

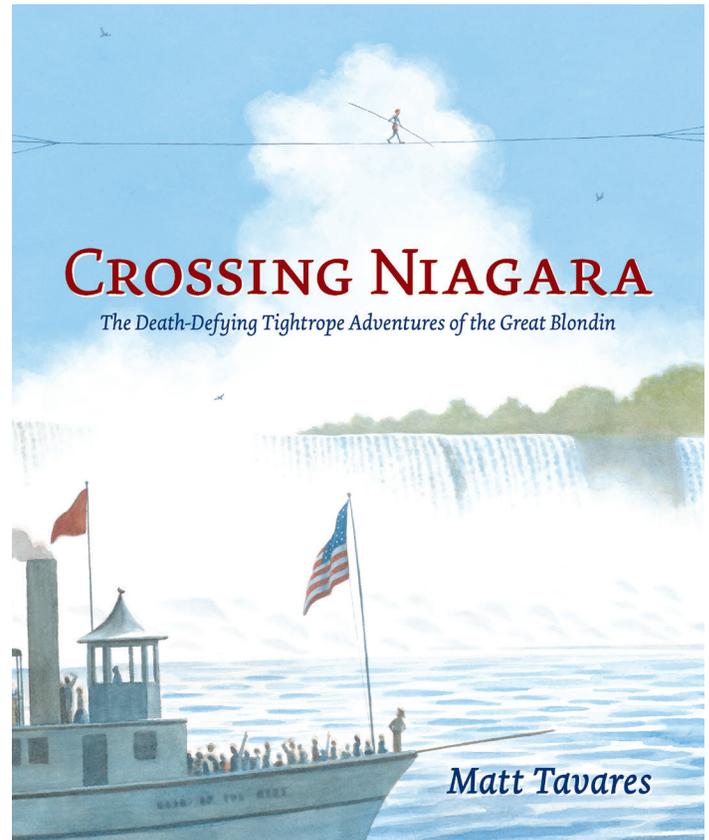
CROSSING NIAGARA

*The Death-Defying Tightrope Adventures
of the Great Blondin*

by Matt Tavares

ABOUT THE BOOK

When the Great Blondin announced that he was going to walk from America to Canada across the Niagara River on a rope that was more than eleven hundred feet long and just three inches wide, hanging one hundred and sixty feet above the raging waters, people came from everywhere. Some people came to watch him cross. Some people came to watch him fall. Some people thought he wouldn't show up at all. But he did show up. And he did walk across the river. And then he did something else amazing. He crossed the river on that tightrope again and again, adding another death-defying flourish each time. Matt Tavares's gorgeous, riveting account of one of the daredevils of Niagara Falls is sure to hold readers in its grip, just as Blondin's feats enthralled those spectators on the cliffs more than one hundred and fifty years ago.



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Common Core Connections

Set at Niagara Falls in 1859 and 1860, this historical picture book highlights the dramatic feats of tightrope walker Jean François Gravelet, known as the Great Blondin. The story is told through substantial text and large, vivid illustrations that include a four-page foldout of Blondin's amazing tricks on the tightrope. A highly appealing choice for class discussion or independent reading, *Crossing Niagara* conveys a strong sense of time and place along with its gripping true story. In this guide, you'll find questions for discussion and writing about ideas, setting, language, and integration of text and illustration, which require the close reading called for by the Common Core Standards. Suggested classroom activities extend the book and its topics into a variety of curriculum areas.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Curriculum Connections

These discussion questions correlate to Common Core ELA Reading Standards for Informational Text: Key Ideas and Details RI.1–5.1, 1–5.2, 1–5.3; Craft and Structure RI.1–5.4, RI.1.6; Integration of Knowledge and Ideas RI.1–4.7. ELA Speaking & Listening Standards: Comprehension and Collaboration SL.1–5.1.

1. Before reading the book, discuss its title and subtitle and try to predict the book’s content. After reading the book aloud, discuss whether the title and subtitle fit the story.
2. The book’s third paragraph says that Blondin wanted to do “something amazing, something impossible, something that had never been done before.” Find where these words are used again later in the story. Discuss whether you think he succeeded, and why or why not.
3. What role do newspapers play in the story? Talk about where they appear both in the text and the pictures. Why did newspapers publicize the tightrope walks?
4. Discuss how the author makes the story exciting through word choice and punctuation. How does he build suspense? How do the pictures add to the drama?
5. What kind of person was the Great Blondin? What are some adjectives you would use to describe him? Tie your answers to specific examples in the book.
6. Why do you think Blondin wasn’t afraid? Or do you think he was? Describe in detail how he prepared for the tightrope walks.
7. Why did so many people come to see Blondin cross Niagara Falls? Give examples of different reactions people had to him. How did his supporters show their enthusiasm?
8. Look carefully at the three panels showing the tricks Blondin did the first time he walked across Niagara. Describe the tricks. Why do you think the illustration has three panels? Discuss why the typeface changes sizes on that page.
9. Partway through the book, pages fold out to create a four-page spread. Describe in detail what that spread shows. Why do you think the book was made to open so wide? How does the unusually long illustration reflect the story?
10. Choose any two-page spread in the book and analyze how the words and pictures work together. Do the words tell anything not shown in the pictures? What do the pictures add that isn’t in the text? Talk about how both elements convey emotion and information.
11. Talk about the scene in which Blondin first carries his manager, Harry, across on the tightrope. What is the manager’s reaction to the idea? What instructions does Blondin give Harry? Describe the difficulties they encounter. Would you have agreed to this idea if you were Harry?
12. Which of the tricks that Blondin performed during his tightrope walks do you consider most amazing, and why?
13. Why does Blondin decide to stop walking across Niagara? Describe his final tightrope walk across the falls. Discuss how he feels at the end and why he feels that way.
14. On the last page, read the author’s note and talk about why he visited Niagara Falls as part of working on the book. What does the author’s note add to the story?
15. In the Acknowledgments, the author thanks “the helpful staff of the Niagara Falls Public Library.” What are acknowledgments? How did the staff help him? Talk about the role of research in writing about historic events like the tightrope walks.

Curriculum Connections

These activities correlate to Common Core ELA Reading Standards for Informational Text: Key Ideas and Details RI.1–5.1, RI.1–5.2, RI.1–5.3; Craft and Structure RI.1–5.4; Integration of Knowledge and Ideas RI.1–5.7. ELA Speaking & Listening Standards: Comprehension and Collaboration SL.1–5.1, SL.1–5.2. Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas SL.1–5.4, SL.1–5.5. ELA Writing Standards: Text Types and Purposes W.1–5.2. Production and Distribution of Writing W.3–5.4. Research to Build and Present Knowledge W.1–5.7, W.1–5.8.

READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Have students work alone, in groups, or as a class to write a short newspaper article describing one or all of the Great Blondin's feats at Niagara. The words can be inserted into a template of an old-fashioned newspaper (presentationmagazine.com/editable-old-newspaper-template-4520.htm), which also includes a newspaper name plus date, headlines, and more. Print out the articles and post them all on a Great Blondin bulletin board.

HOW DID THEY GET THERE?

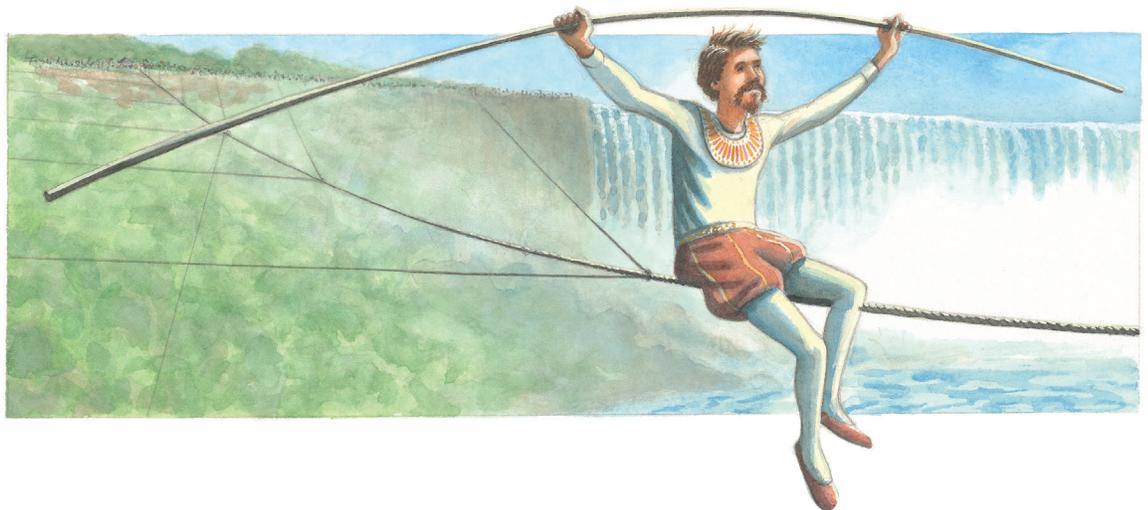
The story mentions several types of transportation that people took to see Blondin's performances: steamship, train, and horse-drawn carriage. Have students work in small groups or as a whole class to research one of these three types, using print and online resources. Have them combine words and drawings to create a short book to share with others.

PERSUASIVE POSTERS

Have students create a colorful poster to advertise one of the Great Blondin's tightrope walks above Niagara. Talk as a class about what makes a poster effective, such as large print and eye-catching colors. Have students work alone or in small groups. Once the posters are ready, students can share them and discuss their choices. (Online poster tool at readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/student-interactives/printing-press-30036.html)

THE PERFECT WORD

Either individually or as a class, have students reread the book and make a list of unfamiliar words such as *plummet* and *skeptical*. Talk about what each new word means, based on reading it in context. Then look up the meaning in a dictionary and discuss it as a class. Have each student print one of the words on a colorful piece of paper, giving its definition and using it in a sentence. Post the words on a *Crossing Niagara* Word Wall.





PLAY-BY-PLAY

Today many people watch athletic events on television and listen to sports announcers describing the action. Have students work in small groups to create a play-by-play type description of Blondin walking on a tightrope across Niagara Falls, including some of his tricks. When the description is ready, one student can read it in front of the class while another acts out Blondin's part, with the rest of the group as the excited crowd.

FOR OR AGAINST?

A tightrope walker today would need permission from government agencies to perform walks like Blondin's. Have students take the role of government officials who are deciding whether to allow a tightrope walk in their town. Two students should compile reasons to allow the walk, and the other two should compile reasons not to allow it. Have the teams debate each other about the topic.

NIAGARA DAREDEVILS

Niagara Falls has a history of attracting risk-takers. Share with your class these events from "A Daredevil History of Niagara Falls" (history.com/news/a-daredevil-history-of-niagara-falls). Then show this video of Nick Wallenda's tightrope walk above Niagara Falls in 2012 (nytimes.com/2012/06/16/nyregion/wallendas-niagara-falls-tightrope-walk-stirs-excitement.html). Hold a discussion about daredevils and what motivates them.

COMPARING BOOKS AND DREAMS

Matt Tavares is the author-illustrator of other nonfiction picture books about people in history who realize their dreams. Have students choose one of these related books and compare it to *Crossing Niagara*. They should make a simple comparison chart with columns for each book to analyze what is similar and different about them, including the illustrations. Possible books are *Becoming Babe Ruth*, *There Goes Ted Williams*, *Henry Aaron's Dream*, and *Growing Up Pedro*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When Matt Tavares was growing up, his mother read to him every night, and his family frequently visited the public library. He has been writing and illustrating books since college, including *Henry Aaron's Dream*, *There Goes Ted Williams*, *Becoming Babe Ruth*, *Growing Up Pedro*, *Zachary's Ball*, *Oliver's Game*, and *Mudball*. He is also the illustrator of *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*, *Over the River and Through the Wood*, *Lady Liberty* by Doreen Rappaport, *The Gingerbread Pirates* by Kristin Kladstrup, and *Jubilee!* by Alicia Potter. Matt Tavares lives in Maine with his wife and their two daughters.

This guide was prepared by Kathleen Odean, a school librarian for more than fifteen years who presents workshops on new books for young people, including one that focuses on nonfiction titles and their connections to the Common Core. She served as chairperson of the 2002 Newbery Award Committee and is the author of several guides to children's books, including *Great Books for Girls*, *Great Books for Boys*, and *Great Books About Things Kids Love*.