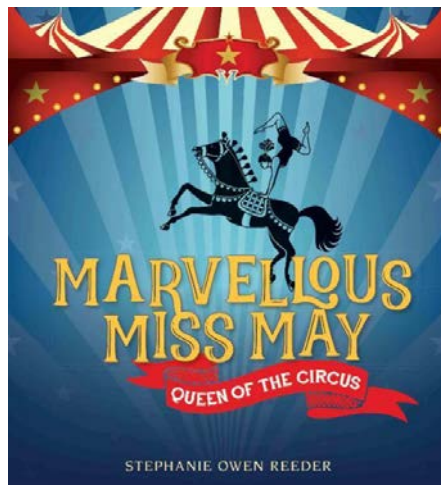


## TEACHERS' NOTES

## Marvellous Miss May, Queen of the Circus

written by Stephanie Owen Reeder



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Recommended Year Levels: Years 3–6

**Author: Stephanie Owen Reeder** [www.stephanieowenreeder.com/](http://www.stephanieowenreeder.com/) and [publishing.nla.gov.au/pages/authors.do?newsId=8](http://publishing.nla.gov.au/pages/authors.do?newsId=8)



*Marvellous Miss May* is the latest of Stephanie's award-winning Heritage Heroes series of stand-alone narrative nonfiction titles. They bring to life true stories about remarkable young Australians from our past. Other titles include *Lost! A True Tale from the Bush* (shortlisted, 2010 CBCA Children's Book of the Year Awards), *Amazing Grace: An Adventure at Sea* (winner, 2012 New South Wales Premier's History Awards) and *Lennie the Legend* (shortlisted, 2016 New South Wales Premier's History Awards and winner, 2016 CBCA Children's Book of the Year Awards for the best information book for children).

## ***Marvellous Miss May: Australian Curriculum Content***

- Learning Areas
  - Humanities and Social Sciences
    - Inquiry and Skills
    - History
    - Geography
  - Civics and Citizenship
- General Capabilities
  - Personal and Social Capability
  - Critical and Creative Thinking
- Digital Classroom
  - Digital Classroom Year 6 Fanny Durack <https://www.nla.gov.au/digital-classroom/year-6/themes/fanny-durack>: The contributions of individuals to the arts and sport, as the nation developed as a society.

### **THE STORY**

May Zinga grew up in a circus during the last years of the nineteenth century. She had a difficult early life. Her father was a troubled and angry man and so, when May was six, her mother took her four children and left her husband and the circus behind. But life only got tougher for them and, in 1901, when May was just seven, her desperate mother gave her away to Wirth Brothers Circus.

May missed her family terribly. It was hard settling into a new circus where she knew nobody, and it didn't help that the circus folk had cut off all her hair! But this little girl from Bundaberg in Queensland had big dreams: she wanted to become the best bareback rider in the world. After years of working hard to perfect a wide range of circus skills, Miss May Wirth, as she was now called, was finally good enough to train as an equestrian—one of the most difficult and dangerous jobs in the circus. Would May's agility, flexibility, poise, talent and determination allow her to finally achieve her goals?

*Marvellous Miss May* is a true story, illustrated with images from early twentieth-century circus posters held in the collections of the National Library of Australia, as well as photographs of May Wirth as a child.

Information sections at the end of each chapter describe life in the circus in the early 1900s, covering topics such as children in the circus, the treatment of performing animals and transporting the circus.

## INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

These are activities to do before reading to prepare students for the concepts/themes explored in the book. They are not necessarily curriculum based.

### The Circus

- What is a circus?
- What types of circuses are there today?
- Who has seen a circus?
- What acts do women perform in circuses today?
- What acts do animals perform in circuses today?
- Are children allowed to perform in circuses today? How old do they have to be?
- In the early 1900s, a visit to a travelling circus once a year was often the only form of entertainment for young children. What types of entertainment do children today have?

### The History of the Circus

- Entertainments featuring people doing amazing tricks have been around for thousands of years, and go back as far as 2400 BC. Divide the class into small groups and have each group explore circus skills from a different era. Examples could include:
  - Ancient Egypt: acrobats, jugglers, clowns and parades
  - Ancient China: tightrope-walking
  - Ancient Greece: mime artists
  - Ancient Crete: bull riders
  - Ancient Rome: performances in the Colosseum
  - Europe in the Middle Ages: travelling performers
  - Early nineteenth-century England: Philip Astley's hippodrome and equestrian acts
- Have each group report its findings, and then discuss the following with the whole class:
  - How do we know about these performances from long ago?
  - What media were used to record them (murals, frescoes, drawings, paintings, books, plays etc)?
  - Why were they important enough to the community for artists and writers to record them?
  - Which circus acts are still performed today? Why have they remained popular? Which circus acts are no longer performed? Why not?

## Circus Posters

- Ask students to examine the two circus posters provided at the end of these Teachers' Notes (images 1 & 2):
  - Who features in the posters?
  - Which performing animals are featured?
  - What colours are used? Why?
  - What is your reaction to the images?
  - What elements are used to gain your attention and make you want to go to the circus?
  - Which poster do you think is the most effective in advertising the circus performances? Why?
- Identify as many circus acts as you can in Image 3. What acts are **not** featured here? (E.g. equestriennes, trapeze artists, circus bands, acrobats and tightrope-walkers)
  - Choose the circus act you would most like to perform in.
  - Create an exotic and interesting circus name for yourself.
  - Create a circus poster advertising your circus act, paying attention to the following:
    - colours
    - design elements, such as layout and typography (text design and size)
    - a catchy heading with alliteration
    - a caption describing your act, using exaggeration to make it sound as thrilling as possible.

# AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM CONTENT: HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (HASS)

## Inquiry and Skills

### Year 3

**Content description:** Draw simple conclusions based on analysis of information and data (ACHASSI058)

#### Elaboration

- examining the meaning of diversity using examples drawn from their community (such as celebrations and commemorations), drawn from other countries (such as environments, climate, lifestyle, settlement) and from the experiences of their peers (such as how they participate in their family and community)

#### *Activity: Daily Life in a Circus*

May Wirth lived her whole life in a circus, travelling every few days to a new town, or even a new country. When she was separated from her birth family, the circus community became her new family. Compare your life with Miss May's life.

- Create a list of your daily activities.
- Create a list of Miss May's daily activities as a child in a circus in the early 1900s, Answer the following:
  - Where did she sleep?
  - Where did she practise her acts?
  - Where did she go to school?
  - Where did she eat her meals?
  - What chores did she have to do?
  - What time of the day did she perform in the circus?

#### *Discussion/Inquiry Question*

How would you cope with life on the road—travelling in a wagon, a steam train or on a steamship—and keep up with your schoolwork, circus training and daily performances? In what ways was life harder for children like May than it is for children today?

## Year 4

**Content description:** Sequence information about people's lives and events (ACHASSI076)

### Elaboration

- creating a timeline by accurately placing information about key events or people in chronological order and explaining the sequence

### Activity: Timelines

Create two timelines:

- the major events in May Wirth's life covered in this book (birth, first circus performance, leaving the circus with her mother and siblings, joining Wirth Brothers Circus, performing on the highwire, her debut as an equestrian, moving to America, her accident in New York and performing before the King and Queen of England)
- the major events in your life, from birth to today.

### Discussion/Inquiry Question

- How does your timeline differ from May's? In what ways was life more difficult for children in the early 1900s than it is today, especially for those in a travelling circus?
- If you were May, what would be the hardest thing for you to cope with of all the things that happened in her life? Why? What from May's life would you most enjoy doing? And, if you could travel back in time to the early 1900s, what would you miss the most about your life today?

## Year 5

**Content description:** Examine different viewpoints on actions, events, issues and phenomena in the past and present (ACHASSI099)

### Elaboration

- analysing sources to identify and understand the different motives and experiences of individuals and groups involved in past or present events and issues (for example, the reasons people migrated to colonial Australia and their diverse experiences; the struggle for rights by emancipated convicts; the way migrants or refugees have been managed over time and their experiences; the motives of whalers and anti-whaling activists)

### Activity: The Multicultural Circus

Research the Wirth Brothers Circus using the National Library of Australia's Trove website (<http://www.trove.nla.gov.au>) as a starting point.

- Divide the class into small groups, with each group researching and presenting five facts about Wirth Brothers Circus. Focus on the multicultural nature of the circus, such as who performed what acts, which countries they came from, and how they were regarded by those they worked with and by audiences. Use the following sources to find the facts:
  - contemporary newspapers
  - books about the circus
  - interviews with circus performers

- photographs, circus posters and other images.
- As a class, compare the facts gathered by each group. What are the similarities? Are there any differences or discrepancies?

### *Discussion/Inquiry Question*

- What did you find out about how people from different countries were treated in the circus? Do you think that these people were treated in the same way in their lives outside the circus? How would they be regarded in Australian society today?
- Discuss the usefulness of the various sources you used. What information did each source provide, and how can you verify the 'facts' they presented?

## **Year 6**

**Content description:** Evaluate evidence to draw conclusions (ACHASSI129)

### **Elaboration**

- contemplating attitudes and actions of the past that now seem strange and unacceptable and imagining what aspects of current society may be viewed in this way in the future

### *Activity: Performing Animals*

May Wirth performed with a lot of different animal. In Australian society today, some of the training methods used at that time would be regarded as very cruel. For example, elephants were chained up; lions, tigers and bears were kept in small cages, and their trainers used whips to keep them under control.

- Divide the class into two groups, with one group listing arguments in favour of using performing animals in circuses, and the other listing arguments against using performing animals in circuses. Each group selects a spokesperson to present their arguments. The class then votes on the question:
  - Should circuses today be allowed to include animals in their performances?

### *Discussion/Inquiry Question*

- Was your class in favour of or against the use of performing animals in circuses? Why did the class come to this conclusion?
- Find out about circuses that do not feature performing animals (e.g. Cirque de Soleil, the Flying Fruit Fly Circus, Circus Oz). What have they replaced the animals with? How do they entice audiences to come to their performances?
- Investigate the rules and laws applying to the treatment and use of performing animals in circuses in Australia. What sorts of animals can still be used in circuses? Do you think this is acceptable?

## History

### Year 6

**Content description:** Experiences of Australian democracy and citizenship, including the status and rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, migrants, women and children. (ACHASSK135)

#### Elaborations

- investigating the experiences of democracy and citizenship of women (for example, the suffragette movement, the bar on married women working, equal pay, the Sex Discrimination Act 1984)
- investigating the experiences of democracy and citizenship of children who were placed in orphanages, homes and other institutions (for example, their food and shelter, protection, education and contacts with family)

#### *Activity: Women's Role in Society*

In the early 1900s, women and girls who worked in circuses were unusual: they had full-time jobs outside the home and, because of their jobs, they often wore clothing that, in normal circumstances, was regarded as unladylike, at a time when women wore hats, gloves and long skirts in public. Miss May's adoptive mother, Marizles Wirth, was a manager of the circus, and Miss May was also unusual because, rather than doing the 'pretties' on the horses as most girls did, she performed acts that traditionally only men could do. No wonder she became a role model in the women's suffragette movement at that time.

- Draw up a chart comparing the lives of women in the early 1900s and now. Include factors such as clothing, jobs, domestic roles, legal and voting rights.

#### *Discussion/Inquiry Question*

- How has the role of women and girls changed since the early 1900s? How did the suffragettes help change the lives of women? Is more expected of young women today than in the early 1900s? In what ways?

#### *Activity: Children in the early 1900s*

When May's mother was struggling to look after her four young children by herself, at a time when there was no welfare system, one of her solutions was to give May away to Wirth Brothers Circus. Later, when May's father was in a similar situation, struggling to support three young children by himself, his solution was to put his two youngest children into an orphanage. Research what life was like in an orphanage in the 1900s.

- Imagine you are May's younger sister Ida. Write a letter to your father telling him what life is like for you in the orphanage, and why you think you would be much better off in a circus, like your sister May and brother Arthur.

#### *Discussion/Inquiry Question*

- What happens to children today when their parents or family are unable to look after them? Can children still be given away to circuses? Are young children today allowed to perform at an early age, or are there laws that protect them?



## Geography

### Year 3

**Content description:** The similarities and differences between places in terms of their type of settlement, demographic characteristics and the lives of the people who live there, and people's perceptions of these places (ACHASSK069)

#### Elaboration

- investigating the diversity of people who live in their place (for example, surveying the school community about age, birthplace and ancestry) and comparing them with a school in another place in Australia or neighbouring country

#### *Activity: Cultural Mix*

May claimed that she could learn more about the world and its people travelling around in a circus than she would ever learn at school. Most of the people she worked with in the circus were, like her, of mixed race. They—or their parents or grandparents—came from many other countries.

- Ask students to research their family backgrounds, going back to their great- or great-great-grandparents. Once they have this information, have them draw a family tree that includes details about where each person came from and where they settled. They could also include photographs, family stories and memories.
- As a class, compile two lists:
  - the countries that the students or their families came from, and
  - the countries that May and the people she worked with in the circus came from.
- Using a large wall map of the world and drawing-pins of two different colours, mark the places on the map identified in the lists.

#### *Discussion/Inquiry Question*

- Based on your findings, discuss the following questions:
  - Where do the two lists overlap? Is there a cluster of drawing-pins in any part of the world? Where do they diverge? Why?
  - Based on your findings, is Australia a more multicultural country today than it was when May was alive? In discussing this, consider whether Wirth Brothers Circus in the early 1900s reflected the cultural mix in society at that time, and whether your class represents the mix of people of different nationalities in Australia today.

## CIVICS AND CITIZENSHIP

### Year 4

**Content description:** The different cultural, religious and/or social groups to which they and others in the community belong (ACHASSK093)

#### **Elaborations**

- identifying diversity through the different social, cultural and religious groups students belong to
- describe real, virtual or vicarious experiences with other cultures and groups

#### *Activity: An Interview with May Wirth*

- Have each student pretend to be a journalist interviewing May and asking her the following questions.
  - Where and when were you born?
  - Who were your parents, and where did they come from?
  - What was your early childhood like?
  - What is your first memory of the circus?
  - What did you do in the circus as a small child?
  - What inspired you to become an equestrienne?
  - What was the most thrilling moment of your circus career?
  - What was the scariest moment in your circus career?
  - What was the funniest thing that happened to you in the circus?
  - Who influenced you most of all in the circus? How?
  - Would you recommend circus life to children? Why/Why not?
- Then, ask each student to write a short newspaper article based on May's answers (contained in *Marvellous Miss May*).

#### *Discussion/Inquiry Question*

- How would working in a circus with people from around the world have helped Miss May as she travelled and performed in different countries?

## CONCLUDING ACTIVITIES

### Activities: The Art of the Circus

*Marvellous Miss May* features artwork by Australian artist Norman Lindsay. Several other famous artists have been inspired by the circus. They include Pablo Picasso, Georges Henri Rouault, George Seurat, Edgar Degas, Toulouse Lautrec and Marc Chagall.

- Study a selection of their paintings of circuses and then answer the questions:
  - What emoji would you assign to each image to show your immediate response to the paintings? How have the artists evoked those emotional responses?
  - How do the artists present female performers (is the focus on how they look or on their performance?)
  - What other elements of the circus do the artists present in their artwork?
  - How do they present performing animals? How do they create a sense of movement?
  - What colours have they used? Why?
  - From what perspective have they created the image?
- Encourage the students to select a painting and respond to it by either:
  - Creating their own picture of a circus act inspired by the artistic style of one of the artists, or
  - Writing a poem or prose piece responding to the image.

## FURTHER READING

### Newspaper articles

Te Whero, 'A Morning in a Circus Tent: Behind the Scenes at Fitzgerald's Circus,' *The Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, 26 April 1905, p.1055,

[trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/164038516](https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/164038516)

'Miss May Wirth a Star of Stars at Seventeen: Young Australian Girl, whose Feats of Horsemanship Startled New York, London, and Paris,' *Referee* (Sydney), 19 April 1916, p.15, [trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/121172333](https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/121172333)

'Queen of the Sawdust Ring: Interview with Miss May Martin Wirth,' *Daily Herald* (Adelaide), 4 September 1916, p.7, [trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/105364529](https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/105364529)

### Books

#### The Circus

Ramsland, John, with Mark St Leon, *Children of the Circus: The Australian Experience*.  
Springwood, NSW: Butterfly Books, 1993

St Leon, Mark, *Circus: The Australian Story*, Melbourne: Melbourne Books 2011

## **May Wirth**

Cummins, Julie, 'May Wirth: World's Greatest Bareback Rider,' in *Women Daredevils: Thrills, Chills and Frills*. NY: Dutton Children's Book, 2008

Geason, Susan, 'May Zinga Wirth: The Greatest Horsewoman on Earth,' in *Australian Heroines: Stories of Courage and Survival*, pp.108–128

St Leon, Mark Valentine, 'May Emmeline Wirth (1894–1978),' *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Canberra: ANU, 1990

## **Websites**

### **Circus**

[www.dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/circus](http://www.dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/circus)

[www.powerhousemuseum.com/insidethecollection/2014/04/wirths-circus-hits-the-road](http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/insidethecollection/2014/04/wirths-circus-hits-the-road)

[www.circopedia.org/May\\_Wirth](http://www.circopedia.org/May_Wirth)

### **Films**

[www.nfsa.gov.au/latest/wirths-circus-home-movies](http://www.nfsa.gov.au/latest/wirths-circus-home-movies) (Wirth Brothers Circus)

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=uc9F32fqzGM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uc9F32fqzGM) (May Wirth)

Image 1: Circus Poster



Image 2: Circus Poster

