



**Classroom Guide for
BALARAMA: A ROYAL ELEPHANT**

Written & illustrated by **Ted & Betsy Lewin**

Reading Level

*Reading Level: Grades 4

Interest Level: Grades 1–6

Guided Reading Level: R

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 5.4/1

*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

Themes

Traditional Festivals, Animals (elephants), Culture and Customs, Holidays and Celebrations, Modern-day Asia (India), Asian/Asian American Interest

Synopsis

Elephants, the largest land animals on Earth, have long been a part of life throughout India. Some of these huge creatures are trained to do heavy work. Others perform in public festivals. When Ted and Betsy Lewin arrive in southern India to see the elephants, they are introduced to Drona, the Royal Elephant that leads the glorious procession on the last day of Dasara, a centuries-old festival celebrated each fall.

The Lewins are so enthralled with Drona that they decide to return the following year for Dasara. They arrive to find out that Drona has been in an accident and a new lead elephant, the majestic Balarama, has been chosen. This will be his first time carrying the golden howdah—a beautifully carved ceremonial carriage—in the grand finale parade of the Dasara festivities. All eyes will be on Balarama as he makes his debut and participates in the wonderful spectacle of the last day of Dasara.

The back of the book contains additional interesting facts about elephants in general as well as the most recent Royal Elephants, plus a glossary and pronunciation guide.

BACKGROUND

Mysore is the second largest city in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, and Hinduism is the major religion. The city is most famous for Mysore Palace and for the celebration of Dasara. Dasara is a centuries-old, ten day long royal and religious festival. The last day of the festival honors the Hindu goddess Chamundeshwari, celebrates the triumph of good over evil, and is commemorated with a parade, led by the Ambari elephant, the Royal Elephant of the maharaja of Mysore.

Elephants are the largest animals that live on land. They are found in both Asia and Africa. All elephants are endangered. Centuries of hunting and habitat destruction have caused severe declines in their numbers. In India today, protecting elephant populations is important for their survival and to the country's rich cultural, social, and religious heritage.

Additional information about India and elephants can be found on the introductory page in *Horse Song* and on [National Geographic Kids](#) and other websites.

Ted and Betsy Lewin are an award-winning husband-and-wife writing and illustrating team. They have traveled the globe to bring back interesting stories that open up new worlds for the children who read their books. Readers will also notice two distinct styles of art within the pages of *Balarama*. This combination has become a trademark of the Lewins' collaborations. Alongside the realistic paintings by Ted are the whimsical field sketches by Betsy. *Balarama* is based on actual events the Lewins experienced on trips to India in 1997 and 1998.

Teaching Tip

You may wish to include *Balarama* on your reading table during May, which is celebrated as Asian Pacific American Heritage Month.

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

Before introducing this book to students, you may wish to develop background and promote anticipation by posing questions such as the following:

1. Have you ever seen an elephant up close? What was the elephant like? Describe some of its features and characteristics.
2. Have you ever heard of the country of India? Let's find it on a map of the world (or a globe). What countries border India? What is the capital? What else do you know about India?
3. Have you ever seen large animals participate in parades? What role(s) did the animals play?

Exploring the Book

Write the title and subtitle of the book on the chalkboard. Ask students what they think a royal elephant might be. Encourage students to use the illustration on the front cover of the book as a clue in making their predictions about the subtitle and what the story as a whole might be about.

Take students on a book walk and draw attention to the following parts of the book: illustrated end papers, half title page, title page spread with dedication, map, introduction, illustrations, section headings, backmatter (Elephant Facts and Royal Elephants of the Mysore Dasara), and Glossary and Pronunciation Guide.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

Have students read to find out who Balarama is and about the special task he has been trained to perform. Have students read also to determine who is narrating the story, how the story is structured, and how the information is presented.

VOCABULARY

In addition to the vocabulary below, it would be helpful to go through the vocabulary in the glossary at the back of the book. There is also a pronunciation guide there, which will be helpful before a read aloud.

Have each student write his or her own sentence using each word or, where appropriate, create a simple illustration to depict the meaning.

cultural	festivities	gong	stout	dazed
weary	lumbering	rice paddy	mournful	aggressive
solemn	plod	temple	millet	nutritious
distinctive	lush	tiered	offerings	ceremonial
sheathed	amble	relent	whisks	turbaned
crane	dignitaries	throngs	bamboo	spectacle

AFTER READING**Discussion Questions**

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation for the content. Encourage students to refer to passages and illustrations in the book to support their responses.

Literal Comprehension

1. Who is telling the story? How do you know?
2. What is a khedda? What was it used for?
3. Who is a maharaja? Why do maharajas want trained elephants?
Why do local people want trained elephants?
4. What is a mahout? What is a mahout's job?
5. What is the climate like in the Karapur Forest? How do you know?
6. How do the children in the camp feel about the young elephants?
How do they interact with them?

7. What kind of elephant was Drona? What were some of the characteristics of his personality?
8. What is Dasara? What job did Drona have in the festival? Why was Drona's job an honor?
9. What happened to Drona? How did what happened affect the people of Mysore?
10. What is a howdah? Why is it an important part of Dasara?
11. Who is Balarama? What are some of the characteristics of his personality? What job does he inherit?
12. Why are the elephants painted and dressed in colorful silk cloths?
13. Describe the Dasara parade. What comes first? Second? Next? Next? What comes last?
14. What is a puja?
15. Was Balarama successful in carrying the howdah? How do you know? Find passages in the story that support your answer.
16. What do the newspapers say about Balarama on the day after the parade?

Extension/Higher Level Thinking
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1. This story is an example of narrative nonfiction. What are some elements of narrative that you can find in the text? What are some elements of informational text that you can find in the text?
2. What is your opinion of the elephant roundups and the use of kheddas?
3. The authors are very good at creating vivid images with their words. What are some of the strongest images they've created in this story? What are some of the adjectives and verbs they use to create precise images? Cite passages from the story to support your answer.
4. Why do you think the authors chose to include the description of the wounded elephant and her calf? What effect does this image have on the reader?
5. Why do you think the authors included the story about Drona and the bananas?
6. What is an aura? What was Drona's aura like? What about Balarama's aura? Have you ever encountered an animal or a person with a strong aura? Describe the experience.
7. What events led to Balarama becoming the Ambari Elephant? Why do you think the authors included this information? How does it affect the reading experience?
8. Why do you think performing a puja during the parade is important?
9. What is the tone of the authors' voice? Is it formal or informal? How does the voice make a difference when reading the story?
10. Why is dressing Balarama described as a "slow, delicate task?" Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.
11. Why are the authors nervous for Balarama before the parade? What could go wrong?

12. How did the authors choose to end the story? How did the ending image leave you feeling? Why?

Literature Circles

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in focusing on the different roles of the group members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to the ones in the Discussion Question section of this guide.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for lines in the story that suggest how each character is feeling.
- The **Illustrator** might create scenes on a timeline that follow the plot.
- The **Connector** might find information about other ways slaves found to educate themselves.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of each character in the book and describe the kind of person he or she was.
- The **Investigator** might look for information about education for African Americans after slavery was abolished.

*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: GETTING STARTED WITH LITERATURE CIRCLES by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), LITERATURE CIRCLES: VOICE AND CHOICE IN BOOK CLUBS AND READING GROUPS by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and LITERATURE CIRCLES RESOURCE GUIDE by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

Reader's Response

Use the following questions and writing activities to help students practice active reading and personalize their responses to the book. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals, essays, or oral discussion. You may also want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work, if they wish to.

1. Why do you think the authors chose to write about their experiences in India as a travelogue, instead of as an informational text? What were the advantages of writing the story as a travelogue? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.
2. How did this story make you feel? Were you nervous for Balarama? Why or why not?
3. Which parts of the authors' experiences did you connect to the most? Enjoy reading about the most? Why? Would you like to visit India to watch the Dasara festival? Why or why not? What would you most like to see and experience? Cite passages from the text to support your answer.
4. Pretend you are watching Balarama in the parade. What does the scene look like? Sound like? Smell like? Feel like? Use the text and illustrations as well as your imagination to write a short descriptive response.

5. The book contains two very different styles of illustrations. Why do you think the authors chose to use both? What is the purpose of each style? How do both the nonfiction text features and the illustrations help you understand the information presented in the text?
6. If you could take a trip anywhere in the world, where would you go? Why? Research the place you choose and write a piece in the narrative style the Lewins used, pretending you have taken the trip and are writing about your experiences.
7. Have students write a book recommendation for this story explaining why they would or would not recommend this book to other students.

ELL Teaching Activities

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners.

1. Assign ELL students to read the story aloud with strong English readers/speakers.
2. Have each student write three questions about the story. Then let students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
3. Depending on students' level of English proficiency, after the first reading:
 - Review the illustrations in order and have students summarize what is happening on each page, first orally, then in writing.
 - Have students work in pairs to retell either the plot of the story or key details. Then ask students to write a short summary, synopsis, or opinion about what they have read.
4. Have students give a short talk about what they admire about a character or central figure in the story.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas.

Social Studies

1. The people of India celebrate several cultural festivals and holidays each year in addition to Dasara. Ask students to research and present on other traditions and holidays such as Holi, Diwali, Pongal, and Lohri. Students may also enjoy researching the holiday of Rakhi, which celebrates the bond between a brother and a sister, and making their own rakhi (bracelets) to give to their siblings. Instructions can be found online [here](#).
2. Students may wish to learn more about Balarama and his current role in the Dasara celebrations. How old is Balarama now? Is he still carrying the golden howdah each year? If not, who has taken his place? What is the new elephant like? [The Times of India](#) has several articles about the status of the lead elephants of the Mysore Dasara as of October 2012.

Science

1. In the back of the book there is a page titled "Elephant Facts," which includes a chart detailing some of the differences between Asian and African elephants. Have students do additional research to find out more about both types of elephants and then compare and contrast the two. Have students answer questions such as: How do elephants' adaptations (trunk, tusks, size, etc) help them survive? Why are elephants endangered? What is being done to protect elephants in the wild? How are trained elephants used? And so on.
2. After students have researched Asian and African elephants, try to arrange for a field trip to a local zoological park. Without looking at any of the visitor information, have students try to identify whether the elephants in the park are Asian or African by looking at their physical features.
3. Research India's climate, geography, and wildlife. After reading the authors' other travel stories—*Horse Song* and *Puffling Patrol*—ask students to compare and contrast India's climate, geography, and wildlife with that of Mongolia and Iceland.

Art

Have students create and decorate their own Royal Elephants for a Dasara parade. Make model elephants from clay or build them from paper mache. When the models are dry, have students paint them and decorate their faces and trunks with designs. Fabric scraps and/or tissue paper can be applied to represent the colorful drapes the elephants wear. Some students may also wish to construct a "golden howdah" to put atop their elephants. You may also wish to create a display of the finished elephants.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR/ILLUSTRATORS

Ted Lewin and **Betsy Lewin** have been traveling the world together for decades and have chronicled many of their wide-ranging adventures in books for young readers. In addition to *Balarama: A Royal Elephant*, their most recent collaborations were *Horse Song: The Naadam of Mongolia* and *Puffling Patrol*.

Ted and Betsy have both won countless awards and honors for their books. Ted was awarded a Caldecott Medal Honor in 1994 for *Pepper the Lamplighter*. Betsy was the recipient of a Caldecott Medal Honor in 2001 for *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type*. When not teaching, visiting with young fans, or traveling, the Lewins are usually drawing and painting in their Brooklyn, New York, home studios. You can visit Ted Lewin online at tedlewin.com and you can visit Betsy Lewin online at betsylewin.com.

Resources on the Web

Learn more about *Balarama: A Royal Elephant* at:
http://www.leeandlow.com/books/374/hc/balarama_a_royal_elephant

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Order Information

On the Web:

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/ordering.mhtml> (general order information)

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/374/hc/balarama_a_royal_elephant

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