

Jean-Claude Mourlevat

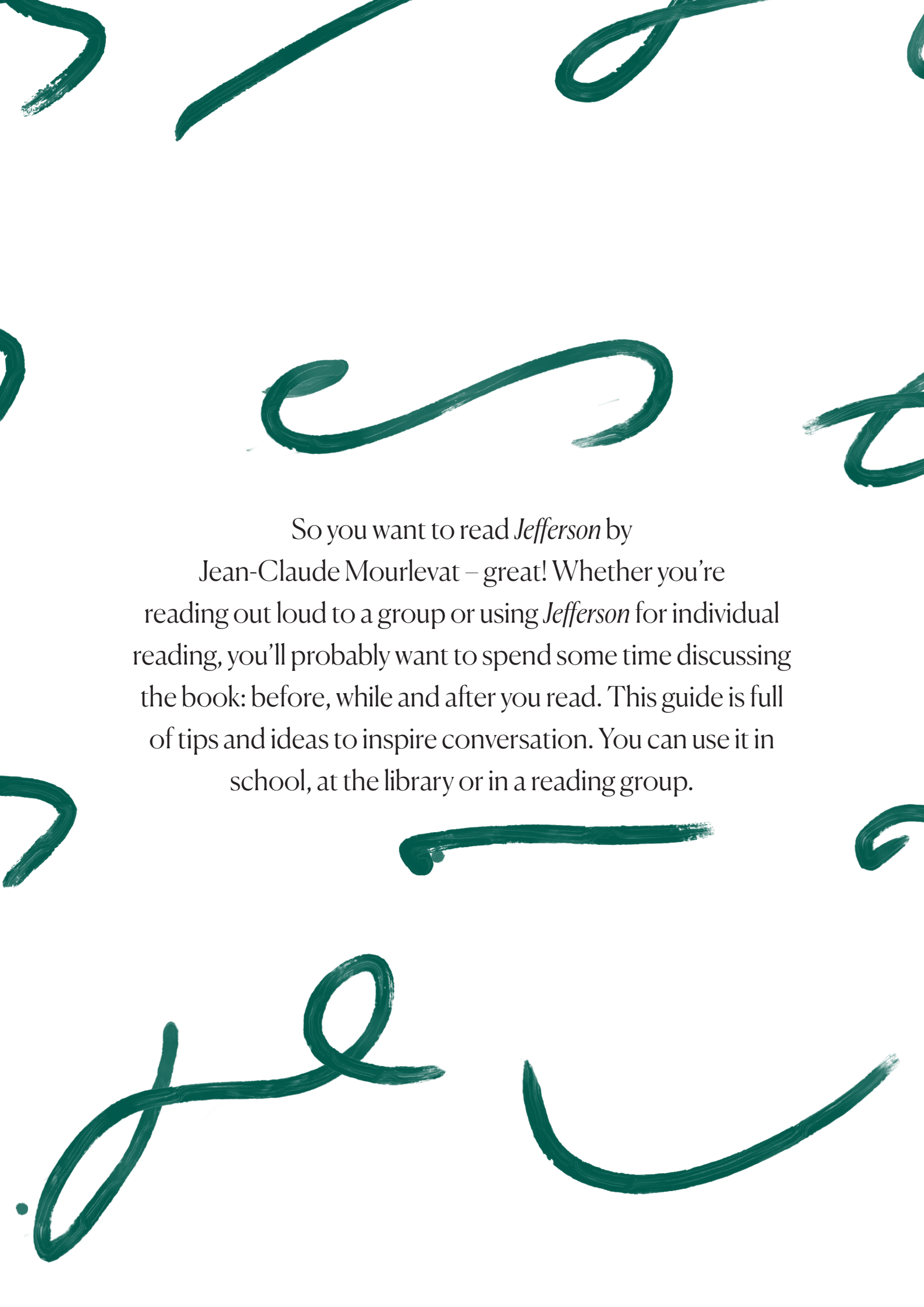
# Jefferson



GALLIMARD JEUNESSE

Astrid Lindgren  
Memorial Award



The page is decorated with several thick, dark teal brushstrokes of varying lengths and curves, scattered across the white background. Some strokes are horizontal, while others are diagonal or curved, creating a dynamic and artistic feel.

So you want to read *Jefferson* by  
Jean-Claude Mourlevat – great! Whether you’re  
reading out loud to a group or using *Jefferson* for individual  
reading, you’ll probably want to spend some time discussing  
the book: before, while and after you read. This guide is full  
of tips and ideas to inspire conversation. You can use it in  
school, at the library or in a reading group.

# Author

## Jean-Claude Mourlevat

Jean-Claude Mourlevat was born in 1952 and grew up on a farm in the French countryside. As a young boy, he was sent to a boarding school with strict rules where he felt unhappy. During those lonely, homesick years, literature became his lifeline.

After studying to be a German teacher and spending five years teaching, Mourlevat changed careers. He studied acting and worked both as a clown and a director. His work in the theatre inspired him to begin writing, and he published his first book in 1997. Since then, he has written about 30 books, which have been translated into nearly as many languages.

Jean-Claude Mourlevat received the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award in 2021. In their citation, the jury described him as a 'brilliant renewer of fairy tale traditions'. He works in genres such as the fairy story, fable and science fiction, frequently recombining and reimagining them in new and innovative ways. *Jefferson* was first published in 2018 and is a superlative example of his ability to recombine and renew traditional genres.



Photo: Susanne Kronholm

# About Jefferson

Books and reading often figure significantly in Mourlevat's texts, and this is the case in *Jefferson*. The novel opens, in fact, as Jefferson the hedgehog is walking to the library to return a highly exciting book. As the story continues, the thrills and danger become all too 'real'. Jefferson is falsely accused of a brutal killing. Joined first by his best friend, Gilbert the pig, and later a tour bus full of other animals, he takes on the difficult task of catching the real killers in order to clear his own name.

*Jefferson* is a classic whodunit with touches of a thriller, a fairy tale with a contemporary sensibility, a story about animals and people that marries seriousness with madcap slapstick humour. In the hands of Mourlevat, a master of the plot twist, what begins as a gentle story about talking animals escalates into an increasingly exciting, comic, arresting and even horrifying tale. At some junctures in *Jefferson*, the dangers feel very real indeed. Unlike many middle grade detective stories, the puzzle being investigated is a real murder, and as motives and connections are elucidated, death (in the form of the animal industry in the Land of Humans) gives the story a grave undertone. But Mourlevat is a secure storyteller, and even the most dramatic and violent scenes have a vein of warmth and humour, if only in Jefferson's head. Naturally, the main characters get a happy ending, and the many warm and joyful friendships and the constant injection of new ideas offer unending opportunities to have fun with this book. *Jefferson* is a fairy tale, but never just a fairy tale; it is dark, but never only dark, as Mourlevat blends gaiety and gravity with consummate skill.

*Jefferson* is a novel that encourages hunting for clues, discussions about friendship and solidarity, and reflections on the nature of our society and whether it could, or should, look different. Its humour, compassion and solidarity across many kinds of boundaries show us the possibilities as well as some of the answers.





# Before reading

A great way to kindle curiosity and imagination is to talk as a group about the book itself before you start to read. Getting a sense of the genre, talking about the cover and the other pictures, and looking at the introductory pages that precede the main text can help readers develop pre-understanding and spark extra interest.

## **The whodunit genre**

*Jefferson* has many of the typical features of a classic whodunit. Thus, one way to approach reading *Jefferson* could be to talk about what makes a book a whodunit:

- It has a thorny problem that needs to be solved, often a murder;
- The detective figure or figures – who are often not real detectives at all, just smart and curious people – discover and interpret various kinds of clues;
- Frequently, the reader gets to join in solving the problem, thinking and guessing will happen next and often feeling at least as smart as the main characters at puzzling out the clues;
- At the end, all is revealed.

Many middle grade readers will be familiar with the whodunit genre and they may be able to offer examples from their own reading. In *Jefferson*, each chapter begins with a small ‘introductory picture’, and these pictures often contain clues about something that will be important in that chapter. Reading itself is a kind of detective work!

## **The cover**

The cover tells us the main character’s name and what he looks like. You can whet your readers’ imagination and curiosity by taking some time to look at the cover before you open the book.

- What do we see on the cover?
- What feeling does the cover convey?
- What can we find out from the cover? What fresh questions does it raise?
- If I wrote a book about myself as an animal, which animal would I be?
- What would the cover of my book look like?

## **Introductory pages**

The story proper is preceded by two introductory texts that are a little extra discussion. You may also want to revisit these texts at the close of the story.

The first text appears on the page directly following. It is Jean-Claude Mourlevat's dedication of the book to his children: 'For my children, who opened my eyes.'

- As a figure of speech, what does it mean to 'have your eyes opened'? How does receiving an 'eye-opener' change someone or something?
- The author is addressing his children, who have given him an 'eye-opener'. What are some ways children can teach things to adults? What examples come to mind?

The second text appears on the following page and describes 'the land where this story begins'. This text talks about animals and people in the story that is about to unfold.

- What does the text say about animals?
- What does it say about people?
- What questions does it raise?
- What might it mean to 'be intelligent'?

# While reading

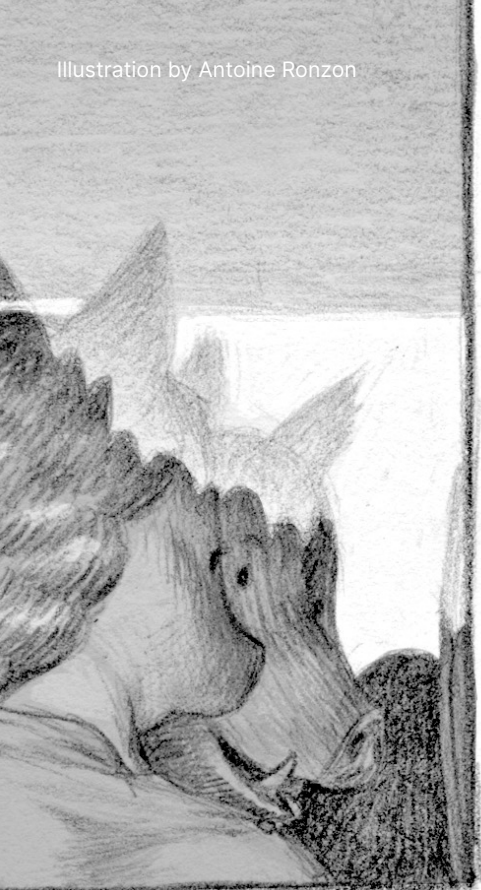
*Jefferson* is an exciting story. We can't stop wondering, 'What is going to HAPPEN to the main characters?' If you are reading *Jefferson* to a group, you'll have countless chances to stop at chapter's end and ask that very question. Together you can try to piece together the various clues and possibilities. Since Mourlevat is so adept at plot twists, the risk of spoiling the story is slim, so you can take advantage of these fantastic opportunities to create and sustain anticipation and curiosity.

Of course, just as important as WHAT happens is HOW. *Jefferson* gets a lot of help throughout the book: first from his friend Gilbert, but eventually from more and more characters with highly varied skills and abilities. This, too, gives you a lot to talk about.

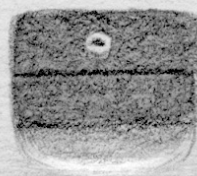
- How does Jefferson's opinion of the various characters change? What about the reader's opinion?
- What larger questions are raised about how people and animals could and should live together?







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# After reading

All's well that ends well...or is it? Jefferson and his friends have finally caught the killers. Jefferson gets to meet his hero Chuck in real life, and as the novel ends, he is walking into the night with his love interest, Carole. In that sense, this novel, like traditional fairy tales, has a happy ending. But *Jefferson* also takes up many themes and some current social issues that bear further discussion. Below are a few examples of themes and questions that you might want to talk about.

## People and animals

- On his trip to the Land of Humans, Jefferson is reminded more than once that many people look down on him and his friends. How does he notice this? How does he react? Have you ever experienced anything similar?
- Edgar is murdered because he worked for animal rights in the Land of Humans. At the end of the book, Jefferson's idol Chuck talks about how getting to know Gilbert and the others made him change his mind about the way people treat animals: 'I knew all that. We talk about it in our world. Photos circulate online. But I'm afraid people cover their eyes and ears. In any case, I've been thinking about it these past few days and asking myself whether I should stop eating meat.' What is Chuck referring to when he says 'I knew all that'? What do you think about his reaction?
- After you finish the book, it might be well worth returning to the two introductory texts. How do you now think they reflect what the book is about?

## Friendship and solidarity

- Jefferson and Gilbert are true friends who stick together through thick and thin. Can you try to describe what makes them get along so well?
- Besides Jefferson and Gilbert's friendship, there are many other friendships in this novel. In what different ways are we shown the nature of good friendship?
- The bus tour brings together many types of personalities, all very different from one another. In the attack on the villains, most of them make good use of their unique traits. Give examples of the different ways in which they complement one another and how this contributes to their successful outcome.

## Truth or rumour?

- Jefferson's difficulties begin when the goat at the hairdresser's wakes up and gets the mistaken impression that Jefferson has killed the hairdresser, Edgar. Perhaps we can understand why, at first, she feels scared and doesn't understand what is going on. But later, she keeps spinning wilder and wilder stories



for journalists, who publish them in the newspaper. What do you think causes her to do this? Surely she must know that what she is saying isn't true?

- What reasons do you think the journalists have for publishing the goat's stories without checking whether her facts are correct?
- How do you think the stories about a hedgehog serial killer of a century ago affect the stories that are written about the events at the Cut n' Dye salon?
- In the descriptions of how the media operates, what elements do you recognise from your own day-to-day life?

### **Danger and violence**

- Gilbert spends one dreadful night at the abbatoir. Choose three sentences from his descriptions that caught your attention and try to describe the thoughts and emotions they evoke in you.
- Jefferson has a close brush with death when he is captured by Mackie and Fox. How does he keep up his courage?

### **Meaningful books**

- Jefferson thinks frequently about a book he once read about Chuck, the adventurer. What does this book mean to Jefferson?
- Have you ever read a book that turned out to be especially meaningful for you? If so, which book was it, and in what way has it been meaningful?



# Learn more

You can find much more information about Jean-Claude Mourlevat and all our laureates at [alma.se](http://alma.se).

# Share your ideas

Would you like to share the ways you've discussed or worked with *Jefferson*?  
E-mail us at [litteraturpris@alma.se](mailto:litteraturpris@alma.se) and we can share your ideas on our website, [alma.se](http://alma.se). Let's build a store of knowledge and inspiration together!

## **About the reading guide**

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## ***Jefferson***

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Translated by Ros Schwartz  
Illustrated by Antoine Ronzon



Photo: Roine Karlsson

**Children have the right to great stories**

The Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award was created in 2002 by the Swedish government to promote every child's right to great stories. This global award is given annually to a person or organisation for their outstanding contribution to children's and young adult literature. With a prize of five million Swedish kronor, it is the largest award of its kind. Above all else, it highlights the importance of reading, today and for future generations. Find more information at [alma.se](http://alma.se)



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