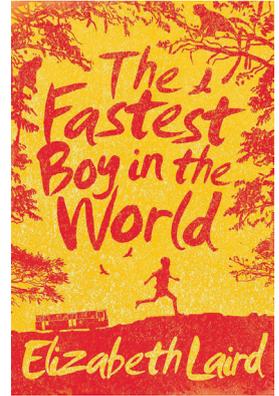


TEACHING NOTES

The Fastest Boy in the World Elizabeth Laird



“People often ask me where I get my ideas from. ‘They come from the same place as my dreams,’ I say. So where do we get our dreams from? They come from the people we meet, the places we know, the things that have happened to us, and, above all, the feelings we experience. *The Fastest Boy in the World* was born out of that mixture of people and places and events. It just needed a flash of inspiration to tie it all together into a story...” - Elizabeth Laird

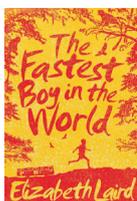
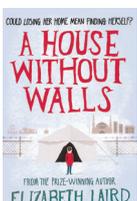
About *The Fastest Boy in the World*

Shortlisted for the CILIP Carnegie Medal, *The Fastest Boy in the World* is the inspiring story of a small Ethiopian runner with a very big heart.

Eleven-year-old Solomon loves to run! The great athletes of the Ethiopian national team are his heroes and he dreams that one day he will be a gold-medal-winning athlete like them, in spite of his ragged shorts and bare feet.

When his grandfather announces that he's going to take Solomon to Addis Ababa, Solomon cannot believe his ears. A trip to the capital? It's unfathomable. Solomon's joy is increased when he realizes that the Ethiopian running team will be doing a victory parade through the city that day. Maybe he'll get a glimpse of Haile Gebreselassie or Deraartuu Tulluu?!

But Solomon's grandfather has other plans. As Solomon follows him through the big, overwhelming streets, he learns something he cannot believe. The strict old man is a war hero who once risked his life to save a friend and has been in hiding ever since. When Grandfather collapses, Solomon knows that getting help from his village is up to him. It's a twenty-mile run from the city to home, and Grandfather's life hangs in the balance. Can the small, bare-footed runner with the big heart do it?

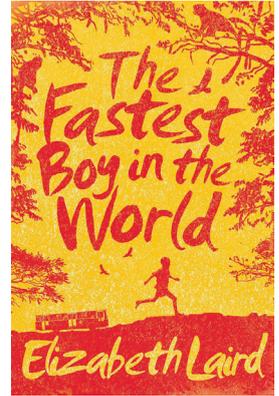



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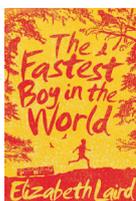
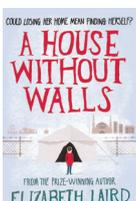
The Fastest Boy in the World Elizabeth Laird



About Me

Here's a picture of me, just in case you're wondering what I look like. I've been writing novels for more than 30 years now. A lot of them are still in print, and you can find out more about them on my website www.elizabethlaird.co.uk.

I've travelled all over the world in pursuit of adventures and stories, so take a look at my other books if you'd like to know more.

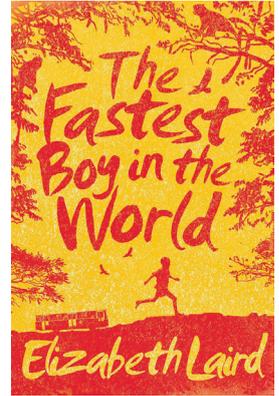



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Ethiopia: A Great Country



- Ethiopia is a big country in Africa. The capital city is called Addis Ababa. It's more or less in the middle of the country.
- More than 100 million people live in Ethiopia. There are fourteen regions, and the people in each region have their own special ways of doing things.



- More than 70 different languages are spoken in Ethiopia. Some people are Christian, some are Muslim and some follow other religions.
- The highlands and the mountains in the middle of the country are cool and pleasant to live in, but the lowlands are very hot. The Danakil Desert in Ethiopia is one of the hottest places on Earth! In the picture below, the white streaks in the desert look like water, but they're actually dried up salt.



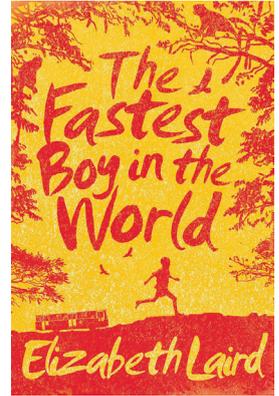
Ethiopian Mountains



The Danakil Desert

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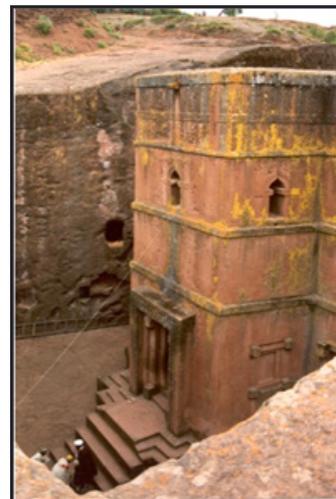


An Ethiopian farmer ploughing his land in the cool Highlands

Ethiopian Artists and Storytellers

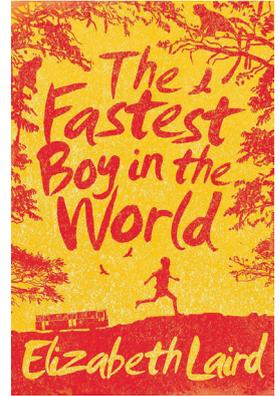
Ethiopians are wonderful poets and storytellers. They have been writing books and illustrating them with wonderful pictures for over a thousand years. You can read some of their stories on this website: www.ethiopianfolktalesforkids.com

For hundreds of years, Ethiopians have been painting beautiful pictures on the walls of their churches. The picture on the left shows three characters from the Bible. It was painted on the ceiling of a church 600 years ago. The church on the right is 800 years old. It's carved out of solid rock. Every detail, inside and out, is perfect.



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Ethiopia Long Ago

Ethiopia has a long and noble history. For two thousand years, the country was governed by an emperor. The last one was called Haile Selassie. He was ruling Ethiopia in 1935 when a huge Italian army invaded his country.



Ethiopian soldiers in the war against the Italians

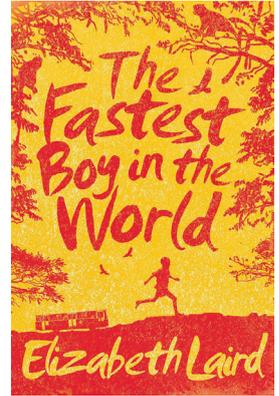
The Ethiopians didn't have enough modern weapons to beat the Italians, and though they fought with incredible bravery, the whole country was finally conquered. Emperor Haile Selassie escaped just in time before the invaders captured Addis Ababa. He flew to England and lived quietly in Bath with his family, waiting for the chance to go home. At last, in 1941, he returned to Ethiopia with an army of British and Ethiopian soldiers. They defeated the Italians, and drove them out of the country.

In *The Fastest Boy in the World*, Solomon's great-grandfather was one of those brave Ethiopian soldiers, and the Emperor himself gave him a medal.

Haile Selassie ruled for a very long time. He tried to make Ethiopia more modern, but he couldn't change things fast enough. When he was already old and tired, the climate was beginning to change, and it didn't rain for a long time. The farmers couldn't water their crops so the harvest failed and there wasn't enough food. Many people died of hunger. When this happens, it's called a 'famine'.

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Some people thought that the Emperor didn't care about the famine and didn't help people enough. In 1974 they started a revolution, to take away his power and put another kind of government in place, one that would be fair to everyone. Unfortunately, the 'revolutionary' government became very severe and cruel. Anyone who disagreed with the new rulers was put in prison or even shot. There were more terrible famines and times of war.

In *The Fastest Boy in the World*, Solomon's grandfather had been one Haile Selassie's special soldiers in his Bodyguard. He and his friend, 'the Bullet', stayed true to the Emperor, and the revolutionary government punished them for it. They were put in prison and made to work hard, breaking stones.



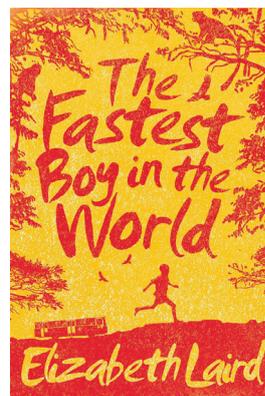
The pictures show soldiers of the Imperial Bodyguard with their lion's mane helmets, Emperor Haile Selassie, and a drawing of the medal by Peter Bailey.

The bad times in Ethiopia lasted for about twenty years, but a new government came to power at last and the country settled down again. Since then, huge changes have come to Ethiopia. Railways and motorways have been built, Addis Ababa and the other cities have grown, with tall new buildings, and many people have started new businesses.

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The Athletes of Ethiopia

In 1968 I was living in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. One morning I was waiting at the airport for a friend's plane to arrive. I went upstairs in the terminal building for a cup of coffee, and looking out of the window, I was startled to see a lion sitting on the tarmac outside the airport building.

"What's that doing there?" I asked someone. "Doesn't anyone realise?"

"Didn't you know?" I was told. "Abebe Bikila, our champion runner, is about to arrive home from the Olympic Games in Mexico. The Emperor has sent the lion to greet him. His Majesty will soon be here himself."

And true enough, a short while later, a Rolls Royce appeared, and out stepped Emperor Haile Selassie, King of Kings, Elect of God, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah. He took no notice of the lion, and the lion took no notice of him. A few weeks earlier, I'd been presented to the Emperor. I'd been ushered forwards to where he sat on a throne at an outdoor ceremony. He was a short man, quite tiny in fact, but he had more dignity and charisma than anyone I had ever met in my life. I bowed, he said a few words to me in French, nodded graciously, and an usher moved me on.

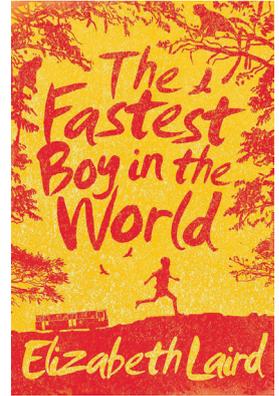


Abebe Bikila arriving home in triumph

The plane landed, and Abebe Bikila appeared at the door of the aircraft. He was the first Ethiopian ever to have won a gold medal at the Olympic Games. He had set his country on fire. The air inside the airport building crackled with excitement as everyone crowded to the windows to get a first sight of their hero.

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Years later, the names of other great Ethiopian athletes, both men and women – Haile Gebreselassie, Deraartuu Tulluu, Tirunesh Dibaba – began to dominate the marathons and international games of the world. The Ethiopian colours of green, gold and red streaked first past the winning post time after time, with only the Kenyans hot on their heels. The athletes were inspirational, the rock stars of Ethiopia!

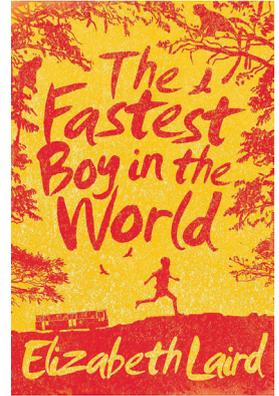


Haile Gebreselassie and Deraartuu Tulluu, two of the greatest Ethiopian Olympic runners

I began to notice, as I travelled around the country, that boys and girls were running everywhere. They ran to school (sometimes for miles there and back every day), they ran from their homes to the nearest town, they ran because they had to, but they ran for the pleasure of it too, and in every heart was a great ambition, to represent their country in the great races of the world.

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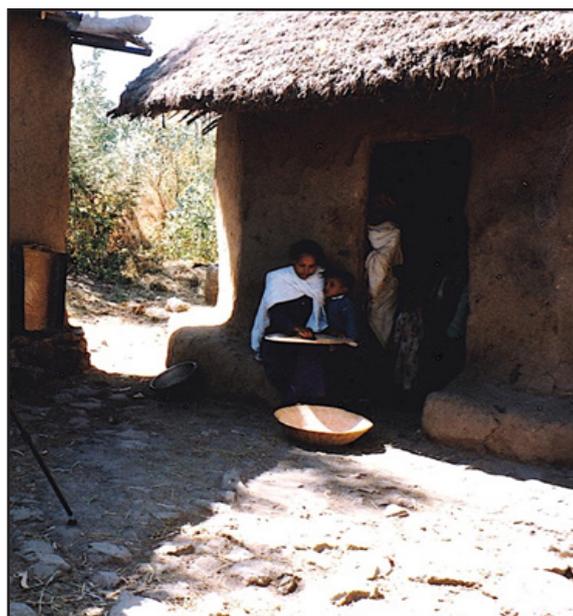


Ethiopia is changing very fast, and Addis Ababa is now a modern city, with high-rise buildings, fast roads and busy shops.

Cousin Wonda's house might have looked like this house on the right. Most farmers in the Ethiopian countryside still live in a simpler way than the people in the towns. Women often have to carry water from wells or springs a long way from home. Cows and horses are stabled in a walled-off part of the family home.



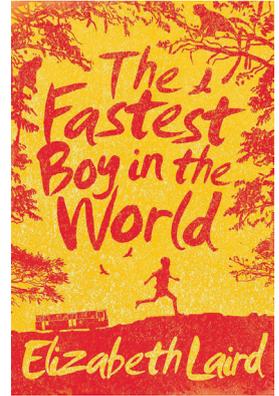
A woman fetching water



Outside an Ethiopian farmhouse

TEACHING NOTES

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The Characters in The Fastest Boy in the World

SOLOMON comes from a farming family. The work is hard, but the family is united and happy. Solomon's parents encourage him to go to school, but he also has to do his share of work at home, learning to look after the animals and caring for the land.



Ethiopian boys at school

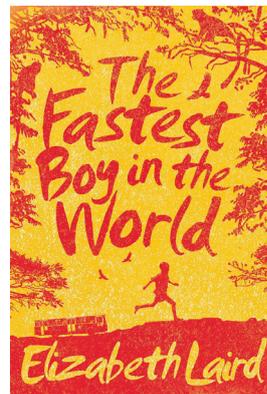


A busy street corner in Addis Ababa

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KEBEDE is a smart Addis Ababa boy. He is different from Solomon but with a great gift for friendship. His life isn't easy and he has to make the best of things. He has learned to look after himself in the tough world of the city, so he knows how to look after Solomon, too.



SOLOMON'S GRANDFATHER is an old man now. This picture shows two retired Ethiopian farmers wearing their homespun 'shammas'. These cotton shawls, which are wonderfully warm and soft, are the traditional dress of both Ethiopian men and women. Although Ethiopia is an African country and is not far from the equator, much of the land is at high altitudes, so it can be very cold at night.

What Inspired Me to Write The Fastest Boy in the World?

By chance, I was back in Addis Ababa in 2000 when the Olympic athletes returned from the Games in Sydney. I'd been watching on the TV in my hotel room as the crowds gathered at the airport. At last there was a speck in the sky, growing larger and larger, and the plane landed. The aircraft doors opened and the athletes appeared. They danced down the steps, waving flags, their medals bouncing against their chests on long blue ribbons, their faces shining. People picked them up and carried them shoulder high. Soon, I knew, they would be passing in a cavalcade along the street nearby. I had to be there. I had to see them for myself.

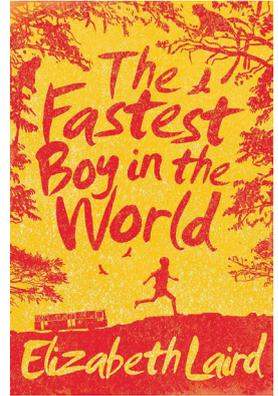
People were waiting in ranks along the sides of the roads to cheer as the athletes came past. Some had tied ribbons of the national colours round their heads. Others had draped flags round their shoulders. Everyone was happy and excited.

An elderly man in a baseball cap smiled at me. "When will they get here?" I asked him.

"Soon," he said, listening to the transistor clamped to one ear. "They're coming!"

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“Isn’t this wonderful?” someone called out to me. “What do you think of our Ethiopia? How is it?”

“Wonderful!” I called back.

Suddenly there were shouts from behind me; then came the chanting of the vanguard of running men. They went past so fast that I hardly had time to register their faces, catching only the glint of sweat on their cheeks and the fluttering of the flags they carried, the poles of which were resting against their shoulders.

“Ah oh!” they were shouting. “Ah oh! Ah oh! Ah oh!”

Their voices were so loud they almost drowned out the wail of the siren from the car behind them, which was filled with policemen and flanked by outriders.

And now, at last, three black limousines were abreast of us, and through their sunroofs, one in each car, stood the medalled athletes garlanded with golden flowers. Daraartuu and Million looked overwhelmed, but Haile Gebreselassie raised his arms and threw back his head. He could have been a Roman emperor at his triumph. At that moment, he was a god.

The crowd roared for him. My skin prickled and my hair stood on end.

A moment later the cavalcade had gone, rounding the corner, entering Churchill Avenue. We could hear the shouts of the crowd down there, a Mexican wave of sound.

My throat was tight with emotion. An old man was standing next to me. I turned and caught his eye.

“I was here, you know, when Abebe Bikila, the first Ethiopian gold medallist, returned with his medal in 1968,” I told him.

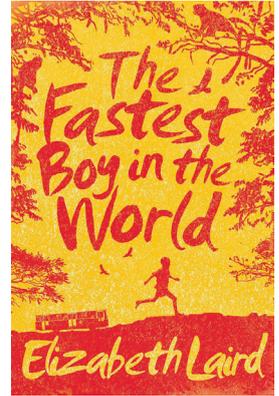
He sucked the air in through his teeth.

“You saw him? You were here then, in His Majesty’s time?”

There were tears in his eyes too. We clasped hands. He shook his head wonderingly. “You are a very chanceful person,” he said.

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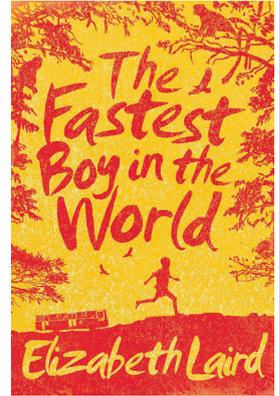
Illustrations from the Book



The Fastest Boy in the World is illustrated with lovely drawings by Peter Bailey. Here is Solomon running as fast as he can all the way home. But will he beat the bus?

TEACHING NOTES

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Together We Learn

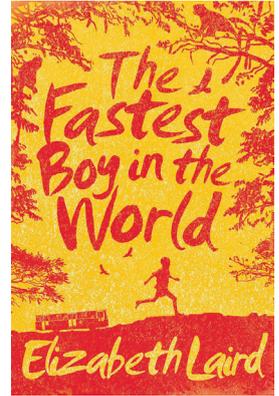
Together We Learn is a brilliant small charity which supports education in Ethiopia through links with British schools and teachers. Without their help, some of the students they support would have to fend for themselves as Mamo and his gang do. Together We Learn makes links with UK primary and secondary schools and many British students and teachers have visited schools in Ethiopia and are still supporting education there.

If you want to find out more about how your school could join in, go to their website at: <https://twlethiopia.org>. You never know – it could be the start of something exciting!



TEACHING NOTES

The Fastest Boy in the World Elizabeth Laird



Activities

1. Imagine you are Kebede. Write a letter to Solomon at home on the farm, telling him how you are getting on in Addis Ababa.
2. Design a medal to be given to the best runner in your school. Or you could design a badge for members of a running club.
3. How far can you run? How many times can you run round the playground at your school without having to stop for breath? How fast can you run? Time yourself running from one side of the playground to the other.
4. Who are the most famous British runners? Choose one and write his or her biography.
5. Write a letter from grown-up Solomon, giving advice to a young person who wants to become an Olympic runner.
6. Do you know any old people? Perhaps you could ask your grandparent or an aunt or uncle to tell you about something exciting that happened to them when they were young.

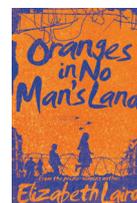
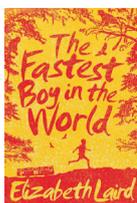
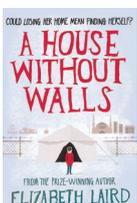
Keyword Glossary

Emperor: Somebody who controls an 'empire' or, more generally, has complete control of a country or region.

Government: A group of people who run a country or state.

Revolution: Causing/involving total change from the current state. A person can be referred to as a 'revolutionary' if they are engaged in this change.

Terrorism: The use of violence and intimidation to create fear amongst civilians in order to get a message across.

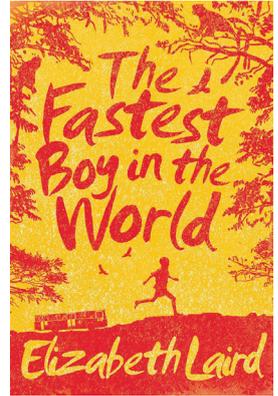



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Curriculum Links

Year 3-4 (Lower KS2):

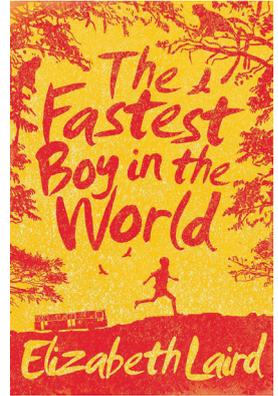
- Reading
- Writing
- Primary School Spoken Language

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and [2] an official portrait of which b/w copies were distributed by the Ethiopian government -
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