

## TEACHER'S NOTES FOR *NEVER EVER BEFORE* – *Visual Arts Focus*

By Stephen Michael King

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### 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 is 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 reaches out to rescue the smalls, and all the smalls are found.

All joined together, they fly.

### Visual Style/Editorial comment

The illustrations are abstract and symbolic, reminiscent of the works of Jean Miro and Alexander Calder. Similarly, Stephen Michael King's images are highly optimistic and joyous, providing readers with a positive message.

*How does the illustrator convey a story about characters made from simplified shapes and colours?*

The 'smalls' have a lightness about them, the illustrator achieves this by putting faint shadows behind each of the shapes. They look lively, as if they could float or whiz off into the distance.

When 'Big' appears, the illustrator places 'him' (this means we know it is a male character) almost in the very centre of the page, very firmly attached to the surface line. This anchoring of Big really emphasises the floaty-ness of smalls.

Big's smooth shape and orange colour (orange is the colour for harmony and peace) make him an optimistic character, also friendly because smalls float towards and around him. The hole in the centre of Big also suggests that although Big is big, he is not immovable. Big's orange colour also contrasts with the blue background because blue and orange are complementary colours (they are opposite on the colour wheel). Big is always the first thing we look at on the page because of this.

There are other characters in this story too – the 'talls' seem very frail and insignificant at first, but when they work together they can lift Big off the ground.

*How does the illustrator change the mood of the story? What techniques does he use?*

Suddenly the weather changes and the illustrator shows this by exaggerating the patterns in the background and changing its colour from blue to purple (purple is often used by illustrators to indicate suspense or foreboding). Even Big has changed to a darker colour orange.

The smalls seem to be floating away but when tall link together to reach the smalls the blue of the background creeps back and Big gets brighter. This makes the images look more positive again.

We turn a page to see a magnificent community of characters: tall has found all the smalls, and anchoring them all is Big. This image is full of possibility, a captured

moment in time. The colours are bright and the lines of the tall balance the solid shapes of the smalls and Big.

*How does the illustrator design the pages? Are all the images the same size?*

Illustrators often use the same design techniques that film directors use in movies to help create an interesting sequence. These are called cinematic devices or shots in movies, and layouts in picture books. In *Never Ever Before* the illustrator has used different types of layouts to help tell the story, including close-ups (where everything looks really near), multiple frames (lots of small images on a white background), bleed-offs (where the image spills off the page), crops (where one edge of the image has a border), and vignettes (where little drawings appear on the same page as the writing). All these techniques help to make the book and the story interesting, and for the story to have a mixture of action and stillness.

### **Author inspiration**

For Stephen Michael King the idea for *Never Ever Before* grew out of a number of events. He gave a talk at his daughter's school about abstract artists such as John Olsen and encouraged the children to make lots of quick, big abstract paintings, and while painting a mural at Taree Public Library he also got to paint an abstract mural for the wall of the youth section but only had one night to do it in! Stephen also thought about his own childhood and remembered having feelings of wanting to "run with the wolves".

The technique Stephen used to make the illustrations was inspired by a short course in printmaking. Stephen really loved a process called mono-printing (where ink or paint is painted onto a glass or Perspex surface and then paper is pressed onto this to take a print) so he made the backgrounds for *Never Ever Before* this way. The characters were made with cut-out shapes which were laid on top. Stephen then scanned the mono prints and saved them as digital images so that he could adjust the colours of the blue backgrounds and Big's orange textures. He used the computer program Photoshop© to do all this.

Stephen likes the results of the images but he wonders if they would look better on matt rather than shiny paper in the final book.

### **Study notes/activities for teachers**

- Count how many words are in the *Never Ever Before* story. Try to write a story for a picture book using a similar amount of words.
- Count how many pages are in *Never Ever Before*. Make a small book from plain white copy paper with the same amount of pages (you can staple it together down the middle fold)
- On a large sheet of paper, draw some small rectangles. Use them to make small drawings to help design how each page of your picture book might look. Think about:
  - The layouts of each image and how they can be different (like in *Never Ever Before*)
  - What the characters might look like
  - What the backgrounds, or scenes might look like
  - How colour affects the mood of the story

- How the images and the writing are placed on each page
- When you are satisfied with your plans, draw up your illustrations in your small book with pencil. Because this is a 'draft' book you can adjust your drawings as much as you like until you are satisfied with them
- Write your story into the draft book with pencil
- Decide which image you'd like to do a final version of in colour
- On watercolour paper, or on a computer, make your final illustration – but do not put the words on!
- Type your words into the computer, then print them off onto a transparent sheet
- With only a tiny piece of tape, attach the transparent sheet to the final illustration. You can then put this in a frame for display

These are a few of the steps some illustrators go through to make their picture book ideas into real books.