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# MILTON THE MIGHTY

BY EMMA READ

## SYNOPSIS

Milton is a friendly false widow spider, living in a suburban home with his friends, fellow spiders Audrey and Ralph. His house-humans tend to avoid him if possible – eleven-year-old Zoe isn't overly keen on spiders but isn't terrified of them like her dad.

After spotting a newspaper headline one day, Milton realises humans have become particularly terrified of false widows, even branding them deadly – which strikes fear into Zoe's dad. After spotting Milton again one day, Zoe's dad enlists the help of Felicity Thrubwell, a spider exterminator from BugKILL, in order to get rid of Milton and the others. Zoe isn't a fan of this idea, and decides to come up with a plan to convince her dad not to kill the spiders.

Milton and his friends manage to avoid Felicity Thrubwell's first attack, but realise Zoe will have her work cut out convincing her dad that the spiders are harmless – though he explains to her that he doesn't hate the spiders, he's just scared of them. Researching spiders for a school project, Zoe tries her best to teach her dad about them – all the cool things they can do, and the fact that they're not deadly – and slowly he begins to feel less terrified.

The spiders devise a plan to somehow get a message to Zoe asking for her help – but their first attempt goes badly, and Milton comes away feeling dejected. The three of them try to enlist the help of the garden spiders outside, but they're not interested, either.



Meanwhile, Zoe and her dad travel to the World Zoo to meet the Curator of Invertebrates, Professor Greta Parker – and Milton sneaks into her bag. But things take a turn for the worse when two of Greta’s deadly spiders stow away in Zoe’s backpack and cause more terror back home.

With the impending BugKILL appointment just days away, Milton realises he must take drastic action to save himself and his friends, and all of spider-kind. Risking a squishing he does something he never thought possible – he communicates directly with Zoe. His faith in humanity is well-placed and together they launch a bi-species fightback against Felicity and the misleading headline, which she planted in the paper. Zoe, Dad and Greta launch the #NotScaredOfSpiders social media campaign, while Milton and the spiders contain Felicity and win the humans over, during a night of spectacular moonlit displays in back gardens across the country.

Milton finds himself in the headlines once again, this time hailed as a hero of spider kind on the BBC news. Felicity is discredited and reduced to selling slipper catalogues door to door, and Zoe gets bonus house-points for her homework.

## WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

*‘Next time you see a spider, stop a moment before you scream, run, squash the poor thing or chase it out of the window, because this story shows how clever and heroic these little creatures can be. They’re funny too – and they can use the internet ... yes, really! With a little bit of help from his house human, Milton makes his mark, saves the day and stops the bug killers. Emma Read launches a small series with a big heart – and you are going to love Alex G. Griffiths’s drawings too!’* **BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE**

## AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Emma was once a very sensible biologist. Now she uses her transferable talents such as attention to detail, patience and fine motor skills, to extract Lego from under the sofa, and, of course, to write children’s books. Her other dream jobs include being an Egyptologist, or the first human on Mars. There’s always hope.



*Milton the Mighty* is Emma's first novel, and was shortlisted for the 2017 Bath Children's Novel Award. She lives in Bath with her young family and many, many notebooks.

## **AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

*'Why did I write a book about spiders? No, I'm really asking ... why?! I've been scared of our eight-legged friends ever since I was in primary school, I was a full-blown Spider Worrier, so it seems like a very strange choice!*

*But then Milton isn't any spider. He's special. He's kind, clever, and in all sorts of danger. You see, I simply had to help him.*

*In the beginning I was planning to write a book about fame. Not the usual kind of fame though. Not the X-Factor, glamorous-lifestyle and adoring fans type fame. Rather the sort that you don't want. The sort you find when a friend shares an embarrassing photo, or a cat's owner posts a humiliating 'missing' poster on a lamp post. Or perhaps the kind that comes from being wrongly branded DEADLY by the media. When I saw Milton and his species being so unfairly treated, I knew I would have to tell his side of the story. And to do that, I would have to get to know him.*

*As an arachnophobe, this was a BIG ask.*

*But I was game. After all, if Milton were to be Mighty, I would need to be too. So from behind a cushion at first, I read and researched, and watched and learned and slowly but surely, the spiders weaved their web-like charm. I realised how incredible they are and began to understand their importance to our planet and our survival. They are beautiful, fascinating, and like so many creatures today, at risk.*

*Ultimately, writing Milton the Mighty taught me a lot about fear. That it can be overcome through knowledge and understanding, which is a wonderful thing. Fear can hold you back from doing what you love, or discovering new things you haven't even tried yet. Letting go of that fear sets you free. Milton also showed me that you don't need to be big to do brave things, and even if we're small, or simply feeling small, we can be superheroes.'*

**EMMA READ**



# THEMES

- Family and love
- Teamwork and determination
- Overcoming fear and phobia
- Misinformation in the media
- Zoology and ecology

# WRITING STYLE

*Milton the Mighty* is written in a classic storytelling style, in third person past tense. The chapters are interspersed with fantastic black-and-white line illustrations from Alex G. Griffiths, depicting key scenes in the story. Author Emma Read has included a handy ‘Spidery Sciencey Stuff’ section at the end along with a ‘How to Speak Spider’ guide, which gives the reader some further information on the real-life spiders the characters are based on. **25 chapters, 242 pages, ages 9+**

# PUPIL ACTIVITIES

## *1. Spider Warriors, not Spider Worriers!*

In *Milton the Mighty*, we quickly learn that spiders aren’t as scary as first thought; in fact, they actually do lots of good for our environment! We’re introduced to three different species: false widow Milton, cellar spider Audrey, and big hairy Ralph. Which of these three characters are your favourite?

Your teacher should divide the class into three separate teams: Team Milton, Team Audrey, and Team Ralph. In your groups, come up with a list of ten reasons why your spider is the best of the three. These can be a list of factual points about their species, but also points based on the character in the novel. Each group should then take it in turns to read out a fact at a time, and try to convince the other groups that their spider is the best!



Once you've done that, it's time to have a go at drawing your spider. You can either try and draw them like Alex G. Griffiths's fantastic illustrations, or use the internet to get a real-life picture of their species for you to copy. Be sure to label all their different parts! Then, create a giant spiderweb display of all your different spiders.

## ***2. Reporting the facts***

We find out quickly that the media is reporting, wrongly, that Milton's species is deadly, which leads to Zoe's dad asking BugKILL to come and exterminate him! This is because he's read it in the paper and seen it on TV, and automatically assumed that the information is right.

On your own, have a go at writing a pro-spider newspaper article. You don't have to pick one particular spider, but rather just write about spiders as a species. Which spiders are readers mostly likely to see in their day-to-day lives? Make sure to tell the reader all the great things spiders can do!

## ***3. Spider Top Trumps***

Working as a class, write down a comprehensive list of spiders mentioned in the book to create a set of Top Trumps cards.

Divide into a several smaller groups and divide the listed spiders between your groups evenly. In your groups you will research the spiders on your list, but first as a whole class you need to establish a list of categories your spiders will be competing on. Try to aim for five categories – for example, 'strength', 'weight', 'speed', 'danger factor', 'length'. When it comes to rating your spiders' more subjective measures, you might wish to consult with members of another group or your teacher in order to get a second opinion.

Once you have all the information you need, you will need to design your cards. You should decide upon the size and layout of your cards as a class, so you are all working along the same lines. Each card will need a picture as well as the information needed to play the game, which you could either find online or draw yourself.

Once you have a complete set of cards, you are ready to play the game in your teams. Remember to give the



cards a good shuffle before dealing them out.

## WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In *Milton the Mighty*, Milton finds that the media are telling people that false widows are deadly. In fact, false widow spiders are very common in the UK, and there is no evidence of their bites being deadly whatsoever. Why, therefore, do you think the media told people they were dangerous? What do you think could be the effects of this?
2. Lots of people are very scared of spiders, even though (in the UK) there are no dangerous spiders – they’re likely a lot more scared of you than you are of them! What do you think it is that makes so many people terrified of spiders and bugs? Are you scared of spiders? If so, what is it that makes you frightened?
3. Would you have a spider as a pet? If not, why? Which kind of spider do you think would make the best pet? What habitat do you think is best for a spider?
4. Greta is an expert on spiders – it’s her job to research spiders, find out more about them, and look after them. If you could choose any animal to be an expert on, what would you choose? Do you think being an animal expert might be something you’d like to do one day?

## IF YOU LIKED *MILTON THE MIGHTY*, WHY NOT TRY ...

- *The Extincts* by Veronica Cossanteli
- *Beetle Boy* by M.G. Leonard
- *White Fox* by Chen Jiatong
- *BMX Princess* by Marie Basting

