

# LEAVING THE BELLWEATHERS

By Kristin Clark Venuti

*Teacher's Guide created by Cassandra Reigel Whetstone*

**Story Description:** Tristan Benway is under an oath of fealty towards the Bellweather Family. The eccentric Bellweathers live in the Lighthouse on the Hill with Benway, who writes a memoir about their adventures with an endangered albino alligator, a kidnapped circus family, and a stolen priceless work of art. Benway longs for the day that he can retire in a warm place far, far, away and the Bellweather children long for a way to get Benway to stay.

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**Pre-reading:** Show students the cover of LEAVING THE BELLWEATHERS. Have students describe what they see in the cover art. Ask, “What sorts of characters might we meet in this story?”

## **Bellweathers Character Chart (Sheltered Instruction)**

**Materials:** butcher paper, markers

**Prep:** Create a chart with six columns. Put a character name(s) above each column- *Tristan Benway, Ninda, Triplets (Spike, Brick, and Sassy), Spider, Mrs. Bellweather, Dr. Bellweather.*

**Directions:** As students learn about the characters, record descriptions and actions under each character’s name. At the end of the session’s reading, add any plot points to the character’s column. Before beginning each session’s reading, review the chart with the students. **Younger Students:** Leave chart up for students to read with a pointer during “Read Around the Room” time or free time. **Older Students:** Encourage students to add small illustrations to the chart after the reading session to help visualize character details and actions.

**Extension:** Invite students to draw the characters on small squares of paper, or cut out as paper dolls, and attach the drawings to the columns.

## **Discussion Questions:**

- Nigel Benway pledged the loyalty and service of his descendents to the Bellweather family for 200 years. Did Benway have to work for the Bellweathers until “Glorious Liberation and Oath Abandonment Time” (GLOAT)?
- Would you ever want to visit the Lighthouse on the Hill? What would be the best part? What would be the worst?
- The author used two different points of view to tell the story. What are they? Why do you think she used both instead of telling it all in the first person from Benway’s perspective, or all in the third person?
- Discuss the author’s use of capitalization within the story. Why do you think she chose to capitalize certain phrases such as “Think Deeply,” “Up to No Good,” or “Developing a Conscience”?

- Describe Dr. Bellweather’s mood. How did the family react to his outbursts? What strategies do you use to cope with someone’s bad mood?
- Why does Spider like to Think Deeply about endangered animals? What did he like about having Heyboy/Heygirl? Do you think he will bring another animal into the Lighthouse on the Hill? If so, what animal might he adopt next?
- How would you describe Ninda’s character? Did your impression of her change during the course of the story? What do you think the Balboas thought of her?
- What do the children think of Benway at the beginning of the story? As they realized that Benway was dissatisfied with his current situation, how did they change their attitude towards him?
- Why did the Triplets want to steal the Mona Lisa? When they read the Harlan Snodgrass’s critique of their art, Spike said, “Someday Mr. Snodgrass is going to be taught a little lesson about criticizing *our* art.” What do you think Spike meant by that comment?
- Did Benway ever intend to hire Smithers as his successor? How would Smithers have fit in with the Bellweathers?
- Why did Benway decide to stay? Do you think he made the right decision? How long do you think his decision will last?
- How do you think things will change for Benway and the Bellweathers now that the Oath of Fealty has expired?

### **Leaving the Bellweathers Reading Journal (Responding to Literature, Writing)**

**Materials:** writing paper, construction paper 12 in. x 18 in.

**Prep:** None

**Directions:** Read the Benway’s first entry in the book. Ask, “Why do people keep journals?” Discuss the purpose and format of journals. Pass out construction paper and have students fold paper in half. Let them illustrate a cover for their journals. Pass out writing paper and have students write a journal from themselves as the reader of the book, reminding students to include a date, greeting, and closing, and signature. Have them write a journal entry after each reading and address discussion questions, make predictions, or question the author. The journals may also be used to check comprehension.

### **Guess My Character Game (Parts of Speech, Writing)**

**Materials:** writing paper, list of major characters in the book- *Benway, Ninda, Spider, Triplets, Mrs. Bellweather, Dr. Bellweather, Thaddeus Bohack, Postman Grimsby, Heyboy/Heygirl, Reverend Shrift, The Balboas, Smithers.*

**Prep:** Divide students into groups of 3-6. Write characters on slips of paper so that there is one character or character set per group. Fold slips of paper and put into bag or basket. Display list of characters where students can see it.

**Directions:**

1. Put students into groups.
2. Say, “I’m going to have each group draw one slip of paper that has the name of a character or a group of characters. Unfold your paper secretly so that no one outside of your group can see or hear who your character is.” Pass out characters and writing paper.

3. Draw three columns on the board and label them “Nouns” “Adjectives” and “Verbs.” Direct students to write three columns on their papers and to brainstorm nouns, adjectives, and verbs associated with their character.
4. When students have their lists of words, have them use their lists to create clues about their character. Have each team write three clues, such as “This character is an adult. This character is creative. This character thinks that Benway is part of the family.” (*Mrs. Bellweather*) Tell students that if they have a set of characters like Triplets or the Balboas, they can write their clues in the singular.
5. Game time! When the clues are written have each student take a piece of writing paper and write the numbers 1 through \_\_ (number of groups.) Have groups take turns reading their clues while the rest of the students write down their guesses as to who the characters are for each group. Remind groups not to give away the answer yet.
6. When all groups have shared their clues, have them share out their answers and have students score their own papers. The student(s) with the most correct answers wins.

### **What Happens Next? (Exploring Ideas Through Freewriting)**

**Materials:** writing paper, pencils, timer (optional)

**Prep:** None

**Directions:**

1. Reread the last page of LEAVING THE BELLWEATHERS.
2. Ask, “Think about what other adventures might happen to the characters in the story?” While students are thinking, pass out writing paper.
3. Say, “Write the name of your favorite character on the top of your paper. We are going to do a ‘focused freewrite.’ You will have 15 minutes to write everything you can think of about what might happen to this character. Perhaps it could be another adventure, or maybe Benway will take a vacation or it could take place several years later when one of the children goes off to college.” Explain to students that during a freewrite they shouldn’t worry about spelling, mechanics, sentence structure. The purpose of the activity is to let students explore possibilities and ideas before doing a more structured writing activity.
4. Give students 15 minutes to write and set a timer or note the start time on the board. Encourage them to keep their pencils going the whole time. If a student gets stuck, suggest they write about how they are stuck, so that they keep writing until they get a new idea.
5. When the time is up, have students put their pencils down and reread what they wrote.
6. Ask, “What was this writing experience like for you? Were you surprised by how much you were able to write about your character?”

**Extension:** Have students use the freewrite as the beginning of the writing process and write and complete a story about the character.

### **Spider’s Endangered Animal Reserve (Science, Research)**

**Materials:** access to research in library, reference books, or internet; shoe boxes; clay, construction paper; paint; glue

**Prep:** Display materials for art project on table or counter.

**Directions:**

1. Read the following description about Spider: *Among the things Spider likes to Think Deeply about are ways to help endangered species. But only those which have the ability to poison, maim, or kill people. He feels these creatures to be misunderstood by society. His dearest ambition in life has always been to open up an animal reserve for them.* (Chapter 2)
2. Say, “We are going to make a collection of endangered species habitats.” Provide each student access to research materials and have them:
  - a. Select an endangered species to focus on.
  - b. Learn what type of habitat the animal requires.
  - c. Learn what the animal eats.
3. When students have researched their animals, give them each a shoebox and have them use paper, clay, paint and other items to create a mini-habitat and model of the animal.
4. Display finished habitats on tables or desks and let students walk around the classroom to examine each diorama.

**Extension:** Have students write a paragraph or report on the animal and its habitat.

**Calendar Problem Solving (Math)**

**Materials:** paper or math journals, overhead, pencils, calendar for students to reference, calculators if needed.

**Prep:** Write questions on overhead or board.

**Directions:** Have students solve the following problems in their math journals or on a piece of paper. Provide calculators if needed.

1. The first entry we see in Benway’s journal is dated July 7<sup>th</sup>. The last journal entry we see is dated August 31? How many days passed during this book, including the first and last days. How did you get your answer? What resources did you use?
2. How many hours passed during this book? How many minutes? How many seconds? Describe how you got your answers.

**Travel Brochures for Tristan Benway (Geography, Writing)**

**Materials:** maps, 8.5 ins. x 11 ins. white paper, markers

**Prep:** None

**Directions:**

1. Remind students that Benway wanted to retire in his own “Charming Cottage in a Warm Location Far, Far, Away.” Brainstorm locations that Benway might have enjoyed.
2. Have each student select a suitable location and tell them that they are to design a travel brochure about that location.
3. Pass out papers and have students fold them into thirds (as if folding the paper to go into a business-sized envelope.)
4. Remind students that a travel brochure is designed in order to sell the idea of visiting or moving to that location. Encourage students to think creatively about their location and to think how they might put a positive spin on a less desirable

aspect of their location. For example, living by an active volcano could “provide the perfect spot for roasting marshmallows.”

5. Have students use markers to create their travel brochures.

**Extension:** Students can create a commercial to accompany their brochures.

Commercials could be performed in front of the class, or videotaped and shown together for an event such as Open House.

### **Grab-bag Collaborative Art (Art)**

**Materials:** one paper bag per group; items such as straws, buttons, thread, string, yarn, plastic utensils, rubber bands, lids, etc.; paints and paintbrushes; glue, tape and glue gun (optional)

**Prep:** Fill paper bags with 4-6 items. Close and tape shut. Divide students into groups of 2-3 students.

#### **Directions:**

1. Reread the first section of chapter five, “The Triplets Engage in Art.” Discuss what the advantages and disadvantages are of working collaboratively?
2. Tell students that they are going to work collaboratively to create a piece of art. Each group will be given a bag of items that they include in an art project. They may use paint, glue and tape as needed. Tell students that the finished art projects will need a title.
3. Divide students into groups and let them take turns selecting sealed bags. Tell students that they must have one finished piece of art, which incorporates each item in the bag.
4. Give students 1-2 sessions to complete and present their projects.
5. At the end, ask, “What did you like about working together to create a piece of art? What was challenging?”

### **Flip Book of Professor Bellweather’s Eyebrows (Drawing)**

**Materials:** stacks of 20 pieces of 2 ins. x 3 ins. pieces of paper (one set per student and teacher), stapler, black markers

**Prep:** Staple each stack together affixing staples to the left hand side, to make little books. Make a sample flipbook of a something such as a face that moves from a small “O” to a large grin. (Optional)

#### **Directions:**

1. Read the following description of Dr. Bellweather: *Professor Eugene Bellweather charged into the dining room his eyebrows fairly leaping. The doctor is the very picture of a mad scientist and possessed of very **busy** eyebrows which wiggle and jump and draw themselves together in a scowl. When he’s enraged, they shake so much that, upon occasion, witnesses have expressed fear that they might fall right off his face.* (Chapter 1)
2. Tell students that they are going to illustrate a flipbook about Dr. Bellweather’s eyebrows. A flipbook shows movement when the pages are flipped. Demonstrate with sample if available. Tell students that to make a picture look like it is moving there will be slight differences from one page to the next.

3. Pass out flipbooks and markers. Have students draw a circle on the last page to represent Dr. Bellweather's head. Have them trace the circle onto the other pages so that the head will be on the same place in the book.
4. Instruct students to illustrate the rest of his face and to animate his eyebrows to reflect the description in the book.

## Q & A with Kristin Clark Venuti

### **Who or what inspired you to write about Benway and the Bellweather family?**

Believe it or not – the Bellweather family was inspired by my own. For instance, my oldest child loves animals, and really does feel that the dangerous ones are just “misunderstood”. Ninda reminds me of my niece who really does have a tremendous sense of right and wrong, as long as it is applied to OTHER people. The triplets were inspired by my younger two children and by my nephew – who really managed to whip up chaos together when they were younger.

### **Which characters did you imagine first? How did the characters change from your first drafts?**

I imagined Spider first – because I kind of lived with him. Next came the voice of Benway who at first was simply a foil for Spider. Then came the other characters. They changed in that they became larger than life – their antics more vivid.

### **Speaking of drafts, how many times did you revise this story? How long did it take you to write it?**

It's hard to say how many times I revised, since I worked on it in sections with a critique group. It definitely got revised as I went along. When Egmont bought it, I received an editorial letter from (who else?) my editor and did a major revision for her, then a minor one after that. It's also hard to say how long it took me to write it, since I put it down for months at a time when I was just getting started on it.

### **Do you have a favorite character in the book? Who would you like to have over to your house for dinner?**

I have to demure here – I love all my characters (except for Thaddeus Bohack and Wodehouse Smithers of course). I'm probably most entertained by the triplets – but I would NOT want them to come to dinner. I like my house too much. Spider's pretty special to me, because he was my firstborn character.

### **It looks like you had a great time using language when writing this book. Can you describe how you decided to use the journal and the narrative to tell the story?**

I do love language – my dad was a linguistics professor, and I grew up with his passion for words and word play.

I decided to use narration along with the journal to tell the story because the kids have most of the action, and there's no way Benway could have been in certain scenes without calling the authorities.

Still, it's really Benway's story. He's too uptight to tell his hopes, dreams, aspirations and even fears to another person – so I couldn't show what was going on with him (first rule of fiction writing – show, don't tell) so I had him confide in his journal.

### **What were your favorite books as a child?**

Oh my, where to begin? I read constantly as a child, and I'm pretty sentimental about the books I loved – I'm afraid of leaving any of them out when I list them...almost the way you'd be afraid of leaving any of your friends out while thanking them in some sort of a speech!

I loved anything by Roald Dahl, especially his short story collection "The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar", I loved "Harriet the Spy", the "Anne of Green Gables" books, "The Mad Scientist's Club", "Cheaper by the Dozen" and "Belles on their Toes" by the Gilbreth siblings. I also loved Nancy Drew – mainly because it was a good, long series, and I knew it would take me awhile to run out of something to read. To this day, I'm uncomfortable if I don't have a sure book or two in the to-be-read pipeline.

### **Do you have advice for young writers?**

Read everything you can get your hands on – and don't get too carried away with criticism, good or bad. Let your story be what it's going to be. You can go back later, after the first draft, to clean it up.

### **You write in your dedication, "For the Real Bellweathers- you know who you are." Will you spill the beans on who they are?**

The Real Bellweathers are my three kids, Johnathon, Max and Chelsea, and their cousins, Michaela and Keenan. The names of the characters in the book are actually nicknames they chose for themselves when we were on a family vacation together!