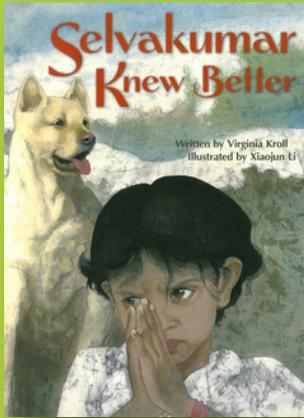


## TEACHER'S GUIDE



LEE & LOW BOOKS

# Selvakumar Knew Better

written by Virginia Kroll

illustrated by Xiaojun Li

## About the Book

**Genre:** Realistic Fiction

**\*Reading Level:** Grades 3–4

**Interest Level:** Grades PreK–3

**Guided Reading Level:** N

**Accelerated Reader® Level/Points:** N/A

**Lexile™ Measure:** N/A

\*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

**Themes:** Animals (Dogs), Courage, Environment and Nature, Extreme Weather (Tsunami), Families, Friendship, India, Overcoming Obstacles, Persistence and Grit, Asian/Asian American Interest

## SYNOPSIS

“Tsunami! Run!” The bright December morning dawned like any other. The Ramakrishnan family went about their daily business, but their scruffy yellow dog, Selvakumar, felt something in the air.

Soon, a low rumbling noise fills the village, and Papa climbs on the roof to see what is happening. What he sees is a wall of water rushing toward the shore. “Tsunami! Run!” As the family scrambles to outrun the huge wave, seven-year-old Dinakaran misunderstands and he runs toward his house.

But Selvakumar does not let him stay there. Barking, nudging, and dragging Dinakaran by the collar, Selvakumar manages to convince him to flee from the house toward the hill. As they reach higher ground, the boy stops to catch his breath, but Selvakumar knew better. He pushes him even higher to where Mama and Papa have fled and are waiting, worrying about their eldest son.

Award-winning author Virginia Kroll’s true story of a courageous and clever dog who saved a boy’s life during the devastating tsunami of 2004 is sure to touch the hearts of readers of all ages. While the region is still struggling to recover from the disaster and families rebuild what they have lost, Selvakumar reminds us that with our loved ones beside us, no obstacle is too great to be overcome. Book includes facts about the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.



## BACKGROUND

**Tsunamis (From the Author):** A tsunami is a series of great sea waves caused by an underwater earthquake, landslide or volcanic eruption. Sometimes, a tsunami can be generated by the impact of a giant meteor hitting the ocean. Most tsunamis occur in the Pacific Ocean. They are also called “killer waves” or “monster waves” because of the damage they do when they roar up onto land, destroying everything in their paths.

The tectonic plates, layers of earth’s crust, usually move slowly and gradually, about one inch per year. On December 26, 2004, however, an earthquake measuring over 9.0 occurred deep in the Indian Ocean, causing the plates in the ocean floor to move violently in a shift that was 300 miles long. Enormous, powerful shockwaves of displaced water radiated in every direction outward, toward the coasts of twelve Indian Ocean countries: Indonesia, the hardest hit, as well as Bangladesh, Burma, India, Kenya, Malaysia, Maldives, Seychelles, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, and Thailand. In many places, the waves reached over 100 feet high.

In January, 2005, *The Washington Post* updated the statistics of the tsunami and estimated that it caused the death of 221,100 people. A year later, the figure had risen to over 280,000. Hundreds of thousands are still homeless.

*Selvakumar Knew Better* is based on a true story involving Dinakaran, a seven-year-old boy in the village of Chinnakalpet in southern India, who was saved by his family pet. I saw the story in the newspaper and was moved to write this book.

See the news story here: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/dog-saves-boy-from-tsunami/>.

Find more student-friendly information about what causes tsunamis, along with before and after photos here: <https://www.natgeokids.com/uk/discover/geography/physical-geography/tsunamis/>. This short video is quite clear and informative, though some of the images of destruction may be frightening for very young students: <http://video.nationalgeographic.com/video/101-videos/tsunami-101>.

**Dogs’ disaster sense (From the Author):** I also based this story on what I know about animals and their extra sense involving weather and earthquakes. I once had a dog, Scamp, who acted strangely before a mild earthquake. Many dogs will risk their own lives to save humans from all sorts of dangers, and I’m sure that Dinakaran’s family is very glad that Selvakumar is such a dog.

**Additional Information:** This *Psychology Today* article states there are accounts of dogs and other animals sensing earthquakes dating back to 373 BC in Greece: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/canine-corner/201205/can-dogs-predict-earthquakes>. In 1975 in China, dogs’ unusual behavior caused officials to evacuate the city of Haicheng, where a 7.3 magnitude earthquake struck only hours later. One theory is that dogs’ superior hearing ability alerts them to seismic changes (such as rocks moving underground) before humans sense them.

### Awards and honors include:

- 2007 Notable Book for a Global Society
- 2007 Bank Street College Best Children’s Books of the Year



## VOCABULARY

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

The story contains several content-specific and academic words and phrases that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary below. Encourage a variety of strategies to support students' vocabulary acquisition: look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, create a specific action for each word, list synonyms and antonyms, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.

### Content Specific

India, supersonic jet, vibrations, goosebumps, earthquake, waves, shore, tsunami, forty yards, survivors, temporary shelter

### Academic

dawned, paced, rumbling, restless, scruffy, perked, whined, roaring, investigate, mighty, rumbled, raging, instantly, swift, approaching, “drowned out,” budge, enormous, panted, nudged, nuzzled, disbelief, swallowed, collapsed, sobbed, bounded, precious, grateful, sputtered, smother, thankful, recover, destruction

## BEFORE READING

### Prereading Focus Questions

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 5, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7) (Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

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

1. Do you have a family pet, or do you know someone who does? How does that pet show it cares about its family? How might a pet protect its family?
2. What is a natural disaster? Are any natural disasters common where you live or in parts of the world where your family members live? Have you heard of a tsunami? What do you know about tsunamis?
3. What might people do if they know a natural disaster is about to happen near their homes? Why? What would it feel like to be in that situation? What makes a natural disaster even more problematic if it's a surprise?

### Exploring the Book

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strand 1, Craft & Structure, Strand 5, and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7) (Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

Talk about the title of the book. Then ask students what they think this book will most likely be about and whom the book might be about. What do they think might happen? What information do they think they might learn? What makes them think that?

Take students on a book walk and draw attention to the following parts of the book: front and back covers, title page, author and illustrator's dedications, illustrations and author's note.

### Setting a Purpose for Reading

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

Have students read to find out about:

- what tragic event happens in Dinakaran's village
- how Selvakumar, the family dog, “knew better” and how he changes lives with his actions

Encourage students to consider why the author, Virginia Kroll, would want to share this story with young people.



## 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/or illustrations in the book to support their responses. **To build skills in close reading of a text, students should cite evidence with their answers.**

### Literal Comprehension

*(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)  
(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration,  
Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)*

1. What's happening on the December morning when story begins?
2. Who is Selvakumar? How does he act that morning? How does the family respond?
3. What happens suddenly? How does the family respond?
4. What does Papa see from the rooftop? What does he say? What does Mama do? What does Dinakaran do? What does Selvakumar do?
5. What do Dinakaran and Selvakumar do next? What's it like around them as they run?
6. What does the tsunami do? How does the author describe the tsunami's power?
7. What does Dinakaran hear in the distance? Why is his mother so upset? How does she react when she sees him? What does Dinakaran say?
8. What do the survivors do at the temporary shelter? What do they say?

### Extension/Higher Level Thinking

*(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 2 and 3 and Craft & Structure, Strands 4 and 6)  
(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration,  
Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)*

1. What can you infer about the lives of Dinakaran and his family?
2. What does it mean to “know better?”

3. If dogs could think in humans' language, what might Selvakumar's thoughts be as the tsunami approached? Why is it hard for him to decide what to do?
4. Why did Papa shout using a “tone he'd never used before?”
5. What mental images do you have of the tsunami approaching?
6. Why did Dinakaran run back into his house? How does Selvakumar respond? What words describe Selvakumar's behavior? What does Dinakaran finally understand?
7. How do Selvakumar and Dinakaran feel when they reach the upper road? How does Selvakumar “know better” yet again? Why do they continue further up the hill?
8. Why do Dinakaran and Selvakumar “blink their dark brown eyes in disbelief” when they look down towards the shore?
9. Why does the family end up in a “mother-father-brothers-dog thankful heap of hugging?” How do you think they each feel?
10. Why are the survivors gathered in a temporary shelter? What is the mood? What challenges will the survivors face?
11. If dogs could think in humans' language, what might Selvakumar's thoughts be at the end of the story? Why do you think the author ends with the line, “And Selvakumar knew better?” How do you think Dinakaran and his family will cope with the destruction they've faced?

### Reader's Response

*(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3 and  
Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4–6)*

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 response journals, essays, or oral discussion.** You may also want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work.



“Based on a true story, this simple tale of courage and survival is enhanced by startling, haunting illustrations.”

–*Book Dragon*

“[T]he story is neither sentimental nor sensational; it depicts the escape and the family’s sobbing reunion without denying the horror of what is lost.”

–*Booklist*

“This picture book is inspired by the true story of an Indian boy, Dinakaran, who escaped the 2004 tsunami with the help of his dog, Selvakumar.”

–*School Library Journal*

1. In what ways could a pet be considered a member of a family? What positive qualities do pets often exhibit? Give examples from this story and your own life or other books.
2. How can a disastrous situation bring out positive qualities in those it impacts? Give examples from the story. Give an example of a difficult situation in your own life that prompted you or someone you know to show a positive quality.
3. How is this story hopeful even though it contains so much destruction?
4. If you had the power to help the victims of the 2004 tsunami, what would you do?

### ELL/ESL Teaching Activities

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4–6)  
(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English Language Learners.

1. Assign ELL students to partner-read the story with strong English readers/speakers. Students can alternate reading between pages, repeat passages after one another, or listen to the more fluent reader.
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. 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
  5. Have students give a short talk about a family pet or a situation that required bravery.
  6. The book contains several content-specific and academic words that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students’ prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary. Expose English Language Learners to multiple vocabulary strategies. Have students make predictions about word meanings, look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, list synonyms and antonyms, create an action for each word, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.



## INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

(Introduction to the Standards, page 7: Students who are college and career ready must be able to build strong content knowledge, value evidence, and use technology and digital media strategically and capably)

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas. These can also be used for extension activities, for advanced readers, and for building a home-school connection.

### English Language Arts

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3, Craft and Structure, Strand 4 and Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Strand 9)  
(Writing Standards, Production and Distribution of Writing, Strand 5)

1. Revisit the text to make a list of descriptive words and phrases the author uses to set the mood of the story. How does she convey the sounds and feeling of the tsunami? How does she describe Selvakumar's behavior and actions? What about the actions of the family members when they are reunited? Use this text as a mentor text to encourage students to include more precise and vivid descriptions in their own writing.
2. Discuss the definition of a "hero." How is Selvakumar a hero? Ask students to draw and/or write about examples of heroic actions.
3. Read other stories about brave animal helpers including *Step Right Up: How Doc and Jim Key Taught the World About Kindness* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/step-right-up>) and *What Boo and I Do* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/what-boo-and-i-do>). Compare the animals' and humans' behaviors in the stories and identify common themes. Discuss why these stories are interesting and powerful to readers.
4. Read other stories about extreme weather events, such as *A House By the River* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/a-house-by-the-river>). Compare the circumstances and characters' responses to challenges. Identify common themes and discuss why these stories are interesting and powerful to readers.

### Science and Social Studies

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 7–9)  
(Writing Standards, Text Types and Purposes, Strand 2 and Research to Build and Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

1. Help your students understand the impact of the 2004 tsunami by making the facts presented in the author's note more concrete. For instance: find the countries impacted on a map, make comparisons in your school or community to illustrate how high a 100-foot wave would be, and compare the death toll of 280,000 to the number of people in your town or city.
2. Learn more about tsunamis with your students. Have small groups research different aspects of the topic (e.g., causes, environmental impacts, impacts on people, preparedness efforts, relief efforts.) Have groups report back to the class or create sections to contribute to a class informational text.
3. Help your students learn more about Give2Asia (<http://www.give2asia.org>), the organization described in the author's note that created the Tsunami Recovery Fund. Research other disaster relief organizations such as the Red Cross as well (<http://www.redcross.org/about-us/our-work/disaster-relief>). How do these organizations help disaster victims? What are ways students can help, either now, or as adults in the future?
4. In this story, Selvakumar was reunited with his family. However, oftentimes this is not the case for animals in areas where disaster strikes. Compare the role of family pets in this story and one like *The Three Lucys*, in which a child's beloved cats are inadvertently left to fend for themselves when a family evacuates their war-torn village (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/the-three-lucys>). Read more about the impact of disasters on both wild and domesticated animals here (<http://www.redcross.org/about-us/our-work/disaster-relief>).



## Art

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Strand 7)

Discuss what makes the illustrations in this book different than many other picture books (e.g., colors and shadows, close-up perspective.) How does the dramatic style fit the subject matter? Invite students to try out some of the illustrator's techniques when they illustrate their own writing.

## Home-School Connection

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Strand 7)  
(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strand 1)

1. Invite family or community members knowledgeable about animal behavior and care to share their expertise with your class (e.g., a representative from the Animal Refuge League.)
2. Invite family or community members with experience in supporting disaster relief efforts to share their experiences with your class.

## Additional titles to teach about nature and the environment:

***A House By the River*** written by William Miller, illustrated by Ying-Hwa Hu, Cornelius Van Wright  
<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/a-house-by-the-river>

***Water Rolls, Water Rises / El agua rueda, el agua sube*** written by Pat Mora, illustrated by Meilo So  
<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/water-rolls-water-rises-el-agua-rueda-el-agua-sube>

***Everglades Forever: Restoring America's Great Wetland*** written by Trish Marx, illustrated by Cindy Karp  
<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/everglades-forever>

***Sacred Mountain Everest*** written and photographed by Christine Taylor-Butler  
<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/sacred-mountain>

***Cycle of Rice, Cycle of Life*** written and photographed by Jan Reynolds  
<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/cycle-of-rice-cycle-of-life>

***Calling the Water Drum*** written by LaTisha Redding, illustrated by Aaron Boyd  
<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/calling-the-water-drum>

***The Mangrove Tree: Planting Trees to Feed Families*** written by Susan L. Roth, Cindy Trumbore, illustrated by Susan L. Roth  
<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/the-mangrove-tree>

***Parrots Over Puerto Rico*** written by Susan L. Roth, Cindy Trumbore, illustrated by Susan L. Roth  
<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/parrots-over-puerto-rico>



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Virginia Kroll** is the author of over 50 books for children, many of them multicultural. She loves animals and nature and is aware of the deep connection between dogs and humans. Her current companions are Daisy, a gentle, smooth-haired collie, Ying-Yang, an affectionate shih tzu, and Bella, a spirited chihuahua. Virginia is married to David Haeick and has six children. She lives in the delightful Village of Hamburg, New York, just south of Buffalo.

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**Xiaojun Li** is an internationally known children's book illustrator. His illustrations have won him awards from United Nations, China, Japan and United States. Born and raised in Inner Mongolia of north China, Xiaojun Li studied art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Tianjin and the University of California Davis, he now lives with his wife and son in Davis, California.

## ABOUT LEE & LOW BOOKS

**LEE & LOW BOOKS** is the largest children's book publisher specializing in diversity and multiculturalism. Our motto, "about everyone, for everyone," is as urgent today as it was when we started in 1991. It is the company's goal to meet the need for stories that children of color can identify with and that all children can enjoy. The right book can foster empathy, dispel stereotypes, prompt discussion about race and ethnicity, and inspire children to imagine not only a world that includes them, but also a world where they are the heroes of their own stories. Discover more at [leeandlow.com](http://leeandlow.com).

## ORDERING INFORMATION

### On the Web:

[www.leeandlow.com/contact/ordering](http://www.leeandlow.com/contact/ordering) (general order information)

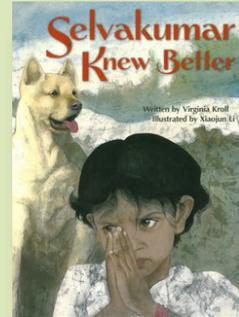
<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/selvakumar-knew-better> (secure online ordering)

**By Phone:** 212-779-4400 ext. 25

**By Fax:** 212-683-1894

**By Mail:** Lee & Low Books, 95 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

## Book Information for *Selvakumar Knew Better*



\$8.95, PAPERBACK

978-1-88500-836-7

32 pages, 9 X 10-3/4

\*Reading Level: Grades 3–4

\*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

Interest Level: Grades PreK–3

Guided Reading Level: N

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: N/A

Lexile™ Measure: N/A

**THEMES:** Animals (Dogs), Courage, Environment and Nature, Extreme Weather (Tsunami), Families, Friendship, India, Overcoming Obstacles, Persistence and Grit, Asian/Asian American Interest

### RESOURCES ON THE WEB:

<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/selvakumar-knew-better>

*All guided reading level placements may vary and are subject to revision. Teachers may adjust the assigned levels in accordance with their own evaluations.*