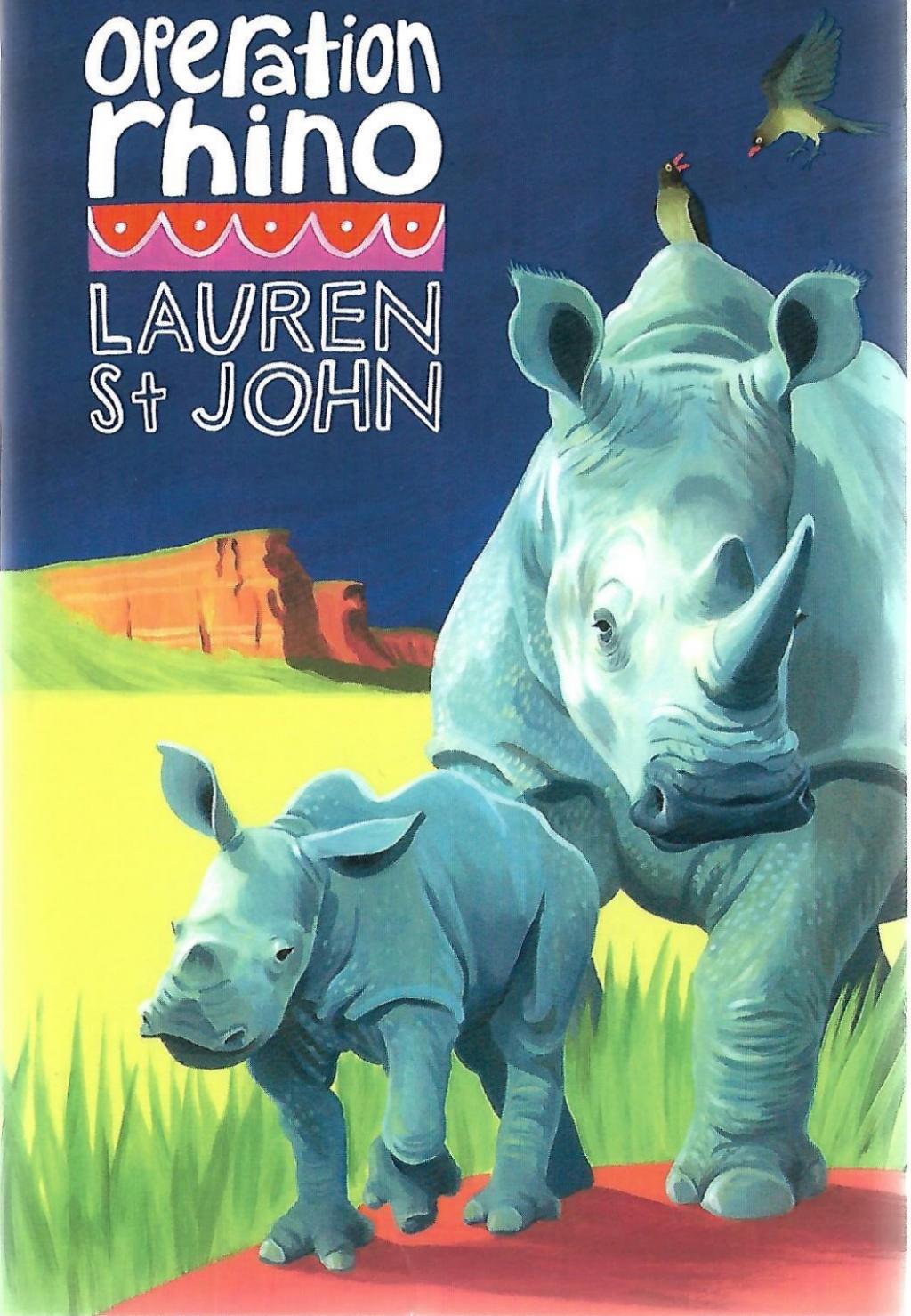


Operation Rhino

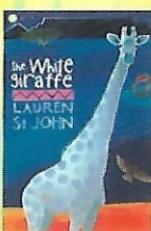
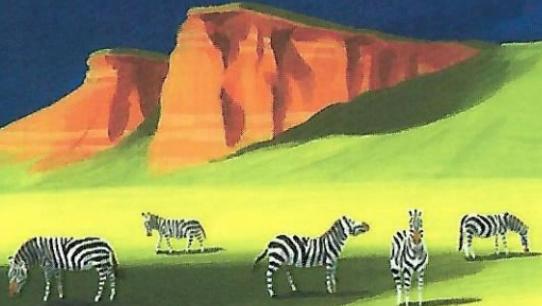


LAUREN
St JOHN



When Sawubona's white rhinos are attacked,
the poachers leave behind a terrified calf.
Devastated but determined to help, Martine
and Ben take the calf to a sanctuary near
South Africa's Golden Gate Highlands.

But the sanctuary is hiding a precious secret.
When that secret gets out, Martine and Ben
find themselves in the fight of their lives
to save one of the rarest animals on earth.
But who can they trust to help them?



'These books made me want to go
all the way to Africa and stand
right in Martine's shoes'

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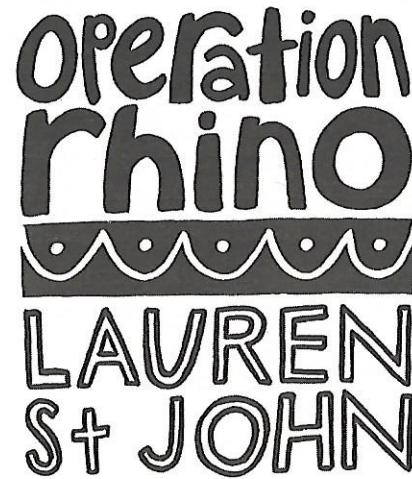
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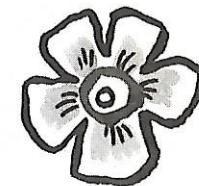
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Dedicated to the memory of Carrie the Brave (17/10/99
– 15/09/12), who identified deeply with Martine and was
passionate about creating a better world for rhinos and
other animals.





‘Race you to the bottom of the hill,’ said Ben, reining in Shiloh, his new pony. ‘Last one there washes the dishes after breakfast.’

Martine brought her white giraffe to a halt by tugging on his silvery mane. She sometimes wondered what would happen if Jemmy ever took it into his head to ignore her; to simply carry on galloping deeper and deeper into the wilds of Africa until she was never heard of again.

After all, it wasn’t as if he wore a bridle or saddle, or had spent even a single day being trained, like a horse, to respond to various commands. Although still young he was already nearly five metres high, which meant that

Martine, perched on his withers, would crash a bone-breaking three metres if anything went wrong. And yet riding the white giraffe was the thing she adored most and the place she felt safest. From the moment she'd first encountered him almost a year earlier, when he'd come plunging out of the darkness to save her from a striking cobra, he'd treated her as if she was as fragile as a newly hatched bird. As far as Martine was concerned, the bond between them and the love they had for each other was the best insurance policy any rider could wish for.

'So how about it?' Ben gazed up at her with an innocent expression. 'I mean, Jemmy's legs are at least three times as long as my pony's so the odds are in your favour, but, hey, I'm willing to take the chance.'

Martine shook her head at her best friend's cheek. 'Do you really think I blew in with yesterday's rain shower? I may not be an expert on horses, but even I know that you and Shiloh will fly down the escarpment and reach the road before Jemmy and I have taken two steps. How about racing all the way to the big yellowwood tree near the waterhole? That would be more fair. You might be quicker on the downhill section but at least I'll have a chance to catch you on the plain.'

He laughed. 'Okay, but on one condition. If you lose, you have to do the dishes for the next two weeks.' Gathering his reins, he squeezed the pony's sides. 'Ready? Steady? See you at the waterhole.'

And with that he was off, cantering Shiloh the short distance to the start of the steep trail and disappearing over the edge at speed.

'Ben, wait,' cried Martine. 'Remember to take the track through the trees when you get near the house. If my grandmother catches us tearing around the game reserve, she'll murder us.'

But her words were lost on the African breeze. Ben was already being whisked down the steep trail by his pretty pony, a surprise Christmas present from his parents the previous week. His Indian mum had made a garland of flowers and silk ribbons to put around Shiloh's neck, and his dad, a tall, handsome Zulu who captained a ship, had stunned his son by leading the mare right to the kitchen at Sawubona. She was a Basotho, a hardy mountain breed native to the Kingdom of Lesotho. At the time, Ben had been helping Martine and her grandmother, Gwyn Thomas, prepare a big lunch. He'd looked up from a pan of roast potatoes to see the pony leaning over the door. Even now he kept stroking Shiloh's bay coat in wonder, unable to believe that she was his.

Martine always got a double set of presents because her birthday was on New Year's Eve. She'd loved all of them. Her grandmother had given her a pair of tan leather boots for bush-walking, two pony books and jodhpurs with a special pad sewn into the rear to make riding Jemmy more comfortable. And yesterday, at her birthday brunch, Ben and his parents had given her some much-needed new jeans.

But for Martine, nothing could top the thrill of seeing Ben's face when Shiloh had come prancing up the driveway on Christmas morning. Despite the fact that he'd only learned to ride a few months earlier, he was a

born horseman. Horses responded to him the way that wild animals responded to Martine, as if they spoke the same language.

Shiloh would be living in the paddock behind her house, which meant that Ben, who was an apprentice tracker to Tendai, Sawubona's game warden, would be spending even more time at the reserve than he already did. Martine couldn't wait. He'd be able to keep her company when she rode Jemmy, her white giraffe. Instead of them both struggling to stay aboard Jemmy (Ben always joked that it gave him vertigo), they'd be free to explore Sawubona whenever they liked.

'That's what *you* think,' her grandmother had retorted when Martine made the mistake of saying it out loud. 'Just because you're starting high school in a couple of weeks' time, doesn't mean you're suddenly grown-up and allowed to run wild around the reserve. There'll be no night rides, except on very special occasions, and no rides anywhere unless you clear it with Tendai and me first. No, don't look at me like that. As you and Ben understand better than anyone, the game reserve can be a deadly dangerous place.'

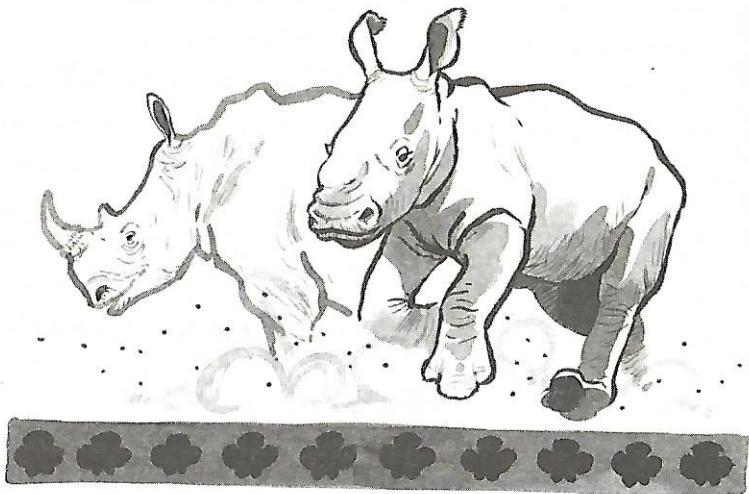
It's also the most beautiful place on earth, Martine thought now as she gazed out over the rose-tinted contours of Sawubona. At dawn, a lacy veil of mist made a mystery of the distant waterhole and every forest and valley on the reserve. As the hot pink sun heaved itself above the horizon, the buffalo, zebra and kudu drifted slowly onto the plains, followed by the elephants, trunks still dripping after an early morning bath.

In the still-dark caves of the Secret Valley, the leopards retreated to doze away the day until they could once more prowl the night. Out in the open a pride of lions with fat full bellies flopped down on a rise and waited for the sun to warm their tawny flanks. Provided she didn't fall off, Martine was perfectly safe on Jemmy because she was high up, but Ben on a horse was a different story altogether. They kept well away from what Gwyn Thomas called the 'carnivore' section of the reserve in case they inadvertently became breakfast.

Almost the best part about the dawn parade of wildlife was the soundtrack. Over thirty different species of birds serenaded the new day. Tendai had taught Martine to identify some of them. Easiest to recognize was the Heuglin's robin, which sounded the first exquisite notes of the morning at around four forty-five, but her favourites were the shy cooing doves and the thrush with his high, pure song. The flycatchers, warblers, bulbul and white-eyes were the back-up singers in a choir where the tenor birds – the turacos and trogons, the melodic shrikes and the whistling cuckoos – were the stars.

Listening to them, Martine fancied that they were providing the background music for her race against Ben, especially since Jemmy started to paw the ground beneath her, eager to go after Shiloh. The unlikely pair had almost instantly become friends.

'Jemmy, I'm counting on you to give this all you've got,' Martine told the giraffe. 'I hate doing the dishes. No way do I want to be stuck washing them for the next two weeks.'



When they were close enough to the rhinos to see the frayed edges of their ears, Tendai turned with a smile. 'I have something very special to show you. I didn't want to say anything before now because if too many others had joined us we wouldn't have been able to come. You are the lucky ones.'

'Well, that's nice to hear,' John Johnson said. 'Are you going to tell us what it is?'

'Follow me and you'll see it for yourself.'

They crept through the bush towards Spartacus and Cleo. The immense animals shifted to face the possible threat, as light on their feet as dancers. They blinked and

sniffed the air. Rhinos were short-sighted and Martine's grandmother always claimed that, at thirty metres, they could barely tell a person from a tree. However, these rhinos were clearly wearing contact lenses. They looked ready to pound the intruders into pancakes at a second's notice.

Tendai indicated a long sloping boulder. 'We wait here. Sit down or lie down and be as still as possible.'

Martine found herself lying between Ben and Jayden in a sort of nature boy-pop idol sandwich. It was unnerving. Still, she smiled to herself when she saw how, in this setting, Ben came into his own. His worn olive green cargo trousers, khaki T-shirt and dusty desert boots were infinitely more suited to bushwalking than Jayden's ripped jeans, studded belt and hi-tech trainers.

But it was about so much more than their clothing. Ben was totally in tune with his surroundings. He moved silently, missed nothing and could read 'sign' – the rangers' word for the traces an animal makes when it passes – as easily as most people read books. Tendai had once told her that tracking was a rare gift. You were either born with it or you weren't. Some skills could be learned but unless a person could think themselves into an animal's head, they'd never make a great tracker.

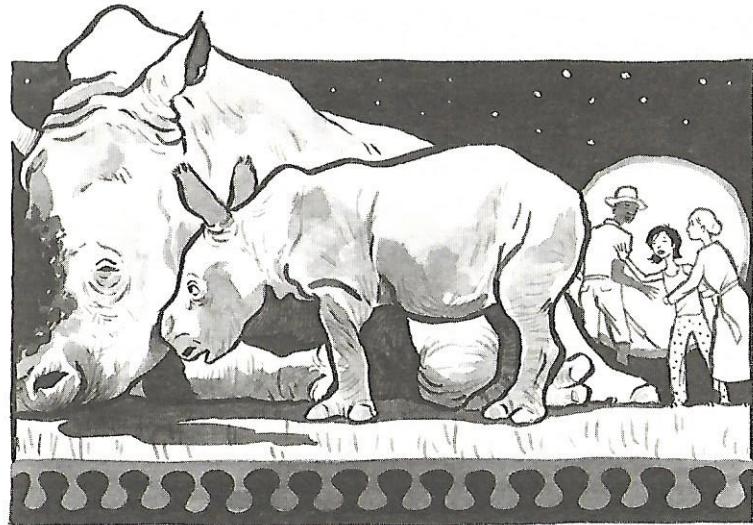
'Oh, my goodness!' exclaimed Olivia.

The rhinos had shifted apart. Cleo's gaze was fixed on the shifting shadows behind her. There was a series of mouse-like squeaks, then a baby rhino shot from between the flanks of its parents.

Martine had only lived at Sawubona a year and there

remaining guests and Ben had left shortly afterwards. Had it not been for the giraffe selfie on her phone, which brought a smile to Martine's face every time she looked at it, the whole amazing day might have been a dream.

• 7 •



Martine woke with a sudden, violent start. There was a sick feeling in her stomach – not the kind of nausea that comes from eating bad food but the kind that accompanies guilt. She'd said or done something that was going to come back to haunt her. If only she could remember what it was.

It was two twenty-one a.m. on her bedside clock. She sat up, bleary-eyed. When she pushed aside the curtain, the black cloth of night glittered with stars. One lonely evening, not long after arriving in Africa, she'd looked out of her window during a fierce storm and glimpsed the white giraffe illuminated by lightning. Desperate for

didn't know about the rhino with the record-breaking horn. Nobody did.

'Your rhino,' Saf said impatiently. 'Jabulani. Goodwin took away his goat friend and I think he got lonely. There's a hole in the fence. Ex-fence, should I say. Now it resembles an exploded diagram. Anyway, he's gone.'

• 18 •



Ben shone a torch at the chaos of tracks outside Jabu's enclosure. He had no trouble identifying the rhino's. Despite his bulk, the orphan had dainty feet. His rigid toes left prints the shape of a three-leaved clover.

'The main gates are locked at night so he can't have gone far,' said Ben. 'He'll be making friends with the babies in the nursery or destroying what's left of Chef Carlos's vegetable patch. We've rounded him up before. I'm sure we can do it again, especially now there's three of us.'

Saf squirmed and looked at her shoes, once-white sneakers polka-dotted with mulberry juice. 'It might not