

**Millie's Something Special**  
Tania Cox / David Miller

TEACHER NOTES  
By Janet McLean

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

**Author:** Tania Cox was born in Ayr, Queensland in 1968 and began writing picture books for the very young in 1996. Tania wrote her first children's picture 'book' at the age of 11 for a school project. The story was about a family's outing to the circus, entitled 'A Day at the Circus'. Many years later, she completed external courses in short story writing and children's literature through the Brisbane college of TAFE. Her titles include *Little Bat, Baby*, the 2004 CBC Notable Australian Children's Book *Wolf's Sunday Dinner* the CBC shortlisted *Snap! Went Chester* and 2008 CBC Notable Australian Children's Book *Alberta* . Tania still lives in Ayr and where she lives on a sugar cane farm with her husband Dave and three daughters.

**Illustrator:** David Miller studied art and design in Melbourne and worked as an art director before starting his own graphic design and illustration studio in a mud brick building in the Yarra valley. Sixteen years ago he saw the light and started writing and illustrating picture books. *Millie's Special Something* is the second book on which David has collaborated with Tania Cox. The first was the CBC shortlisted *Snap! Went Chester*. His other works include *Boo to a Goose* written by Mem Fox, *Where There's Smoke* by Robin Lovell, *Lofty's Mission* by Krista Bell and his own titles *Refugees*, *Big and Me*, and *Rufus the Numbat*. David loves the bush, where he lives with his wife Sylvia and is an officer in the local volunteer fire brigade. When his three children were small, David wrote and illustrated books just for them. Now his books are for everyone and he has fun drawing with his grandchildren.

**SYNOPSIS** When big, bad Reggie leapt out of the bushes and scared Millie, '*she froze, her legs trembled and her feathers shook.*' Millie's friends Gus, Lea and Don came to her rescue, but she was worried that she would never find her own something special to make her feel brave. The next time that Reggie leapt out of the bushes, Millie discovered her own tricky way of making her feel brave, and of becoming friends with big, bad Reggie

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**WRITING STYLE** Tania Cox says that the text of *Millie's Something Special* was reworked many times and went from being too simple, to too long, to too short before it was “just right”. The final version is well-paced and contains a number of writing techniques that cue the reader and the listener (the child/ren) into the story line. The choice of words on each page invites adults to pace the way they read the story. We know that there is going to be a problem right from the start: ‘*The trouble began while...*’ And the sentence: ‘*Millie was busy counting when ...*’ reveals that *something* will happen on the next page – and it does. Big, bad Reggie leaps out of the bushes. Tania creates a pattern of repetition that invites children and adults to actively join the storytelling. When Millie’s friends come to her rescue, each of them makes a loud noise – ROOOOOOAR! SWWHOOOOOSH! BOOM BOOM BOOM! The drama of the story is emphasised by particular writing strategies - the exclamation marks, the upper case font, and the placement of the text on the page. Throughout the story Tania uses evocative words and phrases to show how the characters are feeling. Millie is fearful ‘*Millie froze*’. ‘*I was too frightened to do anything*’. ‘*...she began her lonely walk home*’. Her friends are brave. “*Go away, Reggie!*” roared Gus’. Reggie is tough. “*Found you at last,*” smirked Reggie.’ And in the end she is happy. “*My turn!*” she cried. “*My turn*” This story has a lot of dramatic interaction between the characters, and much of the drama unfolds through dialogue. “*You ask what’s the time big bad Reggie? And I say... DINNERTIME!*” The ending is very satisfying. Millie (accidentally) finds her own special way to feel brave and at the same time be friends with Reggie.

**ILLUSTRATIONS** David Miller has used painted paper sculpture with pastel backgrounds for the illustrations in this book. Unlike other illustrators who draw or paint their pictures, David builds his into 3D paper sculptures. They are made from many, sometimes thousands of pieces of coloured paper that are cut to shape, folded and glued into place. The finished sculptures are usually about twice the size of the printed book. David likes to keep the backgrounds simple, allowing the characters to tell the story. The backgrounds for the pictures are soft pastel drawings on coloured paper. When David has finished making all the sculptures for a book they are photographed, a graphic designer adds words and the books are printed. Apart from the final single page illustration, each page is a full double page spread. The illustrations for *Millie's Something Special* were done using white paper for the

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sculptures, that were then painted after completing the construction. David says, *"I think I have got fresher and more subtle colours this way"*. David has sculpted each of the dinosaurs in a way that reveals the different personalities and emotions. He creates body shapes, movement, and facial expressions that depict boldness, vulnerability, happiness and pleasure. He says, *"I wanted Millie to look cute, small and vulnerable, and Reggie to start out looking scary but ending looking even a bit appealing herself. I chose pink for Reggie because I could make her stand out against the background and somehow pink can be both hard and soft"*. The backgrounds for the pictures are soft pastel drawings on coloured paper. Throughout the book the emotional tone of the story is heightened by the use of contrasting background colours. The brightness and warmth of the illustrations at the beginning and the end of the book, contrast sharply with the dark tones that are used for Millie's lonely walk home, and her frightening confrontation with Reggie. The final single page illustration focuses on Reggie, looking relaxed and contented. By focusing on Reggie this picture adds an extra element to the story. Millie has found her something special and, just as importantly, so has Reggie – acceptance and friendship.

**DISCUSSION POINTS AND FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES**

- The imprint page of the book tells us that the characters in the story are based on dinosaurs and animals that roamed China during the Cretaceous Period. Talk with the children about the different characteristics of each of these creatures – size, weight, type of skin, feathers or fur.
- Help the children to research these particular dinosaurs. Visit the library. Look through books and on the Internet. Write down facts (perhaps up to five or so) on paper cut out in the shape of a feather, and display these where children can access them
- Find pictures of these dinosaurs by dinosaur artists, and compare them with the illustrations in *Millie's Something Special*.
- Talk with the children about how David Miller has made his pictures. What techniques has he used to give the characters their own personalities? Talk about body language. How is Millie feeling when her head and tail are up, as compared to when her head and tail are down. What emotions are shown when her mouth is turned up or turned down?

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- Talk about how the page layout can add to the impact of the illustrations. Look at the picture of Reggie saying, “*DINNERTIME!*” Talk about why the picture is so dramatic – the close-up view focusing on the teeth, the tongue, the eye, and the word, the head pushing into the page from the top right hand corner, the clearly delineated colour contrast of the pink against the dark blue. Create your own pictures using different layouts.
- Provide materials for the children to experiment with cutting and folding shapes, and gluing them into place, to make a sculpted illustration.
- Provide pastels and coloured paper for the children to experiment with creating backgrounds for their sculpted illustrations. Look carefully at how David Miller creates a sense of place and space. Create day and night-time scenes.
- David Miller says that each time Millie appears in the book she is a new sculpture and each feather on each sculpture is an individually cut and glued small piece of paper. Ask different children to create their own happy, frightened, lonely, worried, scary and contented ‘Millies’ and ‘Reggies’ and the other characters. Use these to create shared stories. Try photographing the children’s pictures / sculptures, to create your own picture storybook, or make puppets that can be used to make up different stories.
- Have a Feathery Treasure Hunt. Hide a number of different coloured feathers for the children to find. How many feathers were found? How many of each colour?
- Play *What’s the Time Big Bad Reggie?* Based on the traditional children’s game *What’s the Time Mr Wolf?*
- Talk about how Millie feels at the beginning of the story, and at the end of the story. How did Millie make friends with Reggie. Did she have to be tough and stand up to Reggie?
- Talk about how Reggie feels at the beginning of the story, and at the end of the story. Why wasn’t Reggie playing hide and seek with the others? Does she feel left out? How could Reggie have joined in the game? Been invited? Asked to play? How did Reggie discover that she didn’t have to be ‘big, bad Reggie’. How did Reggie feel when she found a new way of joining in and making friends.
- Find read, and look at more picture story books by Tania Cox and David Miller.
- Find out more about Tania Cox and David Miller. Visit Tania Cox’s website: <http://www.taniacox.com/>