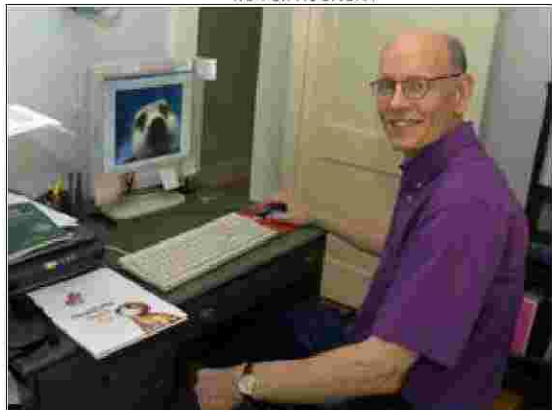


Meet the Meerkat's biggest fan

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Wellesley -

Engineer, entrepreneur, inventor, professor, Sunday school teacher — and now, children's book author and publisher. Meet Wellesley resident Mark Miller.

In his "career" as a father, reading stories to his four young children (now age 17 to 25) was a big part of Miller's daily routine.

"To read a good story to a child is one of the greatest gifts a parent can give," Miller said. "When you stir a child's imagination, you awaken new worlds for that child to explore."

Five years ago, he had an idea for a story of his own. Because he'd had a longtime fascination with meerkats, he decided to write about them in "Meerkats Don't Fly."

Meerkats live in southern Africa in "families" as large as 30 members. The adults teach the children how to catch and eat food and how to stay out of danger. They even collaborate on keeping their burrows neat.

"Meerkats Don't Fly" is the story of Benny, a young meerkat whose dream is to fly. Despite all the criticism and discouragement from his fellow meerkats, as well as several setbacks, Benny decides to pursue his dream.

The book is a story about perseverance. "That, in my own mind, was a metaphor for the book," Miller said, noting that getting the story published has been a long journey. Like Benny, he had to overcome some of his own discouragements, including divorce, along the way.

In "Meerkats Don't Fly," some of Miller's objectives, he said, were to incorporate some humor and some suspense, and to incorporate some real-life activity of the meerkats. The result is a story that has touches of humor and suspense and a happy ending.

"So the behavior of the meerkats is very true to life, except meerkats don't speak English," he quipped. "How can anyone not love meerkats? Measured in cuteness, they tip the scale. And, unlike mice, they don't get into your cat food."

Geared toward 5- to 10-year-olds, the story has been read in numerous classrooms. Miller said the responses he has gotten have always been positive. He read it to a group of 5-year-olds and was surprised when they followed the plot line so well. He added that there's one place, in the middle of the book, where younger children gasp, but he did not elaborate, preferring not to spoil the surprise.

Of course a children's book needs illustrations, and Miller discovered the work of Cathy Butterfield through his mother. After he sent a copy of "Meerkats Don't Fly" to his mom electronically, she printed out a copy and gave it to Butterfield, the daughter of her best friend.

"At the time I got the assignment, I didn't have a job at all," said Butterfield, who has a BFA in art and lives out of state. At that point, she said, she was living with a sibling, recuperating from having been beaten almost to death by her husband. Miller's mother thought that drawing illustrations would be good therapy for her.

"I really believe it's God that got me out and is leading me back to a better life," Butterfield said about the opportunity to illustrate "Meerkats Don't Fly."

Butterfield, who at one time ran a day-care business, she said, loves communicating with children and teaching them. The story suited her. "I loved the script because it encourages children to follow their dreams," she said.

She found Miller was easy to work with and honest. She was willing to make any changes that he suggested along the way, she said.

Miller said that at first he had mixed feelings when his mother suggested that Butterfield do the illustrations. He said he thought he'd politely have to say "no thank you" to her.

However, he said she captured a character that is distinctly a meerkat but also has human characteristics as well — just what he wanted.

"I didn't want a character that was too cartoonish," he explained. "She caught that without my having to explain it.

"Cathy fell in love with the story and really put her heart into the illustrations," Miller said, adding that he hopes the project will be an opportunity for her to do other illustration work. Right now, she works as a cashier at a major retail store — something she said she actually enjoys because during the short conversations she has with customers, "I just get to see the world go by. I feel as though I have my finger on the pulse of the world."

Miller, who is presently working as an engineer, and who has a couple of other inventions in the works (he's the inventor of the mosquito magnet), has three degrees: two in engineering from Lehigh University; and one from the University of Rhode Island in psychology. He said he's always been interested in why things and people are the way they are.

In his down time, he loves taking nature walks and riding his motorcycle. He works out twice a week, is active at his church, and said he's good at table tennis and passionate about cooking. He likes experimenting with recipes, often modifying them to make sure they're as healthy as they can be.

He said he's looking forward to reading "Meerkats Don't Fly" to his 9-month-old granddaughter. "She's precocious," he said, "but I still think it's a little above her level."

When he wrote the book he said he wanted to write a book that kids would enjoy being read to them and that adults would enjoy reading.

"I'll consider it a success when that happens," he said.

"Meerkats Don't Fly" is available at Wellesley Booksmith, 82 Central St., Wellesley, 781-431-1160; www.wellesleybooksmith.com. It is also available at www.goodturnpublishing.com