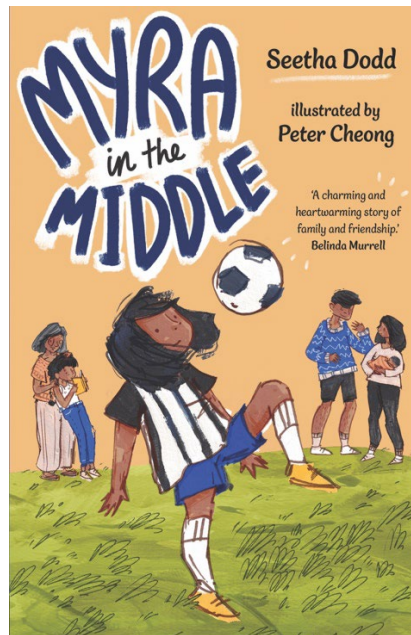


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# MYRA IN THE MIDDLE

## Seetha Dodd

Illustrated by Peter Cheong



## Teachers' Notes

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**SYNOPSIS**

When her little brother is born, Myra suddenly finds herself the middle child. Worried she will become invisible, Myra finds it hard to adjust to the idea of being both a younger and older sister at the same time. No matter which way she turns, Myra feels lost. It doesn't help that her teacher keeps getting her name wrong and she has just been selected as a midfielder in her school's soccer team.

Myra seems destined to be 'piggy in the middle'. That is, until her grandmother, Muthashi, points out all the amazing things that can be found in the middle – from the custard cream filling in her favourite biscuits to building bridges and connecting players in the midfield of a soccer pitch, to name a few.

In a gorgeous novel about identity, family and culture, *Myra in the Middle* shares the importance of adapting to change, finding your place in the world, and letting your own light shine.

**THEMES**

- Identity
- Change
- Siblings
- Grandmothers
- Indian culture
- Acceptance
- Mathematics
- Soccer

**WRITING STYLE**

Told in first-person present-tense, *Myra in the Middle* is a delightful story about an almost eight-year-old girl who finds out what it is to become the middle child. Unsure of what the arrival of her baby brother will mean for her and her older sister, Anya, Myra soon feels unseen, even though she is surrounded by love and friendship. It doesn't help when her teacher confuses her for another girl with brown skin in her class. Myra must find the courage to adapt to her new role as both a younger and older sister, forget worrying about scoring goals and

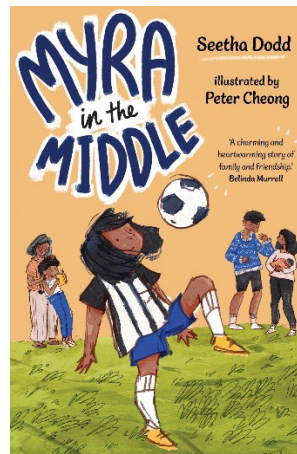
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correct her teacher about her name. Mentored by her adorable Muthashi and supported by her friends, Grace and April, Myra soon learns that there are many unique things about being in the middle, a role like no other.

The inclusion of Indian culture and traditions gives this story depth and perspective, as does Myra's fascination with maths and collective nouns. The addition of her love for soccer makes *Myra in the Middle* an engaging, purposeful and relevant text both for independent readers and as a read-aloud. It is suited to readers aged 5–8.

## STUDY NOTES

- Examine the cover and blurb of *Myra in the Middle*. What do you notice? What are you wondering? Make predictions about the story.



- What do we find out about Myra in the first chapter of *Myra in the Middle*? Why is it important that readers relate with a story's protagonist early?
- Like Myra, show your age and next birthday on a number line and equation (see pp. 1–2).
- Myra likes maths and wonders if she likes it because she is good at it or is she is good at it because she likes it. What do you think?
- Why is maths Myra's favourite subject? What is your favourite subject? Why is it your favourite? Share with a friend.
- Myra describes herself using the Triple Ms (see p. 3). How would you describe yourself? Using the table on p.4, work out your letters and those of your friends. Share in a class display.

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- Myra thinks Anya ‘always seems annoyed’ with her (p. 4). What gives her this impression? Does this happen between siblings in your family too? Share in a reflection.
- How are Anya and Myra similar and different from one another? Show your ideas on a graphic organiser. Use evidence from the text to support your thinking.
- How does Anya’s treatment of Myra prompt her to consider what kind of big sister she will be? What kind of sibling are you?
- Have you ever welcomed a new sibling into your home? What was it like? How can you relate to Myra’s experiences?
- Myra enjoys learning things such as collective nouns (see p. 12). What do you enjoy learning about? Share in a reflection.
- Myra wonders whether ‘big sisters don’t like to learn stuff from little sisters’ (p. 13). What are your thoughts on this?
- Why does Myra ‘LOVE being a little sister’ (p. 14)? What concerns might she have about becoming a big sister?
- What role does Muthashi play in Myra’s life? How does she help Myra? In the role of Myra, write a journal entry about the relationship you share with one of your grandparents or another special person in your life.
- Why, when Myra finds out that some Indian families ‘don’t usually give out sweets’ when a girl is born, does she ‘nearly fall off’ her chair (p. 22)?
- Why does Myra like walking to school with Anya so much? What are your favourite things to do with your siblings?
- Myra says that ‘names are very important’ (p. 27). What does your name mean? Why did your parents choose this name for you? What name would you choose for yourself if you had the chance? Share in a reflection.
- Why, when the baby is born, does the girls’ dad not mention whether it’s a boy or a girl?
- Why does Myra suggest making orange sweets to celebrate the birth of her little brother, rather than blue? How are the special orange sweets made later in the story?
- Why, at first, isn’t Myra as excited as everyone else about the arrival of her baby brother?
- Myra becomes the middle child. Where are you positioned in your family? What is this like? How does reading *Myra in the Middle* make you think differently about families and siblings?
- Discuss the symbolism of Myra now having to sit in the middle of the car’s back seat. In what other ways is she *in the middle*?
- What do Anya and Myra think of their brother’s name Zeeshan? Why does his name make Myra feel even more in the middle now?

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- In the role of Myra, write a journal entry based on the following excerpt: 'Anya's the oldest child, but she's always been the oldest. It's only me who has had to change.' (p. 58).
- Reread Myra's description of what being in the middle is like (see p. 59). Add to this list with your own ideas. Share with the class.
- Myra says, 'everything is changing, and I don't think I like it' (p. 65). What has changed? Why doesn't she like it? What do you find challenging about change?
- Why does Myra find it so difficult to explain to her teacher that she is Myra, not Laila? What advice would you give her?
- Why does Myra like the fact that her name means 'beloved' (p. 79)? How is this a fitting name for her?
- Why does it seem to Myra that Anya is now only being a big sister 'to Zeeshan, not to me' (p. 81)? How would this make Myra feel? In what ways does she need her big sister too?
- Why is Myra unsure about playing in the midfield in soccer? How does she later learn the importance of this position? What is the connection between this realisation and the broader themes of *Myra in the Middle*?
- When Zeeshan is unsettled, this impacts Myra's special time with Muthashi. Why does she find this so difficult?
- What advice would you give to Myra to help her feel less 'lost' (p. 107)? How does Muthashi help Myra to understand the importance of her position in the middle?
- Why is there 'a warm feeling' in Myra's tummy when her dad takes her to buy soccer boots (p. 114)?
- Why, after correcting Miss Robinson about her name, does Myra feel 'lighter ... as if I'm floating' (p. 126)? What does this share about the importance of identity and using your voice?
- What is the significance of Anya telling Myra that 'a group of magpies is called a *tiding*' (p. 129)? Why does this make Myra so happy?
- How is playing soccer in the midfield 'like being a bridge' (p. 136)? How is this the same for her position in the family?
- What does Muthashi mean when she says, 'One more thing, Myra ... don't forget: it's not about scoring goals. It's about winning as a team' (p. 136). How does playing in the midfield help Myra with other parts of her life?
- With relation to Myra's character development in this novel, discuss the following excerpt from *Myra in the Middle*: 'I guess everything has good and bad parts. Whenever Dad talks about electric cars or social media, he says there are pros and cons' (p. 145).
- How is the special ingredient used in Zeeshan's coconut candy a symbol of the joy he brings to the family (see pp. 151–152)? What does

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Muthashi mean when she says, 'sometimes, adding an unexpected ingredient can make a dish taste better' (pp. 153–154)?

- What does Myra's plan to make red eggs to celebrate Zeeshan's first 100 days show about her respect for other cultures (see pp. 158–159)?
- Explain to a friend what Myra means when she says Zeeshan is the 'cream in the custard cream. The bridge between Anya and me.' (p. 159–160)
- Why does Myra describe her and her siblings as a 'snuggle of sloths' (p. 161)?
- Using the chapter headings below as a guide, create a Story Map of *Myra in the Middle*:

- Ch 1 – M is for Myra
- Ch 2 – Family Matters
- Ch 3 – Monday Omelette
- Ch 4 – The Waiting Game
- Ch 5 – And Baby Makes Three
- Ch 6 – Little Brothers
- Ch 7 – Meeting the Baby
- Ch 8 – M is for Middle
- Ch 9 – All Muddled Up
- Ch 10 – Time with Muthashi
- Ch 11 – That's Not My Name
- Ch 12 – Trying Out for the Magpies
- Ch 13 – In Between
- Ch 14 – Zeeshan Takes Over
- Ch 15 – Muthashi Makes Sense
- Ch 16 – Gearing Up
- Ch 17 – My Name is Myra
- Ch 18 – The Big Match
- Ch 19 – Marvel in the Midfield
- Ch 20 – Myra and Zeeshan
- Ch 21 – Coconut Candy
- Ch 22 – Magic in the Middle

- Retell a part of this story from Anya's or Muthashi's point of view.
- Which is your favourite scene in *Myra in the Middle*? Illustrate this scene and explain why it is your favourite.
- Using the Talking Strips below, explain the main storyline of *Myra in the Middle* to a friend.

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| First... | Then... | Next... | Finally... |
|----------|---------|---------|------------|
|          |         |         |            |

- Using the equations, pie graphs, tables and data collection in *Myra in the Middle*, practise a range of mathematical concepts such as number, time, percentage, fractions and probability (see pp. 72, 73, 86, and Ch 17 for more details).
- Retell *Myra in the Middle* in a six-word summary.
- Discuss the contribution of figurative language in *Myra in the Middle*. Examples include:
  - Her tummy is a soft pillow (p. 14)
  - The hours seem to pass as slowly as a snail moving across an empty soccer pitch (p. 30)
  - My throat suddenly feels like it has a piece of murukku scratching it from the inside (p. 32)
  - My head starts spinning like a tornado (p.43)
  - It is a sea of bags, hats and water bottles (p.45)
  - My head feels fuzzy, like all my thoughts are crashing into one another (p.46)
  - I feel like the snail on the soccer pitch (p.46)
  - Dad is peering into it, like he does when he looks under the bonnet of our car (p.49)
  - Her smile is as bright as ever (pp. 49–50)
  - My head feels lighter against her tummy pillow (p. 57)
  - I find Dad making coffee and Muthashi spreading curls of butter on a pile of toast (p. 63)
  - I think that's the prettiest name I've ever heard. It sounds like musical notes. Or a flower (p. 77)
  - 'Sara-dha,' I repeat, letting the syllables dance in my mouth (p. 77)
  - I feel a flutter in my tummy (p. 85)
  - It's as if the ball is glued to her shoe! (p. 87)
  - My tummy twists into a giant knot (p. 103)
  - Mum's face lights up like a moonbeam (p. 110)
  - Monday comes as fast as a bullet train (p. 118)
  - Our house is bustling on Tuesday afternoon (p. 127)

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- The black and white stripes make me think of a zebra crossing. Or the keys on a piano (p.128)
- My heart does a somersault (p. 129)
- It is like the orange of the sky at sunset (p. 155)
- Anya and I are like his soldiers, protecting him from danger (p.159)

**AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

I wrote this book to share a story that draws on my own culture but isn't just about my Malaysian–Indian heritage. Myra is a character with a lot going on in her life, and I wanted to explore themes of family relationships, identity and sport, with valued customs as a thread that runs through the story. In giving Myra a sense of self-advocacy that grows throughout the book, I hope I can show readers (and my seven-year-old self) that standing up for yourself can be liberating.

I'd love for readers to empathise with Myra's journey of finding her place in the world when everything feels muddled, and to know that while change can be hard, it is made easier with the support and love of family and friends.

My own grandmother and I had a strong bond – she lived with us when I was growing up, and her influence on my life is immeasurable. Her hugs and her chicken curry were legendary, and I wanted to honour her memory in this book.

Being a middle child, I could channel my own experiences of sometimes feeling left out, or stuck, into Myra's story. I also remember feeling lucky to have both an older sister and a younger sister. I love the analogy of the middle child being a bridge; it not only connects siblings but also allows a different perspective depending on which way you look.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Seetha Dodd is an emerging children's author who loves wordplay, humorous rhyme and lyrical prose. Her fiction has been published in *The School Magazine* and in print and audio anthologies by Spineless Wonders and Hunter Writers' Centre. Drawing on her Malaysian–Indian heritage, and themes of family, identity and belonging, Seetha writes stories that empower children to challenge stereotypes and to celebrate uniqueness in all forms. She lives on Sydney's Northern Beaches with her husband and three children.