ABOUT THE BOOK
In the summer of 1908, in Muskegon, Michigan, a visiting troupe of vaudeville performers is about the most exciting thing since baseball. They’re summering in nearby Bluffton, so Henry Harrison has a few months to ogle the elephant and the zebra, the tightrope walkers and—lo and behold—a slapstick actor his own age named Buster Keaton. The show folk say Buster is indestructible; his father throws him around as part of the act and the audience roars, while Buster never cracks a smile. Henry longs to learn to take a fall like Buster, “the human mop,” but Buster just wants to play ball with Henry and his friends.

With signature nostalgia, Scott O’Dell Award–winning graphic novelist Matt Phelan presents a rollicking tribute to vaudeville, small-town dreams, and Buster Keaton as a boy, with lustrous color, dynamic lines, and flawless dramatic pacing.

NOTE FOR TEACHERS
This guide is designed to help your students engage with the text through discussion questions, writing prompts, and research activities that may be performed independently or in small or large groups. The nature of the questions themselves, as well as the variety of suggested response formats and opportunities for interaction with peers, will help students develop proficiency in many of the college and career readiness (CCR) anchor standards for reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language. Although we list some of the most obvious connections to the Common Core State Standards, this guide is designed to be versatile and extensible to meet the specific needs of your classroom.
1. Henry struggles to teach himself to do tricks like Buster, but sometimes it seems like all he does is fail. Have you ever tried to imitate someone else? Were you successful? What challenges did you face? Did anybody help you?

2. Henry has never actually seen any of the vaudeville acts, but he imagines something spectacular. He is surprised but undeterred when his dad (pages 41–43) and his friend Sally (pages 100–103) seem unimpressed by their own experiences with the Three Keatons. Is there something that you’ve never experienced firsthand but imagine to be wonderful? What would you be willing to do to get a chance to experience it yourself? If your friends or family casually dismissed the experience, how would that make you feel? Would you still want to do it?

3. A successful prank often requires careful planning and intelligence. Buster is so good at devising pranks that several of the adults in his community actually request his help in engineering solutions to their problems or actively take part in the gags. Have you ever pulled a prank or been on the receiving end of one? Do you think pranks are all just harmless gags? Where do you draw the line, and why?

4. Pages 147–155 depict Henry’s saying something thoughtlessly mean because he is jealous, then feeling unable to bring himself to face his friend Buster afterward. Have your feelings ever caused you to say or do something you later regretted? How did you move on? On pages 206–210, the boys seem to forgive and forget without actually talking about what happened. How have your experiences compared? What do you think makes a friendship able (or unable) to survive hurt feelings?

5. When Henry works up the courage to talk to his dad about the future (pages 187–195), he is surprised by his dad’s response. How important do you think it is for your hopes and dreams to match up with your family’s expectations for you? What does Henry’s dad mean when he advises Henry to “concentrate on who you are going to be”? Do you think this is good advice? Why or why not?

6. Buster explains on pages 67–70 that he was kicked out of school and learns instead by observing other performers. Left on his own, Henry tries to learn tricks simply by doing them. Give examples of each learning method (formal education, observation, and practice) in your own life. Which do you prefer, and why? Does it matter what you’re learning, or do you always prefer one method over another?

**WRITING PROMPTS**

1. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1** Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

   Why do you think Buster brushes off Henry’s repeated requests to learn tricks? Use examples from the text or illustrations to support your answer.

2. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.2** Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

   **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.3** Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

   Buster and Henry both cause others to laugh when they appear to make mistakes or hurt themselves but are, in fact, OK. What is different about the way each of them experiences this comedic effect? How does Henry’s reaction change from page 169 to pages 204–205, and why? How can the audience tell that Henry’s fall on page 182 is not just part of the act?

3. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1** Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

   **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.9** Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

   In some ways, Henry seems to learn more about Buster from people like Ed Gray and Lex than from Buster himself. Why do you think that is? Compare and contrast Buster on pages 35, 84, and 112. Which is the “real” Buster? Throughout the story, can you tell when he is performing versus when he is being himself?

4. **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.6** Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

   **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.3** Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

   Bluffton is told from Henry’s point of view. How does that affect the storytelling? Pick a scene from the book and retell it from Buster’s or Sally’s perspective.
5. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.5 Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.47 Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Graphic novel creators use more than words to tell a story. Artistic decisions can help convey emotion, action, characterization, and other aspects of a story. In Bluffton, how does Matt Phelan use color to differentiate time?

HINT: Compare and contrast scenes depicting various seasons, the main storyline, and flashbacks.

6. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1 Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

In an interview with Candlewick Press, available at www.candlewick.com, author Matt Phelan says, “Each boy sees the other as having a life that is enviable in many ways. Henry realizes this from his perspective, but he can’t imagine how an ‘ordinary’ life would appeal to a star like Buster.” What examples from the text or imagery suggest that Buster treasures “typical summer stuff” (page 49) in Bluffton as much as Henry enjoys being around the performers?
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.5 Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.3 Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

Extension activity to Discussion Question #6: In a small group, devise a plan to learn the next classroom unit using a particular learning style (formal education, observation, or practice) or combination of styles. Prepare and deliver a presentation, including at least one graphic, to persuade your classmates that this is the best plan given the time and resources available to your class. Rate the effectiveness of your peer groups’ presentations. Vote for the best approach.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4 Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.L.4 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.

DEFINE THE FOLLOWING WORDS:
- elucidate
- edify
- catastrophe
- huckster
- contortionist
- sparse
- hack
- tranquility
- rickety
- miscreant
- sweltering
- slapstick
- cavalcade
- knockabout

ABOUT THE CREATOR
Matt Phelan is the author-illustrator of the award-winning graphic novels The Storm in the Barn and Around the World. About Bluffton, he says, “If this book inspires a reader to watch a Buster Keaton movie for the first time, I would be very happy indeed. I recommend all of them.”

He is also the illustrator of Always and I’ll Be There by Ann Stott and The Higher Power of Lucky by Susan Patron, winner of the Newbery Medal. Matt Phelan lives in Philadelphia.

ALSO BY MATT PHELAN

About the World
HC: 978-0-7636-3619-7

The Storm in the Barn
HC: 978-0-7636-3618-0
PB: 978-0-7636-5290-6

Define the following words:
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- cavalcade
- knockabout

Guide written by Michele Gorman. Michele Gorman is the author of Getting Graphic! Comics for Kids and Getting Graphic! Using Graphic Novels to Promote Literacy with Preteens and Teens.