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Picture Books

Horse Song: The Naadam of Mongolia
Betsy Lewin
Ted Lewin
Lee and Low Books
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Let's take a trip to a place where "the people are warm and friendly [and] the landscape ranges from snow-capped mountains and dense forests to the wide-open steppe and the sandy soils of the Gobi," noted author/illustrators Ted and Betsy Lewin encourage. The excitement begins when the Lewins arrive at the Ulaanbaatar airport and travel to Dalandzadgad and Bulgan in southern Mongolia. They drive along on bumpy roads, watching horses, yaks, camels, and Mongolian "four-eyed" dogs just outside the window as they imagine what the Naadam, the "Mongolian national summer festival with wrestling, archery, and horse racing events" will be like. When they finally arrive at the camp of the horse trainers, they stay with a loving family in their ger, a "collapsible round tent with a wooden frame and felt covering."

The family's son, Tamir, will race at the festival. When Tamir wins the fourteen-mile race, excitement fills the air. "An elder…praises the horses with a "long rolling" song. He sings into a microphone, and the song "booms from loudspeakers." Readers who are impressed with Tamir's strength and bravery may become disappointed when they learn his character is a composite of a number of young jockeys.

This informative book is divided into five sections, “Arrival,” “Camp of the Horse Trainers,” “The Day Before,” “The Naadam,” and “The Closing Ceremony.” This organization helps the reader imagine she is along on the trip, learning about a culture different from her own. The illustrations are rendered in watercolor. Earth tone colors in the earlier pages of the book slowly give way to more majestic pinks, purples, and blues as the festival draws nearer. The young jockeys on strong horses with determined looks on their faces add a sense of anticipation and excitement to the story, urging readers to cheer Tamir on. Though the illustrations are filled with details about what the authors see, they remain outsiders, never appearing as a part of the scenes they illustrate.

The Lewins have both won Caldecott Honor medals and written and illustrated numerous books, many of which, like this one, document things they have experienced while traveling. Helpful backmatter includes a glossary, pronunciation guide, and sections called “Ger facts” and “Other Mongolian Facts.”

Youth who love horses and have an interest in learning about how people in other countries live and celebrate will enjoy this book.