



ADAPTED FOR YOUNG READERS FROM THE BEST-SELLING NOVEL

# THE Orphan Keeper

TEACHER'S  
GUIDE

Based on the true story of Taj Rowland

CAMRON WRIGHT



**INDIA, 1971-1978, EARLY MEMORIES**

Taj's early childhood memories include:

- Living in a one-room, dirt floored, thatched hut.
- Throwing rocks at his drunken father.
- Stealing fruit from sellers at the bus station.
- A mother who worked long hours dyeing fabric.
- Getting into trouble with other boys.
- An older brother and a younger baby sister.
- A kind land owner who paid him a few rupees to feed her cattle.

**INDIA, 1978, KIDNAPPED AND SOLD**

Taj, then called Chellamuthu, just 7 or 8, was kidnapped from the streets of Erode, India. He was forced into a van, then a Jeep, and driven three hours away, where he was sold to a Christian orphanage.

**INDIA, 1979, ADOPTION**

In the U.S., Fred and Linda Rowland were corresponding with the orphanage. They'd been assured the child they were adopting was a little girl. Only later was it revealed that Chellamuthu was indeed a boy—and instead of being 3, he was closer to 8.

**DECEMBER 1979, LANDS IN THE U.S.**

Cold, crying and wearing flip flops, Chellamuthu arrives just before Christmas to meet his new family. He speaks no English and can't tell them he was kidnapped in India. Weeks after her new son's arrival, knowing the boy will eventually forget his native Tamil language, Linda has him speak into an old cassette recorder. In this actual recording, you'll hear Taj sing two songs learned at the orphanage. Afterward, he speaks a few words in Tamil. His parents can't understand that he's talking about being taken. Scan code to listen.

**FEBRUARY 1980 - FAMILY DISCOVERS HE IS NOT AN ORPHAN**

After earning a third place wrestling ribbon, the excited child tells Fred and Linda, in his new broken English, that he'd like to show his ribbon to his mother back in India. It's the first time they realize their adopted son is not an orphan, that he has a family back in India.

**APRIL 1982 - A PLEA FOR HELP**

Despite repeated phone calls and letters, over many months, no one at the orphanage will respond. Linda finally finds the name of a man in India she hopes will help. He turns out to be both a friend and a business associate of the orphanage owner. Though he finally replies, he provides no help.



**VIEW TAJ ROWLAND'S FULL STORY TIMELINE**  
[THEORPHANKEEPER.COM/TIMELINE.HTML](http://THEORPHANKEEPER.COM/TIMELINE.HTML)

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1

The book's dedication reads: To the lost child in all of us, searching for home. Can you relate to the plight of little lost Chellamuthu? In what ways are you also an orphan? In what ways are you an orphan keeper? Who in the story could be called an orphan keeper? Why?

2

Eli poses the question, "If a child is kidnapped from hell and carried to heaven, should we condemn the kidnapper?" How would you answer? Was Eli saving children by taking them out of poverty and abuse to give them a chance at a better life, or was he condemning them? Is there any justification for his actions?

3

It's not unusual in India for kidnapped children to be intentionally maimed and then forced to beg on the streets in order to collect money for those caring for them. It has been argued that giving to these children encourages the practice. If you walked past such a child, would you give or refrain? Why?

4

When Taj returned to India as an adult, he remembered the orphanage as being three to four hours away from his home. If you were a kidnapped child of seven, would you have been able to gauge the distance so accurately? Why would Taj (Chellamuthu) have perhaps been more mature than the average seven-year-old American?

5

The Lincoln Home for Homeless Children was established to help poor Indian orphans find new homes. Did it lose its purpose over time? Is greed always destined to push noble aspirations aside? How can the slide to greed be prevented?

6

Linda quotes *The Phoenician Women*, by Euripides: "This is slavery, not to speak one's thought." How was Chellamuthu enslaved? How do we enslave ourselves in a similar manner?

7

It was an amazing coincidence that Priya, when first dating Taj, discovered a letter written years earlier by her own father to Fred and Linda Rowland. Later, Taj coincidentally met Vakesh, a child with whom he had played at the orphanage. Later still, as Taj drove past his unrecognizable childhood home, he would hear the hacking of coconuts, causing him to stop, listen, and remember. Do you believe in coincidence? Are our lives guided strictly by chance, or is there something more that might explain these situations?

8

Linda dreamed that Taj would marry an Indian girl, which he eventually did. How important are dreams in our lives? Can they predict the future? If yes, how is that possible?



**LOST IN INDIA: A BOY'S JOURNEY HOME**  
[THEORPHANKEEPER.COM/DOCUMENTARY.HTML](http://THEORPHANKEEPER.COM/DOCUMENTARY.HTML)

9

When Taj saw Priya's picture, it was love at first sight, with his instant declaration that he was going to marry her. Do you believe in love at first sight? Is it rational? Why? Why not?

10

Many Indian parents still arrange the marriages of their children. What might be the benefits of arranged marriage? What might be the drawbacks?

11

Taj eventually discovered that he was actually from a higher caste than Priya and her family. What do you know about the caste system in India? Why do you suppose it has endured for so many years? How would you respond if you were taught that you could never rise above the duties of your caste? Although we don't follow a caste system in the United States, do socioeconomic conditions often limit our potential? What other conditions might also be limiting?

12

When Taj was desperate for help to search for his family, he begged Christopher Raj, a man he'd just met in person the day before, to take time off work, leave his family, and return to Coimbatore to assist. Christopher, with barely a hesitation, jumped on the train for another ten-hour trip to help Taj.

13

Would you have made a similar decision for a virtual stranger? It turned out to be a choice that dramatically changed the course of Christopher's life (and that of Taj). What lessons can be learned from Christopher's actions? How careful should we be with our own everyday decisions and how we interact with others?

14

In the story, Arayi visits with three astrologers. The last one tells her that her son will return, and when he does, he will fly. Although the timing of this visit to this astrologer was presented in the book as having occurred shortly after Chellamuthu was taken (for the sake of pacing and plot), in real life, it occurred years later, about eight months before Taj actually returned. Do you believe there is any validity to astrology? If not, how does one explain the accuracy of the astrologer's prediction?

15

What in the story points to the possibility that Chellamuthu's father sold him to the orphanage? What points to the probability that his father was not involved? Does it matter? Why? Why not? Taj cherishes his wife and daughters, family he would not have if he had remained in India. That said, he still feels conflicted over having been ripped from his family in India as a child. Should Taj be grateful he was kidnapped, or should he be angry?

16

In the final pages of the book, Priya talks with Taj about his father's possible involvement in his kidnapping, as well as Taj's ongoing angst. When Taj confides that sharing his story has helped, she notes that stories are redemptive. Is she right? What parallels can be drawn between the telling of stories and redemption?

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

In the years since Taj reconnected with his family in India, he has played an integral role in their lives. His mother there still pinches his cheeks—and always calls him Chellamuthu. His brother, Selvaraj, left the fabric-bleaching business to enter politics. For many years, Selvaraj has been the mayor of his village in India and is considered an important figure in the community. Taj's father passed away a few years after Taj returned, likely from the sustained effects of his excessive drinking during the time Taj was missing. However, from the day Taj reconnected with his family to the day his father died, the man never returned to the streets. He remained at home as a functioning member of the family.

Taj and Priya built a home in India with an amazing view that ironically overlooks Madukkarai and the orphanage where he was taken as a kidnapped child, bringing his story full circle. Much of Taj's efforts in India today is in helping those who live in the villages of his childhood. For more details and insights into Taj's story, please visit [TheOrphanKeeper.com](http://TheOrphanKeeper.com). For a pronunciation guide, please visit [theorphankeeper.com/pronunciations.html](http://theorphankeeper.com/pronunciations.html).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Camron Wright holds a master's degree in writing and public relations. He has owned several successful retail stores in addition to working with his wife in the fashion industry, designing for the McCall Pattern Company in New York. Camron says he began writing to get out of attending MBA school, and it proved the better decision. He is the author of several acclaimed novels, including *Letters for Emily*, *The Rent Collector*, *The Orphan Keeper*, and *The Other Side of the Bridge*. Learn more about Camron and his books at [AuthorCamronWright.com](http://AuthorCamronWright.com).



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SHADOWMOUNTAIN.COM

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AUTHORCAMRONWRIGHT.COM  
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