



Ten Thumb Sam
Rachel Dunstan Muller

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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 currently lives on the edge of a small Vancouver Island community with her husband, four daughters and an ever-changing assortment of cats, rabbits, birds, rodents, amphibians and fish.

Curricular Integration

Language Arts

- Sam tries hard to succeed at something. Have students write five daily journal entries about how they feel about his efforts. Then have them write five daily journal entries from Sam's perspective about the same events.
- Have students write a poem for every pair of chapters in *Ten Thumb Sam*. Have them select a character, setting or feeling to use as a guide throughout their writing. Publish their work in a class or personal anthology.
- Idioms give students figurative language choices to use in their writing. For example: Ten Thumb Sam does not really have ten thumbs, though he is very clumsy. Have students write a variety of idioms that connect to the theme found in *Ten Thumb Sam* and illustrate both the literal and figurative meanings. For example: “making ends meet,” p. 74.
- Introduce students to visual think-alouds, where they read a page or passage aloud, 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 their 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 and straps. Have students organize their words into categories and then use them to write a paragraph using the ones most important 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 résumé and/or introductory letter containing their experience and reasons for wanting the job.

Drama

- Using a passage from *Ten Thumb Sam* as a guide, have students create short skits showing what would happen next. Do this before the read on and then have them compare and contrast their responses with what they read.

For example:

“Oh dear,” said Erma Fritzi. “What if we’re too late?”

“That’s not an option,” said Max. “There are lives at stake!” (p. 109)

- When we first meet Sam, he is not having very good luck. 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.
- Prepare a situation where students will go through an interview for the job they have selected (see Language Arts section above). Have some students act as the employer and others as prospective employees.
- Have students create improv skits from random sections of *Ten Thumb Sam*.

Social Studies

- Compare and contrast the lives of the Stringbini family with that of a traditional North American family. Have students create a comparison chart that looks at food, clothing, shelter, schooling etc. or you may want to select a family in another part of the world to compare Sam’s family with.
- Maps can help you find different locations. Have students draw a map for one of the locations in *Ten Thumb Sam*. For example: In Chapter 9 the circus has set up in Winnipeg.



Art

- Have each student 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 copies of these and others to get a sense of his style. Have students recreate a circus scene from *Ten Thumb Sam* in the style of Norman Rockwell.

Selected Resources

Fiction

- Allen, Debbie. *Dancing in the Wings*.
 Banscherus, 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

- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ringling_Brothers_Circus
 Ringling Brothers Circus
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ringling_Bros._and_Barnum_&_Bailey_Circus
 Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ringling_Bros._and_Barnum_&_Bailey_Circus
- www.ringling.com/explore/history/index.aspx
 Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey
- www.circushistory.org/links.htm
 Circus Historical Society
- www.jugglersareus.com/lesson.htm
 Lessons for Juggling Class
- www.kalvan.net/howtojug/howtojug.htm
 Learn to Juggle
- www.teachcircus.com/juggling1.html
 Teach Circus.com
- www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=254
 Figurative Language: Teaching Idioms
- www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=116
 Norman Rockwell
- www.charactercounts.org/
 Character Counts
- www.goodcharacter.com/
 Good Character



A few words from the author

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