



The Elephant of Surprise

Brent Hartinger

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Book 4 in the Lambda Award-winning Russel Middlebrook Series!

People aren't always what they seem to be. Sometimes we even surprise ourselves.

So discovers seventeen-year-old Russel Middlebrook in *The Elephant of Surprise*, a stand-alone sequel to Brent Hartinger's landmark 2003 gay young adult novel *Geography Club* (which has now been adapted as a feature film co-starring Scott Bakula and Nikki Blonsky).

In this latest book, Russel and his friends Min and Gunnar are laughing about something they call the Elephant of Surprise -- the tendency for life to never turn out as expected. Sure enough, Russel soon happens upon a hot but mysterious homeless activist named Wade, even as he's drawn back to an old flame named Kevin. Meanwhile, Min is learning surprising things about her girlfriend Leah, and Gunnar just wants to be left alone to pursue his latest technology obsession.

But the elephant is definitely on the move in all three of their lives. Just who is Wade and what are he and his friends planning? What is Leah hiding? And why is Gunnar taking naked pictures of Kevin in the shower?

The Elephant of Surprise includes Hartinger's trademark combination of humor and romance, angst and optimism. Before the story is over, Russel and his friends will learn that the Elephant of Surprise really does appear when you least expect him—and that when he stomps on you, it really, really hurts.

The Elephant of Surprise Details

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Author : Brent Hartinger

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From Reader Review The Elephant of Surprise for online ebook

Amy Metz says

Who says YA books are just for young adults? Brent Hartinger proves adults can like them too. I've read all four books in the Russel Middlebrook series and loved them all. Brent's characters become your friends, and his stories hold your interest. The series is one of those where you're sad when you get to the last page in book four, because you want to keep reading about these characters. I wouldn't want to be in high school again, but visiting there with Russel, Min, Gunnar, and the rest was a lot of fun. Brent Hartinger knows how to write. Don't just buy one book in this series. Go ahead and buy them all. You'll be hooked.

Kaje Harper says

4.5 stars rounded up.

This is the fourth book in the Russel Middlebrook YA series. If you haven't yet read the award-winning first book, *Geography Club*, you should start there. The characters learn and grow throughout the series. That book will introduce you to Russel, and to his wide-eyed, fun and engaging narrative voice. Russel is a young man learning how to navigate the world, trying to fit his desires, his curiosity and his good intentions alongside his worries, mistakes and tendency to be over-imaginative. The teen voice feels authentic, and I've enjoyed the whole series.

In this book, Russel and his friends come to grips with the Elephant of Surprise - the way things are so often not what they seem, and how sometimes finding out the truth stomps you flat. But then, other times, it can lift you to ride above the crowd. His straight, quirky friend Gunnar and his best friend Min are familiar and well-loved characters who add depth, humor and plot twists to this story.

Russel and his friends meet up with a group of "freegans", social activists who try to live lightly on the planet by using things that otherwise would be wasted or thrown away, living by scavenging, gathering, and borrowing. One of them is Wade, a good-looking guy who seems taken by Russel. But what's the truth behind Wade? And is freeganism a way to save the world from our horribly wasteful modern ways, or just a quirky cult that has a few good ideas among the rest of the dross?

Min is in a relationship, but her girlfriend is acting strangely. Imagination, or is something going on?

Gunnar is chronicling his day to day life by the minute. Will this be just boring, or will evidence of every moment reveal important secrets? Or inconvenient and private ones?

I enjoyed this chapter in the life of Russel and his friends. There were twists I didn't see coming any better than the main characters. A stomp or two from the Elephant of Surprise. But the tone is generally upbeat, despite some of the things Russel and his friends have to face. His forward-looking optimism and clean narrative voice make this book a fun read. This is the opposite of wallowing in overdone YA angst - it slides through the muddy waters of life up in the sunshine, and even when someone's heart is bruised, there is room for a better tomorrow. I like that.

Lindie says

I had really, really high hopes for this one. To steal a thought from it, I wanted it to validate my existence by being awesome and making sticking with the series worth it. Instead it invalidated books 2 and 3 for me.

Reading this book was very much like being kicked back to book 2, *The Order of the Poison Oak*, only without the cool burn survivor kids that tugged at your heart strings. When the story line with Wade showed up, I let out a groan and just had this sinking feeling it was going to be a Web situation (see book 2). At this point I have given up caring who Russel ends up with, because he sure as hell has no idea what he wants and he's likely to fall in and out of love with anyone at any time.

And then there's Kevin Land. I was a big Kevin fan in book 1, even when he was a complete jerk. I liked him so much that I found the way things ended downright depressing. Book 2 featured no Kevin at all. Book 3 brought back Kevin, but a much changed one from what we saw in book 1, even if he still had the ability to distract Russel from absolutely everything in life. *The Elephant of Surprise's* Kevin is the most disappointing Kevin of them all. He went from being an interesting guy, to being too nice. Too willing to sacrifice everything. I just didn't root for him anymore.

There is one upside to this book. Gunnar! I am actually surprised by how much I've come to like him in the last two books. He's had an amazing character arc, going from what I consider the worst friend in the world, to being the only character I didn't want to kick in the butt.

I didn't hate this book, as with the other books in the series, it reads easy and fast, and is amusing in places. I just didn't love it either. Perhaps this series would have worked better for me if I had months/years between each book to dull my expectations, but I read it pretty much back to back. I don't know if there are any more books planned, or if this wraps the series up, but I am personally walking away now.

Ulysses Dietz says

"*The Elephant of Surprise*" has been long anticipated by impatient Brent Hartinger fans - and many of us are adults who are more generally fans of YA novels. Do we hope to recapture our own teen years (why would one ever want to do that?); or is it simply that one never forgets one's teen experiences, whether good or bad, no matter how much of life we have lived since? Whatever the reason for our ongoing interest in YA novels, Brent Hartinger never lets us down.

Russel Middlebrook is beginning to fully understand what he and his friends jokingly refer to as the elephant of surprise - the twists and turns that life throws at you, causing both happiness and pain, but also offering you adventure and excitement. For all the interaction with the "freegans" whose hidden world becomes a centerpiece of the book's action, the real narrative purpose of Hartinger's latest is to continue exploring the three "L's" of teen experience - Life as they are learning to live it; Love as they are struggling to understand it; and loyalty, as they test its boundaries and strengths. The new characters of Wade and Venus; as well as the long-standing figures of Kevin (Russel's ex) and Otto (Russel's current BF), each bring a different perspective to the straightforward complications of high school.

Hartinger's voice is refreshingly crisp and bright. In a field full of endangered teens suffering terribly, Hartinger's characters know pain, but it is the typical pain of teen life. Russel Middlebrook and his best friends Gunnar and Min are vivid and clearly drawn. They are good kids, and intelligent; but they make stupid choices and think in remarkably illogical ways. Because, endearingly, all of these kids are just that - still kids. They still see life from that wide-eyed perspective of youth, all the while confident of their own

wisdom and adorably clueless as to their own complete lack of adult experience. And that's the point: adult experience would hamper them, and it is the freedom of ignorance and hope that lets them grow and learn through their adventures.

Of course, it is hugely important to me - and to many teen readers - that Russel is gay. So few YA novelists take the gay teen to heart, and Russel is a heroic figure simply because he is so normal. He has dealt with coming out, but still hasn't quite figured out love. On the other hand he is fully committed to his friends, and still yearns for life to be more exciting than it is. Hartinger's teens don't really relate to adults at all - they relate to each other and to the reader. So you have to read his books as a teenager, whether you are or not, since that's how you'll best appreciate its pleasures.

Lena♥Ribka says

Audible

What a disappointment!
The last book in the series is the weakest for me.
I think I'm at least 50 years too old for this kind of fiction.
Even if I'd get into minus range.

I only managed to finish it because I listened to it.

Patrick says

Let me start of by saying this is the best book from the series! The BEST one i can confirm! Why? Because I'm a sucker for great HAPPY endings! :)

I am sad though with what happened with Otto and Russel. For me that one felt abrupt but I guess that's life, when you know it's not working then it's definitely not working. There are just these things which are very black and white. I like the fact that Russel did not beat around the bush just to push something to happen or salvage something that is hopeless to begin with (in the romance department). One good thing though is that they remained friends afterwards. Their conversations showed how ex-boyfriends or anyone who have past relationships can move past without being awkward or angry with each other.

Another good thing was that I was so smitten with the entrance of Wade in the story. Freeganism indeed is a cool thing and i respect it. It was sad though that he used it to recruit Russel but it was a great twist in the story. I like how Brent injects serious issues in this series like the burned survivors from the poison oak, the gay-straight alliances and now the freegans. These issues which we can encounter in real life, in my opinion, makes this series hit home. Yes it may be fiction but having these makes it more read-worthy.

Now on the part of Kevin. I was really overjoyed on how it turned out for the both of them especially having read the Double Feature which totally made me cry when Kevin gave way for Otto and Russel. I really love the part where Kevin cried due to his fear of losing Russel again. That really showed how madly and deeply in live he is with Russel. That moment was just damn priceless! Immaculate and divine I must add. This book just topped my list of favorite LGBT books. I cried when i read the part where Russel saw Kevin crying. I felt the emotions.

This book is definitely a must read for LGBT fans out there! 5 stars! :)

Elizabeth (Liz) says

Review posted at: Swept Away By Romance

4.5 Stars

Russel Middlebrook and his two best friends, Min and Gunnar, are high school students. The three are inseparable, and they each bring something unique to their relationship. They support one another no matter what...even when it's a really bad idea. When change comes to each of their lives, good or bad, the three band together. They've taken to referring to life's tendency to NEVER turn out as expected as the Elephant of Surprise, and that elephant is on the move! Russel, who is openly gay, meets a hot activist named Wade who is more than a little mysterious. At the same time, he continues to be drawn to his ex-boyfriend Kevin. Min, a bisexual, is questioning her relationship with her girlfriend based on some sketchy behavior. And Gunnar? Well, Gunnar simply wants peace, quiet and the opportunity to pursue his online documentation of everyday life...as he sees it. That, and spend time with his girlfriend. Remember that Elephant of Surprise? Well, he just may be in a full-out stampede!

Brent Hartinger has written a simple, wonderful story with The Elephant of Surprise. This is book number four in the Russel Middlebrook series, but I was easily able to come in and start reading without feeling like I was missing anything.

Russel and his friends, Min and Gunnar, are such relatable characters, and they're a lot of fun to read about. It's funny because I've personally known people very similar to each of these characters. Then again, maybe it's not such a coincidence. Maybe it's intentional. When we're able to relate, we soak in the details of the story much more easily. This, in turn, allows us to readily grasp the point, the meaning, the purpose within the story. Ah, it's coming together now ;-)

The author uses a sense of humor to make this story as accessible and reader-friendly as possible. I love this. Oftentimes, particularly lately, stories in the Young Adult genre are riddled with drama and teenage angst. Some of them overly so. This was a lovely change of pace for me, as I suspect it will be for all those who read it. There are, without a doubt, poignant moments in this book. I'm thinking of a particular scene between Russel and his ex-boyfriend Kevin. However, underlying it all is this wonderful sense of youthful humor. The Elephant of Surprise will NOT rip out your heart and stomp all over it :-)

Frankly, my favorite thing about this book, about Russel and his friends, is that being gay or bisexual or even a nerdy tech guy does not stop them from living their lives. They're normal kids. They have the same everyday problems as any other teenager. But, mostly, they're each happy with who they are, deep down, where it really counts. That's exactly as it should be. That is **exactly** the way I want our youth in this country, in every country, to feel about themselves. We ALL have things that make us a little different, make us stand out...ALL OF US. But, if each of us could be so comfortable in our own skins, our own lives, and look at life with a sense of humor and a kind, accepting heart...I have to think we would save A LOT of kids. That's a goal worth fighting for!

ARC provided by the author, via NetGalley, in exchange for an honest review

Coenraad says

Russel wants adventure, and boy, does he get it! And not only because of romantic reasons: he and his friends meet a group of freegans (no, I didn't know either!) and the story plays out in unexpected ways. The strength of Brent Hartinger's series is that Russel and his friends do not exclusively mope about romantic dramas and issues - that they do to a high enough level to maintain interest on that score, but they experience other things to show that life (even teenage life) is not merely a set of romantic trysts and tribulations. Lovely - quite a privilege to zip through the series in slightly more than a week (despite heaps of schoolwork to mark, prepare and process!). Now the sequel series awaits ...

Jy moet soms oppas waarvoor jy wens: Russel kry emmersvol avontuur as antwoord op sy versugting! Hy en sy vriende ontmoet 'n groep "freegans" - nee, ek het self nog nooit van hierdie beweging gehoor nie. Maar dis juis die krag van Brent Hartinger se reeks: hoewel die tieners die landskap van die liefde deeglik ondersoek en beleef, gebeur daar veel meer met hulle. Dit was 'n voorreg om (te midde van stapels nasienwerk en ander skoolvoorbereiding) deur die eerste Russel-reeks te blits in omtrent 8 dae. Nou vir die opvolgreks!

Vitor Martins says

Terminei a primeira série do Russel Middlebrook, e estou de coração partido.

Esse último livro foi tão chato. O plot foi tão desinteressante. Uma grande bagunça envolvendo freeganismo (!!!), ataques terroristas, assaltos e traições. E eu não me interessei por nada.

Sei que existe uma outra trilogia, meio ~new adult~ que conta os 20 e poucos anos do Russel. Vou ler com certeza porque esse protagonista mora no meu coração. Mas eu espero que nesses próximos livros tenha mais Russel e Kevin porque até agora tivemos POUQUÍSSIMO.

Linda says

I've been a fan of Brent Hartinger since THE GEOGRAPHY CLUB, which I'm delighted to hear is going to be a movie (yay!).

His characters are fascinating, fun and realistic. As for the theme of this book, surprises, there are a lot of them in this story. While Russell deals with issues of dating, heartbreak and love, he finds himself drawn into a group of teen freegans, shocked at this very different side of life where scavenging for food, roadkill and wild weeds are everyday meals. When things get dangerous, Russell discovers new strengths in himself -- and his friends.

A WONDERFUL book about alternate lifestyles and teen romance. Don't miss it!

Michael Bowler says

This is the 4th book to feature protagonist and narrator Russel Middlebrook and, in my opinion, the weakest. "The Geography Club" was terrific, and so was "The Order of the Poison Oak." The third, "Double Feature" and this one are less satisfying. Part of the problem is that all of these books take place over a span of maybe one year, or a bit more than that, and it all feels too compressed. I feel like, make this kid a senior and graduate him already! Anyway, in the first book he had a fling with Kevin Land, popular closeted jock and during the course of that book Russel was outed to the school as gay. Kevin was too scared to be outed and lose his popularity so he dumped Russel. In the second book, while working at a summer camp for young burn victims, Russel falls madly in love with Otto, a teen burn survivor himself and fellow counselor. In the third book, Kevin outs himself to try to win back Russel's love, and Russel is tempted to dump Otto for Kevin. Then Kevin appears to do something really terrible to Russel at the end to make Russel stay with Otto, even though it's all an act of selflessness on Kevin's part to keep Russel and Otto together. Which brings us to the latest chapter. Despite having declared his love and devotion to Otto and Otto to him in Book 3, the two boys mutually dump each other right off the bat in Book 4, which picks up a few months later. (No spoiler here - this happens right away) This leaves Russel to fantasize about getting back together with Kevin, who seems to have turned over a new leaf with no explanation for any of his actions. However, Russel and friends Min and Gunnar are distracted by some teenaged "freegans" that they meet foraging in the school dumpster. Russel is instantly attracted to Wade, a nineteen year old freegan (is there any boy Russel isn't attracted to, one wonders?) and wants to learn more about freeganism. Thus begins a dull polemic on how Americans are the worst consumers in the world and waste so much and how we're going to ruin the planet and how dropping out of society is better and blah, blah, blah. It plays out like a college lecture and not as a real story until something dramatic happens at the eleventh hour to provide some plot. Alas, as likable as the main characters are, I couldn't buy Wade as a character, especially when we learn everything about him in the end. He just didn't ring true as a teen male. To say more about him would be to give away spoilers and I won't do that. Also, the character of Kevin seems so drastically changed from previous books and without any real motivation. The ending of this book is where I felt it should have begun, or at least gone after Russel dumped Otto. There were some good life lessons learned by the kids and some very well-written and terrific individual scenes, however the whole story just didn't work for me. I don't know how to do 1/2 stars or I'd give this 2 and 1/2 instead of 2. If the author writes another book in the series and it looks to be about what it should be about - Russel and Kevin - I'll likely read it. Overall, I was disappointed by "The Elephant of Surprise," which just seemed like filler in between Books 3 and 5.

Wency says

Insightful and Witty

This book is a continuation of Russel, Gunnar and Min's story. At first I really don't get the title, The Elephant of Surprise? I thought it was Element of surprise. Now that I know I can't stop laughing.

This book is about that, The Elephant of Surprises in our lives. That you may or may not believe in fate, it can be a b*tch sometimes.

And Russel is tempting it. Soon after saying he is done with love he find himself having feelings for Wade, the mysterious activist guy. Remember when I said this book is insightful? That is the part were Wade come into the picture. Min was having trouble in paradise so she drew the friendship card which in turn Russel drew to Gunnar to find out more about Kevin. And Gunnar? He is busy documenting his life which became

really really important.

Where can you buy that friendship card so I can use it too? Anyways, this book is really different the other books. And I think it is good because the author's work won't feel like it is being repeated.

p.s. Russel-Kevin fans don't lose hope.

Anna says

The freeganism movement explained was interesting but...

SPOILERS

I was disappointed on several accounts. Mostly, the lack of character development/relationships in this. I don't read the series to learn about freeganism-- I read them because I like Russel and his friends and I want to see what happens in their lives. Also, several other reviewers mentioned that Wade, the character explaining freeganism, sometimes feels too preachy. I wanted to know more about Kevin-- was he taking those hamburgers to the homeless? Tell me about his friendship with Brian Bund, his helping autistic kids, his devotion to Russel... don't just throw these things out there and never get around to addressing them. When Russel and Kevin do get back together, the chapter was too brief and felt rushed. I had been a fan of Kevin since book one-- even though "The Elephant of Surprise" could be read as a stand-alone, I had read them all and was invested in the characters. After breaking into Leah's house, the confrontation/break-up between Leah and Min was barely a blimp in the book. I wanted to know why Leah was planning a birthday party for Min while cheating, I wanted to hear more from Em and Gunnar, and I was disappointed Otto got so little focus. I really only bought the book to see who Russel ended up with, and the reunion was not worth wading through 200 pages of Wade.

Lorena Miyuki says

Please, please, write another one, Brent!

I can't wait to know what happens after this! I think I'm really in love with Russel.

[PTBR]

Acho que esse último livro é o único que se inicia claramente já resgatando as tramas apresentadas nos outros livros.

O nome, "The Elephant of Surprise", é uma metáfora para a expressão "o elemento surpresa" ("the element of surprise, no original em inglês), que é aquele detalhe que a vida sempre nos coloca para tornar nos eventos menos previsíveis, preenchendo ou não as nossas expectativas. Dessa forma, as coisas normalmente acontecem exatamente ao contrário do que a gente espera. E não é verdade? Quantos planejamentos saíram totalmente da rota? Quantas frustrações, ou surpresas, já não tivemos por conta desse elemento surpresa? E surpresa é a palavra-chave para esse último volume da série.

Digamos que todos os outros livros tem um elemento surpresa sim, aquele plottwist no final e tal, mas nesse último volume a surpresa é que move toda a trama. Quando a gente pensa que é uma coisa, é exatamente

outra! E a forma como o Brent manteve (e revelou) certos detalhes durante o enredo foi muito bem executada!

Eu achei que foi um desfecho perfeito para a série toda - e o livro deve ser visto como o último da série, não como um "volume único", sabe? Porque aí sim faz todo o sentido. Todas as tramas são amarradas, mesmo e principalmente aquelas pontas soltas no primeiro volume, o Geography Club. O final deixa aquele gostinho de quero mais delicado e emocionante! Mas o enredo faz muito jus ao título que, como Russel mesmo explica, o elefante realmente aparece quando você menos espera - e quando ele "acidentalmente" pisa em você, realmente machuca.

Essa série é uma das que eu mais gosto. Brent é um dos meus autores queers mais amados e não cansaria de relê-la sempre que possível e mal posso esperar pra continuar sabendo da vida do Russel, no Futon Years, que promete ser muito mais emocionante.

[Resenha completa em: <http://www.marcadocomletras.com/2015/...>]

Liviania says

Russel, Min, and Gunnar are back in their first outing since 2007's SPLIT SCREEN (now known as DOUBLE FEATURE). I haven't read DOUBLE FEATURE since 2007 so I was afraid I wouldn't remember anything. Luckily, THE ELEPHANT OF SURPRISE begins with a "Previously" reintroducing the characters and their dilemmas. With that brief reminder, diving into the book was quite easy.

Russel thinks that he's finally over Kevin. But he keeps spotting things that make him think Kevin might not be such a bad guy. Min thinks her girlfriend, Leah, is keeping secrets and enlists Russel and Gunnar to help her find out the truth. Gunnar, meanwhile, has started a strange photoblog that he's quite devoted to. Then the friends meet a group of freegans - people who only live off of what they can get for free. Russel is instantly attracted to Wade, one of the groups leaders.

I liked that each of the friends got their own storyline, even though Russel's is the primary one and takes up the majority of the book. I also liked that THE ELEPHANT OF SURPRISE brings on of the series' main storylines to a close. I didn't like where Min's story went, however. I felt like her plot got dropped part of the way through the novel, which makes me sad because I love her and her sharp sense of humor.

The freegans were an interesting touch to the story. I certainly don't find their lifestyle appealing, but there are some valid points in their philosophy and it's easy to see why Russel is interested in learning more - beyond impressing the cute boy. It also pays off in ways I didn't expect, giving THE ELEPHANT OF SURPRISE the biggest and most exciting climax of the four novels.

THE ELEPHANT OF SURPRISE fits in well with the rest of the Russel Middlebrook series, almost as if there wasn't a large gap between the release of books three and four. It's a cute story and an easy read. There's a diverse cast and the side characters have a nice amount of development. I love how important Gunnar is now, the little weirdo. He's come a long way from the kid who thought he was actually joining a Geography Club. GEOGRAPHY CLUB will always be the standout entry in the series, but I don't think THE ELEPHANT OF SURPRISE will be a disappointment to fans.
