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PEACHTREE
TEACHER'S GUIDE

King of the Tightrope

When the Great Blondin Ruled Niagara

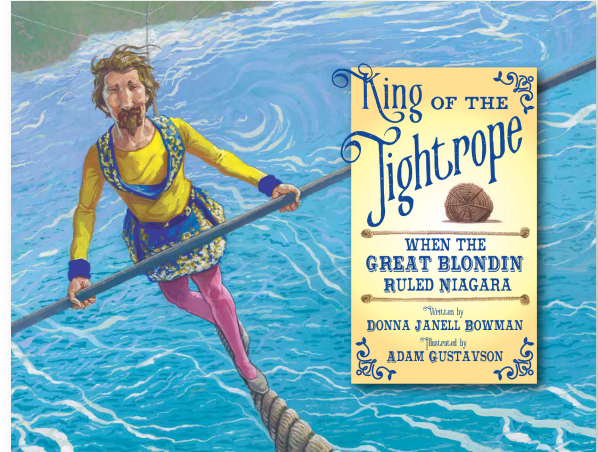
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Ages 6–10

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Jean-François Gravelet, known as The Great Blondin, performed amazing feats on a tightrope, including crossing while riding a bicycle, while carrying a man on his back, and even while blindfolded! To audiences around the world, each feat was greater and more extraordinary than the last, but to The Great Blondin they were too easy and too dull.

So in 1859, Jean-François (or Blondin?) imagined something more *extraordinaire*. Armed with imagination, determination, and 41,300-feet of rope, he successfully engineered a tightrope across the Niagara River (or Gorge) and performed *magnifique* feats. Despite skeptics and a belittling press, The Great Blondin accomplished what nobody had done before! What kind of man would do something like that?

BEFORE YOU READ

- Find Hesdin, France, on a map.
- Look at a map of Niagara Falls.
www.niagarafallsstatepark.com/~media/parks/niagara-falls/niagara-falls-state-park/map-and-directions/niagara-falls-state-park-map.pdf
- Check out this Niagara Falls facts site for kids.
www.sciencekids.co.nz/sciencefacts/earth/niagarafalls.html
- Watch a video of Niagara Falls.
youtu.be/kTOHJZY2VRE When you watch this video, what words come to mind? Imagine someone is going to attempt to cross the Falls on a rope. Does

this make you think of different words? What if you are the person who is going to cross? Do you think of different words or the same?

VOCABULARY

Review these French words with your students before reading *King of the Tightrope*:

French Words and Translations in Order of Appearance

grand-père: grandfather
fléchis: flexed
ouverts: open
équilibre: balance
corde: rope
non: no
mesdames et messieurs: ladies and gentlemen
les enfants: children
hourra: hurray
magnifique: magnificent
très bon: very good
ordinaire: ordinary
fantastique: fantastic
oui, s'il vous plaît: yes, please
merveilleux: wonderful
tout de suite: right away
sensationnel: sensational
voilà: here

arrêtez: stop

dangereux: dangerous

le milieu: the middle

extraordinaire: extraordinary

oui: yes

la fin: the end

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Jean-François Gravelet said, “A rope-walker is like a poet, born and not made.” What did he mean?
- When Jean-François saw Niagara Falls, he said, “What a splendid place to bridge with a tightrope.” What kind of person has an idea like that? Are you that kind of person?
- Jean-François came from three generations of acrobats, gymnasts, and tightrope walkers. Do you need to learn acrobatics and gymnastics in order to walk the tightrope? How would these skills aid you? What do they have in common?
- Where do tightrope walkers work? How do they earn their living?
- Jean-François gradually learned to walk the tightrope, beginning with balancing on a board before moving to a rope. How do you think he developed his confidence? Is it harder to learn something when you are older? Is it scarier?
- How does a balance pole help a tightrope walker?
- If Jean-François had riggers to stretch, crank, clip, and clamp the ropes, why did he learn these skills himself? Would you rig your own rope or rely on others to do it?
- How does a tightrope walker stay safe? What precautions do they take? Are there rules? Are these the same precautions that Jean-François took?
- Jean-François “took to the rope like a spider takes to its web.” Explain this comparison.
- Jean-François always received the loudest cheers when his family performed. Why? Would performing for a big crowd make you more nervous? What if the crowd included royalty?
- Jean-François grew bored performing the same routines. Is boredom dangerous? Why?
- Jean-François believed “if he could imagine more, he could do more.” What does this statement tell us about him? Is imagination important?
- Why do you think Jean-François Gravelet changed his name to The Great Blondin? Would you change your name? Why?
- How did climbing the ship’s masts help Blondin?
- At different times, Blondin walked the tightrope while carrying a man on his back, or with his feet in buckets, or with chains wrapped around his body, or blindfolded. How is each of these feats its own challenge? What made each feat different from the others?
- Blondin was called insane, suicidal, and a madman. Do you agree with the name callers? How would you describe him?
- Blondin had to seek permission to cross the Niagara River on the tightrope. Is it legal to walk the tightrope in public areas today?
- The owners of Goat Island wouldn’t allow him to attach his ropes to their land. Why not? The owners of White’s Pleasure Grounds said yes. Why? Would you have given permission? Why?
- Blondin walked down a support wire from a bridge to shore on a dare. Was this dangerous for him? Would you accept a dare to do something dangerous?
- What kind of things did Blondin need to know in order to plan his walk?
- How could Blondin have calculated the distance between the American and the Canadian cliffs? Remember he had no internet or GPS. He may have estimated it against the length of the suspension bridge. How would knowing this measurement help?
- Blondin was able to estimate the distance cliff-to-cliff as 1,100 feet. Why did he order 1,300 of hemp rope?
- The rope was 3.25 inches in diameter and more than 10 inches in circumference. Why do you think he selected this size?
- How would you attach a rope that size, tighten it, and keep it steady?
- Blondin ordered 40,000 feet of smaller ropes for towing anchoring, lifting, and steadying the walking rope. Why did he need these smaller ropes? What would happen if they were too thin?
- Why did Blondin’s hired help have to pull two different towlines across the river before the giant walking rope?
- Why did the towline threaten to break when it was 800 feet across the river?
- Is a spliced rope stronger or weaker at the point of the splice?
- Blondin used guy lines to manage the sagging rope. What are guy lines? How do they work?

- People were discussing arrangements for Blondin's funeral before he began his walk. How would you think this made him feel? How would you feel?
- Some people came to cheer Blondin and some to see him fall. What kind of person would want to see someone fall? Would you want to watch someone fall?
- Gamblers placed bets on the likelihood of Blondin's survival. Would you bet on someone's life?
- Blondin offered to carry someone on his back. Would you go?
- Blondin kept his shoulders straight, his knees flexed, his eyes ahead, and his arms out. How did this position help him? How did he keep his balance in the wind? Would the experience be different on a calm day?
- Blondin "marched on at a lively pace." Is it easier to walk a tightrope quickly or slowly?
- Once he had completed his walk, Blondin said, 'I hope you will remember me.' Do you think he feared being forgotten or do you think this was his way of asking for donations?
- When he returned to the American side, Blondin described himself as "even greater" than the Falls themselves. What did he mean?
- Blondin demonstrated that whatever he could imagine, he could accomplish. What kind of attitude is this? What sort of person might feel this way? Do you?
- What is the difference between having courage and being foolish or taking risks?
- There are several reports of Blondin's walk that are contradictory. How do you evaluate sources to decide whether you have found the correct information?
- After Blondin completed his walk, some newspaper reporters changed their stories. Why would a reporter write a story ahead of time, not knowing the outcome? Would a reporter do this today?
- What is the difference between a chasm, a valley, and a gorge? Why is Niagara Falls considered a gorge?
- How would a tightrope walker's process be different today than during Blondin's era? What technology has changed?
- Does a tightrope walker need to know math and if so what kind?

ACTIVITIES

- Conduct a Readers Theater by using the script on pages 6–8 of this guide.
- Use the Activity sheet on page 10 of this guide to take The Great Blondin on adventures with you. Take photos of your Blondin and ask an adult to help you share your photo on social media with the hashtag #KingoftheTightrope
- Write a letter to Blondin to persuade him not to walk across the Niagara River.
- You are a reporter. Write an article for your newspaper about Blondin's attempt to walk across the Niagara River.
- Learn to balance.
 - With the assistance of spotters, walk on the wide side of a 2-foot x 4-foot plank. When you can do this, turn the plank on its side and walk on the narrow side.
 - Walk with your arms down. Try it again with your arms up. Which is easier and why?
 - Walk with straight legs. Try it again, bending and flexing as you walk. Which is easier and why?
 - Walk with your shoulders slumped and your eyes down. Try it again, with your shoulders straight and your eyes forward. Which is easier and why?
 - Walk with your weight centered on the board. Try it again, without your weight centered. What did you have to do to keep from falling? Did you need to have your arms out? Discuss equilibrium.
 - Use a pool noodle or a yardstick to help you balance. Which is easier? Why?
 - Fasten a pool noodle to the floor and try to walk across it. Is it easier or harder than the board? Why?
 - Try to pick up an object, such as a glove or bean bag, that is balanced on the noodle. Can you step over an object?
 - Can you do a cartwheel or a somersault on the pool noodle? What about on the board? Can you jump over an object?
 - Try balancing on the board or pool noodle with an open umbrella, then a closed one.
- Test the strength of different ropes.
 - Gather different types of string and rope, such as thread, fishing line, yarn, or shoelaces.
 - Tie each type onto a thick rope such as the kind used for tug-of-war in PE.

- Tie one end of the rope to a chair. Have a person sit in the chair to weigh it down.
- Try to move the rope across the room and tie it to a second chair. Could you do it without the line breaking?
- Try to raise the rope above the floor and make it taut. Did it break?
- Which type of string or rope was strongest? Why did some lines break sooner than others?
- Recreate Blondin's tightrope.
 - Measure the distance between two objects, such as poles or trees.
 - Tie the ends of a rope to the trees or poles. How did you do it? Did it take more rope? Why? How did you figure out how much rope you needed?
 - Could you keep the rope taut or did it sag in the middle?

RESOURCES

These articles include easy-to-understand explanations about tightrope walking:

- Tightrope Walking
www.plus.maths.org/content/walking-tightrope
- Center of Gravity www.explainthatstuff.com/center-of-gravity.html What Happens to Your Body When You Walk on a Tightrope?
www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-happens-your-body-when-you-walk-tightrope-180956897
- How Do Tightrope Walkers Keep Their Balance?
www.darylsience.com/Demos/TightRope.html

These articles and videos discuss tying knots:

- How to Tie the 10 Most Useful Knots
www.motherearthnews.com/homesteading-and-livestock/useful-knots-zmaz79mjzraw
- 7 Essential Knots You Need To Know
www.binged.it/2F9ArYT
- Braiding / splicing 3 Strand Rope
www.youtube.com/watch?v=AD_-3pGiRYE

Learn about sextants:

- How a Sextant Works
www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/shackleton/navigate/escape-works.html
- How to Build a Homemade Sextant
www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOLjEj8OxJM

Make a balancing object:

- Balancing Bicycle
www.arvindguptatoys.com/toys/Balancingbicycle.html

- Make a Tightrope Walker
www.abc.net.au/science/experimentals/experiments/episode10_1.htm
- Make a Balancing Ballerina
www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpeHWnannfE

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

The activities in this guide directly address the following standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA R.1
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA R.3
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA R.4
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA R.6
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA R.7
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA R.8
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA R.10
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI. 4.1
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI. 4.2
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI. 4.3
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI. 4.4
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI. 4.5
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI. 4.7
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI. 4.8

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Donna Janell Bowman is the author of a number of children's books, including the award-winning *Step Right Up: How Doc and Jim Key Taught the World About Kindness* and *Abraham Lincoln's Dueling Words*. She holds an MFA in Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts. She lives in Texas.

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ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Adam Gustavson is the award winning illustrator of over thirty books for children, including *Lost and Found* and *Snow Day!* He lives, paints, teaches, and plays music in his home state of New Jersey, along with his charming family and a neurotic poodle. Not a funambulist, he finds plenty of excitement walking around in socks on polished wood floors.

www.adamgustavson.com

REVIEWS

“The lifelike gouache-and-watercolor illustrations are rich with the drama and tension of Blondin’s performances... Bowman conjures the sheer magnitude of his Niagara endeavor as she describes the calculations, equipment, and manpower needed to simply get Blondin’s rope from one shore to the other.

And like the spectators there
on June 30, 1859, readers will hold their breath as the Frenchman makes his legendary walk.”

—***Booklist***

“Bowman’s well-researched documentary text re-creates the energy, tactics, skill, engineering, unflinching optimism, and sheer grit of Blondin’s preparations to cross Niagara as well as the skepticism and wonder of all who witnessed his legendary endeavor. Bold, colorful watercolor-and-gouache illustrations capture Blondin’s high-wire escapades... Theatrical lighting, stunning perspectives, and arresting close-ups convey the intensity of Blondin’s feats...

Awesome, astounding, death-defying.”

—***Kirkus Reviews***

Teacher’s Guide
prepared by Gail Shipley

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KING OF THE TIGHROPE

Readers Theater Script

ROLES

Narrator 1, Narrator 2, Narrator 3, Narrator 4, Narrator 5, Blondin

- Narrator 1: On a wintry day in 1859, a crowd gathered on the banks of Niagara Falls.
- Narrator 2: The wind blew.
- Narrator 3: The mist rose.
- Narrator 4: The falls roared.
- Narrator 5: People looked down and shivered at the crashing, thrashing waters below.
- Narrator 1: They envisioned falling, falling, falling!
- Narrator 2: But one feisty Frenchman looked up, up, up—to the tip-top cliffs.
- Blondin: What a splendid place to bridge with a tightrope.
- Narrator 3: What kind of man has an idea like that?
- Narrator 4: That feisty Frenchman was born Jean-François Gravelet. His family members were acrobats, gymnasts, and tightrope walkers.
- Narrator 5: When Jean-François turned four, it was his turn to perform. But first he had to learn to balance.
- Narrator 1: He toddled and wobbled along the edge of a thick board. He fell.
- Narrator 2: Again.
- Narrator 3: And again.

- Narrator 4: He soon learned to keep his shoulders straight and his knees flexed. He learned to keep his eyes ahead and his arms open.
- Narrator 5: And he learned to keep his weight centered on the board for balance.
- Narrator 1: Then the thick board was replaced with thinner and thinner ones.
- Narrator 2: Finally, Jean-François was ready to learn about...
- Narrator 3: Rope!
- Narrator 4: There were ropes for lifting, towing, and anchoring. And, of course, ropes for walking on.
- Narrator 5: Jean-François watched riggers stretch, crank, clip, and clamp the ropes.
- Narrator 1: He learned the right knots, loops, hitches, and splices to secure them.
- Narrator 2: If the ropes weren't attached just so, the tightrope walker could tilt, teeter, and tumble.
- Narrator 3: Jean-François didn't want that to happen to him.
- Narrator 4: No!
- Narrator 5: Jean-François came to America.
- Narrator 1: He changed his name to The Great Blondin.
- Narrator 2: His feats became more and more exciting.
- Narrator 3: Like carrying a man on his back,
- Narrator 4: Or performing with his feet in baskets,
- Narrator 5: Or with chains wrapped around his body,
- Narrator 1: Or with a blindfold over his eyes.

- Narrator 2: It was marvelous.
- Narrator 3: Until once again.
- Narrator 4: It became too easy.
- Narrator 5: Too dull,
- Narrator 1: Too ordinary.
- Narrator 2: Then, in 1858, he heard about...
- All Narrators: Niagara Falls!
- Narrator 3: The Great Blondin traveled there.
- Narrator 4: He pictured a tightrope stretched between America's Goat Island and Canada's Table Rock—straight over Horseshoe Falls.
- Blondin: Sensational!
- Narrator 5: He imagined it, but could he do it?
- Blondin: To cross those roaring waters became the ambition of my life.
- Narrator 1: Reporters wrote about Blondin calling him insane,
- Narrator 2: Damphule,
- Narrator 3: And a suicidal madman.
- Narrator 4: The owners of Goat Island were so certain Blondin would fall to his death, they wouldn't allow him to attach his ropes to their land.
- Narrator 5: But downstream, the owners of White's Pleasure Grounds said yes. Canadian officials on the opposite side of the river didn't object.
- Narrator 1: The spot was not directly over the falls, but at least Blondin could continue.

- Narrator 2: That is, *if* he could raise the money to pay for workers, equipment, and rope.
- Narrator 3: Blondin ordered 1,300 feet of hemp rope.
- Narrator 4: But how would he get the big walking rope across the river?
- Narrator 5: How would he attach it on each side, tighten it, and keep it steady?
- Narrator 1: How would he keep himself balanced in the windy space above the Niagara Gorge?
- Narrator 2: Could Blondin figure out the answers to all these questions?
- Narrator 3: Did he make it across the falls?
- Narrator 4: To find the answers to these questions and more, read...
- All Narrators: *King of the Tightrope* by Donna Janell Bowman.

THE END

FLAT BLONDIN

Blondin strung his rope in unusual places around the world. Cut around the image of Blondin walking on the tightrope, tape it to a stick attached to the bottom of the rope in the image, and take your Blondin with you on any exciting adventures or journeys. Take photos of your Blondin and ask an adult to help you share your photo on social media using #KingoftheTightrope.

