



Ten Thumb Sam

Rachel Dunstan Muller

Interest level: ages 8–11

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AR Quiz # 120827

Consider the following question as you read *Ten Thumb Sam*:

Can being “all thumbs” actually be a blessing in disguise?

Story

Samuel Stringbini should be living every kid’s dream. But Sam is tired of high wires, trapezes and magic acts. He’s tired of standing on the sidelines, tired of living on the back of a bus and tired of driving to a new town every week. But most of all, “ten thumb” Sam is tired of being the one Stringbini without any talent.

Author

Rachel Dunstan Muller was born in California and immigrated to Canada when she was two. With the exception of a year in Northern Ireland, she has lived on the west coast of British Columbia since childhood. Rachel has been an English tutor, a ferry worker, a newspaper columnist and a training consultant, but writing fiction is her favorite occupation. Her first book with Orca was *When the Curtain Rises*. She is also the author of *Squeeze*, in the Orca Sports series. She currently lives on the edge of a small Vancouver Island community with her husband, five children and an ever-changing assortment of cats, rabbits, birds, rodents, amphibians and fish.

Connecting to the Curriculum

Language Arts

- Sam tries hard to succeed at something. Have students imagine that they are Sam. Write a series of journal entries detailing Sam's terrible luck in learning the skills other people are trying to teach him.
- When we first meet Sam, everything he tries is doomed to failure. Brainstorm as a class how to help someone in a similar situation. Have students then write letters of advice suggesting how Sam can overcome, solve or improve his situation.
- Have students choose a pair of chapters from *Ten Thumb Sam*. Ask them to write a poem about what happens in that section. Students could select a character, setting or feeling to use as a guide throughout their writing. Publish their work in a class or personal anthology.
- Introduce students to visual think-alouds, where they read a page or passage aloud, and then draw a visual representation of its content. This may be done in a group to start, where one student reads a passage and then each group member draws his or her own picture. The teacher may also guide the whole class by reading the passage.
- Brainstorm a list of objects found in *Ten Thumb Sam*. For example: tent, cotton candy, gray suit, bleachers, trapeze and straps. Have students organize these words into categories. Students should choose a set of words and use them to write a paragraph that relates to the story.
- It takes many people working together to put on a circus, from the people who set it up and take it down, to those who perform in it. Make a list of all the possible jobs and roles there might be, and then have students select one they might be interested in applying for. Have them write a resume and/or cover letter outlining their experience and reasons for wanting the job.

Social Studies

- Compare and contrast the lives of the Stringbini family with that of a more traditional North American family. You may wish to investigate the lives of circus families online too (see Online Resources Section). Have students create a comparison chart that looks at food, clothing, shelter, etc. Open the discussion up to go beyond merely physical needs. Discuss psychological needs (love, religion, security) and social needs (family, belonging, school, language). How do circus families meet these needs differently than other families? How are they the same?
- Online or at the library, pair students up and have them investigate how living in a tightly-knit circus community mirrors life "on the outside." What would be the hardest part of living in a circus? What would be the best part? Have students share their findings and opinions with the class.

- Discuss whether children should grow up at the circus. (This is an excellent topic for dividing your class into teams and planning and executing a debate.)

Art

- Have students each create a different pop-up circus scene. Display them side-by-side, along with a short explanation of their scene.
- Look at local advertising posters as a guide, then design one for your choice of the circuses mentioned in *Ten Thumb Sam*: Circus Enormicus, Triple Top, Kit and Kaboodle or Leaping Lizard.
- Divide the class into two to four groups and have each group create a piece of art about part of the circus (the big top, animal cages, Sam's bus, the high wire, etc.)
- Norman Rockwell was an American artist who painted some circus pictures during his career. Two examples of these are: "Clown Teaching Dog Tricks" and "Circus Strongman (Eugene Sandow)." He was famous for having his work on the cover of the magazine the *Saturday Evening Post* for over twenty years. Locate and study his work to get a sense of his style. Have students try and recreate a circus scene from *Ten Thumb Sam* in the style of Norman Rockwell.

Drama

- Before students read the book, use a passage from *Ten Thumb Sam* to have students create short skits showing what they think might happen next. Then read on and then have them compare and contrast their responses with what they read.
- Set up a situation where students will go through an interview for the circus job they have selected (see Language Arts section). Have some students act as the employer and others as prospective employees.
- Have students create improv skits from random sections of *Ten Thumb Sam*.

Connecting to the Text

- Do you know how powerful teamwork can be? What is the message about teamwork in *Ten Thumb Sam*?
- Provide students with a graphic organizer that will guide them in creating a character sketch for one of the novel's main characters. Have students augment their character sketches by writing a short passage explaining which person in the story this character would most like to spend the day with. Then ask students which character in the story *they* would most like to spend the day with.

- An *idiom* is a familiar expression that means something other than the actual words it is composed of. An example from the story is where Harriet tells Sam to “break a leg” at the end of chapter 18. What does she really mean by these words? What does it mean to “make ends meet”? Divide students into small groups. Give each group a whiteboard or chart paper and have them brainstorm other idioms they’re familiar with. Gather as a class and share the students’ ideas. Why do we use idioms?
- Vocabulary and summarizing: Select a number of at-level and a number of challenging words from *Ten Thumb Sam*. Give each student a card with one of the vocabulary words on it. Allow a few moments for each child to make up a sentence using the word. Encourage students to concentrate on retelling the part of the story where the word occurs.
- Dialogue is an effective way for an author to advance the plot without bogging the reader down with narrative details. Choose several students to help you read the beginning of chapter 18 aloud. Assign students to read the parts of Harriet, Sam, Robbie and Herbie. As a class (or independently, if you’ve got sophisticated writers), rewrite the passage without dialogue. When you’re finished, compare the original with the rewrite. Which version of the passage helped the information “go down easier”?
- Toward the end of the book, some of the relationships between the characters changed. Have students choose two characters and explain how their relationship evolved over the course of the story.
- Like plot, setting and characters, *theme* is an important literary element in any novel. Theme is an idea or message about life revealed in a work of literature. It’s not really a moral, but it’s kind of a guiding message all the same. Break your class into small groups and have them discuss what they understand to be the theme of *Ten Thumb Sam*.
- Engage students in a discussion about whether this story could have actually happened. Guide students in recognizing whether they had to suspend disbelief at any point in the story. Is it plausible? Why or why not? Can they think of any other examples in the world where “big business” tries to strongarm the little guy?

Connecting to the Students—Discussion Questions

1. Sam feels put out by having to sleep on the floor of the bus when his cousins arrive. He wants to go back to the way things were before they came. Have you ever felt like you’ve been shoved out of your normal routine to make way for someone else? What made you feel that way? How did you deal with it?
2. Have you ever been blamed for something you didn’t do? How did that make you feel? Were you able to put the situation right? Explain.

3. When all the adults around them are resigned to having to sell out to Mr. Beaverwick, Sam and Harriet are able to come up with a plan to save the circus. Sam is really glad when the adults decide to listen to his ideas. Why is it important for a community or family to listen to the voices of all of its members? What might happen if a community didn't let everyone have their say? What would have happened in the Stringbinis' case?
4. When everything begins to unravel in Sam's plan on the night they intend to catch Beaverwick, Sam somehow manages to remain calm. Have you ever found yourself able to keep your cool in a stressful situation? Is this something that comes naturally to you, or do you have to work at it? Explain.
5. Is there something that everyone around you knows how to do, but that you're hopeless at? Explain.
6. As characters tend to do, Sam made a number of choices in *Ten Thumb Sam*. Do you agree with all of his choices? Go back through the book and choose one of his decisions. Do you agree with his decision in this instance? Why or why not? Explain your reasoning.
7. Which character in *Ten Thumb Sam* would you most like to spend a day with? Why?

Author's Note

Dear readers,

I wanted to write a story about a boy who couldn't wait to leave the circus, but my first version of *Ten Thumb Sam* was completely different from the story that exists now. In my first draft, Sam gets his wish at the end of the third chapter. The rest of the story takes place far away from the Triple Top Circus. After reading what I'd written and getting feedback from some other readers, I realized I wasn't happy with that version. I liked the color and excitement of a circus setting, and I felt that the story had lost a lot of its energy when I'd moved it away from the circus. So I started again. I kept the first three chapters, and threw out the rest. In the end I had to rewrite the first three chapters several times as well. Authors do a lot of rewriting!

I relate to Sam on a few levels. I know what it's like to want to do something, and to be horrible at it. I love to dance, but every time I take any kind of dance lesson, I'm always the worst in the class. It takes me much longer to learn new moves than it takes anyone else. But I believe in the power of persistence. If something is important to me, I don't give up. For example, I really wanted to write this book, and to get it published. It took me six years to see *Ten Thumb Sam* in print, but I kept at it. Sam didn't give up when he believed the circus could be saved. I think if Sam had really wanted to learn to juggle or walk the high wire, he wouldn't have given up on those things either. It might have taken him longer than anyone else (maybe even years longer!), but I believe he

could have done it. But what Sam really wanted was to feel that he belonged, to feel that he had an important contribution to make in his world. I think we can all relate to that!

Rachel Dunstan Muller

Resources

Books

Fiction

- Allen, Debbie. *Dancing in the Wings*
 Banscheraus, J. *Trouble Under the Big Top*
 Belgue, Nancy. *Casey Little—Yo-Yo Queen*
 Berman, Ron. *The Kid from Courage*
 Carter, Anne Laurel. *The F Team*
 Clements, Andrew. *Circus Family Dog*
 Corder, Zizou. *Lion Boy; Lion Boy: The Chase; Lion Boy: The Truth*
 Drescher, Henrik. *Klutz*
 Falconer, Ian. *Olivia Saves the Circus*
 Ogden, Charles. *High Wire*
 Paulsen, Gary. *Dunc and Amos hit the Big Top*
 Porter, Tracey. *Billy Creekmore*
 Rex, Adam. *Tree Ring Circus*
 Seidler, Tori. *Toes*
 Smith, Joseph A. *Circus Train*
 Smucker, Barbara. *Incredible Jumbo*
 Tibo, Gilles. *Simon at the Circus*
 Wild, Margaret. *Bobbie Dazzler*
 Wildsmith, Brian. *The Circus*
 Wilson, Budge. *Duff's Monkey Business*
 Yolen, Jane. *Wizard's Hall*
 Ziefert, Harriet. *Circus Parade*

Nonfiction

- Beak, Nick Huckleberry. *Crafty Juggling* (793.8)
 Bowers, Vivien. *Crime Science* (363.2)
 Granfield, Linda. *Circus: An Album* (791.3)
 Helfer, Ralph. *The World's Greatest Elephant* (791.3)
 Johnson, Neil. *Big-Top Circus* (791.3)
 Kalman, Bobbie. *Kids Perform Circus Arts* (796.47)
 Montanari, Donata. *Children Around the World* (390.08)
 Platt, Richard. *Crime Scene: The Ultimate Guide to Forensic Science* (363.25)
 Murphy, Stuart J. *Circus Shapes* (516.15)
 Sukach, Jim. *Baffling Whodunnit Puzzles: Dr. Quicksolve Mini Mysteries* (793.7)

Small, Mary. *Caring: A Book About Caring* (177.7)

Sullivan, Charles. *Circus* (811.54)

Swartz, Larry. *The New Dramathemes* (372.66)

Unicef. *A Life Like Mine* (305.23)

Wilhelm, Jeffrey D. *Improving Comprehension with Think-Aloud Strategies* (372.47)

Online

Ringling Brothers Circus

www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ringling_Brothers_Circus

Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey Circus

www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ringling_Bros._and_Barnum_&_Bailey_Circus

Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey

www.ringling.com/explore/history/index.aspx

Circus Historical Society

www.circushistory.org/links.htm

Growing Up in the Circus

http://bac.binary-design.com/About/StudyGuide/pdf/BAC_StudyGuide_Ch10.pdf

Lessons for Juggling Class

www.jugglersareus.com/lesson.htm

Learn to Juggle

www.kalvan.net/howtojug/howtojug.htm

Circus Tricks

www.teachcircus.com/juggling1.html

Figurative Language: Teaching Idioms

www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=254

Norman Rockwell

www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/norman-rockwell/about-norman-rockwell/689

Character Counts

www.charactercounts.org

Good Character

www.goodcharacter.com