

# Read for Pleasure

## The Circus Ship

By Chris Van Dusen



When a circus ship sinks off the coast of Maine, the animals must swim to the shore of a small island in order to survive.

At first, they are viewed with suspicion but are soon living in harmony with the locals.

When the greedy circus owner arrives to take back his animals, a plan must be hatched to outwit the bloated blowhard and give his animals the freedom they deserve.

Based on a true story!

### Title Talk

*The title of this story is: The Circus Ship.*

- Who do you think would be travelling on such a ship?
- Which circus animals might be accompanying them? Make a list.
- Where might the circus be going? Why might they be going there?
- Is such a trip likely to be uneventful or might it be one where something dreadful happens?

### Cover Chat

*Now look at the cover of this picture book.*

- Here we see the Circus Ship sailing in turquoise waters beneath a cloudless sky. Even the dolphins look happy as they follow nearby.  
However, there are two things that appear on the cover that suggest this trip might not be all plain sailing...
- Where is the gorilla? Why might s/he be there?
- Where is the circus owner? Why might we not be able to see him?



### **Page 1-2**

- Why might the Circus Ship be 'overdue' slightly?
- Might this be why the author describes the fog as being 'as thick as stew'?
- Interestingly, it is hard for us to see the Circus Ship clearly, and the waters in which it is sailing are dark and hazy. Might this be intentional?
- How does this make you feel? What might it suggest as to what might happen next?

### **Page 3-4**

- How many animals are on board the Circus Ship? Can you spot and name them?
- Why do you think they have all appeared on the top deck at this time? How might they be feeling?
- Which of them is stood in the lifeboat? What might this suggest about A] the gorilla and B] this journey?
- Who do you think we see standing at the front of the Circus Ship?
- How is he stood? Act it out. What might he be A] looking at and B] thinking about during this time?

### **Page 5-6**

- What name does the writer give the circus owner? Might this be significant? Why?
- How do the words and actions of Mr Paine reflect his character? Discuss.
- How well does the illustrator capture Mr Paine's character on page 6?

### **Page 7-8**

- What happens to the Circus Ship and all those on board?
- How big an accident was this?
- How is this emphasised with the use of the words CRASH and BASH?

### **Page 9-10**

- Can you spot all 15 circus animals swimming in the water?



- Interestingly, there are two characters that we cannot see. Where do you think these characters are?
- Why do you think the illustrator chose not to depict them in this scene?

### **Page 11-12**

- Who is in (or about to get in) the lifeboat?
- Who is looking towards the animals in the distance? Why?
- Where is the circus owner looking? What does this tell us about his character?
- Is this idea backed up by his words and his actions? How so?
- Interestingly, the circus animals are depicted as shadows in the water. Might this have been deliberate?

### **Page 13-14**

- How long have the circus animals been in the water?
- Yet despite the disaster that has just befallen them, we see the rising of a new dawn on the horizon. Might this be significant?
- The animals are tired. The writer tells us this by using some wonderful words on page 14. Which of these words do you like best? Act them out.
- How might you apply these words to the lion who has just reached the shore?

### **Page 15-16**

- How do the locals react when they wake to find the circus animals in their town?
- Would you have reacted in the same way?

### **Page 17-18**

- Can you spot who is in the pantry?
- Can you spot who is in the outhouse?
- Can you spot where the hippo is?
- Can you spot where the lion and the tiger are?



### **Page 19-20**

- Why might the alligator be sleeping on Mr Hood's woodpile?
  - Why might the zebra have eaten Mrs Dailey's daisies by the bunch?
  - Why might the monkey have been swinging in Miss Feeney's bloomers?
  - How would this make the townsfolk feel towards the circus animals?
- Discuss.

### **Page 21-22**

- Such negative feelings towards the circus animals change quickly 'like the turning of the tide'. What do you think this phrase means?
- Why did the tiger feel brave enough to enter the burning shed to rescue Emma Rose?
- What might the rescuing of Emma Rose mean for A] the tiger and B] the other circus animals?

### **Page 23-24**

- Describe the amazing sight we see on these pages.
- What makes the tiger's actions so amazing?



### **Page 25-26**

- Which word on page 25 is arguably the most important? Discuss.
- How might a reader emphasise this when reading this story out loud?
- How does the illustrator depict the kindness of the circus animals towards the townsfolk?
- What does this tell us about how their attitude towards the circus animals has changed?
- Which family is enjoying a picnic with the tiger? Is this significant?

### **Page 27-28**

- What message does Little Red deliver?
- To whom does he deliver it?
- How might this message make A] the townsfolk, B] the circus animals and C] the community as a whole feel? Why would this be?

### **Page 29-30**

- Why has the circus owner come to the island?
- How do we feel towards this character at this time? Why is this?

### **Page 31-32**

- We see the circus owner stood in the centre of the town. Why is his face red? Why is he scratching his head?
- Can you spot all 15 circus animals the townsfolk have hidden in this scene?

Remind yourself: why have the townsfolk gone to so much trouble in order to protect these animals from the circus owner?

### **Page 33-34**

- Where did Mr Paine look when he is looking for his circus animals?
- What do you think he is thinking when he is making this search?
- How did this fruitless search make him feel? How is this depicted on page 34?
- Why do you think it is Little Red who tells Mr Paine that his boat is about to leave?

### **Page 35-36**

- Here we see the circus owner about to leave the island. What might he be thinking at this time? Why would he be thinking this?
- Interestingly, no one else appears with him as he heads towards the rowboat. Might this be significant?

### **Page 37-38**

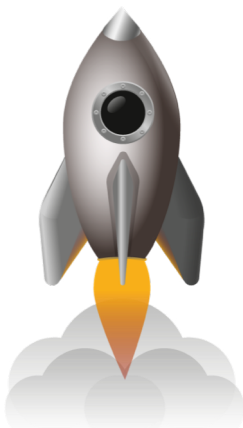
- How happy and joyous is this scene?
- Can you spot the circus owner leaving the island in a rowboat?
- What is meant by the islanders when they dare to say: 'their lives were free of Paine'? Discuss.
- Why do you think the author ended this story at this point?



**Think about the book as a whole:**

What was it that made the townsfolk change their negative attitude towards the strangers who had unexpectedly arrived in their community?

What might this teach about how we should act towards refugees who arrive on our shores in desperate need?



The perfect companion to  
Reading Rocketeers: **Unit 1.4**

## **John Murray**

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John is a recognised specialist in developing children's reading and comprehension.

The creator of Reading Explorers, Top Class Comprehension and Reading Rocketeers, his seminars and CPD training focus on the teaching, learning and enjoyment of reading.

An independent Literacy consultant, he aims to support schools to improve their performance and secure best practice. Above all, it is to ignite within us a passion for books and a genuine love for the written word.

His enthusiasm and expertise can be seen throughout his work and his resources and training are used in classrooms worldwide.

**“The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go.”**

**Dr Seuss**