do. Becky drives a shuttle bus, saving up all year to bring herself and Jack to Maine for three days. During the vacation, Becky stops taking her medication. She decides to sail south to the Bahamas with a yacht captain she meets at Geddy’s Bar and Restaurant, telling the man to call her mother along the way to let her know that Jack is now alone. Becky is ultimately taken to the hospital, where she begins undergoing treatment for disability.



## Gram

Gram is the grandmother of Jack and the mother of Becky. Through Jack's life, Becky has told him that Gram is a control freak and that she is very mean. Jack grows up believing this until he is abandoned. He comes to realize that Gram is nothing like what Becky said, but that Gram is sweet, loving, and kind. He comes to realize that Gram was abandoned by Becky the way Becky abandoned him. Gram, when she learns Jack is missing, travels to Maine to help search and wait for him. She is thrilled when he turns up safely, telling him she will take care of him. She goes on to reveal that Jack's first experience with an elephant occurred because of her.

## Big Jack

Big Jack is a resident of Bar Harbor, Maine, and a patron of Geddy's Bar and Restaurant. Big Jack is a kind and friendly man who meets Jack at Geddy's. Big Jack later joins the search for Jack, ultimately finding Jack at a pharmacy building. Big Jack explains that he himself was a product of the foster care system, and he tells Jack that he can't blame himself for being abandoned. Big Jack brings Jack to see Lydia the Elephant, where Gram is waiting.

## Aiden

Aiden is an eleven-year-old boy who Jack meets at the Mount Desert Island campground in Acadia National Park, Maine. Aiden and Jack quickly become friendly with one another, hanging out and swimming. Aiden is suspicious of the fact that Jack always seems to be alone and without his mother.

## Sylvie

Sylvie Winters is a girl in her early teens who encounters Jack in the town of Searsport, Maine. She is pretty and kind. She recognizes Jack as the runaway everyone is looking for. Learning about how Jack may be taken away from his mother, she covers for him and contacts her cousin, Wyatt, to help get Jack to York.

## Wyatt

Wyatt is the older cousin of Sylvie Winters. He picks up Jack as Jack travels to York. Wyatt's motives in the novel are not entirely clear. He appears to be primarily interested in reward money for Jack's safe return, but later covers for Jack at a gas station when two police officers arrive. Wyatt may merely be covering for Jack on the chance he can find Jack again and collect the reward money, or he may genuinely be interesting in trying to help Jack.



## **Mrs. Olson**

Mrs. Olson is an elderly widow and impoverished farmer outside of Bar Harbor, Maine. She grows vegetables which she exchanges for canned and boxed goods at the YMCA food bank. She allows Jack to keep some vegetables in return for his collecting groceries for her.

## **Ralph**

Ralph is a young patron of Lamoine General Store. Ralph appears as impolite and unkind toward Jack. He recognizes Jack as being the missing kid, causing Jack not only to flee, but to change his game plan for traveling.

## **Lydia the Elephant**

Lydia the Elephant is the only elephant in Maine, spending her summers at York's Wild Kingdom. Visiting Lydia becomes the ultimate goal of Jack on his travels. Gram herself goes to stay with Lydia for a week, hoping her grandson will show up at the exhibit.





# Symbols and Symbolism

## Hubba tent

A Hubba tent is a small, lightweight, one-person tent that Jack uses at the Mount Desert Island campground in Acadia National Park in Maine. Jack spends the night in the tent by himself, using it as a place to sleep and a refuge when his mother goes missing. Unable to bring the tent with him when he sets out to find his mother and return to Boston, Jack must leave the tent behind.

## Sleeping bag

A cold weather sleeping bag is brought along on the camping trip by Jack when he and his mother visit Acadia National Park's Mount Desert Island in Maine. The sleeping bag pays off as the late summer nights and early mornings get very chilly. Jack brings along his sleeping bag when he sets off to find his mother and return to Boston, ultimately losing it along the way at Fort Knox.

## Money

\$14.63 is the amount of money that Jack has on him at the beginning of the novel. Jack uses it to buy a newspaper, salami, cheese, and marshmallows after he discovers his mother is gone and that he has no one to rely on except himself. Jack quickly spends the money and must commit to collecting and returning cans and bottles to make more money.

## Prius

A Prius is the rental car that Jack's mother uses to bring herself and Jack to Maine. The care is a hybrid, running on electricity and gasoline. Jack finds the car interesting. When Jack wakes up after his first night in Maine, he is stunned to discover the Prius, as well as his mom and all of her possessions, are gone.

## Cans and bottles

Cans and bottles are collected by Jack in order to return to supermarkets for money. He also takes cans and bottles from a bed-and-breakfast's recycling bin. During this theft, a cat startles Jack, causing the lid of the bin to slam down and hurt his hand. With the extra bottles and cans, Jack uses this money to buy some food to alleviate his hunger.



## **Salami and cheese**

Salami and cheese is Jack's first meal alone at the campground. He purchases the salami and cheese from Seawall Camping Supplies. The cheese is ultimately stolen by raccoons long after Jack has finished the salami.

## **Water**

Water bottles are purchased by Jack at a grocery store after returning bottles and cans for a refund. Jack knows the water bottles will come in handy, as he can refill them and take them with him as he travels. The water bottles demonstrate Jack's growing independence and forward-thinking, as he begins to carefully weigh what he purchases against what his purposes are.

## **Plastic elephant**

A small, plastic elephant is stolen by Jack from Sherman's, a book and gift shop in Bar Harbor. The elephant is symbolic not only of Jack's obsession with elephants, but of safety and reassuring memories of his mother. The elephant becomes Jack's ward in a way, something to protect and take care of when no one is protecting or caring for him.

## **Cereal bars**

Cereal bars are received by Jack when he drops off fresh produce and picks up canned and boxed goods for Mrs. Olson at the YMCA food bank. Jack keeps the cereal bars, eating them over the next few days when he cannot find food elsewhere. The cereal bars become a vital source of vitamins, minerals, and food for Jack when he has nothing else to eat.

## **Newspapers**

Newspapers are consulted by Jack throughout his travels. The newspapers come to be dominated by stories of Jack's disappearance. As a result, people begin to recognize Jack, so Jack takes to traveling at night, and traveling by backroads. The newspapers are how Jack learns that his grandmother has initiated the search.



# Settings

## Mount Desert Island

Mount Desert Island is a part of Acadia National Park in Maine. Located near Bar Harbor, Mount Desert Island features beaches, lakes, beautiful scenery, and campgrounds. It is at one such campground that Jack and his mother take a site and prepare to spend three days. It is at this campsite that Jack wakes up at the beginning of the novel to discover his mother has vanished. It is also at the campsite that Jack befriends Aiden and Aiden's family, and where Jack must begin to rely on himself for food, drink, and care.

## Bar Harbor

Bar Harbor is a beautiful coastal town in Maine, popular with tourists. It is one of the many places that Jack and his mother have planned to visit. In Bar Harbor, Jack steals a plastic elephant from Sherman's book and gift store, and where Jack meets Big Jack at Geddy's Bar and Restaurant. Having nearly been caught stealing the elephant, Jack runs away from Bar Harbor and takes refuge on Mrs. Olson's farm. Jack later heads back into Bar Harbor to exchange fresh produce from Mrs. Olson for canned and boxed goods in return.

## Jesup Memorial Library

Jesup Memorial Library is located in Bar Harbor, Maine. Jack visits the library primarily in order to access the internet. He uses the internet to see if his mother has attempted to contact him, and then uses the internet to get directions to walk home to Boston.

## York

York is a town in Maine where Wild Kingdom Animal Park is located. York becomes Jack's ultimate objective, supplanting his desire to return home to Boston. York's Animal Kingdom is where Lydia the elephant resides during the summer. Big Jack brings Jack to York to see Lydia. It is there that Jack learns his grandmother has been waiting for him for a week, hoping he would come to see Lydia.

## Jamaica Plain

Jamaica Plain is a neighborhood in the city of Boston, Massachusetts. It is where Jack and his mother live. Jamaica Plain becomes Jack's first objective in order to return home before anyone realizes his mother has abandoned him. Jamaica Plain as an objective ultimately becomes supplanted by York, Maine, as Jack seeks to see Lydia the

elephant. Jack later learns that his grandmother is considering moving to Jamaica Plain so Jack's life will not be uprooted due to his mother's hospitalization.



# Themes and Motifs

## Journey

Journey is an important theme in the novel “Small as an Elephant” by Jennifer Richard Jacobson. In literature, journeys are often far more than mere travel or physical destination, but are about what is learned and experienced along the way by one or more individual characters. Such is the case of Jack and his journey.

When the novel begins, Jack’s world consists of his mother –and his mother is gone. Nothing makes sense without her, including her disappearance. Jack struggles to find her unsuccessfully, ultimately realizing that he needs to get home before anyone else realizes what is going on and calls the Department of Social Services (DSS). Jack is terrified of being taken away from his mother, so he decides to return to Jamaica Plain. The journey, here, is ostensibly simple: Jack wants to get home to find a way to remain with his mother. But there is an even greater journey that Jack will have to undertake.

As Jack hangs out with Aiden and Aiden’s family, and as Jack heads into Bar Harbor, he puts up walls around him, telling others lies to protect himself. For example, he tells Aiden that his mother is not feeling well, which is why she has gone to town in order to get medicine. Jack’s untrusting nature largely comes from previous encounters with DSS, and from the lies his mother has fed him growing up about people like Jack’s grandmother.

Jack, traveling on, meets a number of good people such as Mrs. Olson and Big Jack. These people cause Jack to begin to reconsider the things his mother has told him about others in general. Indeed, it is late through talking with Big Jack that Jack comes to realize that his mother abandoned his grandmother in the same way that Jack’s mother abandoned him. It is a chilling revelation, but a good one because it allows Jack to become close with his grandmother once more. Here, there is a sense of coming of age about Jack’s journey in terms of his emotional maturation.

The journey also gives Jack the ability to grow personally. He recognizes that stealing small elephants and vegetables is wrong, though he sees no other choice at that point in time. He must survive. Through this mentality of survival, Jack grows independent, learning to rely on himself to earn money through the collection of bottles and cans, purchase and provide food and drink for himself, seek shelter for himself, and to carefully plan out what he will do for himself—such as when he buys water bottles because he knows they can be reused.

By the end of the novel, Jack’s journey has come to an end. He knows that, not only can he survive on his own if he has to, but that his grandmother truly loves him. Rather than being alone, he has someone who will care for him unconditionally. He learns to accept the care of people other than his mother, learns that not all people are bad, and comes to understand his mother as a good, but highly complex person.



## Family

Family is an important theme in the novel “Small as an Elephant” by Jennifer Richard Jacobson. Family involves mutual love, compassion, loyalty towards, and emotional, spiritual, and physical support of individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who still behave in the fashion of the traditional family unit. Family is primarily represented by Jack, his mother, and his grandmother throughout the novel. Sometimes it is a positive thing, and sometimes it is a negative thing.

When the novel begins, family appears decidedly negative. It is assumed at first by the reader that Jack’s mother has abandoned him. This is not what a normal mother does. As the reader comes to learn, Jack’s mother is indeed actually not normal, but psychologically imbalanced, requiring medication that she has refused to take because she says it ruins her emotions and feelings. Yet, the reader knows that Jack’s care and safety are paramount to Becky’s own feelings on the medication that she is taking. She has duties as a mother that she is unable to carry out when she is not stabilized by medication.

Jack has grown up believing lies about his grandmother, fed to him by his mother. Jack believes his grandmother to be unkind, controlling, and unrelentingly strict. As Jack comes to find out, this is not the case. His grandmother is responsible for the search. She believes that Becky is a good mother when she is on her medication. Gram spends an entire week waiting for Jack to show up to visit Lydia, such is the depth of her love for her grandson. Jack comes to realize that his grandmother did not force his mother out of her life, but that his mother abandoned Gram the way his mother abandoned him.

By the end of the novel, the tumult of family is transformed into an overwhelmingly positive thing. Not only has Jack come to learn the truth about his grandmother and mother, but he has come to understand that they are not simply black-and-white creations, that they are complex human beings who do not meet first perceptions or appearances. For example, while some would consider Becky to be a horrible mother, Gram insists that Becky can be a wonderful mother. While Jack has been led to believe that Gram is horrendous, Jack comes to learn that Gram is a sweet and compassionate woman.

## Loneliness

Loneliness is an important theme in the novel “Small as an Elephant” by Jennifer Richard Jacobson. Loneliness—the act of being and feeling alone, as though an individual has no one else in his or her life to care, support, encourage, love, or support him—matters tremendously in the novel. Loneliness affects the characters of Jack, Becky, and Gram in different ways and with different results.

Jack’s form of loneliness is the most striking in the novel. A minor child of eleven years, Jack has never before had to take care of himself in the same sort of circumstances as he does when the novel begins. Jack is not only physically alone, but he quickly



becomes lonely. With his mother gone, he no longer has a near-constant companion. He becomes depressed and angry at his mother's leaving, alternating between the two depending on the circumstances. Indeed, Jack's time with Aiden's family reminds him of his loneliness. Aiden goes home to a family of loving people while Jack goes back to a campsite with a small, empty tent. It wears on Jack, and helps compel him to decide to return to Boston and then find Lydia.

Loneliness for Becky is of a different kind. It is obvious that she is single and unmarried, though not alone physically because she has Jack. Becky's loneliness is a loneliness of the mind, of the soul. Her mental illness distorts reality, making her feel lonely and as if no one besides her understands things correctly, whether it is the colors she invents or the train station incident. Becky detests taking medication because it prevents her from feeling, and as a result she is isolated and lonely from herself, or what she believes to be her true nature. It is one of the reasons she refuses to take medication on the trip to Maine.

Loneliness for Gram is subtle, but revealed greatly in her actions later in the novel. It is clear that Gram has been hurt having been abandoned by Becky. Gram appears to be a widow, for she lives by herself, personally initiates and participates in the search for Jack, and spends an entire week waiting for him. She also speaks well of Becky, indicating that Gram loves her family deeply, and longs to be with them. Her loneliness is also apparent when she vows to take care of Jack, even contemplating moving to be with him so that his life is not uprooted. With Jack, she will have a chance at family that she never had with Becky.

## Survival

Survival is an important theme in the novel "Small as an Elephant" by Jennifer Richard Jacobson. Survival entails the ability of one or more individuals to confront and overcome challenges that are a threat to freedom and/or life itself. In the novel, it is Jack primarily who becomes emblematic of the theme of survival.

When the novel begins, Jack is like any normal eleven-year-old kid. He loves and depends on his mother completely for everything from food and shelter to advice and decision-making. However, when Becky abandons Jack, Jack finds himself thrust out into the world on his own. He must immediately begin making his own decisions in order to keep his freedom and survive. He knows he will be sent to DSS if he does not either find his mother or get home. His way of life is at stake, and Jack rises to meet the challenge.

Whereas Becky has provided food for Jack in the past, Jack must now provide food for himself. To do so, he uses spending money, earns more money by returning bottles and cans, and even steals food where he must. Whereas Becky was once Jack's dominant form of transportation by car, Jack must now walk, ride buses, and ride bikes in order to get around. He must do this all on his own. In order to find his way somewhere, Jack



must look up directions on his own. Jack's mother brought him to Maine; Jack must now rely on himself to get back to Boston.

Jack's actual journey is also a matter of survival. He must navigate countryside and towns he has no knowledge of, relying only on himself for direction and transportation. He must seek out shelter on his own, whether it is sleeping out of doors in the woods, in church balconies, or in the backseats of old, rusted cars. Seeking to avert being sent away from his mother, Jack goes through great lengths to avoid the police and people who recognize him. He manages a number of quick escapes, darting into the wilderness to avoid detection. He must begin to plan strategically, spending money carefully, such as when he purchases water bottles in order to reuse them and carry them with him. Jack's need for survival helps him along in his journey in terms of maturation as well, as Jack is able to come to rely on himself more than his mother.

## Forgiveness

Forgiveness is an important theme in the novel "Small as an Elephant" by Jennifer Richard Jacobson. Forgiveness is the act of seeking to make or receive amends and apologies for wrongs, mistakes, or accidents committed by one against another. In the novel, it is Jack who must learn to find forgiveness in his heart in dealing with his mother, and in order to forgive himself.

When the novel begins and Jack's mother leaves, Jack is confused. He does not yet believe he has been abandoned, but merely believes his mother has gone into town or switched campsites. As Jack begins searching for his mother without success, Jack alternates between being angry at his mother and holding out hope that he'll stumble across her and all will be made right. As Jack looks for his mother, he doesn't know whether or not he'll forgive her for ever leaving him in the first place. By the end of the novel, Jack knows that he will indeed forgive his mother, who was not in her right mind when she abandoned him.

Forgiveness is also essential when it comes to Jack, his mother, and their past. Jack has had an unusual upbringing, with his mother's mental illness and medication. Her refusal to take her medication has led to uncomfortable and downright frightening incidents for Jack, from brushes with the DSS to her outbursts at the train station. Jack's anger at his mother increases the longer he looks for her and especially once he realizes that both he and Gram have been abandoned by Becky. However, Jack ultimately does forgive his mother.

Jack has a more difficult time forgiving himself. It is ultimately revealed that, prior to his mother disappearing, Jack and Becky had an argument over visiting Lydia. Jack wanted to visit Lydia desperately; Becky did not wish to pay money to people who keep animals in captivity. Jack went on to antagonize his mother over not taking her medication. As a result, Jack believes his mother abandoned him because of the argument. Only through talking to Big Jack does Jack come to realize that some things are beyond his control and learn that he must forgive himself in order to move beyond the past.



# Styles

## Point of View

Jennifer Richard Jacobson tells her novel “Small as an Elephant” from the third-person limited-omniscient narrative mode in an informal manner as though the story was being related by a friend or someone familiar with the events of the story. Given Jack’s nature as a highly personal and introspective person, it makes sense that he will not be telling his own story. The narrator and the reader both become observers, outsiders to Jack’s journey. The limited-omniscient aspect of the novel adds both a sense of realism and suspense, especially as Jack both attempts to navigate his way through coastal Maine and avoid police and people searching for him.

## Language and Meaning

Jennifer Richard Jacobson tells her novel “Small as an Elephant” in language that is simple and straightforward. This is done for at least two reasons. First, the main character of the novel, Jack, is an eleven year-old kid. The language used in the novel reflects both his age and level of education achieved in life so far. Secondly, the target audience of the novel consists of children. The language used in the novel reflects not only the character of Jack, but the reading comprehension and level of education of the target audience of children.

## Structure

Jennifer Richard Jacobson divides her novel “Small as an Elephant” into twenty-five linear, consecutive, numbered chapters from 1 to 25. The simple and straightforward approach to the construction of the novel has two primary purposes. First, it allows the reader to remain focused exclusively on the plot, on Jack’s journey to get home. Given the wide swath of Maine through which Jack travels, and all of the characters that he meets, focus on the plot is essential. Secondly, the simple and straightforward approach of the novel to its structure is reflective of the target audience: children.



## Quotes

Elephants can sense danger... Unfortunately, Jack did not have this talent. The day his life was turned completely upside down, he was caught unaware.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** When the novel begins, two things are made immediately apparent. First, Jack has an obsession with elephants. Secondly, Jack is without his mother: she has abandoned him. While elephants may be able to sense danger, Jack is not an elephant. He is caught completely off-guard by his mother's sudden departure.

Where was she? Why had she taken off when they already had more things on their list than they could possibly do?

-- Narrator (Chapter 2 paragraph 15)

**Importance:** At first, Jack is in denial. He cannot understand why his mother would take off. Abandonment is not the foremost fear on his mind, but his mother's leaving is. He imagines his mother must be nearby or detained, and incorrectly believes that it would be impossible that his mother abandoned him given the fact that he and his mother have a list of things to do while in Maine as if that list was the difference between her staying and going.

Jack knew that it wasn't supposed to be this way. That a mother wasn't supposed to go off without telling her kid.

-- Narrator (Chapter 8 paragraph 25)

**Importance:** Several chapters into the novel, Jack continues to reflect on his mother's disappearance. While he is not exactly sure what his mother is doing, he is exactly sure of the fact that no mother is supposed to go anywhere without telling her child. Here, Jack is still in denial. He imagines his mother is just around the corner or the next bend or in the next shop, but hasn't accepted that his mother has indeed truly left him. His examination of the responsibilities of motherhood are one of the things he uses to grasp onto the idea that his mother can only possibly be nearby.

He'd been having wild dreams when he woke, wild, chasing dreams.

-- Narrator (Chapter 13 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Realizing that his lies may be wearing thin, and knowing he cannot lie to the people in the campground forever, Jack begins having dreams where he is being chased. These dreams come to foreshadow the coming chase in real life that Jack will have as he rushes to outpace the police and searchers looking for him.

Nina. The only other person on this planet other than his mom who knew him from the inside out.

-- Narrator (Chapter 14 paragraph 20)



**Importance:** Jack's best friend Nina is described here as being the one person who truly knows him. This foreshadows the future when Nina will help authorities and Gram to pinpoint Jack's location. Jack will at first be enraged at Nina for this act of betrayal, but will later come to be grateful for her friendship when everything works out.

He knew that the moment he came out of hiding or was found, his life would change forever. He would no longer live with his mother.

-- Narrator (Chapter 14 paragraph 27)

**Importance:** Jack, though he still has not accepted the fact that his mother has abandoned him, has bigger things to worry about, such as the DSS. Jack knows that if anyone becomes aware of his mother's leaving, DSS will be notified, and DSS will step in. This means that Jack will no longer be allowed to live with his mother, and Jack only wants to live with his mother.

...he suddenly didn't want anything at all. Nothing. He didn't want to get up... or to ever see his mother again.

-- Narrator (Chapter 17 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** Jack has been pushed to a new limit by the time he is at Fort Knox, Maine. He feels as if he has reached the end. He is tired, hungry, and lonely. He has lost all motivation to do anything, from seeing his mother again to even moving. This demonstrates just how truly hurt Jack is. Only swarms of mosquitoes get Jack to keep moving.

He didn't have a plan. Didn't know where he was going or what he was going to do when he got there. He was just heading south, out of habit more than anything else.

-- Narrator (Chapter 17 paragraph 12)

**Importance:** As Jack travels south, his plans to return home to Boston become vaguer, and an idea grows in his head that he wants to go and see Lydia in York. Yet, he still has no concrete plans about how he will get to see Lydia, or someday return to Boston. He begins traveling south listlessly, a reflection of his sense of loneliness and being lost emotionally.

Jack! I'm here to help. I'm Wyatt. Sylvie's cousin!

-- Wyatt (Chapter 22 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** As Jack travels, Sylvie's cousin Wyatt shows up. Wyatt has been told about Jack by Sylvie, and at least on the surface, Wyatt wants to help. However, it soon becomes apparent that Wyatt is primarily interested in the reward money. Wyatt ends up being more of a problem to Jack than a help.

Hey, Jack!

-- Police officer (Chapter 23 paragraph 24)

**Importance:** Along Old Route 1, Jack is finally stopped by a police cruiser. Jack



pretends he is merely on his way to a violin lesson, but the police officer fools Jack by calling Jack by name. Jack's automatic response to his name gives him away, and leads to a chase into an out of a pharmacy.

My mother left me.

-- Jack (Chapter 23 paragraph 104)

**Importance:** At long last, Jack comes to the realization while traveling with Big Jack that his mother did indeed leave him. It was not an accident, no tragedy has befallen Becky, and she did not merely head out for a few minutes. Instead, she actually abandoned him. It is a painful and startling revelation for Jack, who is heartbroken.

It took me a long time to realize that things weren't my fault.

-- Big Jack (Chapter 25 paragraph 8)

**Importance:** When Jack considers the fact that an argument between him and his mother may have driven his mother off, Big Jack—almost as if reading Jack's mind—says that Becky's leaving is not Jack's fault. Some things in life are beyond the control of people, Big Jack explains. Big Jack, a foster kid himself, goes on to explain that his situation in life, like Jack's, wasn't his fault. It is a lesson that Jack takes to heart.