

It's a nightmare come true . . . Jeffrey's mother is his teacher. Within minutes she turns the fifth grade up-side-down, taking "mugshots" of students, piling on homework, even giving Jeffrey's best friends a hard time. And everyone takes it out on him.

Jeffrey is sure his life is doomed. But when the fifth grade starts a club called KAPUT (Kids Against Perfectly Unbearable Teachers), and Jeffrey is forbidden to join, he concocts a desperate plan. A plan that will force his mother to quit her job. A plan that will win back his friends. A plan called: OPERATION RHINOCEROS.

In this sequel to ME + MATH = HEADACHE and THE EYE AND I, readers will root for math-hating, rhino-loving Jeffrey in Lee Wardlaw's funniest book yet.

Lee Wardlaw is the author of nine books for young readers, including two other popular books about Jeffrey, ME + MATH = HEADACHE and THE EYE AND I. Ms. Wardlaw claims she does not own a rhinoceros, does not look like a rhinoceros, and is not married to a rhinoceros. She has, on occasion, been tempted to act like a rhinoceros. Ms. Wardlaw lives in Santa Barbara, California, with her husband, their two cats, and a growing rhinoceros collection.

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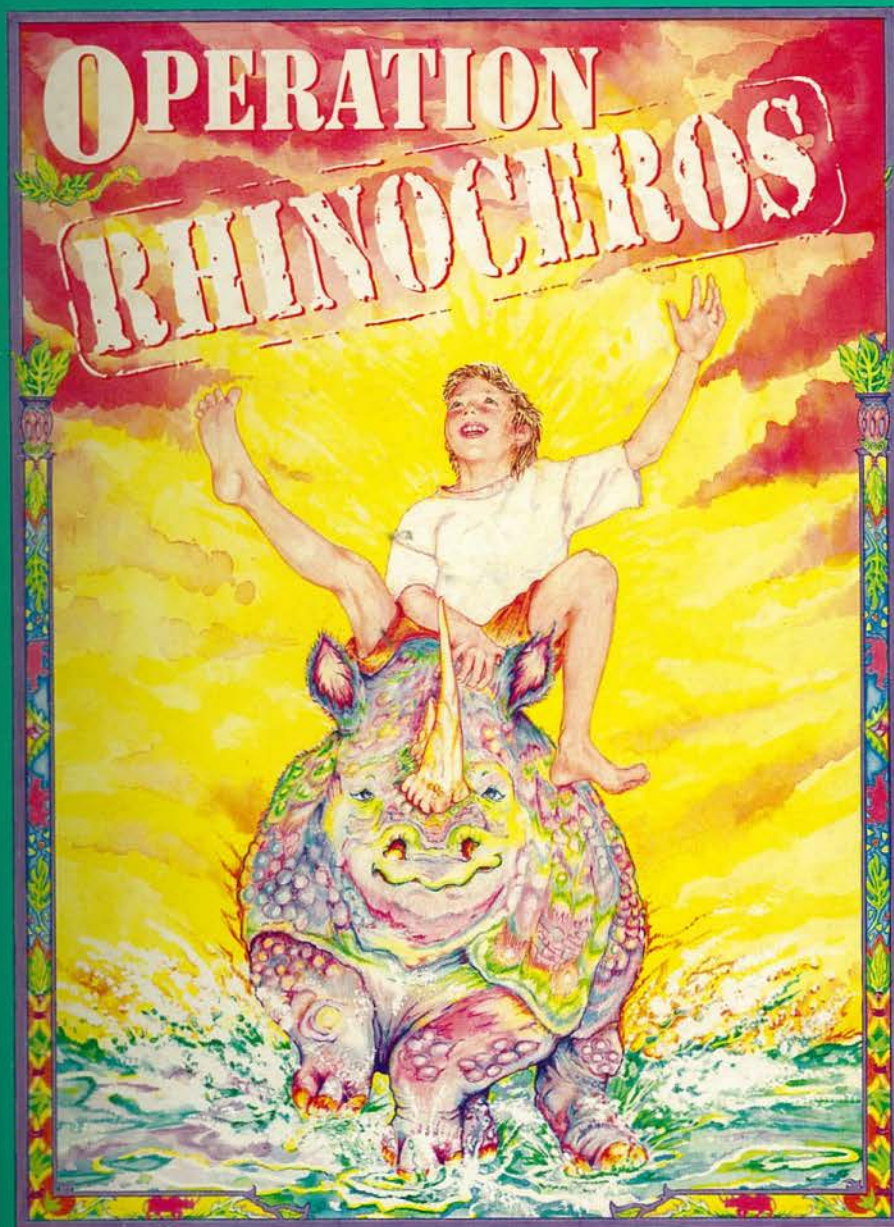
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OPERATION RHINOCEROS

Wardlaw

Red Hen Press



Story by Lee Wardlaw
Illustrated by Deborah Stouffer



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Illustrated by Deborah Stouffer

To all the kids who asked for another book about Jeffrey
and his rhinoceros: Ta-da! Here it is! You're welcome.

-L.W.



This one's for "Aggie Baby": Thanks for the push.

-D.S.

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Illustrated by Deborah Stouffer

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"You have twenty-four hours," Richard Jensen added.

I swallowed hard. There was that lump again. "Uh, one question. What happens if I can't do all this in twenty-four hours?"

"You'll do it," Richard Jensen said. "Or else."

"Or else what?" I asked.

Richard Jensen didn't answer. He just smiled. A slow, evil smile. A smile that meant: *Jeffrey, if you don't succeed, you're going to suffer a fate far worse than eating lizards.*

I'd Rather Have a Rhino than a Sister

After lunch, Mom handed out pieces of white writing paper. "I think Miss Simmons would appreciate getting a letter from each you," she said to the class.

"What are you forcing us to say?" Richard Jensen grumbled.

Mom gave a little smile. "I'm not forcing you to say anything. But you might let her know that you're thinking about her. Or that you hope her father feels better soon."

Immediately, everyone hunched over their papers. Pencils scribbled and scratched. I'll bet the whole class was wishing Miss Simmons' dad would have a miraculous, overnight recovery. No one wished it more than I did!

I nibbled on the end of my pencil, thinking. Then,

I wrote:

*Dear Miss Simmons,
How are you? I am terrible. Guess what? My
mother is our new teacher!*

*Now all the kids hate me. They won't talk to me.
They won't play with me. At lunch today, no one
would even sit with me.*

*They said, "P.U.! Smells like a teacher's pet in
here!"*

*If things don't change in the next twenty-four
hours, I will be in real trouble. When are you
coming back? Help!*

Your friend, Jeffrey

"Is everyone finished?" Mom asked. "Don't
forget to proofread."

I read my letter again. My chest felt empty. A
lonely empty.

"Pass your letters forward, please," Mom said,
"and I'll send them on to Miss Simmons."

I stuffed mine in my desk. I couldn't mail it.
Miss Simmons was worried about her dad. She
didn't have time to worry about me.

I took a fresh piece of paper, and wrote:

Dear Miss Simmons,

*I am thinking about you. I hope your dad feels
better soon.*

Sincerely,

Jeffrey

I turned in my letter with the others and looked at
the clock. Only one-thirty. School didn't end until
three. An hour-and-a-half. An hour-and-a-half is a
long time. Ninety minutes. A lot could happen in
ninety minutes. I mean, if Mom continued doing one
bad thing to us practically every minute, and the
kids did one bad thing to *me* for every bad thing
Mom did to *them*, then in ninety minutes I could
suffer *one-hundred-and-eighty bad things!*

I shuddered.

Nope. Sorry. No way. I couldn't sit there and
take it anymore. I just couldn't.

I raised my hand.

"Yes, Jeffrey?" Mom asked.

"May I be excused? Uh, I need to use the
restroom."

"Of course, dear."

"Of course, dear," Craig mimicked in a sweet-

sweet voice. "Don't forget to flush, dear. Would you like me to go with you and hold your hand, dear?"

Several kids snickered. Richard Jensen laughed so hard I thought he was going to swallow his tongue.

I whirled on Craig, my hands clenched into fists.

"Shut up," I muttered. "Shut your stupid surfer, freckled, ugly face up!"

Craig's laugh froze. "Hey, dude - - " he began angrily.

"Richard Jensen and Craig Zeisloft," Mom interrupted, "you two need to sit outside in the hall until you can control yourselves."

"Oh, man," Craig said, "do we *have* to?"

"Outside," Mom replied, with a jerk of her head.

They headed for the door. I followed.

"This is all *your* fault, Pus Toe," Richard Jensen growled in my ear.

"Hurry back, Jeffrey," Mom continued. "Library time is next."

"Hurry back, Jeffrey," Craig mimicked again. "And don't fall in!" He and Richard snorted, and gave each other the high-five.

I ignored them. My face felt like stone. When Mom wasn't looking I slipped my jacket off the coat rack and scooted out of the classroom, ahead of Richard and Craig.

"What's that for?" Richard Jensen asked. He sprawled on the floor, propping himself up with one elbow. "Is it too cold for you in the wittle boys' room?"

I tugged on my jacket and hurried down the hall.

"Hey, Jeffrey," Craig called. "Are you blind, or something? You just passed the boys' room! You're not going to use the *girls'* room, are you, Jeffrey? Jef-frey! Hey, Jeffrey - - where do you think you're going?!"

I didn't answer. I didn't even turn around. I just kept walking.

Along the hall.

Around the corner.

Out the main door.

Down the front stairs.

Out to the sidewalk.

And then - - home.

* * * * *

"What are you doing in bed?" Juliet demanded when she got home from school. She stood in the doorway of my bedroom, hands on her hips. "Are you sick?"

"Yes," I lied, and gave a feeble cough.

"Well, don't breathe on me."

Juliet went to her room and shut the door.

I yanked the covers over my head, making a bed-cave. It smelled stuffy and rubbery, because I was still wearing my tennis shoes. But I felt safe - - for now. I'd been huddled under there since I got home, listening to the phone ring every ten minutes. I hadn't answered it. I knew Mom probably had the school secretary trying to track me down.

I huddled deeper, thinking the same questions over and over again. How could I get Mom to stop acting so mean at school? How could I convince my friends that I wasn't a teacher's pet? And if I couldn't do either, how could I avoid eating lizards?

If only I had someone to talk to.

I checked off my possibilities. These were the people who usually helped me with a problem:

1. *Mom.*

Forget it. Mom *was* my problem.

2. *Dad.*

Naw. It's the dad's job to always agree with the mom. Besides, he was at work.

3. *Craig and Teresa.*

Nope. They hated me, now.

4. *My teacher.*

Wrong! My Mom *was* my teacher. (See #1)

For about the 17th trillion time, I wished that I had a pet. I'd heard that dogs and cats and even boa constrictors could be very good listeners. But somehow I didn't think I had a chance of getting a pet before school tomorrow.

Only one choice left.

Juliet.

The sister who'd tried to sell me to the garbage men for 25 cents when I was two.

The sister who'd convinced me at age four that worms tasted like milk chocolate.

The sister who just last week had told our new neighbors that I was an exchange student from the New York Home for the Terminally Weird.

Well, Juliet would just have to do.

I threw back the covers, went down the hall, and knocked on her door.

"Juliet?"

"What."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"What."

"Can I come in?"

"No. Now go away."

"Juliet, that wasn't my question."

She sighed noisily. "What, then?"

I opened the door a crack. Juliet was sitting on her bed, reading a magazine.

"That's far enough," she ordered.

"I need some advice," I said. "What would you do if you found out Mom was going to be your teacher?"

"Die," said Juliet.

"No, really. Say you walked into your class one morning, and Mom was there as your substitute teacher, and she started acting real mean and stuff. What would you do?"

"Die," said Juliet.

"And then," I went on, "what if all the kids started blaming you for everything Mom did to them, and they threatened to make you eat lizards if you didn't get Mom to change. What would you

do?"

"Die," said Juliet.

"I'm serious!" I shouted. "I'm desperate!"

Juliet finally looked up. "Is this for real? Mom is your teacher? Your new fifth grade teacher?"

I nodded.

"Jeffrey," my sister said in a soft voice, "I feel very, very, very, very sorry for you. Really, I do. My only advice for you is - - "

I felt a leap of hope.

"- - die. Now take your germs somewhere else. I'm waiting for a phone call."

"But, Juliet - - "

The phone rang. Juliet pounced on the receiver beside her bed.

"Hello?!" She made a face. "Oh. It's only you. Hi, Mom. Yeah, he's here. Yeah, he's fine. Uh-huh . . . uh-huh . . . uh-huh. Yeah, okay. Hold on." Juliet put her hand over the mouthpiece. "It's Mom," she said, "and boy, are you in trouble, Jeffrey. T-R-O-U-B-L-E! She says you left school without telling anybody. Everyone's been looking for you, even the principal! She says she's called here twenty-six times. Why didn't you answer the

phone?"

"I was in the bathroom."

"All twenty-six times?" Juliet shook her head.

"Here, she wants to talk to you."

"Well, I don't want to talk to her." I stormed out of the room.

Juliet followed, pulling the phone with her on its long snake-like cord. "Jeffrey, you better talk to Mom, and you better talk to her *now*. N-O-W. Do you hear me? NOW!"

"Why should I?" I grabbed my jacket from the hall closet. "Mom doesn't care about me. You don't care about me. Nobody cares about me."

"Don't be ridiculous, Jeffrey." Juliet shook the receiver in my face. "Of course we care about you. Didn't I just give you advice?"

"Huh! Some advice. I could get better advice from . . . from . . . a rhinoceros!"

"Hey, wait up," Juliet cried. "Come back here." She ran after me into the living room, almost tripping over the phone cord.

I opened the front door.

"Jeffrey McMillan, just where do you think you're going?"

"To find a rhino to talk to!" I shouted, and slammed the door.

7
Lovely Rita

The first animal I saw at the zoo had black, bristly hair, blue fingernails, and a gold ring in her nose. Her name was Sheba. Her cage was the ticket booth.

"What are *you* staring at?" she demanded.

"Uh, nothing." I tried staring at her name tag, instead of her nose. Had it hurt when she'd gotten it pierced? How about when she sneezed? And did she ever wear a dangly earring, like Juliet does when she gets dressed up? Only in her nose?

"Look, kid," Sheba said in a bored voice, "I don't have all day, and neither do you. Zoo closes in thirty minutes. If you're comin' in, give me three-fifty. If you're not - - scram."

"Do you have a rhinoceros?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"Then I'm coming in." I dug some money from my



jeans pocket .

Sheba handed me a ticket. "The rhino's in the African savanna, behind Monkey Island, in front of the elephants. Make sure you're outta here by closin' time, or the guards will sic the lions on you. Have a nice day."

I hurried along the deserted pathway, pulling my jacket tighter against the wind. I hadn't been there in winter before. Everything looked gray and lonely - - the sky, cages, even the animals. I missed the crowds of chattering, laughing people, colorful balloons bobbing above their heads. I missed the salty smell of roasted peanuts and hot buttered popcorn. Today the place smelled like wet cement and stale hay. And it was quiet. An eerie quiet.

In the aviary behind me, birds cackled. The sound sent cold creepy-crawlies down my neck.

This was a mistake. A big mistake. No one knew where I was. A python could slither up and give me the Hug of Death. A crazed zookeeper could hit me over the head with a broom and serve me as an alligator snack. No one would ever know!

I had to get out of there. *Now.*

I whirled to run - - and stopped.

There it was.

Dead ahead.

My breath caught.

"Ooooh," I said.

The rhinoceros stood at the edge of the savanna, nibbling dry grass. The rhino looked like a small tank - - with ears. It had chalky, leathery skin that hung in wrinkles and thick folds. Two horns, like freeway cones, scooped to a point from its nose.

I moved like a sleepwalker to the railing.

A zoo attendant sauntered by, sweeping trash into a dustpan. "She's a beaut, isn't she?" he asked with a smile.

I gulped. "She - - she's lovely." I'd never seen a real rhinoceros before.

"Got her last week," the attendant said. He leaned his lanky body against the railing. "She's a white rhino. From Africa."

I nodded.

"Rhinos are my favorite," the attendant went on. "Quiet. Good listeners. Don't screech in your ear all day like those fool parrots, you know?"

"Yeah," I said. "I've got a sister like that."

The attendant laughed. "If you like rhinos, sign up,

for our Adopt-an-Animal program. Fifteen bucks a month gets your name on this little plaque with the other sponsors. The money helps buy food and medicine for what's-er-name here."

"What *is* her name?" I asked.

"Doesn't have one, that I know of. Any ideas?"

"Rita," I answered without thinking. I don't know where the name came from. It just fit her.

The attendant chuckled. "Rita. I like that. Rita the Rhino. Lovely Rita, Rhino Maid." He started whistling an old Beatles' song. "You and Rita have a nice chat." He tipped his cap and disappeared through a door that said *Employees Only*.

For a while, Rita and I didn't say anything. She nibbled grass. I gripped the handrail. She flicked her tail. I scratched my arm. But we were both breathing the same air, feeling the same wind on our faces. We stood together under the same sky. It was wonderful.

"Hello, Rita," I said finally. "My name's Jeffrey. Jeffrey McMillan."

Rita blinked. Her eyes looked sad.

I glanced at an information sign, bolted onto the railing. It read:

THE WHITE RHINO HAS A KEEN SENSE OF HEARING AND SMELL. HOWEVER, IT HAS POOR EYESIGHT.

"Sorry to hear about your eyes, Rita," I said. "But hey, don't feel bad. You've got two good things going for you, and that's what's important. Take me, for instance. I'm terrible in math. But I'm a great speller. And I make the best peanut butter sandwich in the state. Ask anyone."

Rita ambled a few steps closer. She chewed a larger clump of grass.

AN ADULT RHINO CAN WEIGH BETWEEN 5,000 AND 8,000 POUNDS.

"Wow!" I said. "I'll bet nobody messes with you, huh? I wish I weighed 8,000 pounds. I can think of a few people I'd like to accidentally roll over on. *Oh, excuse me, Richard Jensen - - I didn't notice you sitting*

there! Here, let me call an ambulance for you. Or shall I just scrape you up with a spatula? "

Rita wiggled an ear.

THE FORE HORN OF A WHITE RHINO CAN REACH FIVE FEET IN LENGTH. MANY CULTURES BELIEVE THESE HORNS HAVE STRONG MEDICINAL POWERS. POACHERS HAVE KILLED THOUSANDS OF RHINOS FOR THEIR HORNS, BRINGING THE SPECIES TO THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION.

"I know exactly how *that* feels," I said. "I'm endangered, too. My whole class is out to get me. Maybe I should start an organization. Yeah, Save the Jeffrey Fund. S.J.F. Money collected would pay to send me to Africa, where I'd live until Mom retires from teaching."

Rita snorted.

WHITE RHINOS ARE NOT VERY SOCIABLE OR SWEET-TEMPERED. THEY WILL SOMETIMES

CHARGE A GROUP OF PEOPLE OR AN AUTOMOBILE WITHOUT REASON.

"That's clever, Rita," I said. "I mean, you're not a wimp. You stand there quietly, until someone starts to really bug you. Then - - WHAMO! You let them have it! I'm not like that at all. I'm predictable. People always know exactly how I'm gonna act."

I sighed. "Like my mom. She's my teacher now. 'You'll get used to it,' she says. She thinks I'll just sit back and take it - - 'cause I always do. And my friends. My *ex*-friends. They called me a teacher's pet today. I swore I'd prove them wrong. But I can't. I don't know how. I don't have any tricks up my sleeve, like you do. Yeah. Keep 'em guessing. That's your motto."

I started to pace. Rita munched.

"I wish I could be more like you, Rita. I wish I could be a rhinoceros. I'd charge full speed into my classroom tomorrow and - - "

I froze, thinking.

Then I felt a smile spread across my face.

"That's it!" I shouted.

Rita finished munching. She started to lumber

away.

The attendant came back out the door.

"Closing time," he said. "Better head home."

"What? Sure, okay." I hoped he hadn't heard me talking to Rita. Even though he liked rhinos, he might not understand.

I let him walk a few yards ahead of me. Then I turned.

"Thanks for your help, Rita," I whispered into the wind. "I've got the perfect plan. Operation: Rhinoceros. I'll tell you all about it tomorrow. Good night!"

Woof, Woof, Good Dog

Mom doesn't have horns. She doesn't weigh 8,000 pounds. And her only medicinal power is to make me chew orange-flavored aspirin when I'm sick. But she can charge better than any rhino I know.

"Where have you been?!" she bellowed, when I walked in the door.

"I - - "

She lunged across the room. I thought she was going to hit me. Instead, she pulled me into a hug.

"I've been worried sick," she said. Her voice softened. She smoothed my hair. She touched my cheek. "It's after dark. Juliet said you went flying out of here hours ago. Where have you been?"

"I - - "

"Are you all right? Are you hurt?" Mom gave my shoulders a shake. "I thought for sure you'd been

Epilogue
Operation: Rhinoceros

After school, KAPUT met in the stairwell one last time.

We officially voted to disband. Then we started a new organization - - and I was chosen president. The purpose of our organization is to raise fifteen dollars a month so we can be sponsors in the Adopt-an-Animal program at the zoo. We're going to hold bake sales and jog-a-thons and bike washes to help pay for Rita's food and care. As president, I get to pick a new name for our organization. I already have the perfect one. *Operation: Rhinoceros.*

Looks like I get my pet rhino after all!