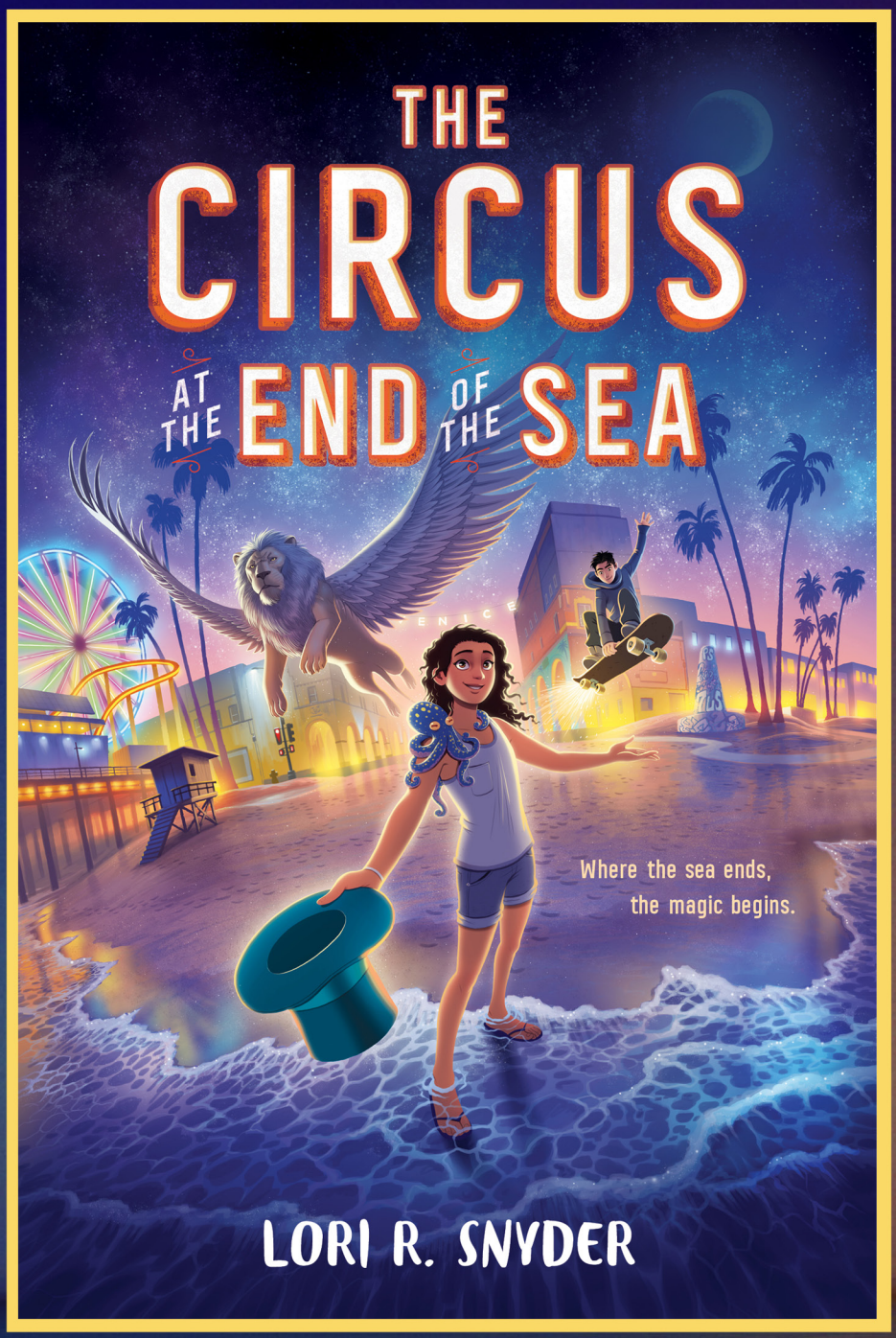

ONE-RING CIRCUS
TEACHER'S GUIDE

5 PAGES OF IDEAS

By Judie Snyder

THE CIRCUS AT THE END OF THE SEA

Teacher's Guide: One-Ring Circus Version

A note to teachers: possible student answers are included in parentheses; information for teachers is shown in brackets.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PART ONE

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The carny in charge of *The Race Thru the Clouds* asks Maddy what her talent is. What is a talent? (A talent is an ability a person is born with that will help them learn something easily.) Without naming names, what are some of the talents people you know or know about have?

People are born with different talents, such as being able to learn languages or music easily or even how to get along well with others. However, having a talent matters only if a person works to develop and use it. Considering that a natural talent or skill isn't enough by itself to make someone successful at something, how might people become very good at what they do? (possible responses: time, effort, learning from failure, not giving up, asking for advice or help)

2. We first meet Skeeter Chen in Chapter 1 and then get a fuller introduction in Chapter 8. Does the author tell you directly what Skeeter is like, or does she show you? Go back into Chapter 8 to find clues to support your responses. (The author uses Skeeter's actions and what he says [dialogue] to show what kind of person he is instead of simply telling the reader.) This is what is meant by "show, don't tell." As a reader, which do you find more interesting: being told something by the narrator, or being shown the same thing by what the characters do or say and how they do or say it? Why?

3. When Maddy starts to tell the Ringmaster what she went through to find him, he stops her, puts his hands over his ears, and says, "That is a terrible way to tell a story." How does Maddy's way of telling a story compare to the Ringmaster's way? (Maddy wanted to tell her story "in the fastest, most direct way," but the Ringmaster thinks every story should be performed, like a show.) Which way do you think is the right way? (Either or both, depending on the purpose of the story.) When would you want to tell a story Maddy's way? When would you want to tell a story the Ringmaster's way?

4. One theme that runs through this story is choice. What are some of the ways this theme is shown in the story? What details in the text can you cite to support your conclusion?

5. What does the nighttime muse mean when she says, "Many faces, one self"? (Each of us has many different sides, and all of those sides combine to make a full, complex human; none of us is only one thing; different sides of us might be seen in different circumstances, but all those things go into making up who we are as individuals.) What are some examples of how somebody might be one person but have many different sides?

6. In the story, Abbot Kinney says that most things are both an ending and a beginning, an exit as well as an entrance. What might he have meant by this? (When one thing ends, something else starts.) Can you give examples of this in people's lives?

7. When the voices on the Bridge of Sighs start telling Maddy that nobody wants her, that she doesn't belong, that she is more trouble than she is worth, what were these comments based on? (Maddy's deepest fears and hurts; things that she had been told by others in her life)

What effect did these comments have on Maddy? (possible response: At first Maddy started accepting them all as true and let them keep her from moving forward in what she had planned to do)

How does Maddy get past the paralyzing effect of all these hurtful comments? (possible responses: She came to realize and accept that her fears were part of who she was, just like the daytime and nighttime circus were both part of Il Circo; she used what she had learned in the nighttime circus to look more closely at her fears and saw that they weren't nearly as big or scary as she thought they were)

What kinds of fears might some kids your age have that hold them back? (possible responses: making a mistake, not belonging, getting hurt, not being the best, being different, not living up to their own or others' expectations)

What might they be missing out on with each of those fears? (possible responses: not trying new things because they might make a mistake, not riding a bike or a skateboard because they might get hurt, not studying because they don't feel smart enough anyway or they might not understand it at first, not standing up for something they feel is right because they're afraid their friends might reject them)

8. The Alter says, "I am change, and I cannot be escaped." What do you think she means by this? (Life is full of changes, whether we want them or not.)

9. When Maddy sees her happy self in the mirror and wants to become that girl, she comes to realize that she can't move forward toward that or any other future unless she does *what*? (possible responses: unless she actively does something to make it happen; unless she chooses to move forward instead of getting stuck in thinking that a change she likes could be held onto as long as she pretends that the world has stopped changing)

10. The Alter tells Maddy, "All decks are stacked. It's a lie meant as a kindness to say that everyone plays with the same deck." Although it sounds as if the Alter is talking about card games, what is she really talking about? (Everyone is dealt a different hand in the "game of life." Some people have more opportunities than others and some people's lives are easier than others'; people have different family arrangements, educational opportunities, talents, likes and dislikes, health situations, etc.)

11. What does it mean when someone says you have to play the hand you're dealt? (It's comparing the things in life you don't have control over to the cards you're dealt in a game; you don't have control over which cards you get, but you have to play them anyway. Everyone starts life with a different collection of advantages and disadvantages, many of which are out of our control. As we go through life, we have to deal with these, along with other negative and positive things that happen in our lives. Reminder: some of life's "cards" can be either positive or negative, depending on the circumstances and how the person plays them.)

12. When parts of someone's life aren't going well, how might they be feeling? One example is *downhearted*. What does the expression *downhearted* mean? (Hint: At one time many people considered the heart to be the source of emotions.) What other words might people use to describe how they're feeling when parts of their lives might not be going well? (possible responses: sad, confused, angry, frustrated, betrayed, lonely, left out, worried, scared, guilty, overwhelmed, resentful, jealous, helpless, hopeless, like a failure, abandoned, disappointed)

How many of you have ever experienced any of these feelings?

Which of these feelings might Maddy have been experiencing up to this point in the story?

Think about some of the times you've felt downhearted. What were some of the things you did or could have done to help yourself feel better? (possible responses: talk it over with someone you trust, try to fix the situation, get together with friends, hug your pet, put on some happy music and sing or dance, play some ball, do something nice for someone else, do some art or make some music, read a book, write in your diary, etc.) [See *Design your own Heart-Mending Kit* extension activity.]

13. The spirit of the circus said that sometimes our most powerful choices are the ones we don't even know we've made. Why might that be? (When we don't realize something is actually a choice we've made and not just the way things have to be, that choice has power over us instead of us having power over it. Sometimes this works out well, such as the example of how Maddy didn't think she had chosen to follow the magic; she just thought that was the only way to be. Sometimes, however, it doesn't work out well, such as if someone makes you angry and you feel as if you have no choice but to punch that person in the face – when, in reality, there are many other choices.)

Can you think of examples of choices we might make without realizing we had a choice in the matter?

14. How did Maddy change or grow between the beginning of the story and the end? What might have brought about those changes? Were those changes for the better or worse? Explain.

15. There doesn't seem to be total agreement as to what the theme of a story is. Some say it's a word or a phrase that describes the general idea of the story – such as courage, friendship, or good versus evil – and some say it's a lesson learned by the main character or a message the author wants to get across to the reader, such as "Actions speak more loudly than words" or "Don't judge people by how they look." Also, stories often have more than one theme.

If you were to try to identify the theme or themes of *The Circus at the End of the Sea* using the first definition (a word or phrase), what would those themes be? (possible answers: search for identity; friendship; change; growth; loyalty; choice; accepting things for what they are but also allowing them to change; chosen families; understanding yourself and all your sides)

PART TWO

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Hybrid Animals [*hybrid*: made up of mixed parts]
Near the beginning of the book, Maddy skateboarded past a mural that showed an animal that looked like a cross between a cheetah, a wolf, and a unicorn.

The class is going to get to make an illustrated book of imaginary but realistic creatures. Each of you will get to make an 8 ½" x 11" full-page illustration for our new classroom book. For this illustration, pick two or three real animals and combine features from each into a new, imaginary animal. (If you prefer, you may combine an animal with an inanimate object.) Using parts of the names of the real animals, name this imaginary animal. (examples: frog + fox could be a *frox*; skunk + hyena could be a *skyena*)

On your poster, create an illustration of your new animal creation in its natural environment and add both a title and a paragraph in which you describe the animal's characteristics, its environment, what it eats, any enemies, its interesting habits, any special and/or unusual abilities, and so forth. Use your imagination, but base this on what you already know or can learn about the animals you combine to keep the details *realistic*: (for example, crossing a giraffe with a fish might allow your hybrid animal to swim and to eat the leaves at the top of a tree, but it won't be able to fly).

FUN FOLLOW-UP: Using details from your poster, write a short, fictional story with your hybrid animal as the main character. If you'd like, include yourself as one of the characters.

Picture Postcards
Make a series of four captioned picture postcards (cut from paper or cardboard) featuring scenes from the book. On each postcard, in the space for the message, write a short message from one of the characters in that scene to another character in the story. Or write from one of the characters to you or from you to one of the characters.

Character Poster
Select a character from the book. Either from memory or by going back into the book, create a list of words and phrases that

describe this character: appearance, how they move or speak, attitudes, behavior/actions, role in the story, what others might say or feel about this character, etc.

Using your visualization of what this character looks like, create an 8½ x 11" or 9 x 12" poster showing the character in a scene from the book. On this poster, artistically list or otherwise arrange the descriptive words and phrases you collected that describe this character.

FUN FOLLOW-UP: Display the posters, grouping them by character. Class or small group discussion: How similar or different are the descriptive words or phrases for each character? What do all the drawings have in common? What are the differences? What might account for the fact that there are many similarities among the posters? What might account for the fact that no two interpretations of the character are exactly the same?

Dear Me!
Write your future self a letter in which you tell your future self what kind of person you want to be when you're grown and how you might go about starting now to become that person. Date it, then put the letter into an envelope and seal the envelope. Write your name on the front, along with the words, "To be opened only by me when I'm grown." Then put it away in a private and secure place to read when you're a grown-up.

Design your Own Heart-Mending Kit
If you could design a personalized heart-mending kit for yourself for the times you feel downhearted and fill it with items and activities that might really help raise your spirits, what would you put into it and why?

Show all your chosen items and activities on a 8½ x 11" or 9 x 12" poster. Give the poster a title and add a label or caption to each activity you've shown that might help you feel better during such times.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Lori R. Snyder

In an alternate universe, Lori Snyder is a circus performer–probably an aerialist wearing a lot of glitter. In this universe, she's had many different careers (none of which, sadly, are circus-related): marine biologist, fourth grade teacher, dancer, yoga teacher and studio owner, book editor, and writer. Venice Beach is one of the great loves of her life, as are kindness, delight, and the sea, and this book is her love letter to all of those. Lori is also the founder of the **Writers Happiness Movement**, which offers free happiness tools to writers.

You can find her at **lorirsnyderauthor.com** or **writershappiness.com**

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Judie Snyder enjoyed a 25-year teaching career working with grades K-8 in both general and gifted self-contained elementary classrooms, middle school language arts classes, and GATE enrichment programs using an integrated, project-based approach. Her criteria for developing curricula is that activities meet both academic and individual needs, foster creativity, are communication based, develop both independent and cooperative learners, and are fun for everyone involved (including the teacher!).