

Schoolchildren are rarely exposed to *Big Books* like *Lightning*. This type of material is not easily available in schools. When the children first see the book *Lightning*, they become very excited because they have never read such a big-sized book before. This book has all the hallmarks of a *Big Book* and its content is relevant to children and provides them with new experiences. When we consider the pedagogy of teaching children to read, there are many opportunities for children to guess and come up with an explanation for the illustrations, which are very appealing and engrossing. The experiences of reading this book to students of classes I and II in a few schools are shared in this article.

This is the story of a famous tigress, named Lightning, who lives in the Ranthambore forests (Ranthambore National Park). Looking at the book's illustrations, the children know that there is a snake, a deer, a bird, and a temple in the forest. The pictures also familiarise them with Lightning's routine activities throughout the day. The book is unique in that it challenges our perception of wild animals – that they are dangerous and attack us – and fosters our sense of sensitivity towards them. It is common to read in Uttarakhand newspapers about tiger or leopard attacks on humans or cattle. As a result, people's perception of a tiger is that of a dangerous animal. And this is what the children learn too. This affects our sensitivity to animals, which is limited to moral preaching.

The images and descriptions on the first few pages of the book demonstrate the close relationship between the (Ranthambore) forest and Lightning. This is a relationship with both the forest and the people of the village. This also gives the reader an idea of how a forest and the animals and birds in it have a symbiotic relationship and examines its relationship with human beings. The story continues to reinforce this relationship. In some places, the book prompts us to reconsider our preconceived notions and our relationship with animals.

When the children first discuss the book, they say that Lightning is a lion, cheetah, tiger, and

so on. During the conversation, the specific characteristics/features of a tiger needed to be explained. While reading the book, the children were told that Lightning is roaming the forest, now going to drink water, and now sitting under a tree. When asked to predict what will happen next in the story, the children say that she will attack an animal.

But the story takes an unexpected turn when Lightning falls into a well and the children begin to wonder what happened. They are surprised that when everything was going so well, what caused this sudden turn of events? They had seen and were delighted by the bright pictures. But suddenly the next image was black! The children felt disheartened. They were shocked when they saw a picture of the inside of the well into which Lightning had fallen. They became concerned about her and how she would survive. But although this bothered them, they expressed the hope that she would be saved eventually. Their belief is confirmed when in the story, the villagers get together and one of them makes a phone call. The story kept them engrossed in this way.

There was also a debate about the book's title. The children speculated about Lightning's eyes – that they must be shining like the eyes of a cat at night – and that is how her name came to be Lightning; or that she may have been named after her roaring, which is similar to lightning and thunder during rain.

In telling this story to children, when we come to this point of where Lightning is in the well, I ask the children, 'How do you think Lightning will come out?' The children offer ideas based on their own experiences. Some children suggest that it can be done by putting a ladder into the well to bring her out; someone says she could be brought out with the help of an excavator machine; another child thinks that she will come out using her claws; or can be pulled out using a rope. Someone else suggests that a rescue team should be deployed and some even suggest calling the police. Later, when they

see a villager in the picture making a phone call, they realise he is calling the police. Some even mention Forest Guards and Officers.

Later in the story, when they see the tigress being rescued by sedating her with a tranquiliser gun, their minds open up to this possibility, and they gain a new perspective on how efforts to save animals are made. How is she injected with a gun to render her unconscious? Where is it given? Then

how is she taken out? The children's eyes were wide with wonder. One can feel their anticipation as we proceed with the story.

After being rescued from the well, when Lightning is taken in a van for treatment, the children feel a sense of relief. After hearing the story, the children in the school where I read it, said it was enjoyable. They went on to ask, 'Will you come tomorrow?' What makes this book special is that it keeps

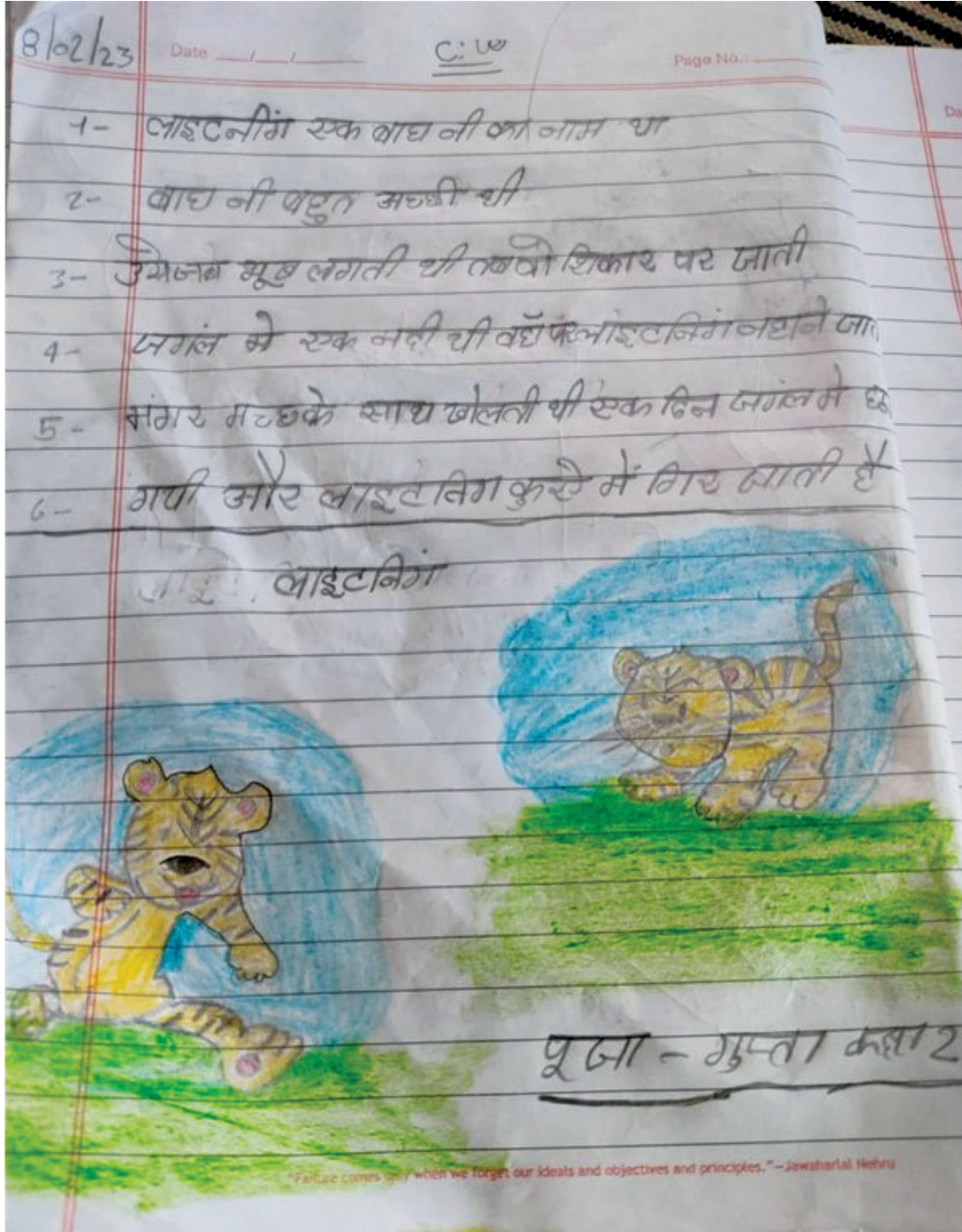


Figure 1. Drawing based on the story by a student of class II, Government Primary School, Pakdia, Khatima, Uttarakhand

children guessing about what will happen next. This is how children become interested in books.

Observations

When we select a book to read or discuss with children, we must ask ourselves, 'What is so special about this book that will connect with the children and also give them a different perspective, or some new ideas and opportunities to think about?' It is similar to the notion that by reading literature, we become 'new'; that we are no longer the people we were. This is the pleasure of a good book. It is also possible that a specific book may come to occupy a special place in their long-term memories; one that cannot be forgotten. Making a book 'connect' with children depends on how the book is presented to the children by the person narrating the book.

After listening to the story, the children draw their own pictures of the book to express themselves. They also propose new titles for the book. This stimulates their thinking. Along with this, we also talk about how they help the animals and birds around them. They spoke about their experiences with helping puppies. As a result, we believe that such opportunities for children to develop a love of books should be provided on a regular basis. Of course, the role of the teacher is crucial when it comes to selecting books to read to children. To choose good books, the teacher should gain an understanding of good literature for children. Another important aspect is that reading to children improves with practice: the more the teacher reads, the better they become.

Endnotes

- i *Big Books* are intended for young children who are learning to read. These books help connect children with printed material so that they are inspired to look at, browse, and read books on their own.

References

Lightning (*Big Book*) Author: Prabhat, Illustrator: Allen Shaw. Jugnoo Prakashan, an imprint of Ektara Trust. <https://www.ektaraindia.in/ektarashop/Lightning?search=Big%20Book&description=true>



Kamlesh Chandra Joshi has been involved in primary education for a long time. He is passionate about a variety of educational issues, including early literacy, children's literature, and teacher education. He is currently working with the Azim Premji District Institute in Udham Singh Nagar, Uttarakhand. He can be reached at kamlesh@azimpremjifoundation.org