



H A R P E R • T R O P H Y

JEAN CRAIGHEAD GEORGE

AN ECO MYSTERY

# The Missing 'Gator of Gumbo Limbo



By the author of the Newbery Medal-winning JULIE OF THE WOLVES

(1)

## Missing

On a warm sun-spangled day, a reedy man in a tan cap walked into the woods. I was fishing for bass in Gumbo Limbo Hole and listening to the trade winds chime through the leaves of the royal palm. I didn't see him until he spoke.

"Missy," he said, "have you seen the big alligator that lives in this lake?"

"You mean Dajun?" I asked enthusiastically as I reeled in my line.

"I don't know what his name is," the man said. "All I know is that he's ten feet long."

"That's got to be Dajun," I said, looking up into a sun-beaten face and keen eyes peering out from under the cap like an armadillo's under his bony armor. "Only he's twelve feet long, not ten." I

checked my bait, saw it had been chewed off, and put on another shrimp. I cast far out onto the winking surface of the lake.

"Come to think of it," I said when my sinker hit bottom, "I haven't seen him for a couple of days."

That was odd. Dajun was always around. He was part of the waterscape at Gumbo Limbo Hole. He would bask on his beach in the morning and bask again in the heat of the afternoon in the cool water, his back, head, and tail exposed to the sun. The rest of the time he was watching for careless fish, turtles, birds, and beasts with only his eyes and nose above the surface of the water. Dajun was swamp-land royalty. I scanned the lake. He was nowhere to be seen.

"The Pest Control Department hired me," the man said. "I'm here to shoot him."

"Shoot him?" I all but shouted. "You can't do that. Alligators are protected by law."

"Not when they get over eight feet." He touched the pistol on his hip and sized me up. He took in my five feet one inches, my head of brown corkscrew curls, my freckles, and my blue eyes. He smacked his lips. "The one I'm after can eat a small girl like you in one gulp." I shrugged to say I didn't believe him.

"I know he could," he insisted. "I'm an alligator hunter. Made my living hunting these critters until they passed that law about protecting them."

"But Dajun's not eating anyone," I said.

"People over there in the condos"—he gestured toward the development on the other side of the pineland—"filed a complaint. They're afraid of him. I'm surprised to see you here. Ain't you scared?"

"Dajun's not vicious," I answered, and was about to tell him how a man named James James and I fed the big alligator the snapping turtles we caught in an underwater trap. The turtles kept Dajun fat and happy. I decided not to tell him. This man was an official. I lived in the woods right behind where we were standing. I lived there with Mom and three other people. Outsiders call us "the woods people." In Florida the weather is so nice that homeless people can camp in the woods. By nature, we all feel uncomfortable around officials. Our group had never been told to leave, but that's because nobody knew we lived in these woods. Word of the terrible Dajun kept people away. He was the dragon protecting our gate.

As unobtrusively as I could, I searched under the coco plum branches that hung out over the water.



## Vanished?

**L**iza Poole lives with her mother in one of the last balanced ecosystems in North America—the Gumbo Limbo Hammock deep within the lush kingdom of the Florida Everglades. Some may think it strange to live outdoors, but Liza feels lucky to live in her small yellow tent amidst tropical birds and exotic plants. And at the center of this natural paradise lies Dajun, the majestic alligator who protects Gumbo Limbo's environment.

Then, one day, a state official arrives with frightening orders. Dajun is scaring people nearby—he must be killed! Liza takes action to save the invaluable 'gator, but suddenly, he is nowhere to be found. Now, she must find Dajun before it's too late, and her search will lead her into the heart of an exciting eco mystery!

“Fascinating.” —*Chicago Sun-Times*

“Will win over nature-loving readers.” —*School Library Journal*

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