

TEACHER'S NOTES FOR *NEVER EVER BEFORE*

By Stephen Michael King

Published by Scholastic Press, 2009

STEPHEN MICHAEL KING has always loved drawing. When he became partially deaf at nine he found communicating with people difficult. Drawing and daydreaming became his escape.

Stephen worked as an assistant in the children's section of a library. He often read to groups of kids and parents, and as a result always imagines kids and parents together reading his books. He also worked in animation and in the art department of a publishing firm. These days, he lives on a coastal island near Sydney with his family and pets and fits his freelance work in around them.

He is inspired by people and animals he knows, and the work of illustrators such as Maurice Sendak, Bob Graham, Edward Ardizzone, Quentin Blake and E H Shepard.

Many of Stephen's books have been published overseas, and two have been made into theatre productions. Several have won and been nominated for awards, including the Children's Book Council of Australia, Australian Publishing Association, BILBY and YABBA and the Bologna Book Fair. Three of his books have been shortlisted for the 2009 CBCA awards, and *Leaf* recently received the White Raven award from the International Youth Library.

Find out more about Stephen and his work at: www.smkbooks.com

SYNOPSIS

In the land where everything is small, Big is born. Big watches the smalls play, blown about by the breeze, but is too big to leave the ground himself. When the breeze gusts, Big shelters the smalls. Then the tall are born. They blow over even in tiny breezes, so Big offers them a place to lean. Sometimes they lift Big off the ground.

Then a strong wind arrives. It blows the smallest smalls away. Anchored to Big, the tall reach out to rescue the smalls, and all the smalls are found.

All joined together, they fly.

CREATING *NEVER EVER BEFORE*

As with many illustrators, picture books are only a part of the body of work **Stephen Michael King** produces. Recently he was delving into printmaking, which he loves, and exploring abstract art. He got to play with abstract forms when making the prints, as well as when he was making a mural for Taree Library.

Stephen also spends a lot of time with kids, his own and other kids at schools when he talks to them about art and picture books. It was observing kids in a playground that he noticed most of them running around like ‘wild horses’, but he also noticed a big kid who didn’t run with the others. The story includes all these kids, being with each other in a balance and harmony that they find themselves.

These two things, expression through abstract form and the idea of everyone living in balance and harmony and being able to fly, became married together in the picture book *Never Ever Before*. Themes of acceptance and finding a place together feature strongly in Stephen’s books, as can be seen in *Milli*, *Jack and the Dancing Cat* and *Henry and Amy*. He sees this theme as part of his need to share a gentle philosophy of life with others. He doesn’t want to impose ideas on others, but wants to help kids ‘think about thinking’, taking them on one or two special characters’ journey through a story. In *Never Ever Before*, Big, the smalls and the tall all find they can satisfy each other’s needs while being true to themselves as they interact with each other.

Stephen made the illustrations for this book using traditional prints that he made with paint. These are artworks in their own right. Scanning them onto a computer, he then manipulated them to create the illustrations. He changed the colours of certain elements, drew shapes onto them, and moved them about on the screen. This artwork was particularly inspired by printmakers Joan Miró i Ferrà (Miró) and John Coburn and sculptor Alexander Calder, who was famous for inventing the mobile. The way all the abstract figures come together is rather like a mobile that flies free on the wind. Stephen also designed the book, placing the words on the page and choosing where the illustrations would sit and how large they would be.

Stephen has a similar approach to creating with words as he has to creating with pencil, paint and sculptural material. He likes to follow his intuition, but as well likes his words to have a certain balance and harmony. He finds that if he begins to think and

analyse too much, they stop working. This doesn't trouble him, as he is reminded of when his mother would encourage him to be creative, saying that the ideas were always the important thing, and that they didn't have to be 'perfect'. It is always vital to Stephen that he leaves himself room to play. He loves the power of poetry, citing the work of Les Murray as one of his favourite poets. When he reads poetry, he lets the words wash over him, enjoying them even if their meaning isn't always clear to him – analysing meaning isn't always what is most significant.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

- When reading the story to a group of children, turn the pages slowly, giving them time to absorb the pictures. Resist the urge to tell them what is happening in your own words.
- Ask the students to think about the book, and say what they think happened and what their feelings about the story are. There may be a number of different interpretations of the story.
- Big, the smalls and the tallies are very abstract, basic characters, but they have strong identities. What does each of the characters need from the others? How do they help each other? What can they achieve when they do things together?
- What are the words that the author uses to describe each one of the characters? Make a list of the words under the heading Big, tallies, smalls. What do they tell us about the characters?
- Can you imagine what the characters might say to each other? Have children write a simple dialogue between the different characters at any stage of the story.
- Students might like to act out their dialogues, giving them voices, facial expressions and gestures, and using their bodies to show how the different characters move.
- As a creative movement exercise, you might divide the students into three groups, bigs, smalls and tallies. Put on a drifting piece of music, and have students move in character. They can swap roles after some time.
- For younger children, give them some time to play out the story co-operatively. This can be done using a sand tray, some sticks, a few larger pebbles and some

small seashells, or a similar range of objects. It could also be done on a play mat with coloured straws, small building bricks and perhaps larger building blocks. Encourage them to help each other make patterns with these objects.

- Kids can make up stories using other made up abstract characters, such as oranges, greens and yellows, or spots, squiggles and straights.
- On a large sheet of paper, draw a long squiggling line that loops and curls all over the page. Now have fun filling in the loops where the lines cross each other with colour and pattern. This could also be done as a class exercise to make a mural, with a painted black line on a large roll of paper rolled out across the floor and paint to fill in the loops.
- Use a variety of materials to make mobiles to hang around the classroom. See if one larger item can be balanced with lots of little ones.
- Make stained-glass Big, smalls and tall. Lay a long roll of clear contact (with backing still attached) along a bench or row of desks. With a permanent black marker, draw Big with the tall connected to Big and to each other. Turn the contact over and peel off the backing, with one person holding the contact down. Anchor the contact to the table, either with something heavy at each corner or using masking tape to tape it down. Now, with lots of shapes cut out of coloured cellophane, fill in the Big and have fun putting lots of smalls coming off the tall. When it is done, tape the stained-glass artwork to the window to watch the Big, the smalls and the tall fly.