



Alastair Humphreys

# AGAINST THE ODDS

The incredible struggles of  
*20 GREAT ADVENTURERS*

FROM THE AUTHOR OF  
**GREAT  
ADVENTURERS**

WINNER OF THE  
**Edward Stanford**  
Travel Writing  
Award 2019

CHILDREN'S TRAVEL BOOK OF THE YEAR

Illustrated by  
Pola Mai

# JEANNE BARET

Jeanne Baret undertook a journey full of adventure and discovered many plants that were new to science. But her route into exploration was not easy. In the 18th century, women were forbidden to travel on French naval ships, so Jeanne had many difficulties to overcome – even before setting sail for the first time.



**J**eanne Baret was born in rural France in 1740. Her father, who died when Jeanne was 15, was an illiterate labourer and her mother died when she was just a baby. Growing up in the countryside, Jeanne became skilful at identifying plants and local remedies. As a young adult, she began working as a housekeeper for a botanist called Philibert Commerçon.

## A MAN IN DISGUISE

In 1766, two ships, *La Boudeuse* and *L'Étoile*, set sail under the command of explorer Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, attempting to be the first French expedition to sail around the world. Commerçon was invited to join the expedition as a specialist scientist. He was unsure about accepting because he was in poor health and needed Jeanne to help him. But the offer was too good to turn down.

In those days, only men were allowed on naval expeditions, so Commerçon and Jeanne hatched a plot in which she would dress as a man – introducing herself as 'Jean' – and offer her services just before the ship set sail. This was a crazy idea: if Jeanne's secret was discovered she would be in serious trouble, or even danger. But their plan worked and they set sail. Commerçon had so much scientific equipment on board that he and 'Jean' were given a large private cabin. This helped Jeanne keep her secret from all the other men on the ship.



## INTO THE WILDERNESS

Jeanne and Commerçon's task was to find natural resources like plants, minerals and spices that would be useful for France. When the expedition reached its first stop, Uruguay in South America, the pair headed inland to collect plants. During the long voyage, Commerçon's health got much worse, so Jeanne had to do much of the heavy work in search of discoveries. Near Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil, they discovered a wonderful pink-flowering vine. They named it Bougainvillea in honour of the expedition commander.



- flower press
- pressed samples
- forceps
- rock hammer
- microscope
- pruning scissors
- specimen containers
- art supplies

# ROBERT SMALLS

Robert Smalls was born into slavery in 19th-century America, deep in the South. He was desperate for his family to escape to a better life. But the outbreak of the American Civil War seemed certain to end his hopes of freedom and safety.



**A**s a child, Robert Smalls worked as an enslaved cotton picker on a plantation.

When he was 12, he was sent to Charleston as a labourer, working in a hotel and then as a lamplighter.

As a teen, he worked on the docks. He got to know the ships well and became a helmsman, in charge of steering the boat.

At 17, Robert got married and was desperate to buy his family's freedom. But for every \$15 he earned as an enslaved man, he was only allowed to keep a single dollar. This made it impossible to save the \$800 he needed. Robert was trapped, as his people had been for centuries, and he knew that if he wanted to be free, he would need to come up with a spectacular plan.



## DREAMS OF FREEDOM

The American Civil War began in 1861, between the Southern States (the Confederacy), who wanted to keep slavery, and the Northern States (the Union), who did not.

UNION STATE  
CONFEDERATE STATE

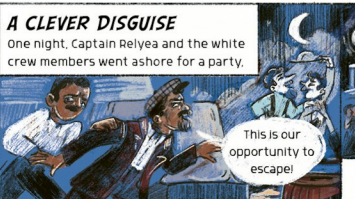
In 1861, Robert was forced into service on a transport ship for the Confederate Army called the *CSS Planter*, delivering ammunition and supplies up and down the coast. The ship was led by Captain Relyea, with two other white officers and a crew of enslaved Black men.

The Robert always wore a wide-brimmed straw hat to protect his head from the bright southern sun. This gave Robert the first glimmering of an idea...



## A CLEVER DISGUISE

One night, Captain Relyea and the white crew members went ashore for a party.



This is our opportunity to escape!



At 2am, Robert gathered his wife, Hannah, their children, and all the others on the boat. This was their chance!



Robert put on the Captain's jacket and hat, and set sail. He knew the routes perfectly, as well as the checkpoints, code words and signals along the river.



He stood on the deck exactly as Captain Relyea always did - hat on, arms folded and looking confident. They sailed slowly and calmly through the checkpoints.



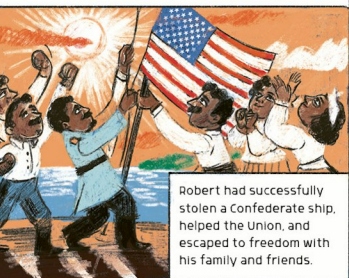
Finally, when they had sailed into Union waters, they hauled down the Confederate flag and raised a white bed sheet to signal peace.



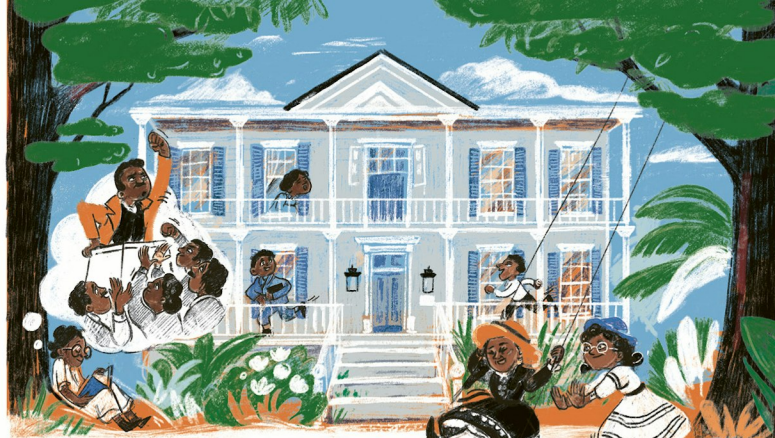
Robert sailed towards the Union ships out at sea, desperately hoping that they would not attack his boat. Luckily, they noticed their flag!



When they realised they were safe, everyone on the boat began to dance and sing.



Robert had successfully stolen a Confederate ship, helped the Union, and escaped to freedom with his family and friends.



## A NEW LIFE

The states of the Union celebrated Robert's bold escape. They gave him \$1500 and an invitation to meet President Lincoln. Robert became a civil rights activist, lobbying to allow Black men to fight for the Union Army. He joined the US Navy himself and rose to the rank of captain.

Robert later became a politician and, when he returned to his hometown, bought the house where he had been a slave, setting it up as one of the first schools for Black children in the region. He also campaigned for laws to improve the lives of Black people in the United States.



## Why Robert Smalls Inspired Me

Robert's seamanship, boldness and bravery won freedom for himself and his family. Despite being born in a land that declared he could be owned by another person, Robert Smalls went on to become a successful businessman and politician, campaigning tirelessly on the long battle towards racial equality in his country.



# JUNKO TABEL

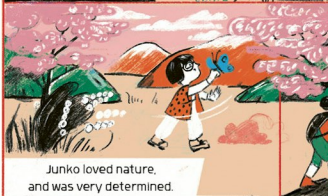
Junko Tabei was the first woman to climb Mount Everest and the first woman to climb the highest mountain on each continent — the legendary Seven Summits. Growing up in the poverty of post-war Japan, Junko was a frail and small girl. To achieve her dreams, she had to overcome society's belief back then that women should be homemakers and nothing more.



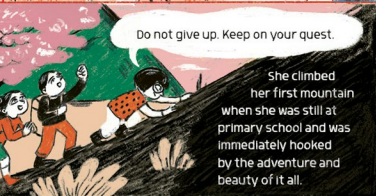
Junko Tabei grew up with her six siblings in the small town of Miharū, among the green mountains and rice fields of northern Japan.



It was just after the Second World War and times were tough. People did not have enough food to eat.



Junko loved nature, and was very determined.



Do not give up. Keep on your quest.

She climbed her first mountain when she was still at primary school and was immediately hooked by the adventure and beauty of it all.

As a young adult, Junko joined a climbing club. Usually, she was the only woman on climbing trips or at club meetings.



The men were not welcoming to female mountaineers, and many would not even climb with her.



So, in 1969, Junko founded a women's mountaineering club whose motto was:

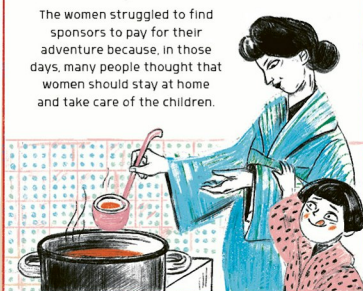
LET'S GO ON AN OVERSEAS EXPEDITION BY OURSELVES.



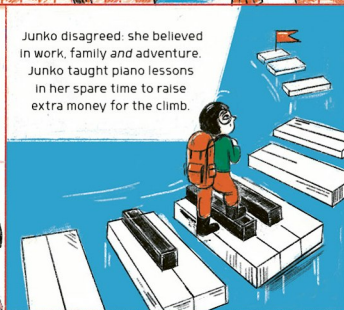
Soon after, the Japanese Women's Everest Expedition was launched. Junko found a team of enthusiastic female climbers and they got to work making plans.



The women struggled to find sponsors to pay for their adventure because, in those days, many people thought that women should stay at home and take care of the children.



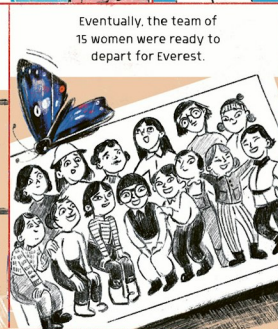
Junko disagreed: she believed in work, family and adventure. Junko taught piano lessons in her spare time to raise extra money for the climb.



She even made some of her own equipment, including sewing trousers from a pair of curtains!



Eventually, the team of 15 women were ready to depart for Everest.



Despite the attitude against female adventurers, Junko's husband was very supportive. He cared for their young daughter as Junko and her team headed for the Himalayas.

