The Circus Ship
Author/Illustrator: Chris Van Dusen

• **Summary:** A circus ship is on its way from Maine to Boston for the next circus show. The ship hits a ledge and all of the animals go flying into the ocean. The animals swim their way to a shore and end up walking through a small town in Maine. All of the townspeople are shocked to see the animals, but then a tiger saves Emma Rose from a burning shed. The townspeople decide the animals are nice, and they want to keep them. When the circus owner, Mr. Paine, decides to go looking for his animals, the townspeople help the animals hide and pretend they have no idea what Mr. Paine is talking about. Mr. Paine leaves, and the animals live peacefully with the townspeople from then on.

• **Awards:**
  o 2009 Oppenheim Toy Portfolio Gold Award Winner
  o 2009 Lupine Award Winner
  o 2009 Minnesota State University Moorhead Comstock Honor Book
  o 2010 Read With ME book

• **Review:** From *School Library Journal:*
  “After their steamship en route to Boston is wrecked in a storm, a troupe of circus animals escapes bad treatment and disaster, finding its way to an island off the coast of Maine. The 1800s residents are surprised to find zebras eating their gardens and alligators lounging on woodpiles. Sympathies change when a tiger saves a toddler from a blazing shed. When a messenger announces that the cruel circus owner is returning to claim his menagerie, the citizens assist the animals in disguises and camouflage that confound him, leaving the friends to a peaceful coexistence. Van Dusen’s rhymed text keeps a rollicking beat. His illustrations burst with color and energy and utilize perspective and texture to add drama and humor. Period details create a counterpoint with elements like a gorilla in a lifeboat. The spread of the animals in ‘hiding’ is pure genius. The book honors the real circus animals that inspired this story.”
  —Gay Lynn Van Vleck, Henrico County Library, Glen Allen, VA

• **Author Information, Chris Van Dusen:** [http://www.chrisvandusen.com/](http://www.chrisvandusen.com/)

• **Discussion Questions:**
  o **Before Reading:**
    ▪ What kinds of animals are at the circus?
    ▪ Can all of these animals swim?
    ▪ Are these animals safe to live with?
  o **During Reading:**
    ▪ Are the animals going to survive the crash?
    ▪ Does Mr. Paine help the animals?
    ▪ Would you help to hide the animals or would you give them back to Mr. Paine?
  o **After Reading:**
    ▪ Which animal saved Emma Rose from the burning shed? Why?
• What were some of the ways the animals helped the townspeople once they were living happily together? What did they do together?
• Where did some of the animals hide when Mr. Paine came?

- **Curricular Activities:**
  - **Reading/Oral Language**
    - Students could practice sharing their posters they made (see Art section below), their journal entries (see Writing section below), their newspaper articles (see Writing section below), or other information they researched with the class or in small groups.
  - **Writing**
    - Students could write a journal entry about waking up and finding a circus animal in their front lawn.
    - Students could write a newspaper article about a shipwreck.
  - **Math**
    - Students could compare the size of the different circus animals. This could be connected to where they might be able to hide when Mr. Paine comes. An elephant is not going to fit inside a house but a python might.
  - **Science**
    - Each student could study one of the circus animals and find out what types of tricks the animals can do and if they would really be able to swim or not.
    - Students could look up different things that happen to ships once they wreck in the ocean.
  - **Social Studies**
    - Students could learn about the real circus ship, *Royal Tar*, which crashed on October 25, 1836 and was the inspiration of this story. Connections could be made between *The Circus Ship* and the real event.
    - Students could research other ship wrecks.
  - **Art**
    - Students could design their own posters. Their posters could be advertising a circus event or the posters could be WANTED posters for the animals.
    - Students could design different elements of the circus they put on for their parents. For example, tickets, clothing outfits, backdrops, etc.
  - **Drama**
    - Each student could dress up as a different circus performer and put on his/her own act. It would be fun to do this in the gym or somewhere big and invite parents to visit and watch the show.
  - **Cooking Food**
    - Students could decide what kind of food they might find at a circus. Then the students could make this food for the circus they are putting on for their parents (see Drama section above).
- Serve Circus Peanuts, Cracker Jack or peanuts in the shell while reading the book
  - **Technology**
    - Websites and video clips could be used to show students what a circus is really like, especially for those students who have never been to a circus.
    - Students could also work to put together a slideshow for the circus event they put on for their parents.
  - **Music**
    - Allow students to listen to circus music
    - Have students pick music to go along with each section of the book. Different sounds for different parts of the story: the storm, the crash, the animals hiding, etc.
  - **Physical Education**
    - This would be connected with the drama portion where students could actually act out their own circus stunts.
    - Students could play a game similar to musical chairs except without any chairs. Have all of the students in the gym or in larger area of the classroom. Call out a circus animal and then play circus music. While the music is playing the students are to go around the gym or classroom acting like that circus animal. When the music stops all the students must quickly sit on the ground and then a new animal is called out.

- **Related Books:**
  - *Circus Parade* by Harriet Ziefert and illustrated by Tanya Roitman
  - *Pete’s Disappearing Act* by Jenny Tripp and illustrated by John Manders
  - *Circus Family Dog* by Andrew Clements and illustrated by Sue Truesdell
  - *Circus* by Roxie Munro
  - *Twenty One Elephants* by Phil Bildner

- **Other Books by Chris Van Dusen:**
  - *Down to the Sea with Mr. Magee*
  - *A Camping Spree with Mr. Magee*
  - *Learning to Ski with Mr. Magee*
  - *If I Built a Car*
  - *King Hugo’s Huge Ego*
  - *Randy Riley’s Really Big Hit*

- **Other Books Illustrated by Chris Van Dusen:**
  - *Mercy Watson to the Rescue* by Kate DiCamillo
  - *Mercy Watson Goes for a Ride* by Kate DiCamillo
  - *Mercy Watson Fights Crime* by Kate DiCamillo
  - *Mercy Watson Princess in Disguise* by Kate DiCamillo
  - *Mercy Watson Thinks Like a Pig* by Kate DiCamillo
  - *Mercy Watson Something Wonky This Way Comes* by Kate DiCamillo

- **Websites:**
  ▪ This website is great for teachers. There are many different resources and lesson plan ideas that connect circuses across curriculum.

  ▪ There are many different educational games for students to plan on this website. The homepage also has links for other topics such as animals, ocean, and dinosaurs that could be used for other units.

  ▪ Great for researching about the Ringling Brothers’ circus, fun activities, games, and actual circus event dates.

  ▪ Information about different shipwrecks including pictures and facts. (For older students)

  ▪ Students can actually pretend to be shipwreck detectives in this online game.