



**Classroom Guide for
THE HAPPIEST TREE**
by Uma Krishnaswami
Illustrated by Ruth Jeyaveeran

Reading Level

*Reading Level: Grades 2-3

Interest Level: Grades 1-4

Guided Reading Level: R

*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

Themes

Self-Confidence, Yoga, Overcoming Obstacles, Helping Others, Contemporary Asian American Interest

Synopsis

Because she is clumsy, Meena pretends not to be interested when her class prepares to put on a play. Even her role as a tree in the play causes discomfort when she trips and stumbles in rehearsals. While shopping with her mother at an Indian grocery, Meena discovers a yoga class in the back of the store. She is encouraged by the shopkeeper known as Auntie to sign up for a kids' yoga class. Although yoga is hard, Meena slowly makes progress and begins to gain confidence. On the night of the play, Meena has yet another mishap and loses part of her tree costume. She wants to hide, but is able to use her yoga training—breathing and moving slowly and carefully—to be a good, indeed a happy, tree in the play.

Background

The word *yoga* derives from a Sanskrit word “yuj,” meaning “to unite or integrate.” Yoga is both a discipline aimed at training the mind for a state of spiritual insight and a system of exercise, breathing, and meditation to promote this control of body and mind.

Although yoga may be much older, the earliest evidence dates to around 3000 B.C. on stone seals depicting figures of yoga poses. The oldest yoga teachings are found in the Vedas, the scripture that is the basis of modern Hinduism.

Yoga was introduced in the West in the nineteenth century. Today, the most familiar branch is Hatha Yoga, which uses physical poses such as the cat pose mentioned in *The Happiest Tree*, breathing techniques, and meditation to achieve good health and spirituality.

Teaching Tip

The Happiest Tree: A Yoga Story is a good title to use in May as part of your observance of Asian American Heritage Month.

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

Before introducing the book, you may wish to develop background and set the stage for reading with questions such as the following.

1. Do you ever feel awkward and clumsy? What causes you to feel this way? Do you have any suggestions for overcoming these feelings?
2. What are some school performances you have participated in? How did you feel about your performance?
3. Do you like to learn how to do new things? What are some skills you have learned in the past year?
4. Who are the people you teach you, other than your teachers in school? How do they help you learn?
5. Do you know what yoga is? Have you ever tried it or seen it done?
6. When is silence helpful?

Exploring the Book

Have students observe the cover illustration. Invite them to comment on what the girl is doing.

Read the book title. Ask students what they think a tree might have to do with a yoga story.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

Have students read to find out how a tree can be happy and what a tree has to do with yoga.

Teaching Tip

The story includes a number of italicized words in Hindi. Draw attention to the pronunciation guide for these words found on the second page of the book.

VOCABULARY

Write the following words from the story on the chalkboard. Explain that these words all relate to the theater. Encourage students to suggest other words they know that are related to this theme. After discussing each word and its meaning in terms of theater performance, have students take turns using the words in sentences. Then ask students to use at least five of the words in a short story about a school play.

play	set	part	rehearsal
stage	audience	lines	costume
onstage	curtains	performance	

AFTER READING

Discussion Questions

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

1. Why doesn't Meena want to be in the class play?
2. How do the other students react to Meena's clumsiness?
3. Who is Auntie?
4. How does Auntie act when Meena knocks things over in her store?
5. Why does Meena sign up for yoga classes?
6. Why is Auntie a good teacher?
7. How does Meena act in the rehearsals?
8. How does yoga help Meena?
9. What happens to Meena just before the performance?
10. Why is Meena "the happiest tree in the whole forest"?

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 those in the Discussion Question section of this guide to help group members explore the book.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for passages that give information about yoga.
- The **Illustrator** might find other books about gaining self-confidence and overcoming personal problems.
- The **Connector** might find other books about gaining self-confidence and overcoming personal problems.
- The **Summarizer** should provide a brief summary of each section of the book the group has completed.
- The **Investigator** might collect books and other materials about yoga.

*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 or similar ones to help students personalize what they are reading. Have students respond in reader's journals, oral discussions, or sketches.

1. What is some advice you would give to Meena based on your own experiences in resolving a problem?
2. How are you and Meena alike? How are you different?
3. Why do you think people learn yoga? Might you try it? Why?
4. What does Meena learn about herself in this story?
5. What are some funny parts of this story? Why do you think so?

Other Writing Activities

You may wish to assign students to complete one or more of the following writing activities. Set aside time for students to share and discuss their work.

1. In the story, Meena's class is writing a "new and improved version" of *Red Riding Hood*. Students in your class might undertake a similar project either with *Red Riding Hood* or another traditional tale. Begin by having students find clues in the book as to how Meena's classmates changed the story. Then have students work in groups to write new scenes that they can incorporate into their own class play.
2. Ask students to imagine that they are Meena. Have them write journal entries for the different events in the book explaining what happened and how they feel about it.
3. Remind students that the classes in yoga for kids that Auntie gives are new. Have students write an announcement or ad about these classes that Auntie might send to a local newspaper.
4. Some students might write invitations to Meena's class play or their own (see activity 1 in this section).
5. Have students respond in writing to this quotation from the author: "You become your best self from the inside out."

ELL/ESL Teaching Strategies

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners or who are learning to speak English as a second language.

1. Read the story aloud slowly, repeating lines for emphasis. Invite students to join in on subsequent readings. Offer frequent praise and support.
2. Model how to use the illustrations to enhance understanding of the text. Read aloud and comment on how an illustration provides clues to the words.
3. Write these words on cards. Have ELL students find each word in the story and then identify the item in an illustration in the book.

paint	arm	bell	window	knees
branches	legs	feet	head	curtains

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

To help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas, you might try one or more of the following activities.

Social Studies

1. In the book, Meena's family is of Indian descent. Yoga also has its roots in India. Use these connections to teach a mini-lesson on geography. Help students locate India on a world map or globe. Have them answer questions such as:
 - What bodies of water surround India?
 - What is the capital of the country?
 - What countries border India?
 - What important rivers and landforms does India have?
2. Invite a local yoga instructor to class to explain and demonstrate some of the poses and to lead students in trying them. If an instructor is not available, you might show a yoga video and let students try the poses.

Language Arts

Students might work with partners to make yoga booklets or charts in which they illustrate words and phrases from the book including: arch, balance, stretch, breathe, movement, quiet, focus, body, still mind, aware, cat pose, frog pose, cobra pose, tree pose, lotus pose.

Art

Creative students might enjoy making posters to advertise Meena's class play. Before starting, suggest that students study the illustrations in the book for ideas.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Uma Krishnaswami was born in New Delhi, India, and is now a resident of Aztec, New Mexico, where she lives with her husband and son. Krishnaswami has written numerous books for children including *Bringing Asha Home*, *Hello Flower*, and *Yoga Class*, published by LEE & LOW BOOKS, and *Monsoon*, *Chachaji's Cup*, *Remembering Grandpa*, and *The Closet Ghosts*. In addition to writing books and publishing in young peoples' magazines such as *Highlights for Children* and *Kahani*, Krishnaswami co-directs the Bisti Writing Project (BWP), a site of the National Writing Project, is on the faculty of the Vermont College MFA Program in Writing for Children & Young Adults, and teaches writing online through Writers on the Net (www.writers.com).

About THE HAPPIEST TREE: A YOGA STORY, Krishnaswami says she and Meena have a lot in common. "I used to be one of those restless kids who talked too much and could never stay still. While in a school play, I once stepped on a loose floorboard and fell right through the stage." The subject of yoga is a familiar one to Krishnaswami. She practices hatha yoga and understands that children can benefit from the idea that "learning to step back and find a quiet place in yourself can help in a host of difficult situations."

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Ruth Jeyaveeran was born in Zambia in Africa to parents of Indian heritage. Jeyaveeran was raised in the Midwestern United States and received her BFA in painting from the University of Michigan. She currently lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she has a studio. Jeyaveeran is a full-time author and illustrator. Her books include *The Road to Mumbai* and *The Spectacular Adventures of Sophie and Sebastian*.

THE HAPPIEST TREE has received several awards and honors. These include:

- "Choices," Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC)
- Best Children's Books of the Year, Bank Street College
- Paterson Prize for Books for Young People, Special Recognition, The Poetry Center at Passaic County Community College

Book Information

\$8.95, PAPERBACK

ISBN 978-1-60060-360-0

32 pages, 10 x 8

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RESOURCES ON THE WEB

Learn more about *The Happiest Tree* at

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/59/pb/the_happiest_tree_a_yoga_story

BookTalk with Uma Krishnaswami on *The Happiest Tree*:

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/uma.mhtml>

Also by Uma Krishnaswami

Bringing Asha Home:

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/25/hc/bringing_asha_home

Order Information

On the Web:

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

http://www.leeandlow.com/books/59/pb/the_happiest_tree_a_yoga_story
(secure on-line ordering)

By Phone:

212-779-4400 ext. 25

212-683-1894 fax

By Mail:

Lee & Low Books, 95 Madison Avenue, NY, NY 10016

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please contact us at general@leeandlow.com