



## About Laura A. Woollett

### Do what you dream!

In second grade, Laura took 2<sup>nd</sup> place in a 4-H fair clown contest. Realizing a career with the circus wasn't going to work out, Laura turned to writing. *Big Top Burning*, a nonfiction account of the 1944 Hartford circus fire, is her first book. She is also a contributor to *The Great Connecticut Caper*, an online, serialized mystery for kids. (<http://ctcaper.cthumanities.org/get-ready/>)

Laura holds an MA in Children's Literature from Simmons College and is a writer and editor of K-12 literacy curricula. Originally from South Windsor, Connecticut, Laura now lives in Massachusetts with her husband, daughter, and two mischievous cats.

## Contact the Author

### Keeping History Alive!

One of the reasons Laura wrote *Big Top Burning* was to make sure the Hartford circus fire is remembered by future generations.

Laura is always happy to answer questions from young people (and adults!) who want to know more about the Hartford circus fire.

She is also available for school visits.

To get in touch with Laura, visit her website:

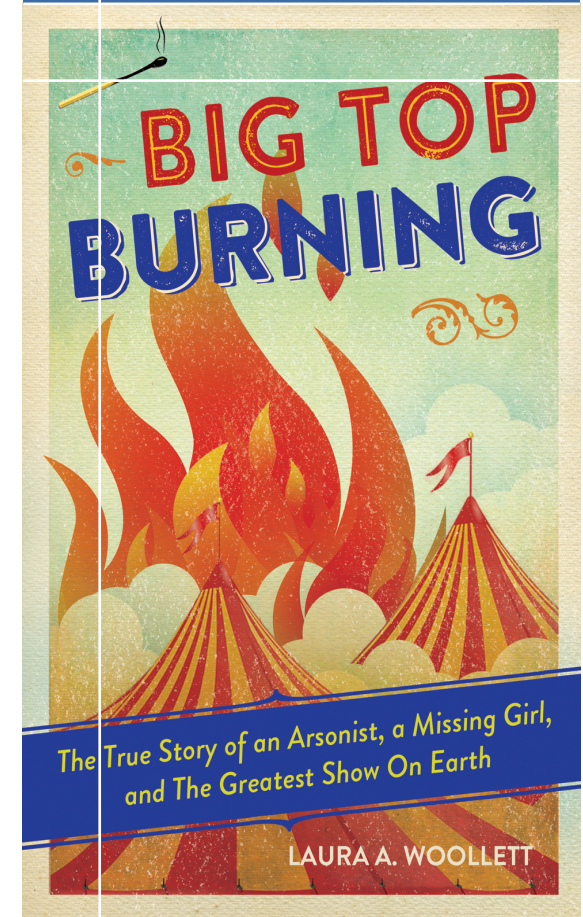
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## Educators' Guide

**Big Top Burning**  
The True Story of an Arsonist, a Missing Girl, and The Greatest Show On Earth

By: Laura A. Woollett



# Discussion Questions

1. WWII was raging in 1944, the year of the circus fire. What effects did the war have on the circus? How did the war indirectly affect rescue efforts in the aftermath of the disaster?
2. What is a bad omen? The author indicates there were several bad omens that transpired before the fire. Use chapter 1 to generate a list of things that may have hinted that something was going to go wrong that day.
3. Which personal accounts did you find the most disturbing or interesting? Why is eyewitness testimony important in nonfiction?
4. The author uses photos, maps, and diagrams throughout the book. Why are visual sources important in nonfiction books?
5. In the 50 years following the circus fire, what techniques did investigators use to try to determine the cause of the fire and identify the victims? Look up “forensic evidence.” How did forensic evidence, or a lack of forensic evidence, influence the investigator’s conclusions?
6. How did this circus fire change laws? Have you noticed any big problems or events in your school that should cause rules to change?
7. Do you think Little Miss 1565 is Eleanor Cook? Defend your response with evidence from the text.
8. What do you think caused the Hartford circus fire? Defend your response with evidence from the text.

# Activities

1. Use chapters 2, 3, & 4 to create a timeline of the fire.
2. Pick one of the children who escaped the fire and write a first-person short story from his or her point of view, describing what it was like to escape the fire. Use sensory imagery (descriptions of sights, smells, touches, tastes, and sounds) to make readers feel like they were there.
3. Pick one of the following historical events:
  - The *Challenger* Explosion
  - The Construction or Destruction of the Berlin Wall
  - The Million Man March
  - The Assassination of JFK
  - 9/11

Use a search engine (like Google or Bing) or a database from your school’s library to look for multiple photographs and videos from different sources. Write a short response explaining what you learned from looking at visuals from different sources.

4. Write a book review of *Big Top Burning*. (Refer to published reviews in magazines like *The Horn Book* or in newspapers to get a sense of this style of writing.)
  - Write a lead that will draw in the reader.
  - Tell your reader the basics of the book, including the plot, characters, and setting. Also mention the author’s writing style and anything that stands out to you about the writing.
  - Tell your reader what you like or don’t like about the book and why—in detail.

# Project

## Researching & Writing About Local History

As a class, produce a list of historical events that have affected your city, town, neighborhood, or community. Have students pick the event that interests them the most. Then generate small groups based on the interests of the students.

Next, students in each group should use multiple databases, search engines, personal interviews, etc. to gather primary and secondary accounts of what happened.

After gathering information, students should work together to decide the order in which they want to tell the story and create a timeline.

Have students divide the information into four chapter sections, each with a chapter title. Then have students assign each group member a chapter. Each student will be responsible for one chapter.

Each chapter should have at least:

- 3 written pages that tell a section of the story
- Information from 1 interview
- Information from 1 primary source
- 2 pictures

Students can also include:

- maps • charts • graphs • diagrams • videos

Students’ final projects can be submitted in print format or as PowerPoint or Google presentations.

[Curriculum content developed by Abby Baker Wittredge]