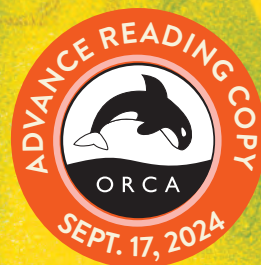
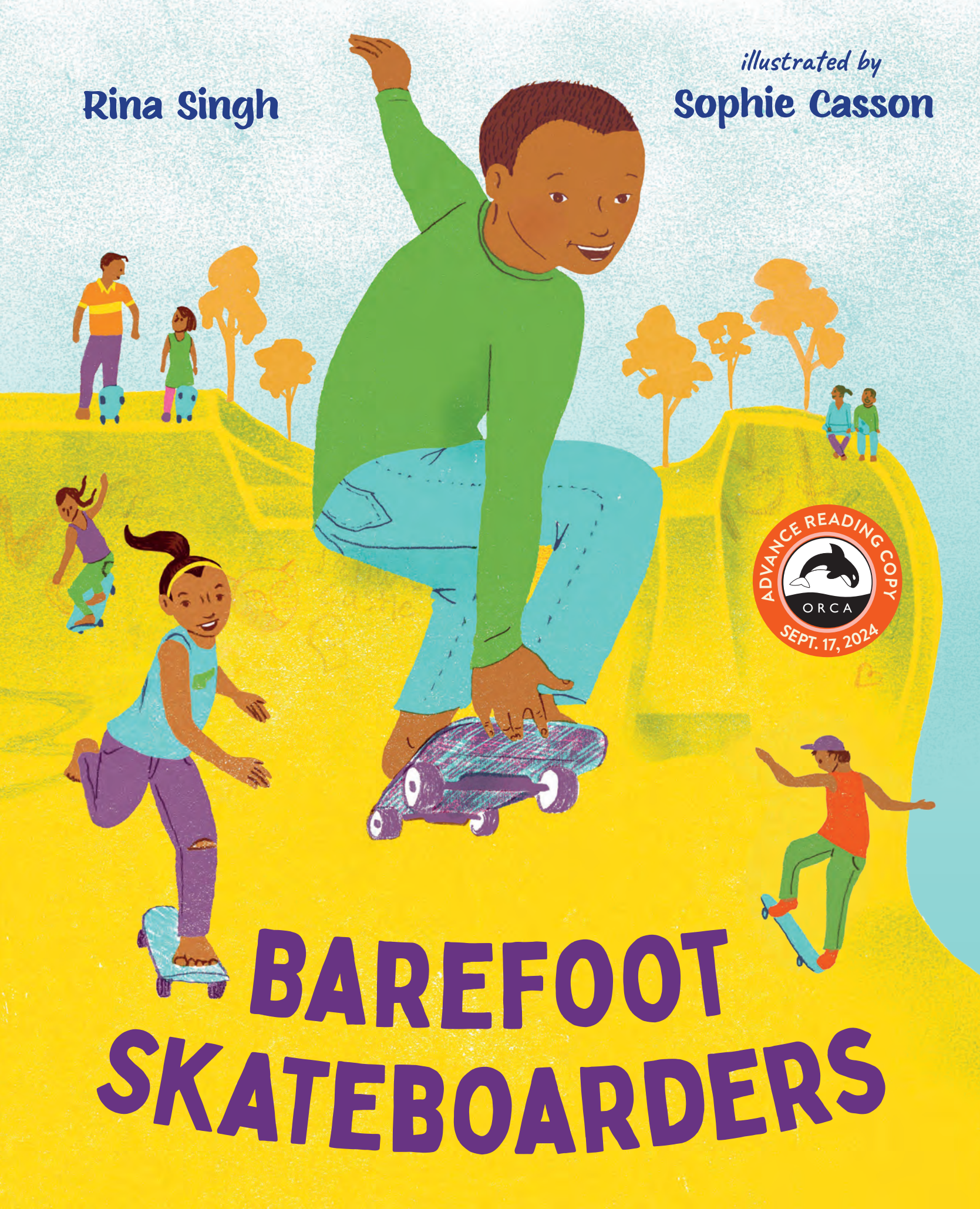


Rina Singh

illustrated by
Sophie Casson



BAREFOOT SKATEBOARDERS

In this tiny town, the skatepark changed everything.

THE REMOTE VILLAGE OF JANWAAR IN NORTHERN INDIA has been the same for a long time, with the community strictly divided into castes. It's a quiet village...until the construction project begins.

Ramkesh can't tell what it will be—it's all ramps and hills. When it's done, he sees kids playing there, on strange boards with wheels. Soon he's invited to try, and he's hooked, practicing tricks and soaring on his skateboard. At first it's all boys, but Ramkesh invites his sister, and other girls join too. Word gets out that the tiny village is a hotbed of skateboarding talent, and people flock from all over to see it and to teach the kids new tricks. Ramkesh and his friends even get invited to travel. But most important, they come back home to tell of their journeys...and to lead the way for Janwaar into the future, with a newfound sense of joy and unity.

Rina Singh is an award-winning children's author who is drawn to real-life stories about the environment and social justice. Her critically acclaimed and award-winning books include *Grandmother School*, winner of the 2021 Christie Harris Illustrated Children's Literature Prize; *Diwali: A Festival of Lights*, nominated for the Red Cedar Award; and *Once, a Bird*. Rina lives in Toronto.

Sophie Casson has illustrated more than twenty-five books, including *The Artist and Me* by Shane Peacock, a finalist for the Marilyn Baillie Picture Book Award, and *Helen's Birds* by Sara Cassidy, selected as part of IBBY Canada's Silent Book collection. Sophie's award-winning work has also appeared in the *Globe and Mail*, the *New York Times*, the *Financial Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and *Nature*. Sophie lives in Montreal.

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Barefoot Skateboarders

Author: Rina Singh

Illustrator: Sophie Casson

September 17, 2024

In this nonfiction picture book, the tiny village of Janwaar in Madhya Pradesh, India, gets a new skatepark, which inspires Ramkesh and all the local kids to learn how to skateboard, putting them on the map and uniting their community.

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8.75 x 10.75"
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KEY SELLING POINTS

- When a skatepark is built in the tiny village of Janwaar, in northern India, Ramkesh and the local children begin to discover the joys of a new sport, regardless of caste or gender, which not only introduces their village to the world but also gives them a newfound sense of unity and hope.
- Based on a true story, this book highlights the concept of sport as an instrument of joy and shows its ability to unite people; it also showcases children's instincts to treat each other as equals, despite the imposed divisions of the adult world, and the concept of the younger generation leading the way to a brighter future.
- Rina Singh has a personal connection to Janwaar, as she's visited there and met many of the skateboarding children and their parents (including Ramkesh), as well as the founder of the project, Ulrike Reinhard. Rina tutored some of the children online for a while, and she still keeps in touch with them to this day.
- Sophie Casson is an accomplished illustrator who brings her own unusual and eye-catching style to this book.
- A short film called *Janwaar*, by Danny Schmidt, was made about the Janwaar skatepark (officially called Janwaar Castle), and the Netflix film *Skater Girl* is a fictionalized version of the life of Asha, one of the skateboarders featured in the book.



AMRITA SINGH

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rina Singh is an award-winning children's author who is drawn to real-life stories about the environment and social justice. Her critically acclaimed and award-winning books include *Grandmother School*, winner of the 2021 Christie Harris Illustrated Children's Literature Prize; *Diwali: A Festival of Lights*, nominated for the Red Cedar Award; and *Once, a Bird*. Rina has an MFA in creative writing from Concordia University and a teaching degree from McGill University. She lives in Toronto.



JULIE ARTACHO

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Sophie Casson has illustrated more than 25 books, including *The Artist and Me* by Shane Peacock, a finalist for the Marilyn Baillie Picture Book Award, and *Helen's Birds* by Sara Cassidy, selected as part of IBBY Canada's Silent Book collection. Her highly acclaimed illustrations are inspired by etchings, silkscreen works and Japanese woodblock prints. Sophie's award-winning work has also appeared in the *Globe and Mail*, the *New York Times*, the *Financial Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and *Nature*, as well as in the Canadian Museum for Human Rights. Sophie lives in Montreal.

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Sophie Casson*

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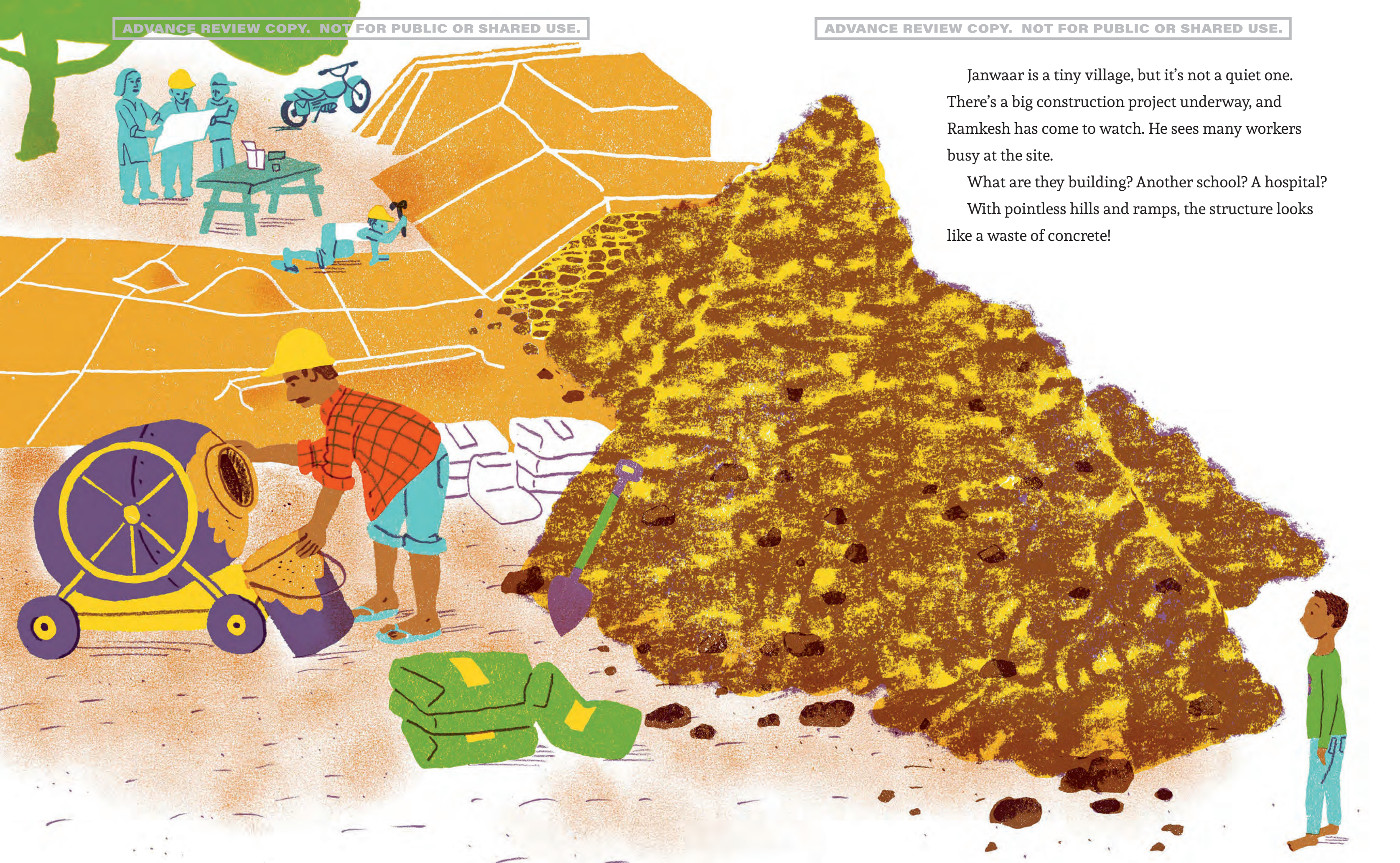
Hidden in the heart of India lies Janwaar, a remote village. A single unfinished road runs through it. On one side live the Yadavs, who own farmland and have brick homes. On the other side are Adivasis, Indigenous people who work as farm laborers and have mud houses.

At the school, Yadavs don't allow their children to play or eat with Adivasis. At the well, Yadav women draw the water first. That's how it has always been. Yadavs never let Adivasis forget their place in the world.



Janwaar is a tiny village, but it's not a quiet one. There's a big construction project underway, and Ramkesh has come to watch. He sees many workers busy at the site.

What are they building? Another school? A hospital? With pointless hills and ramps, the structure looks like a waste of concrete!





When the construction is done, Ramkesh checks it out from nearby. For three days he watches a small group of boys playing on its slopes, gliding on strange boards with wheels.

The foreigner who always seems to be there sees him and calls him over.

He hesitates. “Adivasi.” He points at himself.
“Ulrike.” She points at herself.
Hmm. The fact that he’s an Adivasi doesn’t matter to her. He shrugs and smiles.



Ulrike offers Ramkesh a wooden board with four wheels.

“Skateboard,” she says.

He realizes this new place is for everyone, even Adivasis.

Ramkesh isn’t sure what to do at first.

Ulrike shows him videos of kids riding their skateboards and taking off into the air.

The first thing he notices is their shoes.

Flashy. Bright. Beautiful.





Ramkesh looks down at his dusty bare feet and jumps on the board. He tries to balance and copy their moves.

He falls, scrapes his knees and falls again. But every time, he picks himself up.

He wants to fly too.





Soon the rest of the boys join him, and the skate park becomes their new playground.

The parents aren't sure what to do. Yadav and Adivasi children have never played together. They worry there will be fights. But they decide to watch and wait.

At the skate park, no one brings up Yadav. No one mentions Adivasi.

The divide begins to blur.

But where are the girls?

Ramkesh asks his sister Durgha to come to the park. She is excited to join.

Soon other girls come too. When they are too shy to approach the boys, a rule goes up.

Girls First



Any girl can say “Girls first” to a boy and get a turn at the board.



The village begins to fill with the laughter and shrieks of barefoot children and the clickety-clack of the skateboards. Ramkesh is getting really good.

It's so much fun that some children start skipping school to be at the park. And a new rule goes up.

No School, No Skateboarding



Word spreads. Soon journalists, photographers and filmmakers flock to Janwaar.

Famous skateboarders from Brazil, Canada and the United States hear the buzz too. They travel all the way to India to be part of the children's adventure. They make videos of the kids, who show off for the cameras, and share them with the world.

And, even better, they teach the kids new tricks.

Grinds. Ollies. Backflips. Kickflips. Powerslides.

The children feel free when they are on their skateboards. Like Ramkesh, they all want wings to fly.

Curious and smart, Ramkesh becomes a champion skateboarder in the village. Even the older boys look up to him.

Thanks to their talent, Ramkesh and his neighbors, Asha and Arun, are invited to travel. They are the first children in the village to get passports. And they're all Adivasis.





Ramkesh and Arun are going to Germany. Asha is heading to London. None of them has ever seen an airplane before.

Ramkesh looks at his new shoes.

It is a big moment.





The boys fall in love with Berlin, where they get to try out different skate parks (and ice cream!). They go to other cities too. Antwerp. Paris. Bordeaux. Barcelona. It's a whirlwind of a tour.

They watch in awe as skateboarders shred huge skate parks with ease.

In Janwaar they thought they were champions. Now they realize they have a lot to learn.





The children come back home humbled but energized, and with new dreams—for themselves and for the village.

Ramkesh, Asha and Arun bring the villagers together with their newfound confidence. Everyone is proud that the world knows about Janwaar. For the first time in their lives, the elders let their children lead the way.





Today the road through Janwaar is still unfinished.
But a change has come over its people. They have
hope in their smiles. A purpose in their eyes—to
support each other, to keep learning.

And the village is filled with the laughter and shrieks
of barefoot children and the clickety-clack of their
skateboards.

They are beginning to find their place in the world.



PHOTO BY MANINDER SODHI

The author with some of the Janwaar skateboarders.

Author's Note

In 2018 I spent four glorious days in Janwaar and watched the little barefoot skateboarders ripping up the skate park. Earlier that year I had met Ulrike Reinhard, a German activist, in Delhi. Inspired by the success of the skate park Skateistan in Afghanistan, she started Janwaar Castle in this rural village in Madhya Pradesh, India.

In 2014 she asked fifteen artists worldwide, including Ai Weiwei, to transform skateboards into artboards. The boards were auctioned as a fundraiser, and she built the skate park with the proceeds. Twelve skateboarders from six different countries, including multiple world champion Nyjah Huston from California, volunteered to design and construct the park with the locals. An incredible

story of social, cultural and economic change unfolded. Ulrike did not coach the children, because she's not a skateboarder. Instead children are the driving force. Empowered by the skills of skateboarding, they became the actual changemakers.



PHOTO BY RINA SINGH

Ramkesh with his mother.

I was so excited to hear about what was happening in Janwaar that I planned to see it for myself. I returned to India later in the year, took an overnight train from Delhi to Khajuraho and then a taxi to Janwaar. After touring the village and seeing the kids' brilliant skateboarding skills in action, I visited their homes and talked to their mothers. Ramkesh's mother unwrapped a piece of cloth and proudly showed me her son's passport. He beamed as his mother spoke of his achievements as a skateboarder. Skateboarding has given the villagers identity.

I left Janwaar with my heart full and promised to stay in touch. For a year I volunteered and taught some of the children English via Skype. It used to be the highlight of my Sunday mornings. I'm still available for them when they need help.

So, it is with great joy that I bring the story of the barefoot skateboarders to young readers.

For Maninder and Ulrike, who made it possible.

—R.S.

To your inner strength, reader.

—S.C.

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