

# The Carnegies



## The Carnegie Shortlist 2026 Shadowing Resources

# The Sleeper Train

## Carnegie Medal for Illustration

**Illustrator: Baljinder Kaur**

**Age range: 3+**

### Description:

The colours, diverse characters and commotion of a family journey on a night train are vividly brought to life in this vibrant tale. Every character has a distinct identity and facial expressions. The illustrations draw on rich cultural elements and challenge stereotypes. The colour palette adds a sense of warmth and continuity to this tale of an exciting journey!

Themes:

- Family
- Journeys
- Culture
- Nighttime
- Excitement

### Shadowing Ideas:

1. The girl in The Sleeper Train has a pink owl toy. Can you spot it in every picture? Play a game of hide and seek using your own favourite toy. Why do you think Baljinder Kaur has chosen to put the owl in every picture?
2. As a group, create a sleeper train which represents the places that are special to you. Allocate a window or carriage to each member of the group and encourage everyone to draw a place that holds special memories. Use it to decorate your classroom or shared space. How far does your collective train travel? Where does it go?
3. There are a lot of intricate patterns and vibrant colours in this book; it's a real feast for the eyes. There are also lots of sounds and smells – the whir of a fan, the squawk of a bird, the scent from a bottle of perfume. Work your way through the story, identifying as many different sounds and smells as you can. Which pages are really noisy? Which are quiet and peaceful? How do you know? You might like to create a multisensory experience with sounds and smells to invoke the scenes in the book.

## Teaching Ideas for the Carnegie Medal for Illustration Shortlist 2026

*These notes have been written by the teachers at CLPE to provide schools and settings with ideas to develop comprehension and extended provision around Carnegie-shortlisted picturebooks and illustrated texts for children of all ages. They build on our work supporting teachers to use high-quality texts to enhance critical thinking and develop creative approaches in art and writing. We hope you find them useful.*

*These notes have been written with children aged 5 and older in mind.*

### Introduction:

- Children often struggle to settle to sleep, but the little girl in *The Sleeper Train* has good reason: her family is spending the night in the sleeper cabin of a train crossing the country. To distract herself she recalls all the places she has slept, making this book a moonlit adventure that gently rocks us as the train rocks the narrator. Baljinder describes herself as “nestled in the middle of England”, and her illustrations project Mick Jackson’s words through the lens of a Panjabi and Sikh diaspora existence, translating the story to the Indian countryside of her parents’ homeland.

### Reading the book and close reading of illustration:

- Begin by opening out the book to look together at the illustrations covering the front and back cover (do not yet share the blurb or title), inviting the children to share their first impressions. *What is happening here? What might it suggest about the story you are about to read?* Children might observe the child, the turbaned man reading a newspaper (the script is Gurmukhi used for Punjabi), the woman with plaited hair dozing against a pillow, the little girl’s bunches, the exotic real or imagined birds and the stuffed owl toy. They might also comment on the rich and evocative palette. Now share the title, *The Sleeper Train: how do you think the illustration, title and story are connected? Did you realize that we are looking into a railway carriage from the outside? Consider the characters we see: what do you think you know about them from this illustration? Who do you think they are, what are they doing and what do you think they might be feeling or thinking, what clues do you get from their facial expressions and body language?* Now open the book to look at the endpapers, the little girl and the owl again, the deep pink palette: *where do you think this is?* Read on to the frontmatter “There is a train... not long ago...”: what do you notice about the train, the style of the bridge’s arch, the flowers and the lizard? Finally share the title page: *what ideas does what you see give you about the story and the characters?*

- Now share the opening spread of the family boarding the train in a busy station. *What can you see happening here? How many different activities and groups of people do you spot? How does Baljinder convey how it might feel to be setting off on a journey, especially on a steam train in India? How does it make you feel? How do you think the characters feel? Encourage the children to consider everything that is happening, and to unpick every detail: how does this compare with your own experiences of travelling?*
- Share the next spread as the family settles in their cabin: *what do you see them doing, what do you think they might be feeling and saying to one another?* The children might comment on the special care Sikhs give to their hair: Sikhs do not cut their hair, a practice known as *Kesh*, as a core tenet of their faith, respecting it as a gift from God and a symbol of spiritual devotion. Children might also comment on the palette, the rich and exotic, evocative colours of the furnishings and clothing. The colour continues on the next page where the little girl unable to sleep looks out at the passing countryside: *how do the colours make you feel, what might she be thinking as she takes everything in?*
- The girl decides to try and find sleep by thinking “of all the different places I have slept”: now share the next three spreads — of her parent’s bedroom at home; of the seaside hotel they stayed in last summer; of dozing on the beach. Each spread shows the girl struggling to sleep on the left-hand page, with decorative elements and the train rumbling on, and on the right-hand page a detailed depiction: what details do they notice in each case? They may spot the hair paraphernalia on the dressing table (mustard oil is good for hair growth!); the ironing board; the cats and summer clothing; the toy owl, the other beach visitors. *How do these spreads connect the wakeful girl and her previous experiences?* After the colourful spread of the train driver and the girl “wide awake”, go on to share the spreads of the “one time I spent in a tent in a field in a sleeping bag”; the hospital bed; and staying over at Grandma and Grandad’s (who we saw on holiday earlier, playing with cats and snapping photographs with an old-fashioned camera). Again, support the children to examine every detail of the illustrations. Then share the spread where “I was starting to feel quite sleepy”: *how does this spread make you feel? Can you see “a girl or a boy somewhere who was still awake”?* Look carefully!
- Now read to the end of the book. *What more do we learn about the continuation and end of the girl’s journey; what do you think they are having for breakfast? How do think they are feeling, what clues do you get from their facial expressions and body language, the colour palette Baljinder has chosen to show the scene in daylight? How does the experience of managing to find sleep stay with her afterwards, and how do the final illustrations reflect this?*

- Encourage the children to separate Mick Jackson's words from Baljinder's illustrations: they will note that Mick says nothing about India, stuffed owls, steam trains, hair oil, rich colours directly in the text. *How do the illustrations expand the world of the text? What do they add to your experience of reading the book? What mood do they convey?*
- Allow plenty of time and space to revisit the book to develop deeper understanding of the meanings being created by the illustrator in collaboration with the author and encourage the children to share their thoughts. *What did they like and/or dislike? What did it make them think? How did it make them feel? How do Baljinder Kaur's illustrations deepen their engagement with and understanding of the story?*

### Engaging in illustration:

- Baljinder has a distinctive style — her palette, her line drawing, the motifs she selects, her sense of shape and pattern — and children can see more on her website: <https://www.baljinderkaur.com/> where she shares a portfolio and sketchbooks.
- Invite the children to look back at spreads they especially enjoy or that stand out for them, especially where we see interesting details that offer an insight into characters. For example, they might select dad and his newspaper; grandad and his camera; grandma and her love of cats; mum at the hospital bedside. *How has Baljinder drawn these characters in a way that highlights their feelings and their significance in the story?* Look carefully at how she mixes pencil and colouring pencil to create the faces, hair and body positions of each character, and her use of an evocative colour palette.
- Engage in a life drawing activity where children capture the likeness of a classmate, using the same pencil and coloured pencil materials as Baljinder. Look at how she simplifies her shapes, lines and marks to represent her characters without being photo realistic. This will be a supportive model for children to create an achievable outcome. Model this for the children by exploring and experimenting how to draw another adult in the setting, talking through what you are doing and the artistic decisions you are making as you work. Having access to a visualiser would allow children to observe your technique as you work. Focus on the different lines she uses to create texture in hair and the different shapes she uses to represent eyes, noses and mouths and how the significant characters are portrayed using bold, bright colours.

- Encourage the children to spend time closely observing their partner before drawing, paying careful attention to their facial features, hair colour and texture. Give time and space for them to use pencils, coloured pencils and colour to best capture their subject on the page. Using tracing paper over photographs could offer a similar opportunity to explore these materials and this style of portrait art.

This sequence of activities was designed in partnership with CLPE, a UK-based children's literacy charity working with primary schools to raise the achievement of children's reading and writing by helping schools to teach literacy creatively and effectively, putting quality children's books at the heart of all learning. Find out more about their work, and access further resources and training at [www.clpe.org.uk](http://www.clpe.org.uk).