

**6.5 Minutes With...Transcript**  
**Nigel Rothfels**  
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Nicole Welk-Joerger, C21 Deputy Director: You're listening to 6.5 Minutes with C21 – an audio introduction to the topics, experts, and leaders who take part in the conversations hosted by the Center for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Studies.

I'm Nicole Welk-Joerger, Deputy Director of the Center and the interviewer in this episode. Ahead of our book launch event for *Elephant Trails*, I spoke with author, Nigel Rothfels about the significance of elephants in history and in relation to this year's Lonely No More! symposia. Rothfels is a history professor and the Director of the Office of Undergraduate Research at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

How would you describe your newest book?

Nigel Rothfels: The book is about real elephants, and elephants we only think about, and history. So, there are, I counted up at some point something like 45 elephants in here who we know actually sort of walked around. And who have names, but there's a lot of other elephants in here which are just elephants that we have sort of imagined, in one way or another. Sometimes I say I write about the elephants who's natural habitat is our mind and not the ones that actually are walking around.

The book is called *Elephant Trails*. The idea of it is that, following a trail is part of an historian's task. Right? It's what an archive is: a trail. And following it to where it goes can be an immense pleasure just in itself. It's actually a reference to a very small little story from Brecht about Herr K's favorite animal, which is the elephant, and I think it goes in German at something like, "Wo dieses Tier war, führt eine breite Spur." which is "where this animal has been there leads a wide path." I found that quote decades ago and it's been in my mind, for a very long time. That animals like elephants leave a pretty big path behind them, not just physically, but in our thoughts. And that's what the book's about.

Nicole: In your research, did you uncover any discussion about elephants experiencing grief and loneliness? And how might we understand these discussions and conclusions, especially as they're related to human emotions and how they connect to how, as you were saying, we experience real elephants, as well as those elephants that we just think about?

Nigel: So there's a book that became quite well known in the 1990s by Jeffrey Mason and Susan McCarthy called *When Elephants Weep*. And it was like a New York Times bestseller, basically about animals and the emotions. There's a there's a very small part of the book, I mean pages of a book that actually has to do with elephants. Historical accounts of elephants weeping. So, the issue, or the sort of account of elephants weeping is actually very old, and it goes back to classical times. I use a lot of Aelian so third century AD in the book and there's a there's an account in Aelian about elephants when they are taken from Africa and taken to other shores will often go blind from tears from weeping for their lost homelands. Just to be clear, physiologically elephants don't cry in the way that we do; in the sense of having an emotional tear. However, the issue of elephant grief and animal grief is a really persistent story with elephants.

I can remember when an elephant died here in Milwaukee. And there were two elephants at the time - two African elephants at the time at the zoo who had been together since the 1960s and when one died, I went to the zoo after hours. We just hung out with the elephant. Anyone who has ever had any doubts about grief and animals: I do not. Because I saw it. This is the best part of anthropomorphism, I think, when one can recognize in another animal something that that you know what it is. So, I knew what that was, everyone else knew what that was. This elephant did not eat for a few weeks, did not sleep, was completely devastated. And the recovery was long and slow.

There is an elephant now at the Bronx Zoo named Happy. The fact that this elephant is named Happy has made it a particular focus for some legal challenges which are going on right now about whether this elephant has standing in the courts, which will allow it not to be kept alone. This elephant, there are reasons from the curators' perspectives why this elephant is by herself. And it has to do with her relationships with other animals and with other elephants, but

from our perspective when we see an elephant named Happy standing alone at a zoo, it is intellectually problematic in lots of ways, and more than intellectually problematic for many, many people. And Happy is also, as it turns out famous for another reason...in that Happy is the only elephant, THE elephant, around which the whole account of elephants recognizing themselves in mirrors in the mirror self-recognition test turns. It is Happy who recognized herself in a mirror. And many other elephants have been given that task, but Happy, is the only one who has quote-unquote passed it, and that's also something I talked about in the book. If there are animals that have really grabbed our attention on issues of emotion and grief, elephants are certainly one.

Nicole:

To further engage with this interview, other conversations, and the participatory research and reading activities for *Lonely No More*, please visit our website at [uwm.edu/c21](http://uwm.edu/c21). If not there, we hope to catch you when you have another 6.5 Minutes to spare.