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CROSSING NIAGARA

The Death-Defying Tightrope Adventures of the Great Blondin

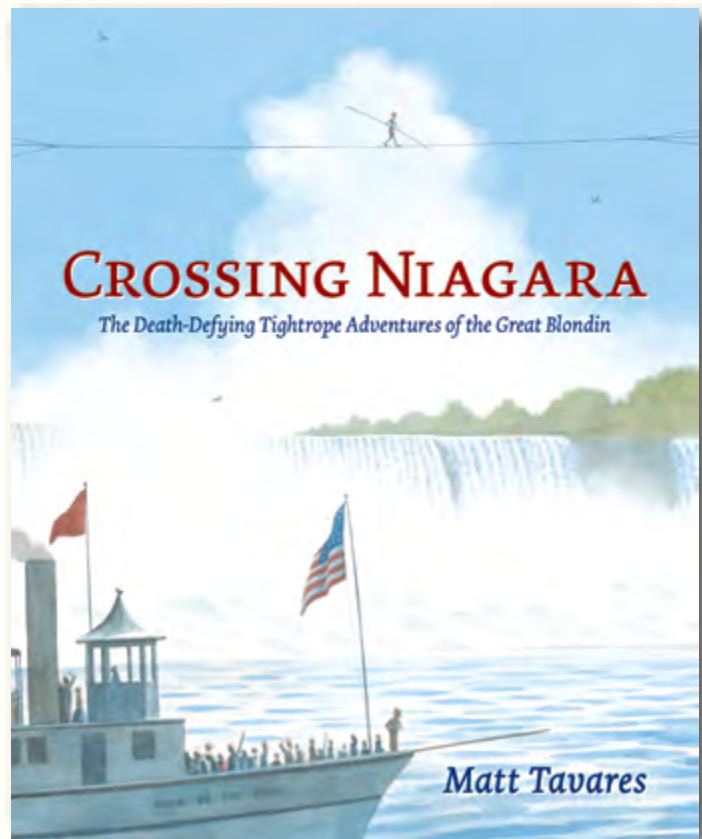
Matt Tavares

“Monsieur Blondin is to cross
Niagara Falls this afternoon, or perish in the attempt.”

— *Troy Daily Times*, June 30, 1859

When the Great Blondin announced that he was going to walk from America to Canada across the Niagara River on a rope more than 1,100 feet long and just 3 inches wide, hanging 160 feet above the raging river, people came from everywhere. Some came to watch him cross. Some came to watch him fall. Some thought he wouldn't even show up. But he did show up. And he did walk across the river. And then he did something else amazing: he crossed the river on that tightrope again and again, adding another death-defying flourish each time. Matt Tavares's gorgeous, riveting account of the daredevil of Niagara Falls is sure to hold readers in its grip, just as it enthralled those spectators on the cliffs more than one hundred and fifty years ago.

Matt Tavares is the author-illustrator of *Henry Aaron's Dream*, *There Goes Ted Williams*, *Becoming Babe Ruth*, and *Growing Up Pedro*, as well as *Zachary's Ball*, *Oliver's Game*, and *Mudball*. He is the illustrator of *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*, *Over the River and Through the Wood*, *Lady Liberty* by Doreen Rappaport, *The Gingerbread Pirates* by Kristin Kladstrup, and *Jubilee!* by Alicia Potter. Matt Tavares lives in Ogunquit, Maine.



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Media Contact: Erika Denn, Senior Publicist • (617) 588-4516 • erika.denn@candlewick.com

A note from author-illustrator Matt Tavares



PHOTO BY SARAH TAVARES

Soon after I started working on this book, I visited Niagara Falls with my family. It was awe-inspiring to see it up close, to stand next to the falls and soak in (literally) the sheer massiveness of it. We got drenched on the Maid of the Mist and ventured out to the end of the observation platform at Prospect Point. I tried to imagine what it must have felt like for Blondin to be right near that very spot, unthinkably high above the raging river, walking on a rope just three inches wide. (It was scary enough standing on a twenty-foot-wide platform!)

The most common question people asked me while I was working on this book was “Did he ever fall?” The answer, incredibly, is no. After leaving Niagara Falls in September of 1860, Blondin spent the next two decades traveling the world, performing on his tightrope. He gave his final public performance at the age of seventy-two. Amazingly, in over sixty-five years as a rope walker, he was never injured. After stepping down from the rope for the final time, he retired to a villa in England.

He called it Niagara Villa.



Illustration copyright © 2015 by Matt Tavares

History of the Great Blondin

“A tightrope walker is born; nothing can make him.”

—The Great Blondin

Born Jean-François Gravelet in Saint-Omer, France, Charles Blondin (or the Great Blondin) was the premier tightrope walker of his time. At the age of five, Blondin was sent to École de Gymnase (Gymnastics School) in Lyon to train as an acrobat. After only six months, he made his first public appearance as “The Little Wonder.” Even at a young age, Blondin possessed superior skill and grace while performing in original and adventurous settings. This made him a popular favorite among audiences.

In 1855, Blondin traveled to the United States and began performing with the Ravel Family acrobat troupe. During this time, Blondin performed his most famous and daring stunt:

crossing the gorge below Niagara Falls on a tightrope on June 30, 1859. After his initial journey across the falls, Blondin continued performing the act several times, always with different theatrical elements: blindfolded, in a sack, pushing a wheelbarrow, on stilts, carrying a man (his manager, Harry Colcord) on his back, and sitting down midway while he

cooked and ate an omelet. He never once used a safety net. According to the *New York Times*, he felt “the public [did] not care half so much for his performance when the possibility of a terrible accident [was] not present to lend a zest to the show.”

By 1861, Blondin was performing in England. While no omelets were served, Blondin’s act consisted of a dangerous, nerve-racking stilt walk on a rope across the central hall of the Crystal Palace. He continued his tightrope-walking acrobatics throughout the United Kingdom—including another death-defying feat of crossing the Edgbaston Reservoir in Birmingham, England, in 1873.

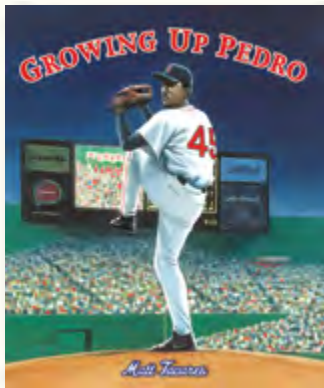


Blondin carries his manager, Harry Colcord, over Niagara Falls.

Blondin returned to performing in 1880 after a brief retirement, and his final public performance was in Belfast in 1896. He passed away at the age of seventy-three. When asked by the *New York Times* if he was ever nervous while performing, Blondin said, “I have never felt fear . . . not even when crossing Niagara.”

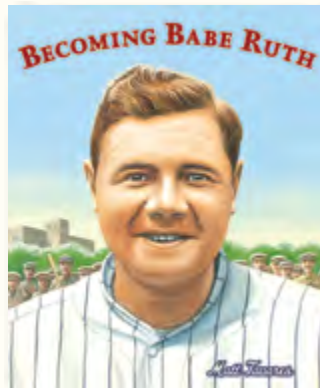


Also by Matt Tavares



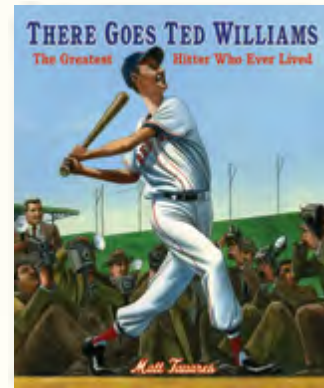
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★“Tavares masterfully depicts, with quick verse and beautiful illustrations, the world in which the two siblings came of age.”
—*School Library Journal* (starred review)



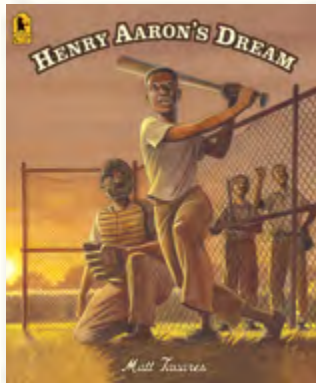
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“Tavares continues to prove he’s a double threat, with a concise, forthright writing style and expansive, sepia-toned watercolors that bring to mind vintage photos and newsreels.”
—*Publishers Weekly*



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“Tavares’s full-bleed spreads alternate with sepia-toned spot drawings, all beautifully arranged in this old-fashioned but evergreen tribute.”
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“Tavares’s vibrant artwork brings viewers into dingy dugouts, on cramped buses, and into the dust of the diamond as Aaron works his way into history.”
—*Booklist*



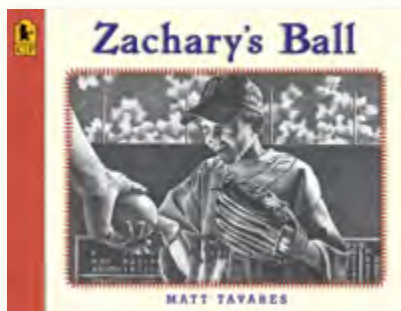
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“Tavares employs short, simple sentences spiced with players’ confused shouts. Pencil illustrations washed with pale watercolors are filled with humorous details and delightfully expressive faces. . . . Play Ball!”
—*Kirkus Reviews*



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“The text masterfully weaves together tradition, perseverance, loyalty, and family lore, and the result will enchant baseball fans young and old.”
—*School Library Journal*



HC: 978-0-7636-5033-9
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“The timeless quality of Tavares’s black-and-white pencil illustrations is in perfect pitch with the story’s setting and theme. Close-up images of Zachary convincingly convey the boy’s elation in his moments of ball-playing triumph—a feeling with which young baseball fans will surely identify.”
—*Publishers Weekly*